VISION AND ILLUSION: PERCEPTION OF BLINDNESS IN LITERATURE

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GÖRMEK VE YANILMAK: EDEBİYATTA KÖRLÜK ALGISI

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ABSTRACT

Blindness and blind characters are fairly common in literary texts; however, they are mainly depicted through positive or negative clichés. Though it seems to depend upon irrefutable truths, the perception of blindness is shaped to a great extent by metaphors. What is obscured by this fact is that there is a lack of information and adaptation regarding this particular matter.

"The Country of the Blind" by H.G. Wells and *Blindness* by José Saramago present us the same scenario, yet with different results. While questioning the fate of the only seeing person in a blind community, they reveal how pessimistic the perspective of the sighted on blindness is. However, there is one other thing that they also reveal: The importance of the part cultural habits play in transforming physical differences such as blindness into "disabilities" and bringing forth a hierarchy between senses.

What this study aims is to compare Wells's story and Saramago's novel, and in the light of their differences take a closer look at the perception of blindness. Despite the fact that both texts criticisize a metaphorical blindness, they diverge when it comes to how they embrace physical blindness. If metaphors lead people away from the reality of physical blindness, how should literary texts bearing metaphorical elements be analyzed? How can perception be changed and what might be the role of literature in this process? While the first two chapters provide background information through recent discussions in the area, the third and fourth chapters focus on finding answers to these questions.

keywords: perception of blindness, literature, metaphors, disability studies

ÖZET

Edebi metinlerde körlüğe ve kör karakterlere sıklıkla rastlanıyor, fakat genellikle onları tanımlamak için olumlu veya olumsuz birtakım klişelere başvuruluyor. Sarsılmaz gerçeklere dayanır gibi gözükse de, körlük algısının oluşumunda metaforların payı büyük. Bu sebepten ötürü de, bu konuda aslında yeterince bilgi sahibi olunmadığı ve adaptasyon eksikliği yaşandığı gözlerden kaçıyor.

H.G.Wells'in "Körler Ülkesi" ve José Saramago'nun *Körlük*'ü bize aynı senaryoyu farklı sonuçlarla sunan iki edebi eser. Görme duyusunu kaybetmiş bir topluluk içerisinde bu duyuya sahip tek kişinin kaderini sorgularken, görenlerin körlük hakkında ne kadar karamsar bir bakış açısına sahip olduğunu ortaya koyuyorlar. Ancak, bunun dışında ortaya koydukları bir şey daha var: Körlük gibi fiziksel farklılıkların bir "engel" haline gelmesinde ve duyular arasında bir hiyerarşinin doğmasında kültürel alışkanlıkların çok önemli rol oynadığı.

Bu çalışmada hedeflenen, iki edebi eseri, Wells'in hikâyesi ve Saramago'nun romanını karşılaştırmak ve farklılaştıkları noktalardan yola çıkarak körlük algısına yakından bakmaktır. Her iki metin de mecazi bir körlüğün eleştirisini sunmakla beraber, fiziksel bir körlüğü konuya nasıl ve ne ölçüde dahil ettikleriyle ayrılmaktadır. Metaforlar insanları fiziksel körlüğün gerçekliğinden uzaklaştırıyorsa, metaforik öğeler taşıyan edebi metinler nasıl ele alınmalıdır? Algı nasıl etkilenebilir ve edebiyat bu süreçte nasıl bir rol oynayabilir? Birinci ve ikinci bölümlerde çeşitli çalışmalara değinilierek konuyla ilgili genel bilgi verilmekte, üç ve dördüncü bölümlerde ise bu sorulara yanıt aranmaktadır.

anahtar kelimeler: körlük algısı, edebiyat, metaforlar, sakatlık çalışmaları

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Introduction

Upon starting my research, my main intention was to examine the positive representations of blindness through selected blind characters in literature. I was, and still am, of the opinion that we attach too much importance to visuality and the ability to see. Therefore, my plan was to prove that the opposite is thinkable as well, by bringing characters that are both blind and competent to the fore. However, before long, it was revealed that this was not the right method to achieve such a goal. Here, I will briefly discuss the reasons that necessitate a change in the course of action and define the scope of this study.

What is aimed at in this paper is to take a look at the perception of blindness through the comparison of two literary works: "The Country of the Blind" by H.G. Wells and *Blindness* by José Saramago. For in my opinion, if not acting as foils to each other, these two works surely highlight certain points in one another by contrasting elements. These points that they differ from each other will serve as cues to understand to which degree the pillars of perception are liable to change and what kind of role literature may play in it.

Saramago's novel and Wells's story focus on one curious question: What is the fate of the sole sighted person in a sightless community? In order to find an answer to this, we have to resort to our imagination, since, considering the culture we belong to, this can not be a common experience for us.

> Beyond my taste for the visual, I know what it means to be sighted, because I live in a sighted world. The language I speak, the literature I read, the art I value, the history I learned in school, the architecture I inhabit, the appliances and conveyances I employ were all created by and for sighted people. I find it easy to imagine what it's like to be sighted. I had to write this book to learn what it means to be blind. (*Sight Unseen* 3)

As Georgina Kleege states, regardless of the fact that we can see or not, we belong to a visual culture and in the minds of especially the sighted, the importance of vision and consequently the idea of what its loss may bring are embedded. A brief glance at the representations of blindness in literary texts, where life as we perceive it is reflected back at us, is enough to reveal how biased we can be concerning particularly this disability: "Even a random survey of nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction written in English reveals the same notion, which links blindness to some sort of illicit sexual union, to a tragic reversal of fortune, and to the complete loss of personal, sexual, and political power" (Kleege, *Sight Unseen* 69). The inferiority attributed to blindness is obvious. Aside from being related to unfortunate or outrageous incidents, it is also thought be incapacitating, and not only on a physical level. Furthermore, though this quote offers us a critique of relatively recent literature, this negative outlook on sightlessness dates back to much older periods. For instance, the literature of the Ancient Greeks and the holy scriptures of Abrahamic religions abound in such biased representations. It also seems that there is no geographical limitations, either. Of course these representations vary in details, but they are to be found almost all around world, though we can not speak for all communities without exception. In short, we are face to face with a persistent gloomy image, a label that the blind can not shake off.

However, this is only one part of the problem. To paint a true portrait of blind individuals, it is not enough to condemn negative comments and associations. It is equally damaging to let positive generalizations thrive in the meantime.

> Alternating with the theme of blindness as perfect evil is its exact reverse: the theme of blindness as perfect virtue. On the surface these two popular stereotypes appear to be contradictory; but it takes no great psychological insight to recognize them as opposite sides of the same counterfeit coin. What they have in common is

> the notion that blindness is a transforming event, entirely removing the victim from the ordinary dimensions of life and humanity. (Jernigan par. 36)

Kenneth Jernigan's article, "Blindness: Is Literature Against Us?," is a valuable source in that it presents a fresh perspective on the subject. Being a congenitally blind person himself, Jernigan meticulously reviews the positive stereotypes as well as the negative ones and expresses how detrimental they are in "the other"s point of view. He makes it clear that such seemingly positive attitudes are insults in disguise, for they take away "all credit for our [the blind's] achievements and all responsibility for our failings" (par. 19). Jernigan is not after retouching the same old story in order to come up with a milder, more optimistic version. He demands equality, though it would mean renouncing the privileges this special treatment brings, and taking it a little further, he argues that "The blind, in short, may (according to this view) be extraordinary, but we can never be ordinary. Don't you believe it! We are normal people neither especially blessed nor especially cursed and the fiction to the contrary must come to an end!" (par. 19)

Having been the leader of the National Federation of the Blind for over seventy years, Jernigan is at times overly sensitive in his study. Intended as a speech to be given at a NFB convention, this text eventually turns into a clarion call to the audience to embrace their responsibilities. However, writing as an art form is not necessarily guided by morality. In a literary work, the author does not have to depict a blind character, or a character with any other disability, realistically. Nevertheless, drawing our attention towards the stereotypes of blindness, Jernigan proves something. Although there is no responsibility of literature to represent the blind objectively, the sighted must admit the fact that there are old and settled stereotypes that need to be reconsidered.

> They tell us that blindness is not merely a loss to the eyes, but to the personality as well –that it is a "death," a blow to the very being of the individual. They tell us

> that the eye is a sex symbol, and that the blind person cannot be a "whole man" –or, for that matter, presumably a whole woman either. They tell us that we have multiple "lacks and losses." (par. 46)

The reason behind choosing specifically Saramago's novel and Wells's story to analyze here in this paper lies actually here. Both of these works clearly reveal what blindness is when looked at from the perspective of those who can see. They uncover how horrible the sighted believe it to be. Moreover, when they are compared to each other, these two texts make it possible for us to notice the excuses the sighted find in order not to change the image in their minds and question their validity. We'll try to learn more about the underlying fear and discover if it is justifiable or unfounded.

Our research will be consisting of four chapters. The literary texts that we are going to analyze will not be discussed separately under different headings. Instead, in the second and third chapters they'll be compared and contrasted within the frame of related topics.

At the first chapter, we'll take a look at perception of blindness in general and generally in literature. How is blindness described in literature? What do we associate it with and why? Depending on other researches done in this field, such as Michael Monbeck's *The Meaning of Blindness* and Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*, we'll seek answers to these questions and provide a background to our analysis.

Having found the base that we'll stand upon, we'll turn to the literary texts that we've chosen to analyze. Though more specific in comparison to the previous one, chapter two will also provide us background information and basic tools for further analysis. Here, we'll focus on the superiority that the ability to see supposedly grants people. If that is the case, is this process independent of external factors or contingent on them? How is this hierarchy created and how does it function? Our intention is to see through the mechanism of this phenomenon.

At the third chapter, we'll approach the same texts, but from a different perspective. Our understanding of blindness certainly has a metaphorical side to it. Due to the fact that we try to grasp what blindness means for the sighted through two allegories here, we have to spot the line between literal and metaphorical representations. Metaphors are generally blamed for fueling stereotypes. What can be said about the metaphors created by Wells and Saramago? Do they differ from each other? If so, in what ways? By delving into the depths of narration, we will discover further knowledge about a metaphor's place in a literary work.

Finally at the last chapter we'll meditate upon the possibility of changing the present perception of blindness and the role literature may play in this process. We will find out the difficulties of such a task, talk about cycles of activity and passivity, and explore the advantages literature might have in arousing awareness.

Chapter I

Perception of Blindness in General and in Literature

One of the well-known blind figures in literature is undoubtedly the figure of the blind oracle. At first glance, this figure might seem to paint a nice picture of blindness, for s/he is granted insight and a clear mind in return for his or her lost vision. However, just like other blind characters bestowed with various virtues and skills, it does not go beyond a stereotype, albeit a positive one.

In *The Meaning of Blindness*, Michael E. Monbeck examines the clichés concerning the blind, based on his researches in fields such as literature, history and mythology. He comes up with a list, dividing blind characters into fifteen categories:

1. Deserving of pity and sympathy
2. Miserable
3. In a world of darkness
4. Helpless
5. Fools
6. Useless
7. Beggars
8. Able to function
9. Compensated for their lack of sight
10. Being punished for some past sin
11. To be feared, avoided, and rejected
12. Maladjusted
13. Immoral and evil
14. Better than sighted people (idealized)
15. Mysterious. (25)

This, of course, is a flexible classification, made and condensed for the sake of convenience. Some of the categories almost overlap and some characters might be listed under a couple of them. For example, we may take a look at Oedipus from Sophocles's famous trilogy. If we try to define his blindness in terms of these categories, we can say that he first gets punished for his past sins and then becomes helpless and useless. In *Oedipus the King*, we also meet a blind oracle, Teiresias, at whose face Oedipus yells these words: "Offspring of endless Night, thou hast no power / O'er me or any man who sees the sun." (37). Teiresias is said to have been blinded by the gods as well, but later on he is bestowed with the gift of prophecy. Therefore, it is possible to consider him, as well, as an example of at least three different groups in Monbeck's list (namely the third, ninth and tenth).

