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The Reason of Vision

*Variations on Subjectivity in José Saramago's
Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*

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Este artigo explora a intersecção dos conceitos de racionalidade, subjectividade e comunidade no romance Ensaio sobre a Cegueira de José Saramago. Num primeiro momento, o ensaio analisa a forma como a narrativa questiona a noção de racionalidade herdada pela Modernidade do Iluminismo, que desemboca frequentemente em abusos da razão, exemplificados no texto pelas medidas de control da epidemia de cegueira adoptadas pelo estado. A esta instrumentalização da razão opõe-se a subjectividade dos cegos, sendo que a cegueira serve de mediação para uma reflexão sobre a própria definição de sujeito, que o artigo explora fazendo referência a Althusser, Foucault e Judith Butler. A autora sugere que a epidemia de cegueira leva à criação de uma subjectividade alternativa, que cristaliza num sujeito comunitário ou colectivo, ideia que se coaduna com as convicções marxistas de Saramago.

*Resistamos à ilusão de supor que tudo pode ser inundado de luz.
Deixaríamos de ver.*

Eduardo Lourenço, Heterodoxia I

José Saramago's novel *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, published in 1995, invites a meditation upon the limits of rationality in contemporary societies. Even though the text seems to advocate a return to reason, this facile interpretation is thwarted by the narrative's questioning of the very meaning of thought. The luminous blindness portrayed in the work is presented as the

point where reason and unreason intersect. The corporeal dimension of the plague of blindness further indicates a rejection of an abstract universal rationality and the recovery of the material individual who is exposed to the workings of ideology and of power. In the novel, blindness is tied to the transformation of this individual into a subject, dependent upon social constraints and upon the state. Yet, it also becomes a necessary step in rendering the main characters conscious of their political allegiances and opens the path for a reflection on power relations and on the possibility of agency predicated on collective subjectivity.

The Reason of Blindness

The polyphony generated by the multifarious exegetic commentaries on Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* seems to cohere with surprising harmony on the interpretation of the inability to see as an emblem for unreason. The catastrophic plague of white blindness that befalls an unidentified region is frequently explicated as a figuration for the irrational organization of contemporary societies, where inequality prevails.¹ *Ensaio* contains various pieces of textual evidence supporting an allegorical reading of the illness as an exacerbation of an irrational condition in which the world already finds itself. At key moments in the novel, the main characters seem to become aware of the emblematic character of their affliction:

Não somos imortais, não podemos escapar à morte, mas ao menos devíamos não ser cegos, disse a mulher do médico, Como, se esta cegueira é concreta e real, disse o médico, Não tenho a certeza, disse a mulher, Nem eu, disse a rapariga dos óculos escuros. (282)

In this passage, the doctor's wife implicitly compares blindness with a certain form of death that could be equaled to the annihilation of reason itself. Both she and the girl with the shades realize that the condition of being blind is not so much a physical as a moral one, which could potentially be reversed. Similar insights surface at key points throughout the narrative and are summarized, once again, by the doctor's wife: "Abramos os olhos, Não podemos, estamos cegos, disse o médico, É uma grande verdade a que diz que o pior cego foi aquele que não quis ver" (283). Here the woman exhorts her companions to open their eyes and see since she knows that their affliction is not a concrete illness. The situation described in the text is thus reduced to the corporeal correlation of an unethical inability to see social ills.

In moments of metatextual commentary such as the ones described above, the characters seem to distance themselves from the action and become conscious of their position as pawns in an essayistic experiment. They eschew their plot-embedded selves to adopt the perspective of the author/narrator and to replicate the latter's views. These decisive instances when

the protagonists transcend their roles seem to be the corollary of a novelistic process that affords both anagnorisis and catharsis. In psychoanalytic terms, physical blindness would be an exteriorization of a latent malady ensconced in the depths of the social fabric, and to be able to identify it as such would be the first step in curing it.

If the tethering of reason and human emancipation is presented in the text as the reverse side of irrational blindness, it follows that the novel should be ranked amongst the apologies of enlightened rationality. In fact, in his interviews, Saramago often harks back to the values of the Enlightenment and bemoans the ongoing demise of the mindset inaugurated by eighteenth-century thinkers with proleptic nostalgia.² The solution to the concrete and metaphorical blindness depicted in the narrative would seem to be the bright light of reason. To consider *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* as an allegory that calls for rationality in a society increasingly governed by unreason is certainly one of the possible paths for interpreting the novel. However, this reading encounters a number of difficulties. First, the positing of a universal reason that presupposes the infinite replication of the same interiority in multiple instantiations seems to contradict the author's imperative of respect for individual differences. Furthermore, this reason would imply the existence of a totalizing truth shared by all. Finally, this disembodied notion of rationality contrasts with the omnipresent physicality portrayed in the novel. The avowal of these interpretative paradoxes will be the starting point of a rethinking of the correlation between blindness and unreason in Saramago's text. This link will not be wholly repudiated. Rather, it will be the basis of a more nuanced reading of lack of vision that will take into consideration the multiple layers of meaning embedded in the narrative.

