

The Edge of Darkness, or, Why Saramago Has Never Written about the Colonial War in Africa

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*That notion of being captured by the incredible
which is of the very essence of dreams...*

Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

One of Western culture's major literary works to be inspired by the colonial situation is undoubtedly Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The symbolist procedures that make Conrad's narrative discourse often ambiguous decisively contribute to preserve the sense of mystery that is the central aim of the novel's fictional construction. This sense of mystery encompasses the presentation of characters, the description of territory, and the relations established between them. In this essay, I will try to show the way in which some aspects of two of Saramago's novels (*The Stone Raft* [1986] and *Blindness* [1995]) can best be understood in the light of the cultural legacy bequeathed by Conrad's novella and how they can be interpreted from a contemporary postcolonial perspective.

Given the diversity of textual procedures used by Conrad, it appears that the absence of precise references to the African territory (very probably the territory of Congo, as is now generally accepted by critics) cannot be the result of an unlikely narrative lapse. The strangeness of the details describing the environment where Marlow's voyage takes place may in fact connect the plot to any exotic country subject to colonial exploration, and the story acquires, by way of this careful erasure of most of the African specificities, an exemplary, even transcendental, dimension that is reinforced not only by its title and by the motifs of shadow and darkness constantly present in its

semantic construct, but also, and very particularly, by the enigma that the core of the narrative intriguingly builds up, elevating the primarily biological notion of "heart" to an ineffable dimension of humanism. This enigma is simultaneously that of all narrative construction, the veil of obscurity surrounding the beginning of every story that can ever be told, and of this one in particular: as Marlow says, nostalgically contemplating the sunset over the Thames: "And this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth" (6). An enigmatic aura dominates also the main character's sense of behavior; while many answers regarding Mr. Kurtz's identity and nature are progressively given to Marlow and to the reader, they only contribute to further envelop that character in an atmosphere of mystery: "a first-class agent," "a very remarkable person" (30), "a prodigy" (42). But that enigma consists mainly of the difficulty in understanding the nature of a man acting in a position of command over other men, that is, of exploitation, which in fact is Kurtz's role, who represents moreover the occupation of a land where he, a non-native, must be viewed as a declared and accepted master; in other words, an entirely strange entity made up of people's beliefs, the force of the earth, and the assumption of power by a singular, individual human being.

That combination, experienced as simultaneously positive and negative (both "a heart of a conquering darkness" and "the horror" [130]), is viewed in the text as both inevitable and unintelligible; moreover, its culmination in a process of human behavior that can not be considered accomplished by the satisfaction of greed and by the practice of power opens a clear path for postcolonial reasoning. In fact, *Heart of Darkness* remains throughout a narrative minutely engaged with the colonial project, specifically exploration and trade, dealing both with goods (ivory) and with human feelings (a taste for adventure). In this sense, it treats particular semantic concerns, such as knowledge and otherness, voyaging and the river, earth and the emergence of races, intention and contingency, the search and the enigma, and, finally—in the return to England and the *Nellie*, the cruising yawl where the story is told—the island and the unbounded vastness of the sea. But what seems particular and enticing in this narrative, and what was rendered emblematic during the widespread decolonization process of the twentieth century, is the fact that greatness is emphasized in projects, feelings and ways of acting that are turned into forms of tragic derision, into deception and the impossibility of understanding human relations and events. What is more, the spirit of adventure and the exercise of mastery seem to be reabsorbed by an ultimate

reduction to limited proportions that maintains the impulse for quest but underlines its inevitable anxiety, as in the final lines of the novel: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."

The heart, thus understood as the core of the whole mystery, which includes a strange land, different habits, unusual ways of living, incomprehensible human relations and, most of all, the ultimate level of approach to impossible knowledge (or, as the Symbolists used to express it, the quest for the Absolute), is in that way also a territory for writing and inquiry, a territory mapped for narrative and poetry. It may also be the symbol of an experience that normally has no concrete results in an objective sense, but which dwells on an artistic level as the expression of desire and intimate deep convictions.

Reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is without a doubt illuminating for any attempt to better understand certain contemporary fictional constructions; in this sense, Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation in the film *Apocalypse Now* is persuasive enough. Even Coppola's version (explicitly transferred to another continent, to an unfinished and raging contemporary war, to an explicit conversion of the Absolute into a relative assumption of power) shows that Conrad's Darkness, understood as the mystery of Africa expressed by dark skins and forests of impenetrable vegetation, may be another kind of darkness, as the final sentence of Conrad's novel already emphatically suggests; nevertheless, the meaning of its "heart" persists, as both the center of life (biologically) and the irradiation of mystery (imaginatively). Yet what is crucial in the second half of the twentieth century is that the center begins to get lost, and new poetic and imaginative concepts begin to emerge in the development of cultural thought and reasoning. Here, however, we have to take into consideration the content of artistic texts along with their focalizations, both with regard to the production and the reception of literary utterances. It is not a matter of indifference whether one considers the author's origin, nationality, language, and class (as in Conrad's case), or whether one examines the sense of the most prevalent readings of his work and the historical dimension of the narrative data as well. In this respect, I find particularly interesting the case of two novels by José Saramago, *The Stone Raft* and *Blindness*. The first narrates the voyage of the Iberian Peninsula after it breaks away from the rest of the European continent by splitting at the Pyrenees, between France and Spain. The

Peninsula begins drifting across the Atlantic Ocean towards North America, but then changes direction and begins to move southward, finally stopping between South America and Africa—with a particular though not definite suggestion that it may position itself between the coasts of Brazil and Angola. Meanwhile, a small group of Iberians from both Spain and Portugal happen to meet by chance and decide to live together, traveling on board the voyaging Peninsula and investigating the reasons and solution for this unexpected situation. The other novel, *Blindness*, presents the case of an anonymous country (with all the characteristics of everyday life in contemporary Europe) where an epidemic of “white blindness” causes a rapidly growing number of people to lose their vision and forces them to face terrible difficulties in order to stay alive. Their fate is aggravated by the fact that the government quarantines them in an old hospital where groups of criminals begin to seize food and other essential goods by force—yet where one woman, the only person who has not gone blind (of which only a few of the others are aware), leads them in their quest for survival.

José Saramago is a writer of humble origins who is almost completely self-taught, and who has always remained close to the Portuguese Communist Party. Until the age of fifty-two he lived under Salazar's dictatorship and experienced the joy of seeing the regime toppled by the Portuguese democratic revolution on April 25, 1974; some six years later he also began to experience success with his novels. These novels deal mostly with periods of the Portuguese and Western historical and cultural past; but *The Stone Raft* and *Blindness*, as well as the latest works Saramago has published, take the shape of allegorical fictions, which mix elements of the fantastic either with a utopian vision of the future (especially in *The Stone Raft*) or with the dystopia of its completely abstract conception (as in *Blindness*). It is important to point out that political liberation also has brought freedom from censorship, and that Saramago and other writers in Portugal are now allowed to write in complete liberty. Since 1974, many Portuguese novelists have plunged into fictional matters dealing with the colonial war in Africa. This war, which had a devastating impact on the African countries it affected, also had a tragic effect on Portugal, ravaging the country politically, socially and culturally. It compelled young people to fight against the African colonies struggling for political autonomy (the now-independent Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Cape Verde) and in many cases against their own beliefs and wishes. In this context, an anticolonial stance

began to gain ground very early on amongst Portuguese youth and intellectuals and was directed against the war itself in the form of desertion, evasion or self-imposed exile. At the same time, African writers were becoming successful in some milieus in Europe due to the positive reception that their forms of abrogation were given by leftist groups there. Some of the most important Portuguese contemporary literature published in the last three decades manifests such concerns and the effects they produced.