In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the reader comes across another common stereotype, a blind and mentally deranged beggar. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Earl of Gloucester goes blind and turns into a fool. "The Blind Man" by Kate Chopin, presents the reader a helpless, useless blind man trying to sell some pencils that were slipped into his hands. And in Orhan Pamuk's *Benim Adım Kırmızı* (*My Name is Red*), we coincide with both a blind beggar and numerous artists who sacrifice their eyes in order to excel at their profession.

In another vein, there are some works in which blindness becomes a source of fear. E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sand-man" tells us the story of what becomes of Nathaniel, who, as a child, was scared by his mother to go to bed early. Each night, Nathaniel's mother would tell her children that the "sand-man" was coming and they should go to sleep. "Sand-man" was obviously an imaginary character; Nathaniel was aware of that, but still he associated the gruesome tales he had heard from his nanny (for example, that the sand-man put sand in children's eyes to make them pop out) with the image of the lawyer Coppelius, whom he hated. One night, after what might have been an alchemical experiment that they were working on with this wretched lawyer, Nathaniel's father dies and Coppelius runs away.

However, when Nathaniel grows up, Coppelius shows up again. Seeing his childhood nightmare resurrect causes Nathaniel to have a nervous breakdown and eventually, after witnessing a disturbing incident that brings his childhood fears before him, he commits suicide.

Freud argues that what renders this story uncanny is the fear of losing one's eyes and that he associates with castration anxiety:

> Many adults still retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no bodily injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye. We are accustomed to say, too, that we will treasure a thing as the apple of our eye. A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration. (137)

This argument is only one attempt among many to explain the source of the dread in question. Whether it is sufficient in reaching this aim might be discussed. Nevertheless, it is certain that we may find a link between blindness, or more precisely, not being able to notice something because it is hidden form sight, and fear.

Let us take a look at another literary text where we can see fear and blindness interwoven. In John Gardner's *Nickel Mountain*, grown tense with terrifying ideas in mind, George Loomis remembers the blind man he met at an antique shop and shudders. What is left in his mind from that brief encounter is the blind man's cane like a "witch-rod" and his pale skin, which gives Loomis a creepy impression as if the man had lived all his life in darkness (134).

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," there isn't any blind character. But, in a somehow similar way, in this story the eyes gain a mysterious and frightening quality, by being blocked out. Reverend Hooper hides his face behind a veil because of a sin which only he knows. The veil does not obstruct his vision; however, it prevents those around

him from seeing his eyes. This is certainly a little change, but spreads fear in the village all the same.

What may be the thing that makes us afraid? A blind man? Eyes that are hidden behind a veil? What makes us afraid is undoubtedly not individuals but the idea of blindness in our minds and the feeling of weakness that we associate it with. The anxiety does not reside in the person or object looked at, but in the mind of the onlooker.

If that is the case, we should look for the reasons that might trigger such a reaction. The first reason one can think of is that meeting a blind person or any representation of blindness brings to mind the question, "What if?" Being reminded of the possibility of losing one's ability to see, compels him or her to imagine what would happen in that case. As Monbeck puts it, "When a blind person is encountered, the sighted person may feel threatened in two ways that are closely related to this ability. First, the blind person reminds him of the vulnerability of his sight (related to the instinctive fear of being hurt or maimed in some way) and, by extension, his personal productivity and defense" (94). The image of the blind, or an encounter with a visually impaired person not only compels one to face only his/her physical fragility, but also the risk of losing self-sufficiency. As to the other type of influence a blind person may have on the sighted person, Monbeck says that "a perhaps more common reaction is the threat posed by someone who is blind and who is perceived as a functioning and productive person. In this instance, the highly valued sense of sight is shown in its true light, that is, as not absolutely essential" (94). In order to have a clearer understanding, let us elaborate on this argument a little.

In her article on the blind characters in John Gardner's novels, Edna Edith Sayers quotes a scene from *The Resurrection*, which could be a nice example to illustrate Monbeck's point:

> When a blind friend of her father-in-law's was there at the home place for a visit, there had been a thunderstorm and the lights had gone out. They could hardly find their way from one room to another; but the blind man had gone at once to the pantry, where the candles were, and set them up in their pewter holders and had lighted them with a look of unspeakable indifference, like an alien god intervening to resolve some idiotic dilemma of his creatures; and she had been alarmed. (qtd in 6)

The blind character here proves to be a functioning and productive person in the circumstances that paralyze the sighted. In the manner described in Monbeck's quote above, the feat he performs turns him into a possible source of threat in the eyes of the others for the gap between their potentials is too big and disempowering. However, the consequence is a little different from what Monbeck foresees. The sighted woman alarmed by this scene (though her eyes are not sharp, either, due to old age) does not learn the lesson that the ability to see is not irreplaceable as it is thought to be. Instead, she exaggerates the situation and likens this man not only to a god but to an "alien god," thus removing him further away from a common plane of existence.

Sayers takes this attitude of the character, as well as the attitude of George Loomis (from *Nickel Mountain*) aforementioned, to be resulting from mental problems.

> The uncanniness and alarm are entirely in the mind of George Loomis, and precisely of a piece with his deteriorating personality. Like the elderly Rose Chandler, herself not only nearly blind but also quite lame and disfigured by a goiter, George Loomis, an odd collection of disabilities and disfigurements, is afraid of blind people. Each has projected personal fears –in George's case, what we would today call post-traumatic stress disorder and clinical paranoia; in Rose's, something more like frightened old-age after a remarkably insular social life– onto

> a fellow hobbyist or neighborhood tradesman who is somehow different. In so doing, they symbolize the blind person by casting him in otherworldly terms […] (7)

The blind person, then, is like a blank page that might be filled with the onlookers' opinions, which are not necessarily born out of his own acts or features. According to Sayers, Gardner "never allows a character who is healthy and sound to make observations such as these" (7), for he grew up in a town with a large blind population, which made it easier for him to see them as a functioning part of society. However, perception of blindness is laden with symbols –both positive and negative, but mostly negative– in general and all of these do not have to be the products of an ill mind.

"Blindness symbolizes a loss of power, of individual creativity, of control. It also symbolizes the terrible sacrifice that is often necessary for certain gains in knowledge, insight, revelation, or growth" (Monbeck 142-3). Though this is a brief comment, it is quite demonstrative of the fact that blindness is associated with various concepts. However, though it may be compensated with certain gifts at times, it is basically defined as a lack that takes other things along.

If being blind is defined in such a way, what can be said about being sighted? In order to fully understand how we perceive the former, we should understand what kind of metaphorical qualities are attributed to the latter.

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall. (55-58)

These four lines come from T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Here, the power of the gaze and pressure of being seen are elegantly displayed. While the gaze turns

the person who is looked at into a small, paralyzed object like an insect pinned somewhere, it grants the onlooker the sheer power to capture and observe the other, without paying heed if it's against his or her will. In Hawthorne's story, the frightening quality Reverend's eyes gain is also related to the power of gaze. By not obstructing his view, but concealing it for those outside, the veil gives his eyes the power to see without being seen, and hence turns them into a permanent source of control. Consequently, in such a case being blind is being stuck in the position of the disempowered object.

Of course, there are many other metaphorical definitions for both sides of the coin. For example, rather than "not being able to see," being blind is "living in a world of darkness," which is "worse than death." Besides, this is not the limit for this chain of connotations. When blindness is associated with "darkness," it takes over its metaphorical usages as well. Thus, blindness becomes an apt symbol for ignorance, and the rest follows. Yet, in the meantime seeing is equated with white –the color of purity– and light –which, according to Cirlot's Dictionary of Symbols, may stand for "spirit, manifestations of morality, intellect, or virtue, and with spiritual strength" (Monbeck 121-122).

To find metaphors of blindness, we do not have to flip the pages of a dictionary, either. In our daily lives we use many of them, yet we are so accustomed that they go almost unnoticed. Some of the frequently used ones can be listed and explained as follows:

> […] we all have our "blind spot," are "in the dark" about many things, and are, therefore, exposed to dangers from unknown directions; that we are often not in complete control of either ourselves (when, for example, we are in fit of "blind rage") or the situation (which may be subject to "blind chance"); that we have eyes, but cannot see; that we have all committed the "sin" of looking at what is forbidden and are subject to the talion (the punishment –in this case blinding– that is reciprocal to the offense–looking), that we are attracted by the submergence of our

> consciousness –by "blinding"– in sensual pleasure, in irresponsibility, and in compulsiveness. (Monbeck 146-147).

Only after taking these metaphors out of their contexts and pondering over them separately it becomes obvious that there are implicit messages hidden in our daily speech. The last one among those mentioned in the quote above, relates blindness to sin and pleasure, and brings us back to the link between sexuality and the eyes. Depending on various texts, Monbeck summarizes the theories of psychoanalysis on this subject in this way: "The piercing quality of vision is phallic in nature. The eye and its lids can be seen to resemble the female genitals, a symbolic similarity that is expressed, for example, by the Latin *pupillae*, the Greek *kophn*, and the Spanish *niña*, which in each instance means both 'the pupil of the eye' and 'maiden'" (140).

Though it is possible to make such an analogy and though it is a well-known analogy indeed, by no means can it exhaust of the metaphorical weight of blindness, nor has a privilege over the other implications hidden in this word. In his article on the motif of blindness in Sophokles's works, R.G.A. Buxton claims that "to regard blindness as merely 'standing for' castration is quite as arbitrary as to regard dumbness as 'standing for' madness. The priority of castration over blindness cannot be demonstrated from the Greek evidence" (35). Buxton studies the works of Sophokles and his claims are confined to the field Ancient Greek texts. But still, a point that he makes is applicable to the literature of all times. "In using blindness as an image to represent the limits of humanity, Sophokles was making explicit something already implicit in the logic of Greek myth" (35). Then, rather than depending on a fixed, universal truth; negative and positive perceptions of blindness might depend on the assumptions of cultures. Monbeck makes a similar claim as well. However, the sources he counts are various and more comprehensive. "[…] there is […] a broad range of other data that will be used by an individual in filling out his categorization, among them,

secondhand information, imagination, directly received past attitudes, superstitions, associations, and so on" (Monbeck 81). No matter how "natural" they may seem, the images of blindness may rest upon multiple other factors which are in fact unrelated to the physical condition, but readily available.

Blindness is a source for and in ways related to many metaphorical expressions. We define many concepts by comparing or resembling them to blindness. On the other hand, our understanding of blindness is shaped through the same metaphors in turn. Perceived through the veil of all these negative metaphors, both of the past and present, blindness is carried to a special position. About sight and its loss, Monbeck conludes that "our beliefs about them can be colored by our emotionality, our fears and terrors, our inflated sense of our worth, and our sense of inferiority" (149). But he also has a warning to give: "Most importantly, however, we often fail to distinguish between the symbolic and the actual, between the meaning of sight and blindness and the physical sense of sight and the actual loss of that sense." The greatest danger concerning the perception of blindness lurks here: Stagnancy. One can not change something of which s/he is not aware, and in this case there is the risk of falling into a loop.