One of the peculiarities of the plague of blindness described in Saramago's novel lies in the fact that it is caused by a luminous whiteness:

Chegara mesmo ao ponto de pensar que a escuridão em que os cegos viam não era, afinal, senão a simples ausência da luz, que o que chamamos cegueira era algo que se limitava a cobrir a aparência dos seres e das coisas, deixando-os intactos por trás do seu véu negro. Agora, pelo contrário, ei-lo que se encontrava mergulhado numa brancura tão luminosa, tão total, que devorava, mais do que absorvia, não só as cores, mas as próprias coisas e seres, tornando-os, por essa maneira, duplamente invisíveis. (15–6)

Blindness is usually characterized by darkness, which stands for the complete absence of color. This obscurity is limited to erasing the appearance of beings and things but leaves their essence unchanged. In contrast, the affliction portrayed in the novel results from a very bright white light. The passage above depicts this second mode of blindness as a vortex that draws and absorbs beings and things into nothingness in that they are rendered doubly invisible, neither beheld nor experienced. In the end, the blind themselves

run the risk of dispersion into the vacuum of light: “[. . .] eles diluem-se na luz que os rodeia, é a luz que não os deixa ver” (260). Their determining trait is the light that does not let them see.

By defining blindness as an excess of brightness the novel precludes a straightforward articulation between the plague and unreason. The coupling of the inability to see with light, traditionally linked to rationality and the Enlightenment, unhinges the reading of vision as a synonym of emancipation. The narrative postulates the existence of two kinds of light, or two modalities of the rational, namely, the reason of the blind and that of those who see, as the white luminosity of sightlessness is concurrent with the seeing illumination of rationality. This proliferation of light seems to indicate not so much a mitosis originating divergent illuminations and rationalities but a split within reason itself, which is one of the features of modernity inaugurated by the Enlightenment.³

Theodor Adorno and Marx Horkheimer have identified a contradiction inherent to the unfolding of the Enlightenment. According to these thinkers, the movement, which aimed at freeing human beings from their bonds, has led to calamity.⁴ Departing from this aporia, they conclude that: “The not merely theoretical but practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the first, not only in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly” (xix). Thus, unreason, or a certain form of reifying rationality, necessarily dwells within enlightened reason. Adorno and Horkheimer trace the beginning of the Enlightenment to mythology, which inaugurated the creation of concepts as abstract units and thus marked the separation between subject and object (11). This development ultimately led to an objectification of the relationship of human beings both to other human beings and to themselves (21). However, in spite of their critique of a totalizing and objectifying streak of Enlightenment’s rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer believe that society cannot dispense with it: “We have no doubt [. . .] that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. [. . .] If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate” (xvi). It is up to enlightened reason to reflect upon itself and its multiple manifestations since totalitarian rationality can only be defeated through thinking.

The understanding of reason adumbrated by Adorno and Horkheimer seems to coincide with the notion of rationality underlying Saramago’s *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*. Similarly to the ideas expressed by the German thinkers, the novel appears to imply that there are multiple modes of rationality. These can lead to a totalizing universality predicated on sameness or they might open the path to more ethical social relations. In the narrative, the moment of blindness seems to encompass both alternatives.⁵ On the one hand, the brutality the authorities employ in their attempt to isolate the ones

contaminated by the plague, as well as the egoistic behavior of some of the blind, is an example of the worst excesses of rationality. Both cases denote a desire for a uniform, submissive and hierarchical society. On the other hand, sightlessness triggers a process of reflection in some of the main characters, which leads them to re-evaluate the tenets that have guided their former lives and to understand the relevance of sharing and the rewards of communal living. Consequently, in the text, the situation of blindness does not stand for irrationality but rather represents reason itself, in its variegated and often contradictory manifestations. The whiteness of the blinding light encompasses all colors and, metonymically, all possibilities. By imagining interpersonal exchanges in a limit situation, the text sparks a rethinking of currently held beliefs. The narrative takes the reader by the hand and guides her or him to an intersection, metaphorically represented by blindness, showing her or him the different directions that human reason can take. It will be up to each individual to determine what is the concrete path to be taken.

In *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, the body becomes the site where moral dilemmas are played out, since sightlessness is a physical condition that affects the characters' material lives. Furthermore, as the organization of the imaginary community collapses, hunger, cold and sexual desire become the key motivators of the action. The abstract reason of the Enlightenment appears in Saramago's novel to have gained a material dimension. In fact, the narrative is characterized by a morbid insistence on the scatological and there are detailed and synaesthetic descriptions of filth, putrefaction and death. The idea of a plague descending upon a region also points towards the centrality of the body. It evokes both historical occurrences, such as the medieval Black Death, and some of its literary reworkings, like Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*. The omnipresent corporeality depicted in the text emphasizes the vulnerability of the human body and its dependence on social structures for survival.

The fictionalized inscription of the quandaries of reason on the body of an entire population through a plague extends the implications of *Ensaio* beyond individual concerns and into the level of the state. As Sandra Stanley suggests, the material and the social body appear intertwined (294). Sightlessness can be read as the passageway through which the undifferentiated members of a society are turned into subjects. In the novel, blindness becomes the locus where the individual and the communal converge.

Becoming Blind, Becoming a Subject

Ensaio sobre a Cegueira does not offer an explanation to the cause of the sudden epidemic that rapidly spreads to an entire population. Even though

Luciana Stegagno Picchio likens the plague depicted in the text to the white blindness that scourged the sinners of Sodom in Genesis (74), there are no indications in the book that the affliction is a result of punishment. On the contrary, with the exception of the doctor's wife, the illness affects everyone indiscriminately and, like death, is transformed into a great equalizer. The disconnection between cause and effect portrayed in the narrative is frequently identified as one of the hallmarks of contemporary societies. Friedrich Nietzsche had pointedly diagnosed it in his dictum: "the doer' is simply fabricated into the doing – the doing is everything" (25). According to Nietzsche, only effects are real and causes are construed retrospectively. The process of creating a cause, i.e. the production of a doer or of a subject of an action, results from social conventions. In Saramago's text, this formation of subjectivity seems to coincide with the moment when characters go blind.