The fact that José Saramago has never written about the colonial war in Africa, despite having always been engaged in Portuguese politics and having taken an active part in them during most of his career (albeit without personal experience in the military, since he was not conscripted to fight against the African pro-independence movements), is, to say the least, curious. It makes us read his narratives more attentively. Keeping in mind the analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* outlined above and the contradictions this story carries with respect to late-colonial concerns, we may reread Saramago's novels with respect to the way in which power, the practice of oppression, and the emergence of autonomy are envisaged in them. As Leela Gandhi observes:

Few critics would dispute the understanding that all literature is symptomatic of, and responsive to, historical conditions of repression and recuperation. While postcolonial literary theory invokes these cultural materialist assumptions in its account of textual production under colonial and postcolonial conditions, it goes a step further in its claim that textuality is endemic to the colonial encounter. Texts, more than any other social and political product, it is argued, are the most significant instigators and purveyors of colonial power and its double, postcolonial resistance. (141-42)

Further, after quoting Tiffin and Lawson ("Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality" [Tiffin and Lawson 3]), she adds: "Conversely, it follows that the textual offensiveness of colonial authority was met and challenged, on its own terms, by a radical and dissenting anti-colonial counter-textuality" (142). The notions of offensiveness and dissent in the textuality of the contemporary novel are precisely what interests me in this reading, as well as the way in which we may question the relations of supremacy they establish.

The Stone Raft is the story of a disruption (though a disruption of unknown causes effected on the earth) that gives rise to a voyage in which some people arbitrarily participate, constructing for themselves a space of freedom, a mode of rebuilding the world, and a way of living in it. Writing on an abstract imaginative level and following both utopian and dystopian procedures, Saramago alludes to the recent inclusion of Portugal in the European Community when he makes clear his wish, or the need, for a separation of the Iberian Peninsula from that community and in turn asks for a closer relationship not only with Spain but also with Brazil and the Portuguese-speaking African countries. While not explicitly expressed in the story, this is the concrete meaning implied in the text through the composition of a very neat allegory:

As things stand, people are no longer surprised. Several months have passed since the peninsula separated from Europe, we have traveled thousands of kilometers over this violent open sea, the leviathan just missed colliding with the terrified islands of the Azores, or perhaps, as later emerged, it was never meant to collide with them, but the men and women did not know that as they found themselves obliged to flee from one side to the other, these were only some of the many things that happened, such as waiting for the sun to rise on the left only to see it appear on the right, not to mention the moon, as if its inconstancy ever since its breaking away from the earth were not enough, and the winds that blow on all sides and the clouds that shift from all horizons and circle above our dazzled heads, yes, dazzled, for there is a living flame overhead, as if man need not, after all, emerge from the historic sloth of his animal state and might be placed once more, lucid and entire, in a newly formed world, pure and with its beauty intact. (282-83)

"There is a living flame overhead," the story continues, and nobody is trying to separate the peninsula from the continent, nobody is fighting against anything whatsoever—only some spirit of the future, some curious and inexplicable phenomenon occurring on earth and among animals that may help humankind in a transition toward a better life. In this voyage subjectively assumed by the Iberian Peninsula, there is a sure effect of reading that implies derision being heaped on the whole enterprise of the Great Discoveries, in the sense that History may assume in fantasy what it was supposed to achieve in reality. There is also a clear allusion to the peripheral expectations (from a political point of view) regarding Africa and South

America at the time, during the 1970s and 1980s, when Eurocentric perspectives replaced lost colonial insights with some minor and dubious reconfigurations of social and cultural concerns. In his important analysis of Verdi's *Aida*, Edward Said addresses a similar kind of ideological representation with the following remark: "One must remember, too, that when one belongs to the more powerful side in the imperial and colonial encounter, it is quite possible to overlook, forget, or ignore the unpleasant aspects of what went on 'out there'" (157).