After discussing Anita Shreve's *Eden Close*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed*, Kleege makes this comment:

> These are the old stories of blindness. They make me weary and a little afraid. They take Oedipus at his word, and start from the assumption that blindness is both an outward sign of hidden sin and a punishment worse than death. They show no life after blindness, offer no hope to the blind, except that the condition might prove impermanent or that death might come quick. Oedipus does not adapt to his blindness. […] If Oedipus got used to the idea of his lost sight, much less adopted new methods of getting around or recognizing people, then his blindness would be

> less of a punishment. He would cease to be the instructive and frightening spectacle he voluntarily made of himself. (73-74)

The sighted do not know what blindness is. We create an image for blindness in our heads via the easily accessible metaphors that we've become inured to. However, it is not the end of the road. Though we've inherited so many biases from the past, and though they are strong and intimidating, it is always possible to unblock the road to adaptation and eventually to change, first by noticing the mechanism at work here.

In the following chapters we will examine two literary works in detail: "The Country of the Blind" by H.G.Wells and *Blindness* by José Saramago. Through these texts we'll be able to discuss both the literal and metaphorical representations of blindness. We are going to see how mental capacity and moral awareness are symbolized through a physical ability. But before that, we will continue from where we leave here and discuss the dynamics of a perfect adaptation.

Chapter II

In the Country of the Blind, Who Will Be the King?: Cultural Illusions in "The Country of the Blind" by H. G. Wells and *Blindness* by José Saramago

Considering the plots of Saramago's *Blindness* and Wells's "The Country of the Blind," we can say that basically we are dealing with the same story: a story that revolves around the sole sighted person in a blind community. Both works speak of disasters and somehow, metaphorically or literally, tie them to blindness. Yet, their plots differ from each other at a very important point. The fates of the protagonists diverge halfway through the texts and while one of them becomes the eyes of those who cannot see, the other ends up exhausted trying to prove his worth. In this chapter, we are going to look for the reasons behind this contrast and find what it takes to be the king in the country of the blind. Our intention is to discover through these works if there is a solid base to the illusion of superiority over the blind/visually impaired.

We'll start our analysis with a summary of the short story by Wells. In "The Country of the Blind," after a climbing accident, the protagonist Nunez finds himself in a mythical country inhabited by a race of blind people. This place, which is "imagined" in where Nunez comes from as the Country of the Blind, has been cut off from the outside world and cultures by a natural disaster. Due to an epidemic, all the people of this valley gradually lost their sight and after fifteen generations totally forgot what the word "sight" even means.

Rumors in the outer world say that such a place exists, yet there is no actual evidence. When Nunez understands that he accidentally set foot on this hidden land, a proverb he is familiar with sounds in his ears:

> Nunez advanced with the confident steps of a youth who enters upon life. All the stories of the lost valley and the Country of the Blind had come back to his mind, and through his thoughts ran this old proverb, as if it were a refrain –

"In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King."

"In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King."

And very civilly he gave them greeting. He talked to them and used his eyes. (20)

As this quote clearly shows, Nunez is sure that he'll charm the natives. What gives him this confidence is the perspective of the culture he belongs to, condensed here in the proverb that echoes in his mind. It is only natural that Nunez thinks he'll be superior to the blind villagers, for this message encoded in his brain and very likely validated by what he's seen or heard in his homeland "where man have eyes and see" (24), is enough to make him assume that he has fallen amid blind, therefore helpless people.

However, in his "superiority" Nunez also finds the right to rule the others, to be "their heaven-sent king and master" (27). He emphasizes his ability to see with his gestures and speech and in the meantime he makes plans to seize the crown. "While he meditated his coup d'état, he did what he was told and learnt the manners and customs of the Country of the Blind. He found working and going about at night a particularly irksome thing, and he decided that that should be the first thing he would change" (29). Nunez makes plans not only to be the king of the blind, but also to change their lives according to his taste. It does not occur to him that these changes might be unnecessary or even incapacitating. Not interested in the visual advantage daylight would give them, the villagers prefer working at night and sleeping in the warmth of sun and hence, this practice is for the benefit of all. In short, Nunez acts according to the image of a ruler who owes his position to the power to threaten his subjects, in this case with his genetic gift, and wants to found a system of exploitation.

Nevertheless, Nunez can not get the reaction he expects. From the day on which he sets foot in the Country of the Blind, the villagers think of him as "a wild man –using wild words" (23) and imply that his mind is yet unformed (27). In time, Nunez grasps the fact that he is not so superior to those people as he thought he was upon entering the village. When he decides

to hide from the villagers in order to prove that he can fool them, it surprises him to discover that they can hear the sound his feet make when he steps on the grass (28). When he mentions to one of them the proverb of the outer world, "In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King," thinking that it will cut him down to size, the man asks him the meaning of the word "blind" (28-29). Then Nunez understands that if one does not know something, s/he does not notice he is bereft of it. Thereupon, he tries to prove the villagers the advantages of sight, yet he fails to do that, either. Instead, he learns that the ability to see, which he thinks so highly of, is efficient only on certain conditions: when there is light and no obstruction to hinder his perspective.

When he can not prove his talents despite all his efforts, and, to top it all, ends up being ridiculed, Nunez thinks of resorting to violence. But at that instant he notices that "it was impossible for him to hit a blind man in cold blood" (32). What he discovers here is his unwillingness to hit a person, but more importantly, his unwillingness to hit a *blind* person who is thought to be unable to defend himself. Therefore, what comes to surface is the fact that he still believes in the superiority of sight over blindness. Still, with a surge of panic, he thinks that he is trapped and his dreams of grandeur comes to the brink of collapse. In a frenzy he strikes at one of his opponents encircling him and runs away, only to turn back after "he thought chiefly of ways of fighting and conquering these people, and it grew clear that for him no practicable way was possible" (36). Thus, Nunez ends up to be a slave in the country he thought he would rule, and later, upon being forced to have a surgery to remove his eyes, he flees from the valley. Finally, it can be inferred from the last lines of the story that he dies trying to climb over the impassable mountains.

Now that we've finished the summary of the story, let us turn to Saramago's *Blindness* for a similar treatment. Again, an epidemic sweeps the country and drags everyone into a white mist. Only one person, for unknown reasons, maintains her ability to see and just like

Nunez, remains as the sole sighted character in the story. In the meantime, the rest of the population tries to cope with their common loss and its results.

On this society this strange epidemic leaves various effects, for its members have certain, *negative* judgments in mind.

> Like most people, he had often played as a child at pretending to be blind, and, after keeping his eyes closed for five minutes, he had reached the conclusion that blindness, undoubtedly a terrible affliction, might still be relatively bearable if the unfortunate victim had retained sufficient memory, not just of the colours, but also of forms and planes, surfaces and shapes, assuming of course, that this one was not born blind. (6)

Apart from reinforcing the "indisputable fact" that not being able to see is horrible, this quote contains the conviction that total loss of sight –if it results in disconnection from all kinds of visual stimuli– or congenital blindness equals to a complete, unbearable disaster. It presents seeing as if it were the only way to gain knowledge about "forms and planes, surfaces and shapes." The person in question depends on his five minute experience to form this pessimistic and unfair opinion. But there are others who have even gloomier outlooks. When the white mist shrouds their eyes for the first time, it is revealed that some of them associate blindness with darkness: "But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white" (3). Later in the following pages, the reader comes across the reflection of another conviction, put into words in vivid detail. It takes some time till the epidemic spreads to the whole population and till then, the first group of people smitten by the disease is kept under surveillance by soldiers, who "would have liked to aim their weapons and, without compunction, shoot down those imbeciles moving before their eyes like lame crabs, waving their unsteady pincers in search of their missing leg" (101). As these lines make it obvious, in the eyes of the observer, blindness is associated also with

animality. And our last example, the following dialogue clearly shows how closely related blindness and death are in the sighted minds: “We have a colonel here who believes the solution would be to shoot the blind as soon as they appear, Corpses instead of blind men would scarcely improve the situation, To be blind is not the same as being dead, Yes, but to be dead is to be blind” (108). Under these circumstances, after meeting their inevitable fate, some people are surprised to notice that their sexuality is not lost (49) or their minds are clearer than ever (75), while some feel extremely desperate and break into tears (92).

Meanwhile, a group of seven people, in the guidance of whom the narrator refers as “the doctor’s wife,” tries to survive the chaos. To her, the right to command is given voluntarily by the other members of this group: “You're not blind, said the girl with dark glasses, that's why you were the obvious person to give orders and organize the rest of us” (256). Though the woman does not question her appropriateness for this role, she revises the definition by saying, “I don't give orders, I organize things as best I can, I am simply the eyes that the rest of you no longer possess.” This discussion comes to an end by an unanimous approval that she is “a kind of natural leader, a king with eyes in the land of the blind.” The guidance of this woman seems almost natural for the band, for she is the only person maintaining her ability to see. Though they share the same unique position, the doctor’s wife does what Nunez can not do in the country of the blind and takes the leading role. But how? We must take a closer look at their conditions to answer this question.

After the blindness outbreak, the first solution that the government comes up with is to put the first victims of the illness in quarantine, as we’ve mentioned, under close watch by soldiers. Soon, in the face of the contagion rate, efforts prove to be of no avail and without any announcement, those people confined to an asylum are left to their fate. Thrown into this abnormal environment, these blind internees sink into what might be called apathy. At first comes the loss of identity: “What he said was, I'm a policeman, and the doctor's wife thought

to herself, He didn't give his name, he too knows that names are of no importance here" (59). Later on, apart from the doctor's wife no one winds his/her watch anymore, and just like their identities they lose their time concept, too (71). And finally, they discard their appreciation of beauty: "With all of us ending up blind, as appears to be happening, who's interested in aesthetics" (126). Apart from these and most importantly, with the scarceness of food and other sources and in the absence of an authority to watch over, the notion of morality takes a huge blow. In the chaos that ensues, cases of rape, murder and exploitation abound.

This, actually, is the disappearance of an entire culture, a retreat back to the state before civilization. As the doctor's wife puts it, the permanence of this situation means that "these blind internees, unless we come to their assistance, will soon turn into animals, worse still, into blind animals" (132-133). Put in the position of a leader thanks to her ability to see, this woman acknowledges the fact that their humanity is reduced and urges the rest to maintain what they have: "If we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals, words she repeated so often that the rest of the ward ended up by transforming her advice into a maxim, a dictum, into a doctrine, a rule of life" (116). However, as the circumstances deteriorate and it is revealed that outside the walls of the asylum things are no better, she understands that this is not enough to fill the gap. To the girl with dark glasses she says, "Your poor parents, poor you, when you meet up, blind in eyes and blind in feelings, because the feelings with which we have lived and which allowed us to live as we were, depended on our having the eyes we were born with, without eyes feelings become something different, we do not know how, we do not know what" (252). If we set aside the metaphorical meaning and moral implications –to be discussed later–, from this quote we may infer a fact that can not be denied. That is, what we've got here is much more than simply the loss of the eyes; with the outbreak, over an extremely short period of time a whole population is bereft of its lifestyle which was *based* on their ability to see. They

are thrown into a new world and as a result, apart from vital necessities, a new set of values, new codes are required to meet their needs. Still, with the shock created by this radical change, it is not easy to find the way out, especially for the doctor's wife: "It did not occur to her that all around her the people were blind yet managed to live, she herself would also have to turn blind in order to understand that people get used to anything" (225).