The first part of the novel is dedicated to a description of how various characters lose their sight. In *Ensaio* there is no information about the life of the community where the action is taking place before it was taken over by the plague. The narrative seems to imply that the situation from which it departs is uninteresting, since it coincides with a social environment that most readers would be familiar with, namely that of a post-industrial society. Further, the main characters are only individuated at the moment when they are touched by blindness; their fictional lives begin when they are about to stop seeing. The community and its members need to be transformed into an object of blindness in order to become subjects in the text.

The depiction of the first cases of blindness in the opening chapters of the book recurs in a condensed form when the blind have already been confined to the mental asylum. Shortly after his arrival in the dormitory, the old man suggests that each person describe the moment when they lost sight:

[. . .] ceguei quando estava a ver o meu olho cego, [. . .] Parece uma parábola, disse uma voz desconhecida, o olho que se recusa a reconhecer a sua própria ausência [. . .] Quanto a mim, disse a mulher do primeiro cego, a última coisa que me lembro de ter visto foi o meu lenço, estava em casa a chorar, levei o lenço aos olhos e nesse instante ceguei, [. . .] O meu caso, disse o ajudante de farmácia, foi mais simples, ouvi dizer que havia pessoas a cegarem, então pensei como seria se eu cegasse também, fechei os olhos a experimentar e quando os abri estava cego, Parece outra parábola, falou a voz desconhecida, se queres ser cego, sê-lo-ás. Ficaram calados. (129)

The revisiting of the instant of passage from seeing to the white light of blindness, complete with comments in the form of a Greek chorus represented by the voice of an unknown person, highlights the fact that the loss of vision arose at a time when individuals were reflecting about sight.

This is particularly obvious in the case of the man working at a drug store and in the situation of the old man, in that they attempt to contemplate lack of vision itself. In a Lacanian move, the two characters' efforts to turn blindness into an object for consideration backfires, as they become themselves the object of the affliction. The old man wants to look at the blindness already affecting one of his eyes, while the drug store employee tries to recreate lack of vision within himself and becomes blind in this process of internalization. As the unidentified individual states in the end of this passage: “[. . .] já éramos cegos no momento em que cegámos” (131). This disembodied voice that appears to translate the words of God suggests that a kind of blindness preexisted the physical one. Both the old man and the drug store employee lose sight at the moment when they become conscious of this blindness within themselves or, in other words, when this conscience becomes self-consciousness. They are overpowered by sightlessness in their efforts to master it. It is precisely through this process of re-flection, where the characters' blindness returns to them after being exteriorized, that they are created as subjects.

It is telling that the sequence of brief narratives portraying each character's passage into blindness culminates in an ekphrastic moment. The unidentified person in the group declares that she/he had been in a museum when she/he went blind.⁶ This individual embarks on a long description of the picture she/he had been contemplating at the time, which is a composite image of a number of famous works in the tradition of Western painting, from Van Gogh's "Wheat Fields under Threatening Skies" to Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" or Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (130–1). The last image to be beheld in this random collage was that of a battle and, more specifically, of a frightened horse in combat, a reference to Picasso's "Guer-nica" that foreshadows the violence to come in the text. Art itself seems to be the topic of this montage. Artistic representation can be read here as a facilitator that renders people aware of a blindness that preexisted the time when they became physically unable to see. The moment of going blind is the time when characters become cognizant of their condition.⁷ It takes blindness to end blindness or, to put it differently, the end of physical vision marks the beginning of the end of sightlessness, a development mediated through art. The novel bears an implicit desire that its readers will, too, identify their own blindness while reading.

In Saramago's narrative, becoming blind translates into becoming a subject, in that it is a process that both subjects and emancipates. Characters are subjected to the disease but some amongst the blind are simultaneously lent agency by their newly acquired self-consciousness. This mechanism mirrors the structure of the hailing of ideology delineated by Louis Althusser in his renowned essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." For Althusser,

it is necessary to distinguish between ideologies, which depend upon the history of social formations and of class struggle, and Ideology that is essentially ahistorical and represents the imaginary relationship of human beings to their real conditions of existence (107). Interpellation is the process through which Ideology hails concrete individuals and, through that call, turns them into subjects (118). As the author points out, even though one can adopt different ideologies, one is always within Ideology, i.e. one has always already been summoned to subjecthood (119). In Althusser's words, man is an ideological animal who at all times recognizes himself as a subject (116). Hailing is an image that substantiates the abstract and atemporal individual subjection to Ideology, turning it into a concrete subjugation to a specific power (the police, the law, etc.). Ideology is thus the mechanism by which causes are construed and cohere around the subject.

In *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, the hailing of ideology comes as a plague of sightlessness. The absence of proper names in the narrative points to the fact that each character should be defined, first and foremost, as a blind person. Subjects become conscious of themselves through the materiality of their subjection at the moment when they stop seeing. From then on, they identify with their sightlessness, as a voice in the text declares: "Quem está a falar, perguntou o médico, Um cego, respondeu a voz, só um cego, é o que temos aqui" (131). The interpellation by ideology signifies a move toward self-consciousness, as the blind become aware of an impossibility to see that already dwelled within them before its physical manifestation.