The task is to determine which location Saramago assumes for his discourse, since he is no longer under the control of strict political censorship, and since allegory implies a distancing from the described (imagined) phenomena. In other words, the autonomy of life that the characters in *The Stone Raft* finally find and enjoy is not something they have had to conquer, but something that has been offered by randomness and poetic intent. Far from Africa (and closer to Brazil, which has been an independent country for almost two centuries), Saramago chooses not to write about this Africa of which he has no knowledge; rather, in a way, he writes "on the edge" of Africa, given that the peninsula finds itself in its final destiny in closer proximity to the "dark continent." Silently, and with some hope for a bright future (for the dry elm branch that precipitated the movement of the peninsula and the narrative impetus of *The Stone Raft* is now budding and will possibly soon flower, as the final words of the novel tell us), "the peninsula has stopped" (292) and the narrator, speaking apparently to (or in the name of) the female characters Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira, exclaims:

Dear God, how all things in this world are linked together, and here we are thinking that we have the power to separate or join them at will, how sadly mistaken we are, having been proved wrong time and time again, a line traced on the ground, a flock of starlings, a stone thrown into the sea, a blue woolen sock, *but we are showing them to the blind*, preaching to the deaf with hearts of stone (290; my emphasis).

Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin remind us that "a distinctive use of allegory, irony, magic realism and discontinuous narratives are characteristic of postcolonial writing" (28), while Saramago's use of allegory and magic realism is currently being emphasized by critics as well. *The Stone Raft* is a

marvelous example of allegorical writing, but it seems true enough that the space it offers for living (the marginal peninsula) is not the same as the space it creates for speaking: its narrative voice stems from the distance of allegory and from the very edge of the intended and approached margins, the other continents.

According to the above quotation from the novel, we may argue that people in it do not seem to be really free, or appear rather subject to superior organized forces. Randomness may be viewed as a kind of manifestation of the forces of heaven and earth, as "a line traced on the ground, a flock of starlings, a stone thrown into the sea, a blue woolen sock" are supposed to demonstrate when they set the narrative events in motion. Furthermore, the "living flame overhead" indeed does act, be it as God, government, social forces or randomness: it depends on one's cultural perception, albeit this time in a non-postcolonial mode, since Saramago makes no choice, due to the fact that the voyage does not come to an end, as opposed to the voyages of discovery that ended in triumphant arrivals or in tragic defeats. Instead, the peninsula stays away from the African and South American continents, truly on the edge. This absence of a positive, dynamic or definitive reaction may be a wise position, but there may also be claims against the "blindness" that blocks humankind from the understanding of nature, and even (or mostly) culture. Therefore, in order to avoid the obstacle of "the blind," let us imagine all humankind in blindness, and observe how thus they begin to see: "Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are" is one of the statements in the more recent *Blindness*.

I do not mean to claim that *The Stone Raft* was a source for the conception of *Blindness*; however, it is interesting to discuss the relation between the two allegories, that of the voyaging peninsula and that of the sudden and general blinding of a community. In both books, the allegory manifests the textual aims of a well-organized universe of fiction, where every element depends on a central, impossible idea (one that is at the same time bizarre and inconceivable, yet that deals with common details of everyday life, steering the fictional construction towards both the fantastic and the utopic). In both cases, an ironic message also can be detected: that of Portugal and Spain leaving the European Community in order to join the countries of the Third World, and that of an entire society possessing a level of cultural understanding that does not stretch to the real aims of life and its meaning. Of course, we should emphasize once again the fact that such simplistic ideas

are not fostered by Saramago himself. In fact, none of these underlying central questions is even considered in the texts, either because the characters stand for common people (who usually do not seem to question events on a philosophical level, although there are in the novel many observations that reveal that they really do), or because literature today no longer conveys a sense of absolute meaning as it used to in Conrad's time. But there is a clear difference: Conrad develops his own acute experience of being in Africa (or of having been in touch with forms of otherness), which brings him closer to uncommon manifestations of different entities. This creates the need for knowing and understanding, a need that encompasses the notions of sin and culpability:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea of the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea... (10)