Until the very end, with the exception of small groups, the people of Saramago's imaginary country can not get used to blindness and before finally gaining their sight as miraculously as they lose it in the first place, a large number of them die in the resulting chaos. As it is implied by the narrator in the quote above, the key to survive is apparently adaptation and it brings us again to Wells's story, for this is exactly how the villagers in Wells's story pull through. See the description of the villagers as a whole, a unit:

> It was marvelous with what confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities of path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedure arose naturally from their special needs. Their senses had become marvelously acute; they could hear and judge the slightest gesture of a man a dozen paces away-could hear the very beating of his heart. Intonation had long replaced expression with them, and touches gesture, and their work with hoe and spade and fork was as free and confident as garden work can be. Their sense of smell was extraordinarily fine; they could distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can, and they went about the tending of the llamas, who lived among the rocks above and came to the wall for food and shelter, with ease and confidence. (29-30)

The quote above describes at least a three-level adaptation. First of all, we are told that the villagers have organized the surroundings according to their needs. This, consequently, renders them more effective, for they live in a land with no obstacles to get in their way. And as the third step of this process, in the long run, their other senses are sharpened. Though they experience a great change, which in other cases might cause a social trauma, they find ways to get over it. As Michael Monbeck states in *The Meaning of Blindness,* "Wells admirably demonstrates that man can and does adapt his existence to whatever conditions he must face. The inhabitants of this 'world of blindness' are shown as completely self-sufficient and, because of the fortunate circumstances of their valley, reasonably well off" (64). This is a fine summary in that it also mentions the chance factor in the whole process. The village is abundant in water supplies and has a mild climate, therefore it is suitable for both farming and stockbreeding. In such conditions the villagers do not have to hunt or struggle against the forces of nature to survive and this gives them an opportunity to adjust to their loss.

However, what we have said about how these people adjusted themselves to this new environment is not enough to display their success thoroughly. "Blind men of genius had arisen among them and questioned the shreds of belief and tradition they had brought with them from their seeing days, and had dismissed all these things as idle fancies, and replaced them with new and saner explanations" (25). This community has created itself a distinctive understanding of philosophy and mythology and gone through, as Kleege points out, a "perfect adaptation" (*Sight Unseen* 79). When physical adaptation is supported by a transformation of mentality, the risk of retreating back to a state of chaos is fully eliminated.

Turning back to Saramago's novel, we can see that there is a chance of survival, although the conditions are harsher than those in the happy valley of Wells's creation. "If we stay together we might manage to survive, if we separate we shall be swallowed up by the masses and destroyed, You mentioned that there are organised groups of blind people,

observed the doctor, this means that new ways of living are being invented and there is no reason why we should finish up by being destroyed, as you predict" (256). For those who can accommodate themselves or at least can come together there is a light at the end of the tunnel. For example, upon joining forces to exploit the people around and establishing a system that works for them, a pack of blind men stand out amongst the others and their increasing confidence affects their attitudes as well. "The leader of the blind hoodlums, gun in hand, came up to them, as agile and frisky as if he were able to see them" (178).

Up till now, we've completed the summaries of both works and by means of that we found the chance to see the role of adaptation in dealing with a disability. Now, it is the time to get back to the question of what it takes to be the king in the country of the blind. What gives the doctor's wife the crown, but passes over Nunez?

> "In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king."
>
> "Oh yes –Wells said that, didn't he? Only in the story it turned out not to be true."…
>
> "Wells imagined a people who had adapted themselves to blindness. I don't think this is going to happen here –I don't see how it can." (qtd. in von Koppenfels 167)

This dialogue comes from John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, which belongs, as Werner von Koppenfels argues in "'These Irritant Bodies': Blinding and Blindness in Dystopia," to the same tradition of writing –the Menippean satire, which will be discussed in the next chapter– as Wells's story and Saramago's novel discussed here. However, it wouldn't shock us to read these lines in *Blindness*, either. The conversation starts with the proverb, the problematic assumption that appears many times in both texts and the second person to speak challenges it right away with the example of Nunez. Then, a comparison of the situations at hand yields the condition on which the this saying is valid: In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king, *if* people fail to adapt themselves to blindness. As we've seen, this is also

the case in Saramago's novel. Since the plague takes their eyes abruptly, they have no time to digest the chance. What happens, then, when adaptation is incomplete? Though it is not sufficient anymore, these newly blinded people cling to what is left of their former culture and to the only sighted person, for it is their only chance.

Comparing the protagonists of "The Country of the Blind" and *Blindness*, Werner von Koppenfels argues that the doctor's wife,

> […] has resisted the threat of blinding, and not degenerated to the state of the wild brutes and primitive hordes that have invaded the initially tolerable life in the asylum. Hers is an act of retribution and liberation, as, later, is her setting fire to the den of the hoodlums; it is not an act of individual liberation, as in the case of Nunez, but of social responsibility and moral leadership. Through her passion (in the double sense of the word) she has realised what in Nunez is only a naive ambition. (171)

It is true that these two characters have different motives for their actions. However, attributing success to passion should not suffice in this case. Nunez ends up to be a slave, not due to a lack of passion or a social or moral goal. Even if he acted for a noble cause and with all his might, he wouldn't be able to reach achieve his ambitions. Nunez is doomed to fail because he is an individual trying to compete with a culture, which, unlike the one in Saramago's novel, can not be described as a deprived version of the old.

Therefore, we have to find an alternative saying to explain Nunez's case, just as Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne come up with in their article "Culture as Disability": "In the Country of the Blind, a One-eyed Man is confused and confusing. That is what it is like to be in another culture" (325). The tension between two cultures –one being the culture of the blind and the other, the sighted culture represented by Nunez– adds another dimension to the discussion. Let us follow this cue to dive deeper into the story.

Though they are different in many ways from each other and especially on a moral level, in fact there are some important similarities between Nunez and the doctor's wife. The former steps into a world of blindness with a biased mind, just like the latter and all the other characters do in Saramago's novel. McDermott and Varenne defines this situation in this way: "Before entering the Country of the Blind, Nunez thought that sight was essential to being fully cultured and that having sight in a world of people who cannot see would net him the cultural capital of a king" (326). When he knows for sure that he has fallen into the legendary country, Nunez thinks a "great and enviable adventure" is on the way (20). And the first impression the inhabitants of the valley make on him matches the image he carries in his head. "The three stood side by side, not looking at him, but with their ears directed towards him, judging him by his unfamiliar steps. They stood close together like men a little afraid, and he could see their eyelids closed and sunken, as though the very balls beneath had shrunk away. There was an expression near awe on their faces" (20). This is how a blind person should be according to Nunez: timid and in awe. If he is the embodiment of the all the ideals he knows –sophisticated, experienced and physically able–, as people who can not live up to these standards, how else they can be? In *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*, Renata Salecl analyzes the mechanism of hate speech and underscores its relationship with identity and culture. By attacking a person of a different race, gender or minority, "the speaker searches for confirmation of his or her identity" (120), an approval of his/her superiority over the other and his/her place in society. Salecl also touches upon the question if the speaker is responsible for his or her actions and she summarizes the answer Judith Butler offers: "the subject who utters injurious speech merely quotes from the existing corpus of racist speech; he or she repeats, re-cites, fragments of the discursive environment, of the reasoning and habits of the community" (119). Though Nunez understands very early in the story that he can not attack and hurt the villagers by words, in Salecl's article there are some relevant points that we can

make use of to explain the protagonist's attitude towards the blind. Nunez's behaviours are founded upon "the reasoning and habits of his community," as well. He acts according to the norms of his culture and expects a reaction –filled with fear and awe– that will confirm his superiority as a seeing person. He considers the villagers as a lacking lot, for he looks at them with a negative mindset, already convinced that he'll find defects. Yet, the course of events prove him wrong. For instance, while the villagers think the voices they hear belong to angels, Nunez knows what the real source is for he can see the birds in the sky. However, this fact does not bring him any advantage in his struggle to be the king of the blind. In other words, ability does not necessarily mean superiority. Especially, if you define superiority as the power to harm the other.

Though she does not define it in this way, the doctor's wife also believes that sight grants her a superiority, albeit undeserved. "For the first time since she had arrived there, the doctor's wife felt as if she were behind a microscope and observing the behaviour of a number of human beings who did not even suspect her presence, and this suddenly struck her as being contemptible and obscene. I have no right to look if the others cannot see me, she thought to herself " (65). At one point, her ability to see the others while they can not return her gaze bothers her conscience, just like the time Nunez's conscience curbs his actions and almost deters him from striking at the blind men in a panicked state. To the doctor's wife this privilege is more explicitly obscene; nevertheless, it is clear that both characters believe that the loss of eyes naturally leaves people vulnerable and exposed.

As these two instances display, the point where Nunez and the doctor's wife feel the pressure of moral values differs. The former finds himself in a dilemma when he comes to the brink of harming another person physically, while the latter feels bad upon thinking she is, in a way, violating other people's privacy. But the risk of abuse is always there for both of them, since it is inherent in the sighted culture that they belong to. Here, in this dialogue, is another

interpretation of the proverb that lies at the core of both works, made by unspecified blind characters in *Blindness*: “If only we had someone here who could see just a little, Well, he'd try coming up with some ruse in order to make sure he got the lion's share, As the saying goes, in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king” (98). Taking all of these approaches into consideration, we can say that sight is seen as a source of power over the blind and thought to be susceptible to exploitation for it “naturally” creates a great inequality in terms of power between two parties.

Natural as it may seem, this does not have to be the case in every confrontation between the sighted and the blind. What happens to Nunez is an apt example. Despite the fact that his eyes were priceless in his homeland, his skills are of no use in the country he falls into. He challenges what he sees as a disability, but blindness is no longer a disability in this new world.

To elaborate on this idea, we can turn to a comment Kleege makes on certain writers who put on paper the accounts of the lives they lead without the guidance of one or even two senses we generally consider indispensable. “What these blind authors have in common is an urgent desire to represent their experiences of blindness as something besides the absence of sight. Unlike the Hypothetical, they do not feel themselves to be deficient or partial –sighted people minus sight– but whole human beings who have learned to attend to their non-visual senses in different ways” (“Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account” 187). The inhabitants of Wells’s imaginary country are even further ahead in this race, for they have no memory of sight anymore, nor have they anyone to remind them of such a sense. “The daily routine of the inhabitants is supported by a ‘four-sense’ theology and cosmogony; they have no remembrance or even a conception of sight and so count it a harmful deviation or mutation. Wells, therefore, indicates the true nature both of normality and deviation and of the relationship between a majority and minority” (Monbeck 64).

Our discussion so far leads us to one final argument that puts together all of the ideas we've discussed above: Disabilities are, in fact, simply cultural constructions (McDermott and Varenne 327). It is the majority who, through submission to its authority, sustain the existence of normalcy: "In every society, there are ways of being locked out. Race, gender, or beauty can serve as the dividing point as easily as being sighted or blind. In every society, it takes many people –both disablers and and their disabled– to get that job done" (McDermott and Varenne 327).

That is why, rather than an "overman" he imagines himself to be, Nunez is taken to be a lacking person. "'I fell down,' he said; 'I couldn't see in this pitchy darkness.' There was a pause as if the unseen persons about him tried to understand his words. Then the voice of Correa said: 'He is but newly formed. He stumbles as he walks and mingles words that mean nothing with his speech'" (24). Nunez is a disabled outcast in the country of the blind, for "those who cannot show the right skills at the right time in the right format are considered out of the race for the rewards of the wider culture" (McDermott and Varenne 335). Though he is able to see, his other senses, the ones that are of importance in this culture, are not fine enough. It is the same game that is played, but the rules are just the opposite. "They were moving in upon him quickly, groping, yet moving rapidly. It was like playing blind man's buff, with everyone blindfolded except one" (34).

In the light of what we've discussed so far, let us pose our question one last time: What does it take to be the king in the country of the blind? First, we have to give the definition of a king in this context. Here, the king is the person whose superiority is acknowledged by the others and due to this she or he is granted the right to command the others, therefore a natural leader, one might say. The problem is this: We search for a static ability that can put a person in a more elevated position than the rest. There is no intrinsic ability to guarantee that; as long as the use of it is denied by the others, the "gift" of the person is of no use in gaining power.