According to Althusser, the only way to go beyond Ideology is by an epistemological break, through which one would be able to situate oneself in a non-ideological realm, such as the subjectless discourse of science (117). For Saramago, however, such a position would be untenable. The author believes that all thoughts and actions are ineluctably determined by ideological precepts.⁸ As Onésimo Almeida points out, for the author of *Ensaio* the term "Ideology" does not necessarily possess a negative connotation. Rejecting the strictly Marxist understanding of the concept, where it was associated with false consciousness, Saramago defines ideology in the sense of a "system of ideas" (Almeida 25–6).⁹ For the novelist, everyone is inextricably immersed in an ideological "soup." The writer thus denies the possibility of an outside of ideology, which would eschew the bonds of subjecthood. *Ensaio* is in tune with this belief that ideology is inescapable. Everyone in the text becomes blind, with the exception of the doctor's wife. Yet, not even the latter can be said to occupy an ideologically free position, since she is immersed in the world of those who do not see: "De uma certa maneira, é verdade, estou cega da vossa cegueira, talvez pudesse começar a ver melhor se fôssemos mais os que vêem [. . .]" (283). Sight loses its meaning in the society of the blind, since no one can reciprocate the gaze. To see largely depends on

the possibility of being seen, as sight is not only a material reality but also a social construction.

Ensaio sobre a Cegueira distances itself, then, from Althusser's theory of subjecthood by renouncing the possibility of a discourse extraneous to ideology. Further, there is in the novel an emphasis on the corporeal that is absent from the thought of Althusser. Turning blind is a process of individuation through which characters move from universality to subjectivity, as blindness is substantiated in slightly different ways in each of their bodies. These aspects of Saramago's narrative echo Michel Foucault's understanding of the workings of power. Moving away from Althusser's notion of Ideology, which still retains some elements of transcendence, Foucault declares that there is nothing outside the immanence of power. While, for Althusser, the formation of subjectivity by ideology is mostly a process of intellectualization, Foucault postulates, in *Discipline and Punish*, that individuals are turned into subjects when the presence of power is actualized and internalized in their bodies. As Judith Butler points out, Foucault propounds a radical inversion of Althusser's theory. On the one hand, there is a dissemination of power that manifests itself through an imprint on the body. On the other hand, the body, which mediates the process of subjectivation, is itself constructed by the intricate web of discourses of power. An individual's corporeal self is thus the fulcrum where power and discourse intersect.

The Foucaultian take on subjectivity can inform the reading of blindness in Saramago's novel. The physical affliction plaguing the characters in the text is supplemented by the social and discursive construction of the illness. This begins with the institutionalization of people in the mental asylum and continues with the political and media discussions on the subject. There is thus a split within blindness that divides it between the corporeal fact and its discursive representation. Further, following a Foucaultian argument, we realize that, in the narrative, blindness only really starts to exist in a discursive mode, when the doctor warns the authorities about the outbreak of the plague. It is solely at this moment that the epidemic is recognized and treated as such. This second level of blindness, which almost supplants the physical affliction, is what allows us to speak about the reality of the condition as such.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the origin of disciplinary mechanisms to the measures of invigilation put in place in urban areas to respond to upsurges of plague. In order to prevent the spread of the disease, authorities tried to confine individuals to their homes and established a complex system of control whose goal was to circumscribe the body. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is, according to Foucault, the culmination of the disciplinary norms used to stave off epidemics. In *Ensaio*, those afflicted by the illness are rounded up and incarcerated in a former mental asylum,

where they are left to their own devices. Even though this institution is not designed as a panopticon, it functions as a prison and its entrance is permanently lit and guarded by soldiers. Contrary to the guards, the doctor's wife, who retains her sight in the midst of the blind, questions the ethicality of her position:

Pela primeira vez desde que aqui entrara, a mulher do médico sentiu-se como se estivesse por trás de um microscópio a observar o comportamento de uns seres que não podiam nem sequer suspeitar da sua presença, e isto pareceu-lhe subitamente indigno, obsceno, Não tenho o direito de olhar se os outros não me podem olhar a mim, pensou. (71)

The doctor's wife realizes that watching without being watched is essentially unethical. She rejects this position of power and embodies a vision opposed to that of the panopticon. She chooses to use her eyes not as an instrument of control but as a means to help the blind, becoming the guide and provider of the small group that clusters around her.

In his later writings, Foucault posits the existence of a non-disciplinary technology of power. This mechanism, which does not exclude disciplining, is defined by the author as biopower. While discipline acts upon the body, biopower relates to man as a living being, in its multiplicity. It deals with issues that affect humans as a species, such as birth rates, illness or old age, and attempts to regulate these developments. Foucault coins the term "biopolitics" to designate this new way to exert power that views the whole population as a political problem. The author associates disciplinary methods with the classical theory of sovereignty, according to which the sovereign had the right of life and death over his subjects. With the development of sovereignty in modernity, this right was permeated by its opposite. In contemporary democratic societies, the traditional right over life and death has been transformed into the right to make live and to let die, which forms the basis of biopolitics (*Society*, 241). The fashion in which blindness is dealt with in Saramago's text evinces a combination of disciplinary measures, associated with an exclusionary discourse, and efforts of a biopolitical manipulation. The latter comes to the fore with particular conspicuousness in the authorities' failed attempts to avoid contagion.