This idea is undoubtedly also central in Saramago's novels, but as a kind of negative compensation for the lack of a similar experience, thus giving rise to the configuration of allegories—a common option in the fiction of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in postcolonial narratives—as opposed to symbolist representations. Allegory implies a distance in conception and a retreat from explicit quests. In doing so, Saramago draws a parallel between the Third World and the European and Portuguese complex vis-à-vis the recently decolonized countries, but without manifesting it directly. The “heart” of the question is the object of an implication (duty or regret), not that of a statement; discovering a new way of life (as in *The Stone Raft*) is the issue for an aleatory quest, not for a precise project. Realizing the goals of living in the society and of maintaining solidarity in difference (*Blindness*) is also the issue for an aleatory event, not for a precise quest. The interest that Saramago has always shown in condemning political and social inequities reveals itself in his literary works as more and more remote from precise referential circumstances, even from concrete implications that his allegories might have in relation to contemporary situations. This is, after all, a literary attitude resulting from the sensibility of the Symbolist movement, which helps to make our approach in some way manageable. In her

examination of eighteenth-century travel literature, Mary Louise Pratt finds a very close relation between Eros and abolition; in a different way, but with similar goals, we see in *The Stone Raft* the prominence of place and sexuality in erasing differences—mostly of nationality, age and strictly defined belonging. For the voyaging peninsula, Africa (but maybe also South America) is the truly unknown and forbidden (or denied) notion; the “heart of darkness” is slightly approached in *The Stone Raft*, but, one might say, only along its edge. Some further insights can be gathered, however, in the novel *Blindness*, which addresses the predicament described by Conrad (“We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” [60]) as a symbol of knowledge for crucial problems.

In *Blindness*, a group of blind people stays together and tries to preserve their health and dignity in the midst of an entire community that has also been struck by the mysterious epidemic. Abject attitudes and atrocities generate an atmosphere of oppression and death. The text gives us no clues as to what Saramago has in mind as the point of reference for this negative vision of life, except for the way in which Western civilization has developed and created its patterns of behavior. In the whole process there is of course room for all forms of assault and oppression, including those of the dictatorship that the Portuguese people had to endure and of the colonialism in Africa that went hand in hand with it. On the other hand, Saramago wrote his novel against the background of the definitely postcolonial attitudes of the Portuguese democratic governments, during which time the “colonial complex” was being replaced by a mix of favors, honors, offers and donations to the Portuguese-speaking African countries. Even today, such attitudes have given way to a very specific situation, in which abrogation is curiously adopted more often by the ex-colonizer than by the ex-colonized. There is no doubt that one cannot yet see the elements of this social and political situation clearly, and I am not suggesting that Saramago himself is feeling disturbed by this lack of vision—not to mention the fact that cultural analysis of these kinds of interrelations has not yet been performed for Portuguese literature and that Saramago does not seem in the least concerned with either postmodern or postcolonial labels, at least on a superficial level or in terms of meta-theoretical implications. What I am trying to show is that it is possible to read *Blindness* in a way that asks questions about the postcolonial views that are partially integrated in the conception of the novel—even with the contradictory directions and denials that after all characterize the

contemporary age—if we consider that globalization has been redefining our entire political configuration as part of a postcolonial condition that reabsorbs all the social and cultural manifestations of the industrialized world. The fact that Saramago replaces the “figurative” allegory of the Iberian Peninsula with the “abstract” allegory of an entire community of blind people means perhaps that his negative conception of globalization has progressed from an initial focus on reduced nationalisms to an abandonment of that form of communitarian thinking.