In this case, the "king" would be someone who belongs to the dominant culture, even if it is in ruins, no matter if s/he can see or not. The characters in *Blindness* choose the doctor's wife as their leader, for they do no know any other way of living than the one they are used to and she is the only person able to help them live so. However, Nunez encounters a culture so different from his own that he can not add anything to it. The doctor's wife is more than adequate, whereas Nunez is deficient. In short, these events do not say anything about the nature of a "disability" or a fixed superiority; these are choices not based on truth, but on the hardened habits of masses.

Chapter III

Where to Draw the Line: The Limits of a Metaphor

> "… if you look at the statistics of casualties, just take notice of the proportion that has been stung across the eyes, and blinded. It's remarkable –and significant."
>
> "Of what?" I asked.
>
> "Of the fact that they know what is the surest way to put a man out of action." (qtd. in von Koppenfels 167).

This claim made about blindness by a fictional character in John Wyndham's novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, is undoubtedly not a proof that sight is the most important and powerful of our senses. However, "the fact" presented in the dialogue above is not baseless at all. Remember the plot of Saramago's *Blindness*; if the nature of the plague suggested by the title were different, if there were an outbreak of deafness for example, would the magnitude of the ensuing catastrophe be that great? Though it is predictable that this scenario would likewise produce a remarkable obstacle to overcome, compared to the situation imagined by the novelist, it would be far less grave in its effects. Plunged deeper into a world of images with transformative inventions such as the printing press, camera and television, we depend heavily on sight, even to the point of sacrificing from hearing, taste, smell and touch. There is a hierarchy of senses, but it is of our own making. Owing to this the sighted suffer terribly in the absence of their ability to see; yet, they mistakenly take it to be a sign of its intrinsic irreplaceability.

In the previous chapter, though, through reading "The Country of the Blind" and *Blindness* from different perspectives, we saw that blindness as a disability is a cultural construction and our opinions about it are formed in the shadow of our inexperience. But in the humdrum of everyday lives, this fact goes unnoticed. The mechanism at work here is almost imperceptible, for it is veiled by metaphors of sorts. The nature of sightlessness is

generally defined depending on clichés substituted for knowledge. A simple example to this would be the myth of living in darkness. Though this is not the case for the majority of visually impaired people with visual acuity lower than what is considered normal, it is a widely held belief that blindness leaves a person in total absence of light (Kleege 14). However, this myth does not seem to be true even for those who are totally blind, because of the fact that, according to some studies done in the field, light is required in order to perceive darkness itself (Monbeck 7).

This being the case, metaphorical texts are accused of representing the blind in a negative way. Naomi Schor begins her article, "Blindness as Metaphors," by reminiscing Susan Sontag's argument on the relationship between metaphors and diseases:

> There is a casual cruelty, an offhanded thoughtlessness, about metaphors of illness. As Susan Sontag demonstrated some years ago, illness constitutes a special category of metaphor; to speak of cancer as just another word for what the dictionary defines as "a source of evil and anguish" is to massively deny the reality of mutilating surgery, chemotherapy, hair loss, pain, and hospice care, but also, and more importantly, to freight an already onerous diagnosis with the crippling stigma of an unspeakable disease. (Schor 76)

When they are associated with diseases, metaphors exceed their descriptive function and supersede facts. According to Sontag, such metaphors may even "kill", for they can influence people negatively by portraying their situation even gloomier than it already is and dissuade them from seeking a cure (qtd. in Schor 77). Schor claims that "metaphors of disablement and disfigurement" fall into this category as well, in that they also "void words of their charge of pain and sorrow, dread and death, and invest them with the language of stigma and shame and burden them with negativity" (Schor 77). Later in her article, to prove her point, she examines the image of the "Beauty and the Beast," a traditional metaphorization of blindness –beauty

being blind and generally female– which keeps recurring in fiction and film. Following the same arguement but focusing solely on literature, Kenneth Jernigan, however, takes the point further and accuses a whole genre for presenting a symbolic and therefore negative blindness:

> The last of the popular literary themes is that which deals with blindness not literally but symbolically, for purposes of satire or parable. From folklore to film the image recurs of blindness as a form of death or damnation, or as a symbol of other kinds of unseeing (as in the maxim, where there is no vision, the people perish). In this category would come H.G. Well's classic "The Country of the Blind"; also, "The Planet of the Blind", by Paul Corey; and Maeterlinck's "The Blind". […]
>
> In virtually all of these symbolic treatments, there is an implied acceptance of blindness as a state of ignorance and confusion, of the inversion of normal perceptions and values, and of a condition equal to if not worse than death. (pars. 43-44)

Sontag, Schor and Jernigan approach sensitively towards this subject and condemn metaphors for distorting perception. However, solving this problem is not as easy as pointing the finger. Though they result in a terrible image of those they depict, it is impossible to get rid of metaphors once and for all. Depending on her reading of Sontag, Schor acknowledges this fact:

> To be *against metaphor* makes as little sense as to be against interpretation, to cite Sontag one last time. The lesson of structuralism is, as the linguists and philosophers of the past forty years or so have irrefutably demonstrated, that the fantasy of stripping language of its figurality, is just that, a fantasy and thus doomed to fail. The catachresis of blindness cannot be dissolved by ideological fiat. (Schor 83)

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Mark Johnsen and George Lakoff touch upon the same idea, yet by drawing attention to the neurological basis of metaphors' birth.

> Metaphor is a neural phenomenon. What we have referred to as metaphorical mappings appear to be realized physically as neural maps. They constitute the neural mechanism that naturally, and inevitably, recruits sensory-motor inference for use in abstract thought. Primary metaphors arise spontaneously and automatically without our being aware of them. There are hundreds of such primary conceptual metaphors, most of them learned unconsciously and automatically in childhood simply by functioning in the everyday world with a human body and brain. (256-7)

Metaphors, then, at least up to a point, are unavoidable. It seems that using some of them is not a matter of intellectual preference, but of a necessity for comprehension and communication, us being embodied creatures.

But is it necessary to let go of metaphors altogether in the first place? Are all the metaphorical texts guilty of distracting the reader from reality and therefore, when they are about blindness, detrimental to its image? Though Jernigan puts all the symbolic texts into the same category, there must be differences between them. Our primary texts, "The Country of the Blind" and *Blindness,* for instance, are similar in terms of plot and in that they both talk about a metaphorical blindness; nevertheless, as I hope to prove, it is also true that they differ to a great extent, and in ways that influence their effect on perception of blindness. A close reading of both texts is required to understand where the limits are when it comes to metaphors.

> It [Menippean satire] stages paradoxical inversions of normalcy by establishing a heterotopia, or Other Place (to use a term coined by Foucault), from which to cast a fresh and disillusioned eye on the state of the world […] By means of wittily or

> sarcastically applied cognitive shocks it attacks closed systems of thought and social organisation, the powers of obscurantism, and the totalitarian outcome of enlightenment gone bankrupt. (von Koppenfels 156)

Being "historical variants of the same multiform genre" (von Koppenfels 156), Wells's story and Saramago's novel take shape around the same core. Both texts intend to make the reader grasp the danger inherent in closed systems of thought. However, in his article, von Koppenfels also warns us promptly that these examples of Menippean satire come with "obvious differences of plot, style, and period" (156). Still, despite the fact that he draws the attention to the existence of divergences, von Koppenfels dwells more on similarities between these texts. About this genre, the author further states that "it is a basic rule of this particular literary game that we have to watch the utopian, or rather dystopian, worlds through the eyes of an outsider. In 'The Country of the Blind' and *The Day of the Triffids* the seeing man among the benighted assumes this function of central –and peripheral– intelligence" (170). It is true that the framework consists of the experience and opinions of the sighted person; in Wells's story the source happens to be Nunez, while in Saramago's novel it is the doctor's wife. However, the role of the narrator to mold this material should not be overlooked, either. "In dystopian fiction the reader is at the same time inside and outside the Undesirable Society, looking through the 'traveller's' eyes, and listening to the authorial or implied narrator's voice" (171). That is why, I believe, it is necessary to make a narratological reading to grasp the full meaning of these two texts and to highlight the difference between them. In the previous chapter we saw that in both *Blindness* and "The Country of the Blind" the protagonists face disasters, at least according to their own points of view. But if we are to study perception of blindness in detail, especially through literary works with such dominant narrators, we have to read between the lines. The narrators' attitudes towards the characters

and events should be discussed individually, otherwise we might fall short of our intentions, since the effect of their perspectives on the stories is too strong to be ignored.

Let us, then, take this path and continue with von Koppenfels's small description of the narrator and narratorial voice in *Blindness*, "In Saramago this voice, dry, sarcastic, full of black humour, is prominent. The speaker is that figure familiar from Swift and Wells, the moralist disguised as an ironist" (171). Though described in the same way with the one in Wells's story, as to the narratorial voice in *Blindness* we can say that it is explicitly omniscient and more interfering than the former. The narrator frequently interrupts the flow of the story to make a comment such as this: "With the passing of time, as well as the social evolution and genetic exchange, we ended up putting our conscience in the colour of blood and in the salt of tears, and, as if that were not enough, we made our eyes into a kind of mirror turned inwards, with the result that they often show without reserve what we are verbally trying to deny" (17). It is apparent that the narrator has no concern for subtlety and the underlying moral tone is almost always preserved in the points s/he steps in. Sometimes, again not making any attempt to conceal his or her voice, but without disrupting the course of events, s/he chooses to embellish the tale with similar remarks. "The blind man opened them [his eyes] wide, as if to facilitate the examination, but the doctor took him by the arm and installed him behind a scanner which anyone with imagination might see as a new version of the confessional, eyes replacing words, and the confessor looking directly into the sinner's soul" (14). The similarity lies in the fact that here, too, instead of narrating the events as they are, or as they are seen by the characters, the narrator jumps into the story and charges it with a metaphor. The way s/he describes the scene, also, just as in the previous quote, is intertwined with familiar associations of blindness: eyes reflecting the soul and betraying the sins. In short, the narrator seems to be luring us away from a literal understanding of blindness and the quote below displays this objective in full circle:

> Let us try to imagine, not the dialogue for that is over and done with, but the men who took part in it, they are there, face to face, as if they could see each other, which in this case is impossible, it is enough that the memory of each of them should bring out from the dazzling whiteness of the world the mouth that is articulating the words, and then, like a slow irradiation coming from this centre, the rest of the faces will start to appear, one an old man, the other not so old, and anyone who can still see in this way cannot really be called blind. (183)

The narrator tries to convince the reader of that mental images made up of visual memories can replace the function of the eyes. Here, we face the utmost example of metaphorization: over a few lines, people who are physically blind are stripped completely of their blindness, and granted a compensatory, metaphorical sight in return.

This act of substituting literal blindness with the metaphorical, actually, is not confined to one paragraph or certain scenes, nor is it peculiar to the narrator. We might speak of the same thing for the novel in its entirety. While the story comes to a close, the plague disappears by itself and their eyesight restored, the characters articulate their doubts, saying that maybe they've been blind from the beginning: "Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see" (326). This retrospective analysis renders all the experience of the characters unreal, part of something other than itself, part of a moral lesson. "At the end we are being told […] that wilful blindness leading to barbarism has become universal in the contemporary world. It is a verdict one may not wish to quarrel with, but its break with the Menippean mode of irony makes it a curiously pat conclusion to a powerful parable" (von Koppenfels 171-2). While I agree with von Koppenfels about the message the novel gives and its conclusion being somewhat pat, I belive this acknowledgement of the characters at the end is in accordance

with the rest of the book, and therefore not so much of a curious divergence. Rather than that, it is a final embrace of the metaphorical blindness, the true topic of the novel, which keeps resurfacing every now and then.