If the methods employed by the government to prevent the spread of the plague in *Ensaio* mirror the mechanisms of biopolitical control that Foucault pinpoints as instantiations of power, this becomes palpable in the message issued by the authorities and played every evening through loudspeakers in the asylum:

O Governo lamenta ter sido forçado a exercer energeticamente o que considera ser seu direito e seu dever, proteger por todos os meios as populações na crise que estamos a atravessar, [. . .] abandonar o edifício sem autorização signifi-

cará morte imediata, [. . .] em caso de incêndio, seja ele fortuito ou intencional, os bombeiros não intervirão, [. . .] em caso de morte, seja qual for a sua causa, os internados enterrarão sem formalidades o cadáver na cerca [. . .]. O Governo e a Nação esperam que cada um cumpra o seu dever. (49–51)

Power is here exerted not merely over single individuals but aims at reaching an entire population. Rather than invoking its domination over the life and death of subjects, the government refers to its duty to shield the public from a nefarious plague. The authorities thus camouflage their despotic stance under the guise of protection and appeal to the sense of duty of the blind as citizens of a state. This message becomes a symbol of the ineptitude of the response to the calamity. It is repeated numerous times throughout the novel and it accompanies the degradation of the living conditions inside the asylum. It progressively acquires an eerie quality, as some of its warnings about attempts to escape being punishable by death or the duty of detainees to bury the deceased materialize. The interruption of the message coincides with the collapse of all organized forms of government, as the entire society becomes blind.

Foucault argues that the possibility to undo oppression lies in creating discourses that subvert the existing ones. This process of re-signification would give rise to objects of knowledge that would forge new paths for contestation. In her comments on both Althusser and Foucault in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler inquires into the plausibility of this resistance for a subject completely immersed in power. Accepting the premise that individuals become subjects by becoming subjected to power, Butler concludes that the rejection of domination would amount to a denial of individuality and self-identity. Any struggle against control would thus have to come to terms with the fact that power is a condition of possibility of subjectivity and, therefore, of agency as such. Butler seems to find an alternative to this double bind in psychoanalysis. The unconscious confounds the normalization imposed by disciplinary techniques and discourses in that it is hospitable to contradiction. It exceeds the conscious subject and therefore becomes a site of nonconformity. If resistance can partly be traced to the unconscious, it follows that alterity is indispensable in the questioning of power. For Butler, subversion is necessarily self-subversion, in that the subject is attempting to overthrow the discourses and practices that allowed her or him to attain subjecthood in the first place. Becoming other is thus a first step in the challenging of power, a battle from which no individual subject will ever emerge fully victorious.

According to Butler, the hold of power over a subject functions as a visual construct: “[. . .] regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, *visibility*, and place” (29, emphasis added). Yet, this visible subject who wants to persevere in its

own being is haunted by alterity dwelling in its self. In Saramago's text, this otherness is materialized in blindness. When they lose sight, individuals become other to themselves, in that many of the coordinates that governed their previous lives no longer apply. The blind react to this self-discontinuity in different ways. Some, like the members of the gang that is formed inside the mental asylum, cling to old habits. The gang appropriates the other detainees' jewelry, even though precious metals and stones have completely lost their value in the society of the blind. Others, such as those who follow the doctor's wife, retain traits of their former selves while remaining open to change. The latter seem to actualize the possibilities inherent in sightlessness. Blindness stands for the impossibility of ontologizing, in that it represents a moment of alterity in the shifting identity of a subject. The impossibility of seeing is the black spot at the core of subjecthood, where the first step in a collective resistance to power originates.

Despite the similarities between the situation portrayed in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* and Foucault's elaborations on techniques of domination, Saramago's allegory moves beyond the scenario of an Orwellian realm of total social subordination to power. The second part of the novel marks the end of a panoptical society of control, as the entire population becomes blind. However, this lack of a centralized authority does not lead to a complete release from the mechanisms of power, as a large part of the blind remain attached to disciplinary means of control. The novel seems to suggest that the subject's subversion of domination cannot be fully achieved by an isolated individual but will only be actualized at the level of the collective.

Collective Visions

The crisis of vision portrayed in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* may be understood at the same time as an outcome of and as a key to grappling with the impossibility of reconstituting a subject endowed with agency based on the ideal of reason or the all-pervasiveness of power. Incapable of tackling the problem of political praxis, oppositional and subversive, individual subjects are arrested within the folds of the power-relations that constitute them. Whereas Butler searches for a solution to this impasse in the unconscious, Saramago's narrative looks for an alternative in a collective subject.

If the moment of becoming blind coincides with one's entry into subjecthood, some of the characters in the narrative craft a common sense of subjectivity based on their social interactions. These individuals, who meet in the mental asylum, share only the condition of not being able to see, its consequences, and the suffering caused by this predicament. The founding moment of the group coincides with the deterioration of the circumstances inside the asylum. When a gang takes possession of the food and demands

payments for the continuation of its supply, this community, led by the doctor's wife, invokes the "sacred principle of collective property" and falls back on the Marxian notion of justice:

Daremos todos e daremos tudo, disse o médico, E quem não tiver nada para dar, perguntou o ajudante de farmácia, Esse, sim, comerá do que os outros derem, é justo o que alguém disse, de cada um segundo as suas possibilidade, a cada um segundo as suas necessidades. (141–2)

In the transition from possessive individualism to the respect for the "sacredness" of collective property, blindness is a factor of expropriation, marking both the limit of the old and the horizon of the emergent systems of value. In the newly created collectivity, it would be possible to make a contribution, in the doctor's words, to "give everything," only after the initial dispossession, that is, from the depths of despair and abjection that unite the victimized blind. Here, one can witness the transformation of a mass of people assembled together by chance into a joint subject with its own judgments and principles for action.¹⁰

A poignant illustration of this newly created communality grounded on shared suffering is the group formed by the women who offered their bodies to the bandits in exchange for food.¹¹ After being raped and tortured during the night, they are returning to their room when one of them dies of a heart attack. The doctor's wife describes the corpse the following way:

Levantou em braços o corpo subitamente desconjuntado, as pernas ensanguentadas, o ventre espancado, os pobres seios descobertos, marcados com fúria, uma mordedura num ombro, Este é o retrato do meu corpo, pensou, o retrato do corpo de quantas aqui vamos, entre estes insultos e as nossas dores não há mais do que uma diferença, nós, por enquanto, ainda estamos vivas. (178–9)

The marks of pain inscribed on the dead woman's body correspond to the lacerations imprinted on the skin and on the psyche of each victim. As the doctor's wife realizes, the deceased and the living constitute a whole brought together by suffering, in that the condition of being alive is reduced to an agony that will necessarily end in death. Thus, the battered women converge around the beaten corpse and treat it as if it were their own. They walk to their room together, holding hands and carrying the dead body, while comforting each other with small gestures of support, in which they find a temporary respite from the ordeal they went through. Their mutual aid, represented by their collective washing of one another and of the dead woman, is a mute communal response to the violence to which they were subjected.

The collective subject that emerges from the group formed by the protagonists of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* develops in the second part of the novel,

after the main characters have left the mental asylum and wander through the streets of the city in search of food and shelter. When they reach the doctor's house, they partake of a meal defined, once again, by the principle of sharing: "Não dispunham os companheiros de mais do que este pouco, e contudo veio a ser uma festa de família, daquelas, raras, onde o que é de cada um, é de todos" (240). But this communal approach to existence is not perceived as an option among others. The events triggered by the plague of blindness lead the group to realize that this is the only possibility to survive: "Voltemos à questão, disse a mulher do médico, se continuarmos juntos, talvez consigamos sobreviver, se nos separarmos seremos engolidos pela massa e destroçados" (245). Blindness makes the characters understand that the concept of an autonomous individual is a fiction. The situation depicted in Saramago's text only accentuates a fact that should be self-evident even under normal circumstances, namely that collectivity must be the guiding principle in the organization of a just society.¹²

Alfonso Lingis has described the birth of collective subjectivity in terms of "a community of those who have nothing in common." For Lingis, to have nothing in common is to be absolutely different from the other person, but also, in the spirit of Heideggerian philosophy, to have the same fate as the other, namely, being-toward-death. Such a community has been named the "New International" by Jacques Derrida who defines it as "a link of affinity, suffering, and hope, [. . .] without common belonging to a class. [. . .] a kind of counter-conjuration, in the (theoretical and practical) critique of the state of international law, the concepts of State and nation" (*Specters*, 85–6). Derrida's New International is based upon the negation of identity claims, and yet it is this lack of co-belonging that enables the forging of ties among the oppressed. In parallel to the communities delineated by Lingis and Derrida, the members of the group that comes together in Saramago's text form a subjective alliance, based upon absence, i.e. lack of vision, while retaining their differences. This kind of a collective avoids the pitfalls of individual agency in that it is not constrained by transcendental rationality or by power relations. As a subjectivity, it harbors multiplicity and operates through a permanent displacement of power, whose erratic trajectories traverse the different bodies of the blind without encountering a unified core. Yet, this lack of structure does not deteriorate into the complete anarchy of the unconscious. Through dialogic interactions, the group formulates its idiosyncratic reason while respecting singularity and remaining receptive to open-ended solutions.

In *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, the character of the doctor's wife introduces an asymmetry into the community of the blind. This is perceived by the old man, who describes her the following way: "Uma espécie de chefe natural, um rei com olhos numa terra de cegos [. . .]" (245). The doctor's wife recog-

nizes that the exceptionality of her vision puts her in a position of authority. However, she does not exploit this circumstance to her own advantage. Similarly to Blimunda in *Memorial do Convento*, she considers her ability to see what others cannot behold as a curse, rather than a blessing. In several moments throughout the novel she expresses her desire to become blind like the rest of the population: “[. . .] serenamente desejou estar cega também, atravessar a pele visível das coisas e passar para o lado de dentro delas, para a sua fulgurante e irremediável cegueira” (65). Becoming blind is here described as a trajectory that moves from the dimension of appearances into the inside of things. It can be read as a more intimate relation to the world, since the division between subject and object, upheld primarily as a visual construct, collapses, as the blind penetrate the core of thinghood. If many of those who lose sight are unable to realize the liberating possibilities inherent in blindness, the doctor’s wife becomes a “natural chief” in that she perceives this potential. She circulates between the visible and the invisible realms, which allows her to touch the interiority of things without being completely lost in an undifferentiated totality.

Even though the doctor’s wife never went blind, she does not feel superior to those who cannot see. Rather, she embraces the group of blind: “Penso que não *cegamos*, penso que *estamos cegos*” (310, emphasis added). She inscribes herself in a collective to which she does not really belong. Further, by stating that people, including herself, did not get blind but *are* blind, she arrests the dialectical movement of the book, and focuses on the present condition of the characters, emphasizing not an horizontal move from seeing, through blindness, to an enlightened rational seeing, but rather a deeper awareness of a condition that has always already existed. She understands that the blindness of her companions, which becomes, to a certain extent, her own, was a necessary moment in a rejection of individualism and in a move to forging communitarian ties.

The doctor’s wife often feels the impulse to abandon the role of a witness and the burden of involuntarily testifying to the events that the community undergoes: “[. . .] vocês não sabem, não o podem saber, o que é ter olhos num mundo de cegos, não sou rainha, não, sou simplesmente a que nasceu para ver o horror, vocês sentem-no, eu sinto-o e vejo-o” (262). She wishes not to see the horror from which others are shielded by their inability to see. Throughout the novel, tears are portrayed as an ephemeral solace that affords her a momentary blindness in the midst of chaos.