Once again, experience is a kind of schizophrenic failure in Portuguese cultural life, where people fall into three categories in relation to Africa: those who went there to fight, those who did not, and those who try to establish relations between the first and the second (these are always acting dubiously, for they belong necessarily to one of the first two categories, and they sometimes forget to distinguish between the different ways in which others may have fought in Africa: idealistically, indifferently, greedily or dramatically). It is obvious that Saramago, belonging to the second category, and being a very intelligent novelist, does not forget the tragedy of the colonial war in Africa, yet cannot write directly about it. One might say, nevertheless, that Saramago has a special skill for describing environments that he has not witnessed personally: the Portuguese eighteenth century, in *Baltasar and Blimunda*; the first half of the twentieth century, in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*; or even the Middle Ages, in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*. But then that concerns history and time, and here we are dealing with space and experience. With *The Stone Raft* and *Blindness*, allegory replaces experience, which brings us closer, once again, to the set of symbolist devices in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and to the edge of the African question.

Let us push our hypothesis just a little further: in dealing with the basic contemporary problem created by the sequels of colonialism, namely, that of the unstable and conflicting dialogue between the center and the margins (which is, moreover, the major theme of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, expressed on the contemporary level by a love story between a well-educated woman and a second-class administrative employee, and on the medieval level by the righteous fight of the Arabs against the wrongful hegemony of the Christians), Saramago cannot *not* be in favor of the margins, for this is the politically correct contemporary position, and consistent with his personal political opinions too. Neither, however, can he erase the question of knowledge and the fact that it gives supremacy and power (Said 157), thus

diverting the direction of meaning by means of an allegory, and even literally diverting the direction of the gaze by means of imagining blindness.

In fact, blindness in Saramago's novel has very little to do with not being able to see, except for pragmatic details that make the fictional construct picturesque and "realistic." Thus, for example, the central character—the doctor's wife—is the only one who never becomes blind, and for two good reasons: first, the narrator has to adopt some perspective in telling the story, and a narrative perspective is always, and also literally, a point of view; second, one cannot have an allegory if one cannot develop a reasoning, a moralistic attitude, a final judgment, and it is the doctor's wife, set apart from the entire community of the blind, who achieves the convergence of the different meanings of blindness in the text (and outside of it as well). Besides, as the only witness to what is happening, the doctor's wife says something very similar to Kurtz's final remarks in *Heart of Darkness*, and to Marlow's ongoing intertwining of memory and nostalgia: "You do not know, you cannot know, what it means to have eyes in a world in which everyone else is blind, I am not a queen, no, I am simply the one who was born to see this horror" (276).¹

One of the most impressive episodes in *Blindness* is that of a visit to a church, where the doctor's wife notices in the paintings hanging on the walls that the images of saints have their eyes blindfolded. The allegory is here resumed as a *mise en abîme* of the plot's meaning, and the plot's frame may be seen as a possibility of other ways of framing the reference, which possibly might be lost in the vertigo of the multiple acts of framing, for the major glory of the literary artifact. Even simple sentences, similar to aphorisms, may be taken as part of the entire allegory, or as minor allegories inside the entire framework of the novel:

Give us an example, said the doctor, Certainly, replied the old man with the black eyepatch, I went blind when I was looking at my blind eye, What do you mean, It's very simple, I felt as if the inside of the empty orbit were inflamed and I removed the patch to satisfy my curiosity and just at that moment I went blind, It sounds like an allegory, said an unknown voice, the eye that refuses to acknowledge its own absence. (127)

This last example shows that seeing or not seeing is not the major goal in the progression of the narrative, and, especially, that the central factor of

meaning in the text (being blind) is not equivalent here, as commonly accepted, to being plunged in darkness. On the contrary, let us emphasize that blindness, in the circumstances created by Saramago's narrative, is a kind of luminous whiteness that borders, in a symbolic (and physical) way, on the whole set of components of reality (for instance, colors). It is insinuated that the fact of not seeing their everyday circumstances progressively allows people to become more sensitive to other objects and other realities, which are, of course, now filtered by the mind rather than by direct visual representation. The problem is that the fictional construction gives us the idea that only some groups (such as that which holds the point of view, since we follow the point of view of the doctor's wife) have access to this specific, somehow elitist, understanding. Moreover, what about the implication that only with someone such as the doctor's wife who has kept the ability to see of vision are we able to obtain such specific understanding? This "centric" perspective once more puts the narrative on the edge of the question, finding no way of relating the center and the margins, and obliterating their conflicting consistency.