Though it can not wipe the effects of the characters' physical condition, throughout the novel a figurative blindness hangs in the air and the characters occasionally allude to it. "Fear can cause blindness, said the girl with dark glasses, Never a truer word, that could not be truer, we were already blind the moment we turned blind, fear struck us blind, fear will keep us blind […]" (129). These people believe that they have been suffering from a metaphorical blindness which even predates the occurrence of the plague and rather than the disfunctioning of an organ –the eye– it is caused by an emotion. Even the only person who is left untouched by the plague, the doctor's wife, expresses her doubts that she may not have eluded this nonphysical blindness, either. "You're not blind, you can't fool me, Perhaps I'm the blindest of all, I've already killed and I'll kill again if I have to […]" (191).

However, this certain blindness does not lead the characters to opine on what blindness really is, though they have a firsthand experience. On the contrary, while they associate the erupting corruption with it, they believe that it is this arbitrary and temporary disability that brings about the catastrophe they live through. "[…] the doctor simply said, If I ever regain my sight, I shall look carefully at the eyes of others, as if I were looking into their souls" (276). The doctor's words imply an ill disconnection of souls, caused by blindness and he dreams of a moral reconnection through recovery. This is an example of the way Saramago's characters behave: Though going through it, they do not form an opinion about how a physical disability is perceived. Instead, they come up with abstract, moral fantasies or philosophical arguments. In short, by not including a real, physical blindness in his novel and by not touching on its perception in society, Saramago leaves blindness only as a parable. The characters in Saramago's novel do not display the culturally created tension between the blind

and the sighted, what they display is the new found unity in corruption, for they all are each others' wolf, they are united in corruption.

However, it would be a grave mistake to blame *Blindness* for portraying the blind negatively. The problems that we read about in this novel do not stem from the fact that people are blind, but the fact that they are prone to abuse each other in the face of danger. Remember, in Wells's story, too, an epidemic causes blindness. Wells's blind characters do not suffer the same as Saramago's and do not resort to violence, but it is not because they are morally superior than the others. The narrator in "The Country of the Blind" mentions that the villagers have plenty of food and other sources at their disposal and that they've lost their sight over a long time. The epidemic of blindness is the right tool in that today we depend so much on sight and value visuality so extremely that in such a case people can not adapt swiftly to the situation and fall into a chaos. Only when the order is challenged, when we explicitly hurt ourselves we understand how we behave and that is what the author tries to expose. Therefore, Saramago's characters are not representatives of the blind people, they are symbols of ignorance with no hint of a literal blindness left in them. If there is still a problem in this text, it arises from the fact that Saramago uses blindness as a tool for an unrelated problem of mankind.

Before passing to our next step and applying the same method to the story of Wells, let us summarize what we've said so far, regarding *Blindness*. First of all, the narrator along with the characters try to draw the attention to a metaphorical blindess instead of a literal one. Although an epidemic is held responsible for the catastrophe, vanishing as abruptly as it appeared, this epidemic itself is a metaphorical way of teaching a moral lesson. Still, Saramago can not be blamed for representing the blind negatively, for it is not the blind he represents. Through a metaphorical shell, he attacks at the corrupted state of mankind and if he is to be blamed, it is for using blindness as a tool.

Now that we've seen the narrator's cruical role in the novel and exposed its effect on the perception of blindess, it is time for us to analyze the story of Wells. In my opinion, an even more comprehensive narratological reading is required in order to catch the nuances of "The Country of the Blind," for, as we will see, they might go unnoticed in a hasty analysis. To discover if there is anything hidden beneath the narrator's mask of serenity, we have stay alert.

"Three hundred miles and more from Chimborazoo, one hundred from the snows of Cotopaxi, in the wildest wastes of Ecuador's Andes, there lies that mysterious mountain valley, cut off from the world of men, the Country of the Blind" (9). Thus begins the narrator recounting the tale, or more accurately, his/her version of the tale of the Country of the Blind. If the aim is to analyze the role of the narrator here in Well's story, one should take a closer look at this quote, for in this very first sentence it is possible to find clues about his/her position. While presenting the setting, by revealing the exact spot of a "mysterious mountain valley" that no human being knows even if it exists, s/he sets himself above "the world of men." In sum, at first glance, we believe that we are told the story by an omniscient narrator.

However, the narrator tries to assume an impartial role and contradictory to his/her aloof state implied at the very first sentence, s/he tries to give credit to outside sources to force this image. First of all, s/he reports the story of a man who once upon a time left the Country of the Blind, his homeland, to seek a cure for the disease which was to give the secret valley its name later on. But, unfortunately, the man got trapped in the outer world after an earthquake which resulted in the permanent isolation of the valley. This little report includes the first depiction of the beautiful valley: "The valley, *he said,* had in it all that the heart of man could desire–sweet water, pasture, and even climate, slopes of rich brown soil with tangles of a shrub that bore an excellent fruit, and on one side great hanging forests of pine that held the avalanches high" (emphasis added; 10). What we have to notice about this depiction is that it

comes not from the narrator –"he said"–, but an inhabitant of the valley, therefore a seemingly "reliable" outside source.

Secondly, just like an ordinary character in the story, the narrator admits having a limited vision concerning this man's fate and resorts openly to his or her imagination. "I can picture him presently seeking to return with pious and infallible remedies against that trouble, and the infinite dismay with which he must have faced the tumbled vastness where the gorge had once come out. But the rest of his story of mischances is lost to me" (11). With these sentences it is made clear that the narrator knows neither the man in person, nor what became of him later, except that he died in the end. More surprisingly still, s/he displays explicit affection for this man, exclaiming, "Poor stray from that remoteness!" (11). Exposing emotions and lack of information in this way is certainly undermining to his or her objectivity and reliability. However, as if to counterbalance this effect, we are told that the story of this poor man, "developed into the legend of a race of blind men somewhere 'over there' one may still hear to-day" (12). Thus, referring to the present day influence of this supposedly real event, the narrator implies that there is a temporal continuity and adds the story an air of credibility.

Third and last of all, getting closer to Nunez's story, the narration becomes even more journalistic: "To this day Parascopetl lifts an unconquered crest, and Pointer's shelter crumbles unvisited amidst the snows" (14). Just like a reporter, the narrator furnishes us with information about the place. Apart from assuming an appropriate tone of voice, in order to make sure that the reader does not question the validity of what is told, s/he even cites articles: "The story of the accident has been written a dozen times. Pointer's narrative is the best. He tells how the little party worked their difficult and almost vertical way up to the very foot of the last and greatest precipice […]" (13-14). Here we are given a name and a summary, which should –at least is hoped to– convince us of the concrete basis of the story.

Therefore, we can say that we have an ambiguous narrator –is s/he omniscient or not? Is s/he above all mankind or is s/he just one of them –limited in knowledge but honest enough to refer to outside sources for confirmation? More precisely, much as the narration seems objective, should we believe what we are told?

Curiously enough, following this ambiguity, there comes a breaking point: "And the man who fell survived" (14). With these words the narrator becomes the sole and all-knowing source for the rest of the story. Up till here, all the information concerning the secret valley and its people consists of the story of the former inhabitant and one article that the narrator deems the best among many others that were supposedly written. As a story teller, naturally, the narrator is expected to fill the gaps with his/her reasoning and s/he does so, otherwise s/he'd have nothing but patches to match. However, what makes here a breaking point is the sharpness of the transition to a totally unconfirmable narration. The story turns out to be about a village that is rumored to exist and a man who dies there at the end. In short, there is no one to oppose or verify it. Though s/he mentions other sources to strengthen his/her reliability at the beginning, the narrator later assumes omniscience and we have to keep our eyes open, for the former can not be a validation for the latter. Therefore, we have to expose the moments when s/he intervenes in the story implicitly and discover the reasons that are hidden behind this act.

In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn defines "narrated monologue" as "the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration" (100). The effect that narrated monologue creates is like an illusion. While, on the surface, we hear the narrator talk from an objective perspective, what we perceive is the opinions of the character. This short quote can be an example for this: "It seemed they knew nothing of sight. Well, all in good time he would teach them" (23). Now, though the narrator seems to be conveying his own thought on this subject, as the second

sentence more clearly displays, he is only reporting Nunez's convictions. As Cohn suggests, we can "translate" this narrated monologue into an interior monologue to prove that this is the case (100-101). Then, Nunez should be thinking just like this: "It seems that they know nothing of sight. Well, all in good time I will teach them." Short as it may seem, this quote is important for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that there might be a second layer of meaning even in a simple statement such as this. Secondly, and more importantly, "no matter how 'impersonal' the tone of the text that surrounds them, narrated monologues themselves tend to commit the narrator to attitudes of sympathy or irony" (Cohn 117). In this case, we can say that the quote hides an irony in that the narrator knows that Nunez will fail in his attempts to change the villagers' opinion of him. Moreover, Nunez thinks he will "teach them" something, implying that he is superior to them, and the narrator chooses to preserve his pathetic mistake by slipping it into the story.

A similar but more comprehensive approach that can help us deal with the rest of the story comes from Mieke Bal: "It is also possible for the entire story to be focalized by E[xternal]F[ocalizor]. The narrative can then appear objective, because the events are not presented from the point of view of the characters. The focalizor's bias is, then, not absent, since there is no such thing as 'objectivity,' but it remains implicit" (Bal 149). Given the fact that there might be mines of subjectivity throughout the whole story, we can widen the scope of our research. Another seemingly innocent sentence stands out right away. "Four days passed, and the fifth found the King of the Blind still incognito, as a clumsy and useless stranger among his subjects" (29). Though this time it is not exactly how Nunez wants to see the picture in his mind, still, some parts of his perception are trapped in the report of the narrator. His dreams of becoming a king is mocked by being juxtaposed with the position he ends up in. Moreover, as it is in the previous quote we analyzed, it is successfully disguised as a simple statement of the truth.

Despite the fact that our protagonist is Nunez and we mainly follow his actions throughout the whole story, sometimes even his perspective is masked or camouflaged. With the negative mindset he has acquired through living in a sighted culture, Nunez perceives the inhabitants of the valley as a lacking race. Nevertheless, the negativity is not always reflected in the narration and this is certainly of the narrator's making. For example, after the paragraph that summarizes the plans of Nunez to change the way of life of the villagers, comes a large description of the perfection of the valley and the culture that has sprung forth from it.

> It was marvelous with what confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities of path and meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedure arose naturally from their special needs. (29-30)

Right after finding "working and going about at night a particularly irksome thing," (29) there is no way Nunez can appreciate the degree of civilization in this way. The narrator, then, must be inserting fair observations in between Nunez's biased opinions and here subtly draws the attention to the true and admirable deeds of the villagers.

However, the narrator does not act solely with the intention to defend these people from injustice. It is equally probable for him or her to step in to implicitly criticisize them. "[Nunez] expected dire punishments, but these blind people were capable of toleration. They regarded his rebellion as but one more proof of his general idiocy and inferiority; and after they had whipped him they appointed him to do the simplest and heaviest work they had for anyone to do, and he, seeing no other way of living, did submissively what he was told" (37). Despite the fact that this quote seems like a description of the tolerance shown by his hosts to the erring guest, what we are told is in direct contrast with the notion of respect that should be

inherent in it. Though seemingly serious, behind this mask of detachment the narrator mocks the understanding of tolerance which goes hand in hand with contempt and punishment. Simply by the choice of words and order, a sense of irony is created.

The story, I believe, ends with a similar treatment as well. Coming to the last page, the reader finds a longish depiction of the mountains that Nunez desperately tries to pass over but fails.