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Jacques Derrida defines tears as the essence of the human eye since, at the moment when they veil sight, they reveal that what is proper to the eye is not the gaze and the superficial knowledge it might afford, but the expression of emotion (127). The tearful eye is indifferent to seeing as it brings home that, beyond the permanent move between

seeing and blindness, the truth of the organ of vision is to weep in joy or sorrow. In Saramago's novel, the doctor's wife becomes the inheritor of the eyes' truth. Contrary to the other characters, she often cries in the narrative. Her tears temporarily blind her to her surroundings but this sightlessness is different from that of the other blind. It results from her position as a witness that has to come to terms both with her own predicament and with the suffering of others. She cries not merely for herself but for the whole society of the blind.¹³ Her tears are therefore truer to the way blindness itself is portrayed in the novel, since they open the eye to the community that exists beyond self-individuation.

The doctor's wife's tears well up at moments when she considers that she might not succeed in providing for those around her. After a number of days without eating, she manages to find food and is carrying the provisions back to share them with the blind when she gets lost in the streets of the city. She collapses on the ground, crying for fear of not being able to rejoin the group that depends on her for subsistence. She finds consolation in a dog that, from that moment on, accompanies the main characters under the name of "the dog of tears," and who becomes an emblem of the sorrows of the group.¹⁴ This association of the doctor's wife's tears with her mission to provide for others becomes even clearer when she realizes their frailty: "Olhou-os [aos cegos] com os olhos rasos de lágrimas, ali estavam, dependiam dela como as crianças pequenas dependem da mãe, Se eu lhes falto, pensou [. . .]" (218). Her tears are an exteriorized sign of her sense of responsibility for the group that has formed around her. Concurrently, they also mark her frustration with not being able to help everyone who cannot see:

Hoje é hoje, amanhã será amanhã, é hoje que tenho a responsabilidade, não amanhã, se estiver cega, Responsabilidade de quê, A responsabilidade de ter olhos quando os outros os perderam, Não podes guiar nem dar de comer a todos os cegos do mundo, Deveria, Mas não podes, Ajudarei no que estiver ao meu alcance [. . .]. (241)

She realizes that responsibility is not an abstract notion. It begins, as Emmanuel Levinas would put it, as a concrete ethics of absolute responsibility for the other, whose uniqueness one can never grasp (214–5). To be responsible is therefore to give oneself fully to each single person. The collective subjectivity that arises in the commonality formed by the protagonists is therefore the conjunction of each of its members' singularity in an organic whole, bound together by the sense of responsibility infused into the group by the doctor's wife.

The precariousness of the doctor's wife's situation, on the threshold between seeing and blindness, between her position as a provider of a small

group and her tears for all the blind that she helplessly beholds, determines her reflections in the end of the novel:

A mulher do médico levantou-se e foi à janela. Olhou para baixo, para a rua coberta de lixo, para as pessoas que gritavam e cantavam. Depois levantou a cabeça para o céu e viu-o todo branco. Chegou a minha vez, pensou. O medo súbito fê-la baixar os olhos. A cidade ainda ali estava. (310)

Her gaze travels from the street to the sky and back in a vertical trajectory that betrays her potential position of hierarchical authority. However, in the end, only that which is down below remains. The doctor's wife rejects the transcendental dimension represented by the sky and opts to embrace the life-world of the street. The plague of blindness, which she experienced as a horrified observer, has taught her the relevance of an immanent communal subject predicated on alterity.

In *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* (2004), Saramago's follow-up to *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, the notion of collective subjectivity is further developed. A large majority of the population of an unknown city, which later in the novel proves to be the same community that had been afflicted by a plague of blindness some years before, expresses its discontent with the current political situation by casting blank votes in an election. The events surrounding the epidemic depicted in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* seem to have given rise to a process of learning for this group of people that resulted in a change in behavior in the second novel. This time, the community sticks together and calmly manifests its opposition to the authorities with the lucidity mentioned in the title of the narrative. Even though there are no leaders, the population acts as one, in a concerted effort, and peacefully resists the restrictions imposed upon them by the government.

The lucidity shared by the inhabitants of the city portrayed in *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* does not extend to those in power, who seem not to have learned from the experience of dealing with the plague of blindness. In order to prevent the spread of the tendency to cast blank ballots, which is treated like a disease, the authorities resort to the mechanisms of control described by Foucault. The government isolates the city and declares a state of siege that allows it to censor the press and to imprison and torture countless citizens. The final part of the narrative coincides with the incrimination of some of the protagonists of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, who are used as scapegoats for the situation. Since she did not go blind, the doctor's wife is identified as the head of the supposed conspiracy behind the wave of blank votes and the novel ends with her assassination, together with that of the dog of tears.

If critics had already identified pessimism as a distinctive trait of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, its follow-up presents an even gloomier outlook on con-

temporary society. In the first novel, the end of blindness might be read as a redemptive moment that is absent from the second installment. However, the collective subjectivity born in the group formed by the protagonists of the first narrative lives on in the inhabitants of the city depicted in *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*. The hope remains that, in spite of the death of the doctor's wife, the population will be able to continue its communal struggle against the arbitrary decisions of those who hold power.

José Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* is a parable, where there is always something invisible beneath the surface of things. In the narrative, blindness marks the crossroads between reason and unreason, and constitutes the concrete and metaphorical locus where subjectivity emerges. Yet the possibility of forming a non-totalizing agency, bound with the subversion of power, only comes to fruition in a collective subject. Communality is formed within a group without a core, constituted by the dispossessed and characterized solely by the absence of light. In other words, in the displaced community of those who have only blindness in common.