Nor in Saramago's novel are we yet in the "heart of darkness." If being in the center implies the possibility of access to (and even exercise of) power, and peripheral instances are supposed to be exposed to its hegemonic irradiation, being on the edge may be considered as the privileged position for knowledge, both objective and impartial, uncontaminated by either centripetal or centrifugal concerns. Being on the edge is obviously the convenient place for a wise witness (like the Old Man of Restelo, in *The Lusads*, inveighing against the earliest stages of Portuguese colonialism) who is not quite "marginal" and able to ponder the issue of observation and of its exercise as a decisive contribution to a better way of seeing. This, in the final analysis, is a position that emulates power and covets supremacy, and is very likely opposed to adventure and modernity. It is a particular way of deserving reverence, brought about by a more respectable, equidistant knowledge, or by seeing inside, as is the case, once again, with Saramago's blind:

It made no difference to them whether it was day or night, the first light of dawn or the evening twilight, the silent hours of early morning or the bustling din of noon, these blind people were for ever surrounded by a resplendent whiteness, like the sun shining through mist. For the latter, blindness did not mean being plunged into banal darkness, but living inside a luminous halo. (89-90)

Thus, “banal darkness” (into which one might be plunged by common blindness or by other causes) is not a way of living but rather a way of being close to death. This is a symbol for Western culture, from the divine manifestations of Antiquity or the Middle Ages that are normally enveloped in light, to the marvelous and contested “enlightenment” of modernity. This leads us once more to problematize Conrad’s heritage and the relation he establishes between darkness and the ivory trade: ivory opens up the possibility of a replacement of darkness with whiteness, which may well mean that it is in Kurtz that the darkness lies. It leads us also to consider that in the art of the novel there are two kinds of composition: one that organizes the invention of realizing circumstances (which takes as its point of departure a vague reference, with this reference being gradually surpassed in order to build another reality, an allegory, where reality seems more real); and another that assembles problems (where interrogations of the reference may dismantle reality in order to reconsider and remake, not only by symbol but also by open-endedness, the given reality). Here is the way the Russian and Marlow describe Kurtz:

“He made me see things—things”... He had, as he informed me proudly, managed to nurse Kurtz through two illnesses (he alluded to it as you would to some risky feat), but as a rule Kurtz wandered alone, far in the depths of the forest... “What was he doing? Exploring or what?” I asked. “Oh, yes, of course”; he had discovered lots of villages, a lake, too—he did not know exactly in what direction; it was dangerous to inquire too much—but mostly his expeditions had been for ivory. “But he had no goods to trade with by that time.” (98)

Being “on the threshold of great things” (116), Kurtz tried to capture the dream of possessing the distant and the incredible, made concrete by Marlow’s narrative perspective—this was then the way to the heart of darkness. At the end of *Blindness*, looking at the sky and seeing “everything white,” the doctor’s wife thinks, “It is my turn,” and we learn that “Fear made her quickly lower her eyes”; as the novel ends, she immediately feels that “the city was still there” (326). Thus the narrative is brought again to its normal place, to brightness in an urban mode, to proximity, in a word, to the centers of this world, although it was built aside from it. That is the center from which Saramago writes in any case, perhaps inevitably so, given the Europeanness of his gaze and condition. For his being on the edge (more of

an aesthetic position, with inquisitive and decisive yet distant implications) is apparently different in this context from being on the margins (a political and ethical confinement implying the eventual beginning of a process of struggle or conciliation), and Kurtz's threshold is finally the crossroad containing both the sources of imprisonment and the dream of accomplishment.

Notes

¹ In the Portuguese original these last words read "sou simplesmente a que nasceu para ver o horror," that is, literally, "I am simply the one who was born to see *the* horror" (276; my emphasis).

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