> Already it was dim with haze and shadow, though the mountain summits around him were things of light and fire, and the little details of the rocks near at hand were drenched with subtle beauty–a vein of green mineral piercing the grey, the flash of crystal faces here and there, a minute, minutely-beautiful orange lichen close beside his face. There were deep mysterious shadows in the gorge, blue deepening into purple, and purple into a luminous darkness, and overhead was the illimitable vastness of the sky. But he heeded these things no longer, but lay quite inactive there, smiling as if he were satisfied merely to have escaped from the valley of the Blind in which he had thought to be King. (48)

Up to a point, this is a nice, visually detailed representation; but with the final sentence there comes a twist which complicates the situation at hand. Apparently, Nunez has had an accident and is lying unconscious on the ground. Now that Nunez is obviously not able to think, the narrator interprets the smile on his face. Again, in the way s/he defines the scene, through the juxtaposition of contradictory elements, the irony of the position Nunez ends up in is revealed. Notice that the sentence does not end after the word “blind,” and a relative clause reminds us of Nunez’s shattered dreams. Thus, once more we witness the abysmal gap between his ambitions and the outcome. Rather than acquiring the crown of superiority that he believes he highly deserves, he not only feels compelled to escape, but escapes into the mountains where no possible future awaits him.

However, the ending is also significant for the fact that the same move that puts an end to Nunez's journey and life, in a way, binds him to the village forever.

> Nunez, being insensible, is finally blind, and his contentedness is something that he shares with the blind people of the valley. In keeping with the Happy Valley topos, the most characteristic of the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind is their complacency. In mythopoeic terms, Nunez is finally reunited with the blind people, at one level, almost fully as if he had gone back to face the surgeons. (Parrinder 74-75)

Nunez, who once "had an eye for all beautiful things" (27), can no longer admire the striking view in all its colors and radiance, yet he still seems happy. But why? Nunez is content, because he has escaped from that "pit of sin" in which he has been wronged. However, what happens to him at the mountain makes him one of the villagers despite all his efforts. Though they were at conflict all the time, now that they are united with blindness, it seems like it was only his sight that set him apart from the villagers. I believe, this ending also shows us that even before his fall, Nunez had much more in common with them than he could think of.

As we've said, the narrator in "The Country of the Blind" acts more subtle than the one in *Blindness* and to grasp the full nature of his or her critique, a closer reading is required. Referring to Wells and Swift, von Koppenfels states that "the clinical approach of stunted human beings to dealing with the outsider and social misfit is, in both authors, a 'critique of practical reason'" (164). If not wrong, in my opinion this explanation is certainly lacking. This attitude attributed to the blind in Wells's story, shows itself clearly in the outsider's, Nunez's attitude as well. Similarly, in this claim he makes for the same story, I think von Koppenfels errs again: "Like Cyrano's sun birds and Swift's Lilliputians the blind people do not lack the light of reason, but their reason, too, has non-human and inhuman qualities: it is

strictly partial and functional, and any act of nonconformity is inconcievable to them. The light they have lost, without ever missing it, is the light of the imagination" (163). This is certainly a partial reading. Take a look at this definition of the villagers: "Much of their imagination had shrivelled with their eyes, and they had made for themselves new imaginations with their ever more sensitive ears and finger-tips" (25). Their loss on one side, becomes their gain on another. This is not a lack, but a shifting of potential. The villagers are intolerant; that is an unquestionable fact. But let us take a different perspective and think about Nunez instead. Is he tolerant of what he does not understand? Though there is ample evidence at hand, he has hard time grasping that abilities are defined in the context of cultures. How would he treat a rambling stranger who can't even walk straight? The blind want to turn Nunez into a blind citizen just like themselves, as much as Nunez wants them to resemble himself. Neither of the parties are aware of that but they are united in this way.

Then, though it is not as obvious as in the case of *Blindness,* we can see that here, too, the narrator manipulates the narration. At the target of criticism is a metaphorical sightlessness; a moral ignorance in the case of the novel and a lack of tolerance in the case of the story. Though their methods differ, both authors choose blindness as a metaphor to deal with their subjects.

Saramago's narrator wants to draw the attention towards a totally metaphorical blindness and leaves its physicality aside. However, Wells's narrator intervenes in the story in order to create a balance and saves it from being a biased fantasy. Portraying Nunez as an opportunist rather than a naive victim and mocking both parties via subtle remarks, s/he silently levels the story. This is not a struggle between binaries, this is not a struggle between good and evil; these are all people, victims of intolerance.

Another important difference between these two texts is, in Wells's story, there are two parties and a mutual cause for conflict. In Saramago's novel, there is only one community,

one culture and they are united by a temporal physical disability and the fault that they share. The extraordinary blindness serves its purpose, the main characters grasp what their fault was and then the disease disappears. On the other hand, in Wells's story, the sighted man and the blind community are united in their metaphorical blindness –ignorance– and at the end in literal blindness –by Nunez's sightlessness at the mountains–, yet they do not notice that they reflect one another.

However, though a metaphorical blindness unifies the sighted and the blind, this understanding of non-figural sightlessness does not sweep away the literal representation of blindness. While Saramago's metaphor of blindness can be identified as a pure metaphor or a symbol, I believe that the one of Wells's creation differs strikingly from the other in regard to its relationship with the literal understanding of blindness. Despite the fact that the author uses blindness as a metaphor, he uses it to attack the same source that harms the blind: the lack of empathy and tolerance towards those who are mentally or physically different. Besides, Wells's story shows not only that people can be blind on a metaphorical level regardless of a physical disability, which is a common trait of metaphorical texts, but also that it is possible for the blind to have the upper hand on a physical level.

Though it presents the literal and the metaphorical side by side without letting one absorb the other, Wells's story can not save itself from Jernigan's accusations, either. However, if we can use the phrase "fail to see" and mean "fail to notice," but can not use "fail to hear" instead, Wells can not change this metaphor while he lives in and writes for this culture. In such a story like this, we have to draw the attention to the author's success in dividing the two realms, the literal and the metaphorical. In my opinion, this is a remarkable feat; coming from a sighted culture, Wells can not destroy the metaphors of sight or sightlessness, but he can come up with an egalitarian point of view.

Our extremely negative outlook on blindness is continuously fed by our lack of knowledge. We consider sightlessness as a source of constant physical incompetency. Therefore, the first step to improve the image in sighted minds should be to eradicate misinformations and challenge widely held beliefs. Getting rid of the metaphorical usage abrubtly is out of the question and Wells's story is important in that, even if it does not banish metaphors completely, it uses them to take the physical source out of its context and challenges the assumptions encircling.

Chapter IV

A Story about Breaking the Chains: Literature's Role in Shaping the Perception of Blindness

Before starting our fourth and the final chapter, let us briefly recall what we've done so far, in order to put all the pieces together. At the first two chapters, we tried to gain some knowledge about the close relationship of blindness with metaphor and adaptation. These chapters showed us that the lack of experience with blindness is filled with metaphors and that perceptions do not necessarily rest on solid ground. Finally at the previous chapter, we attempted to analyze how H. G. Wells and José Saramago in their particular ways used blindness as a metaphor. Now, we'll conclude our work by discussing possible methods of changing the perception of blindness and the role that literature may play in this.

In his ardent speech delivered at the banquet of The National Federation of the Blind in 1974, Jernigan states that they, the blind, are negatively represented in literature and that they deserve equality. According to him, so far even the blind writers, such as Milton, betrayed their cause by portraying blindness as seen from the outside, in a stereotypical manner. But the reign of these outmoded, unjust images has already come to an end, he says, past is the past, let us look ahead.

However, this is not the time to relax, for, according to him again, they should be responsible for the future of their own portrayal. Literature must go through a transformation and he believes that it is possible only by means of self-awareness.

> If we turn to the future, the answer is that the future –in literature as in life– is not predetermined but self-determined. As we shape our lives, singly and collectively, so will we shape our literature. Blindness will be a tragedy only if we see ourselves as authors see us. The contents of the page, in the last analysis, reflect the conscience of the age. The structure of literature is but a hall of mirrors, giving us back (in images

> slightly larger or smaller than life) exactly what we put in. The challenge for us is to help our age raise its consciousness and reform its conscience. We must rid our fiction of fantasy and imbue it with fact. Then we shall have a literature to match reality, and a popular image of blindness to match the truth, and our image of ourselves. (par. 54)

Jernigan assumes that there is a direct relationship between life and literature and bases his expectations upon it. It is undoubtable that literature is based on life. But to give rise to a pure, perfectly true-to-life image through personal and collective awareness does not seem to be a realistic aim itself. In his enthusiasm, Jernigan seems to be passing over something in this formula. What this may be, we'll try to find out in the following pages.

As we continue tracing Jernigan's trail of thoughts, we see that, interestingly, while verbalizing his dreams, he creates a second dichotomy –after the sighted/blind dichotomy– , this time between the representer and the represented. These two dichotomies mainly overlap, though; and the represented correspond to the blind: "The future is ours, and the novelists and the poets will record it" (par. 56). The difference is, represented-representer division separates groups based on the function they carry out, rather than static abilities. Therefore, a statement such as this sounds like some kind of labor division: "The poets and novelists can write the words, but we must create the music" (par. 55). The important thing is, the blind or the represented are hereby locked out of the realm of words. Due to the fact that, according to his theory, standing out as a good model in social life is the means to change the face of blindness, Jernigan ignores the artistic potentials of the blind and confines them to a passivity in the literary field.

Right at this point, let us stop and recall how we began the second chapter of this paper: "Considering the plots of Saramago's *Blindness* and Wells's 'The Country of the Blind,' we can say that basically we are dealing with the same story: a story that revolves around the sole

sighted person in a blind community." However, a better way to define it would be, "a story that revolves around the sole sighted person *fallen* into a blind community." In Nunez's case, there is a literal fall. He ends up in the Country of the Blind after a climbing accident. Though it is not possible to talk about a physical fall in Saramago's novel, it is certain that similarly the doctor's wife ends up in the midst of a blind not by her own will. What might this mutual experience be pointing at? In my opinion, it implies that the roles of the sighted and the blind are already defined in terms of activity and passivity; but, passivity is attributed to the sighted rather than the blind.

In order to change the image in his/her head, the sighted person has to be thrown in the world of "the other." In *Sight Unseen*, Kleege poses some questions to which she can not come up with answers herself. "At what point would the writers responsible for these descriptions, or the announcers who read them, begin to gag on their words? Will actors and directors began to imagine other ways to represent blindness? Will screenwriters rethink their facile assumptions about blindness when they imagine an audience with first-hand experience of it?" (Kleege 65). In my humble opinion, if the first step is left for the sighted people to take, this day may never come indeed. This passivity on the side of those who are able to see, is not necessarily a sign of their indifference. An external factor, a stimulus is needed to reach the sighted and make them come out of the protective shell of majority. To draw these people's attention beyond the borders of their Happy Valley, the blind have to be the active part in this cycle. In other words, the blind have to represent themselves.

We'll continue our discussion with three examples of imaginary self-representation coming from three different authors: Georgina Kleege, Henry Green and Deborah Kendrick. Let us start with Kleege, who has become a very familiar figure for us by now. Bored with the attempt to foresee what will become of the persistent, stereotypical image of blindness, the author goes on to describe the reader an imaginary film scenario of hers:

> […] I cannot see the future. So I picture this instead. A blind woman escapes from the peep show where she's been held prisoner for many years. She successfully stalks the wealthy movie mogul who owns the peep show a lucrative sideline to his mainstream filmmaking. She torments him for a while. She leaves braille notes around his mansion, and ominous messages on his answering machine: "Someone's watching you." (66)

The movie in Kleege's head does not end in this point. Later on the blind woman confronts the filmmaker in a studio, the lights go out and taking advantage of the resulting darkness she kills the man. During this whole scene there is nothing to be seen on the screen and rather than a final image, the movie ends in with a final sound, the sound of the woman's cane.