Notes

1. In an article that came out shortly after the publication of the novel, Maria Alzira Seixo already emphasizes the allegorical dimension of the text (98–9). David Frier equally stresses the parabolic aspects of the narrative. He compares the fall into blindness to a descent to chaos, from which the protagonists would arise with a desire to break the bonds of unreason tying them to a dark Platonic cave (98–9). José Ornelas also argues for a socio-political interpretation of the plague of blindness: “[. . .] the white blindness, can and must be read as a social and/or political text, insofar as these diseases can be read as a correlative of an infection in the body politic and of social disorder and anarchy” (122).

2. Saramago directly links *Ensaio* with the decline of the values of the Enlightenment: “Si quiere buscar una explicación para los temas de esas novellas [*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* and *Todos os Nomes*] no creo que se la encuentre en los cambios tecnológicos. Más bien en los cambios acelerados de la mentalidad humana, en los trazos inquietantes de ese nuevo hombre que se perfila en el horizonte. El tipo humano nacido de la Enciclopedia, del Iluminismo, de la Ilustración, está diciendo adiós, ya nos cuesta trabajo reconocerlo en los rostros de los contemporáneos y mucho más en sus acciones” (Halperín 46–7).

3. In his interview with Baptista-Bastos, Saramago describes *Ensaio* as a text that questions the nature of human reason: “E o que eu quero com o *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* é exactamente interrogar-me sobre o que é a razão para nós?” (65). Saramago does not depart from a pre-defined notion of rationality. His novel could be read as a collation of approaches to the question of *what* reason is.

4. Adorno and Horkheimer's text was published in 1944 and the specter of fascism looms over their reflections. The authors state that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (4), and thus directly link the political situation in Europe at the time with a certain version of enlightened rationality.

5. In an interview with Carlos Reis, Saramago recognizes the existence of very different manifestations of reason. The novelist acknowledges that rationality can encompass both oppression and respect for the other: "[. . .] mesmo as doutrinas que se podem facilmente classificar de irracionais, são todas elas produtos da razão. Creio que fora da razão somos loucos. [. . .] por isso, não posso aceitar (e aí entra uma questão ética) que a razão seja usada contra a razão. Neste sentido, uma razão que não é conservadora da vida [. . .] é uma razão de que se faz um mau uso. Se o homem é um ser racional e usa a razão contra si mesmo — um contra si mesmo representado pelos seus semelhantes —, então de que é que serve a razão?" (149). According to Saramago, there is no necessary connection between reason and ethics, which makes it all the more pressing for the former to be guided by the latter, as he states in his diary: "Se a ética não governar a razão, a razão desprezará a ética" (*Cadernos III*, 147).

6. The voice of this unknown person is not marked in terms of gender. She or he seems to represent "everyman" or, more to the point, "everyperson" or "everybody."

7. The epigraph of the novel already states that, more than seeing, one should reflect upon one's act of looking and upon what is being seen: "Se podes olhar, vê. Se podes ver, repara." The characters in the novel need to become blind in order to achieve this awareness.

8. Saramago states this position in an interview with Carlos Reis: "[. . .] a ideologia como sistema de ideias geral [. . .] toca a todos, porque toda a gente, escritor ou não, vive imerso nessa espécie de caldo. O que significa que nem sequer é legítimo pensar que se poderia viver fora dessa espécie de mar, porque aí é onde se respira, aí é onde se está, é onde nos alimentamos no plano mental" (73).

9. Almeida points out that the concept of ideology used by Saramago would be close to the notion of "worldview" or to the German "Weltanschauung" (26).

10. The decision-making process of the collective subject delineated by Saramago could be read as the opposite of the workings of disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms of power employed by the authorities in *Ensaio*. Whereas the former is rhizomatic and depends upon communal agreement, the latter are hierarchical and authoritarian.

11. There is in this passage a gender divide that crisscrosses the wider collective subject formed by the victims of the gang operating inside the mental asylum, in that the women have to sacrifice their bodies for the well-being of the rest of the community. Yet, this division seems to preclude, rather than endorse, a sexist gender politics since the group of victimized women are presented as exemplary of the new communal subjectivity and, in their suffering, are portrayed as more socially progressive than their male counterparts.

12. Anna Klobucka suggests that Saramago's writing is guided by a principle of "rooted cosmopolitanism" that entails an attachment to a certain region and, at the

same time, encompasses the acceptance of a multiplicity of roots and allegiances (xviii). In the author's later novels, it becomes clear that, even though Portugal remains a point of reference, the texts reflect upon forms of community and belonging in any post-industrial society, where characters often have very disparate loyalties. In *Ensaio*, there is an attempt to conceptualize a notion of community in the midst of this difference, in that characters share only the circumstances brought about by the plague.

13. As Georges Bataille points out, tears result from a sense of shared intimacy: "[. . .] tears are the expression of a keen awareness of shared life grasped in its intimacy" (48). For the author, crying belongs to immanence, beyond the concerns for the future. In the case of the doctor's wife, tears arise from her situation as witness to the present horror caused by the plague of blindness and from her sense of co-belonging to the community of the blind.

14. The "dog of tears" attests to the fact that suffering is not limited to human beings. It is portrayed with features that make it seem almost human and it demonstrates that, in the novel, nature is not mere landscape. The dog becomes a member of the group, linked to humans by the evidence that, as a sentient being, it can share their pain.

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