Saramago’s *Blindness*: Humans or Animals?

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This short article will consider the blurring of the human-animal distinction in José Saramago's *Blindness* from a perspective that is far too frequently ignored. The significance of animals in the novel has already been raised in Kevin Cole’s assertion that one in particular, the dog of tears, ‘becomes a full-fledged character’ (109). Indeed, expanding on the narrator’s remark that the character is ‘an animal of the human type’ (253), Cole goes so far as to assert that the dog is humane. His thinking is that the dog of tears and the doctor’s wife can be categorised together because both are sighted figures who act as heroic guides for their blind counterparts. When the blurring of the human-animal distinction is considered from the converse perspective, however, it soon becomes apparent that the canine anthropomorphism is coupled with animalisation of the blind humans.

The animalisation is explicit at many points in the novel. A dog is ‘identified by its scent and that is how it identifies others’, asserts the

doctor's wife, 'here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance' (55). This animalising declaration is bolstered by the way in which the blind humans are repeatedly depicted 'on all fours' (62, 69, 70, 97, 131, 198, 218), as animals (96, 126, 170), as pigs (90, 92, 97, 178), as crabs (97) and 'Thieving dogs' (102), not to mention the obligatory invocation of the blind-as-a-bat maxim (99). Put briefly, the novel is abundant with animalising references to blind humans.

Not always explicit, though, the animalisation also takes the form of an extraordinary sense of smell, as is illustrated when the doctor's wife is said to have watched the blind internees 'twitching, tense, their necks craned as if they were sniffing at something, yet curiously, their expressions were all the same' (40) and another group 'stopped, sniffed in the doorways of the shops in the hope of catching the smell of food' (214). Indeed, having described her eating habits by saying 'I kill a rabbit or chicken, And eat them raw' (233), the old blind woman appeared 'on the landing of the fire escape to sniff out the sounds that were coming into her flat' (244). The mythology of such compensatory gifts can be traced back to ancient times, according to Donald Kirtley, but Berthold Lowenfeld has stressed the salient point that comparative studies have found no sensory superiority among people who are visually impaired.

The animalisation also becomes manifest as uncleanness. When the epidemic of blindness breaks out, the Government protects the population by gathering ‘together in one place all those infected, and, in adjacent but separate quarters all those who have had any kind of contact with them’ (41). It is during this period of segregation that the blind humans become increasingly unclean. Firstly, the newly-blind doctor feels the roughness of his beard after three days without shaving, saying ‘It’s preferable like this, I hope they won’t have the unfortunate idea of sending us razor blades and scissors’ (66). Secondly, the narrator describes the doctor as ‘dirty, dirtier than he could ever remember having been in his life. There are many ways of becoming an animal, he thought, this is just the first of them’ (89). Thirdly, the unused mental asylum into which the blind humans are herded is reduced to a state of unimaginable filth, for owing to what the narrator calls the lack of respect shown by some inmates and the sudden urgency of others, the corridors and passageways are turned into latrines: ‘The careless or impatient thought, It doesn’t matter, no one can see me, and they went no further. When it became impossible in any sense, to reach the lavatories, the blind internees began using the yard as a place to relieve themselves and clear their bowels’ (125-6). Because these examples of uncleanness are incremental, following an apparently natural regression from blindness to absolute filth, it is worth emphasising that not even the

first has any factual grounding. That is to say, the actual onset of visual impairment does nothing to negate the bearer's ability to shave, let alone wash or use a toilet–an uncontroversial point that seems curiously noteworthy in a discussion of Saramago's *Blindness*.

The animalisation is also evoked by a marked lack of empathy. After all, when the doctor's wife addresses the girl with the dark glasses by saying, 'I am blind with your blindness' (281), the sense of empathy is just as explicit as when the dog of tears laments the discovery of a man's rotting body, for the narrator asserts that 'the trouble with this dog is that it has grown too close to human beings, it will suffer as they do' (294). But it is apparent that such empathy will be unreciprocated by the blind humans when the doctor warns his wife against the exposure of her solitary vision: 'Think of the consequences, they will almost certainly try to turn you into their slave, a general dogsbody, you will be at the beck and call of everyone, they will expect you to feed them, wash them, put them to bed and get them up in the morning' (127). Again the underpinning assumptions about visual impairment are erroneous, but the point to note is that Saramago's blind and sighted humans must be kept apart for not only biological but sociological reasons. It is as though the blind humans want to project their suffering onto their sighted counterparts. Accordingly, when the doctor's wife offers sympathy to an injured blind man, placing her hand on his forehead to wish him goodnight, he is

supposed to have ‘grabbed her by the arm and drew her towards him obliging her to get close to his face, I know you can see he said in a low voice’ (67). Indeed, the intentionality of the contagiousness becomes still more dramatic when one of the blind internees addresses a sighted soldier by saying, ‘I’ll gouge your eyes out’ (105).

The objective in this brief article is not to deny Cole’s assertion that more than being humanlike, the dog of tears is humane, but to emphasise the converse point: Saramago’s blind humans are more than doglike; they are inhumane. Humanity ‘will manage to live without eyes’, says Saramago’s narrator, but ‘then it will cease to be humanity’ (241). Given that historicity cannot be raised as an excuse for this late twentieth-century work, the expected retort is that my reading has missed the whole point of the novel, that the representation of people who have visual impairments is purely allegorical. The trouble is, however, that the tenor of the allegory relies on the stereotypical assumptions of its vehicle, meaning that people who have visual impairments must be perceived as helpless if their portrayal is to represent the metaphysical bewilderment of humanity convincingly. In other words, the allegory will not bear scrutiny because it is grounded in the mythology of blindness as opposed to the facts about visual impairment.

Works Cited

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