Here, Kleege presents us a way to express oneself in cinema but not visually. There is this protagonist, who stands as a symbol for the treatment towards the blind in cinema and who uses her own methods and tools to act out, to pull the sighted into her world and to make herself, metaphorically speaking, *truly* visible.

In *Sight Unseen*, Kleege mentions another fictional character who also wants to change the perception of blindness with an act of rebellion: it is John Haye, the protagonist of Henry Green's novel entitled *Blindness*. "He would start a crusade against people with eyesight. It was the easiest thing in the world to see, and so many were content with only the superficial appearance of things" (qtd. in 77). Blinded in an unfortunate accident, John comes to understand that the things he has heard or read do not suffice to define his condition. He is critical of the acceptance, the content passivity of the sighted and just like the protagonist of Kleege's movie, he wants a reaction. He imagines killing the boy who blinded him and being imprisoned for this crime: "He would make the warder read the papers to him every morning, he would be sure to have headlines: BLIND MAN MURDERS CHILD no. TORTURES

CHILD TO DEATH; And underneath that, if he was lucky, WOMAN JUROR VOMITS" (qtd. in 74-75).

These two characters, Kleege's and Green's, in theory or in practice, express their resentment and anger, for they want to shake the people around them out of their inertia. They want sincere attention and they revolt in order to leave people no way to ignore them.

But the real revolt, a revolt on a wider, social scale, comes with Deborah Kendrick's "20/20 with a Twist." In this short story, through the reflections of the protagonist, Mary Seymour, we learn the onset and the outcome of a revolt of which she once was among the leaders. Being neglected to a great extent mainly in terms of education, blind people start gathering around secretly and make plans to change the current situation. But in contrast to the brutality of the scenes Kleege and Green imagines, their revolt does not happen to be violent in any way. Interestingly and amusingly, one of the moves that start everything is the blackout of televisions. From then on, only audial broadcasts are permitted and from time to time this message is announced to inform the sighted: "You, too, can function without pictures" (140). This peaceful revolt ends in success, after the rebels take total control of the power sources. Though at some point the leaders of the blind are kidnapped to be "cured" of their blindness, the operations do not give the expected results and instead of sight, they grant these people partial visual awareness. Nevertheless, this does not change the rebels' minds and eventually they make the government accept their requests. Their gains are a "Department of Visual Equality," educational and professional opportunities, and tecnological solutions to make their lives easier and more independent.

All of these fictional creations are about dragging the sighted to a certain position where they can have a better understanding of their potential. The majority needs food for thought, otherwise it may never question its assumptions. But, unfortunately all such attempts may not

suffice in triggering transformation, just as in the tale of the Country of the Blind. Though he tries his best, Nunez can not prove that he is in fact an "able" person.

This is the point we should reconsider Jernigan's idea of the relationship between life and literature. What he claims is that to change literature, blind people must be aware of their condition in its reality, and by showing this to the world raise social awareness. The problem is, this is a unilateral approach, missing the effect of literature in this process. It is true that to change the image of blindness in literature, the perception of blindness must be changed. However, to change the perception of blindness, it is not enough to count only on social campaigns. It must be noted that life does not only influence literature, but it is also influenced by it.

Social campaigns are indispensable in raising awareness, but they have to be supported by imagination. Monbeck also suggests creating public education programs to help people recognize the function of the unconscious in their perception of blindness, though he admits that there are certain drawbacks to it (150-159). The problem is, this approach assumes that there is already a level of public understanding and interest concerning blindness. Social campaigns may work only if people are willing to participate and believing in the cause. However, another obstacle stands in the way: "[…] a discrepancy in an expectation category that is perceived as a threat to the personal values of an individual will be avoided altogether if possible or, failing that, its apparent reality will be altered in some way to lessen its threat" (Monbeck 88). In other words, if they threaten one's self-esteem, individual success stories can easily be ignored ("S/he is not remarkably successful, s/he could have been better if he were able to see"), manipulated ("S/he must be trying his/her best to overcome this loss, poor thing, living in darkness") or regarded as exceptional ("S/he is extraordinary, therefore s/he can succeed *despite* being blind").

The three characters which Kleege, Green and Kendrick have created try to prove their potential, fighting with the resistance described above. Another common point that this trio share is their attempt to make themselves heard by the masses. Kleege envisions a movie for the ears as well as the eyes of the sighted, Green gives us a protagonist dreaming of a murder plot that can get him on newspapers and Kendrick tells us a tale of blind rebels taking control of public broadcasting. These are all depictions of people not helpless as they are thought to be but capable of doing things never expected from them: capable of proving physically superior, capable of even murder, and in the end, capable of creating a change. Leaving aside the *idea* of violence in the first two, this resembles the publicity Jernigan has in mind; however, not social but an artistic one.

However, as we touched upon in the previous chapter, when there are metaphors involved, literature (or any other branch of art that makes use of metaphors) may create just the opposite of the effect. There is a risk of deepening the hole the reality is buried in. After examining one commonly seen metaphor, Naomi Schor therefore expresses that language has to be reformed in a way:

> Any impairment of the five senses cannot be viewed as anything but a challenge, any loss of sensual apprehension of the world as anything but a catastrophic diminution of human potential. But as long as the dysfunction or deprivation of vision is metaphorized, viewed as monstrous or disproportionately gendered as female, representation is placed in the service of ideology and blindness, naturalized. The time has come for a new body language, one which would emanate from a sensorium that is grasped in its de-idealized reality, in its full range of complexity. (103)

Schor advocates that the lack of the eyes should be seen as it is; nothing less, nothing more. Instead of being metaphorized and taken as an abnormal case, it should be included in

the limits of normality by the expansion of the realm of senses. Though I do not reject Schor's argument, I'd like to emphasize that it shouldn't be interpreted and formulated in this way: Fewer metaphors equal better perception. Fiction has a gift that must be taken into consideration: It does not only reflect life, it can play with it to make people find other ways to interpret their existence. Though it rests on a metaphor, "The Country of the Blind" can make one question what "disability" really is.

Literature has no moral obligations to depict anyone as s/he is in real life. This is where its true force resides. Fiction is a field of potentials. The artist is not bound by the limits of the lives that are taken for granted. As Viktor Shklovsky observes: "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. 'If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.' And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (20). Just like Kleege, Green and Kendrick do, by presenting an alternative reality, it is possible to create a striking effect. Without killing anyone, beating anyone, spreading a plague or forcing people to resemble each other, it is possible to make people ask the question, "Why not?"

Literature is not a means to reach each and every person in the world. Not everyone is fond of books, moreover the effect they make depends on the reader's personality. For some sighted readers, Wells's story might seem like a horror show when read for the first time. A sighted person just like themselves tries to prove the worth of his ability but fails, because the villagers who judge him does not understand what sight is. Yet, for others it may prove revolutionary. This is a sign of the fact that there is a need to confront blindness and its potential more in our lives. This is true both for the sighted and the blind who are accustomed to judging themselves by their standards.

Just like social campaigns, literature or art in general, is not enough to create a total change in perception. However, it has a certain advantage: it can envisage alternative realities. Therefore, it should not be ignored or seen as a passive element. Nothing can reach everyone and change their perception abruptly. This would be a totalitarian aim, a technique of brainwashing. Neither literature, nor social campaigns should attempt to change the present perception with another one. However, joining forces in this battle, they can give birth to a need to question perception, if not create a new one.

Conclusion

In this research, first of all I've tried to bring together various ideas which I found striking and, if you'll excuse the term, eye-opening. Perception of blindness, along with other disabilities, is a popular subject of research and naturally its relationship with literature arouses interest. The sources I've chosen to form a groundwork mainly focus on narratology and metaphors of blindness, yet they are also complementary in many respects. As to my humble work, I can say that within its limits I've tried to stand closer to literature through a close reading of José Saramago's novel *Blindness* and especially H. G. Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind." My intention has been to draw the attention to some points so far neglected, especially in the latter, and to approach them with regards to the perception of blindness.

These two texts I've chosen to analyze, *Blindness* and "The Country of the Blind," are important works in that they present us an arena to discuss two crucial factors that mold our perception of blindness today. First of all, they reveal clearly that adaptation to a "disability" may turn it into an ordinary experience in life. Secondly, when they are read comparatively, these texts give us an idea of the part that metaphors play in understanding a physical condition –though the opposite is a much common way of thinking– and how we could deal with this data in a literary work.

The first two chapters of this study were basically collages. They consisted of ideas taken from different sources in order to provide us the basic tools and background for our further reading. At the first chapter we talked about the perception of blindness in general. Taking a look at both negative and positive portraits of blindness in literature, we found the chance to observe metaphors' place in our perception. In our daily lives, we define sight and sightlessness to a great extrent through metaphors, but in turn they start to shape our understanding by spreading and replacing reality. Though they might seem to be, these

metaphors are not necessarily related to fixed, universal truths; where our experience of the real, physical blindness comes short, we tend to fill the gap with "secondhand information, imagination, directly received past attitudes, superstitions, associations, and so on" (Monbeck 81). We do not notice how far we are of a literal, fair understanding of blindness and we get caught in this cycle of metaphorization. Yet, by acknowledging this and getting through a period of adaptation, it is possible to including it in our lives as it really is.

At the second chapter the main literary texts to be analyzed were introduced and getting more specific, we saw how the link between culture and perception are reflected in their plots. *Blindness* and "The Country of the Blind" are very similar in terms of their plots: They envision the fate of a sighted person trapped among the blind. However, what happens to these characters in the end sets these tales apart. Although brief summaries show us that the judgements these sighted characters have of blindness are pretty close, only one of them finds herself in a position where they are validated. Facing a community which has perfectly adapted itself to sightlessness, the protagonist of Wells's story seeks the superiority sight must bestow upon him in vain. Abilities change from culture to culture; no mental or physical trait is intrinsically superior to others. There is no fixed "disability," but there are hardened habits of masses.

It is at the third chapter that we drew our own path. We sought what could be said more about the manipulation of the perception of blindness in Wells's story and Saramago's novel. Due to the fact that metaphors distort reality, literary texts containing or based on metaphors of sightlessness are sometimes criticisized with ethical concerns. However, after a narratological reading, we claimed that it is possible to guide the readers and shape their perceptions with naration, as well, and this should be taken into consideration in order to judge a text ethically. The characters Saramago has created are not representative of blind people; they are symbols. Yet, he can be accused of strengthening negative associations while

treating blindness as a tool to deal with an unrelated problem. Wells's story, on the contrary, attacks the power relation between the sighted and the blind, not only with its plot, but also on a narratological level. Moreover, I believe that the author does not only play with the disability/ability opposition. Portraying Nunez as an opportunist rather than a naive victim and mocking both parties via the narrator's subtle remarks, he seeks to create a balance in the story. What we see here is not a war of opposites; this is a story of people fallen victim to intolerance, though they do not acknowledge this fact. It is true that Wells can not destroy the metaphors of sight or sightlessness, but he presents us an egalitarian point of view, and in this way deserves praise.

Finally at the fourth chapter, we dwelt on the question whether it is possible to change the image of blindness in minds. In the discussions of the perception of blindness some dichotomies emerge, such as the represented and the representer, the active and the passive, the blind and the sighted. Because of the fact that stiffened perceptions are hard to break, somebody has to play the active role, somebody has to represent the reality; through fiction and/or social means. However, if this is an attempt to set someone thinking, it is not the sighted or the blind. It is those that are trapped inside the protective shell of majority.

In order to change the present situation, a social awareness is required, yet, practical means, social campaigns are not enough to reach this end. For, in order them to function, a level of willingness must be attained. Therefore, creative means should be used; not with moral concerns but in ways to undermine the settled beliefs. The persistent image in the minds of masses can be challenged by the power of art in presenting alternative realities.

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