

The French Metanarrative of Blindness

Les aveugles sous les portes, impassibles en leur éternelle obscurité, restent calmes comme toujours au milieu de cette gaieté nouvelle, et, sans comprendre, ils apaisent à toute minute leur chien qui voudrait gambader.

(“The blind, as they sit in the doorways, impassive in their eternal darkness, remain as calm as ever in the midst of this fresh gaiety, and, not understanding what is taking place around them, they continually check their dogs as they attempt to play.” Maupassant 311; n.p.)

When we think of blindness in French fiction, we think first of its presence in canonical literature. We think of Gustave Flaubert’s grotesque blind beggar who haunts Emma Bovary and whom Larry Duffy has analysed at length; we think of Charles Baudelaire’s “affreux” (“awful” 93) and “vaguement ridicules” (“vaguely ridiculous” 93) Blind Men from *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) who are objects of scrutiny, speculation and pity. In fact, there is no doubt that most French fictional depictions of blindness reinforce and subscribe to the “metanarrative of blindness” cleverly elaborated by David Bolt throughout his book. Indeed, Bolt’s inclusion of several seminal francophone writers, including Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, André Gide, Albert Memmi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, in his anglophone survey testifies to the widespread presence of ocularcentric attitudes to blindness and sightedness in the French canon and beyond. One of the opening sentences from Guy de Maupassant’s short story “L’Aveugle” (“The Blind Man”),

quoted above, is a typical example of the negative way in which blind characters can be presented in literary texts. The story's title is an example of the phenomenon of "nominal displacement" discussed by Bolt (35–50) whereby blind characters are both dehumanized and homogenized by their lack of a name. In this story, the title, which is echoed by the first words of the passage, displaces the main character's identity, his very personhood, by insisting that his blindness is his only, and thus his defining, characteristic. In addition, the generalization achieved by the plural situates the story's protagonist as one of many, part of a homogenous group whose infirmity distances them from both the narrator and the reader, who is thus aligned with the narrator's point of view through their complicit shared sightedness. After establishing that blind people are a breed apart, the narrator evokes three stereotypes of blindness in quick succession. The reference to "eternal darkness" mobilizes the problematic and erroneous "blindness-darkness synonymy" which Bolt analyses in detail (22–23), and the subsequent reference to the blind man's lack of understanding is an allusion to the "seeing-knowing metaphor" also discussed by Bolt (18), which seems to be the logical extension of the "blindness-darkness synonymy" as well as the moment when literal and figurative blindness merge, and which thus associates blindness with lack of knowledge and insight. Finally, the adjectives "impassive" and "calm" evoke blind people's stereotypical passivity, which posits them as victims of their affliction. As the story progresses, the blind man's status as victim is reinforced by his harsh treatment at the hands of his fellow villagers. By tricking him into eating inedible objects and sharing his food with various animals, the villagers enact another familiar image of blindness in French fiction—that of the easily fooled blind person who can be effortlessly outwitted by his superior, because sighted, peers. Finally, when the blind man is abandoned by his family, he is obliged to go out begging for food. According to Kudlick and Weygand, "the public imagination was limited with respect to blindness; one could be a beggar and a grateful recipient of charity or one could be a miracle as the result of restored vision" (*Reflections* 139). We shall return to the myth of the miraculous and redemptive cure below and, as I show in my article "Les aveugles en France", the figure of the blind beggar is indeed one of the most common images of blindness in nineteenth-century French popular fiction.

Whilst most of this study will be devoted to the analysis of the ways in which the most interesting and insightful occurrences of blindness in

French fiction are in fact those which resist stereotypical and clichéd representations of blindness, such as those found in Maupassant's depiction, this chapter will explore the precise nature of these negative attitudes so that the extent and nature of the resistance to them can be understood and appreciated when it is examined in subsequent chapters.

BLINDNESS AS EMASCULATION

In his third chapter, Bolt shows in detail how the metanarrative of blindness sets up an association between blindness and castration which effectively emasculates male blind characters (51–66). André Malraux's 1930 novel *La Voie royale* (*The Royal Way*) provides a literal example of this blindness-castration synonymy as the indigenous tribe who capture French colonizer Grabot both blind and castrate their prisoners when they turn them into slaves. In a more metaphorical sense, although Maupassant does not make overt mention of his blind man's sexuality, the very lack of reference to it can be read as a kind of textual emasculation. The use of generalization, the reference to animal-like eating behaviour and the emphasis on his passivity all mark him out as less than human. His position outside family relationships coupled with his lack of status further emphasize the fact that this lack of humanity encompasses a lack of masculinity. This passive and pitiful blind man displays none of the qualities—such as courage, resourcefulness, physical prowess and the ability to provide for his family—which were traditionally associated with masculinity in nineteenth-century France. This association between blindness and lack of masculinity can be found elsewhere in French fiction. Indeed, if we agree with Schor that, in fiction, “blindness is gendered and, predictably, gendered as female” (“Blindness as Metaphor” 87), we begin to understand why writers such as Maupassant might emphasize the effeminacy of their blind male characters.

The reaction of the servants in Paul Margueritte's 1916 novel *L'Autre Lumière* (*The Other Light*) to the news of their master's sudden sight loss during a hunting accident suggests that, like most people at that time, they subscribe to the “personal tragedy” or “medical” model of disability which describes blindness as a tragedy, a debilitating disaster, even a fate worse than death:

Mais tout le monde s'était trouvé d'accord pour proclamer que, de toutes les injustices qui pouvaient tomber sur un bon et brave garçon, celle-là

était bien, de la part du sort, la plus “canaille”. L’idée de tout ce que M. Claude perdait avec la vue s’exagérant en ces esprits simplistes, ils ne l’eussent pas plaint davantage d’être mort.

(“But everyone was united in insisting that of all the injustices which could befall a good, decent man, this was absolutely the ‘meanest’. The idea of everything that Mister Claude would lose along with his sight became exaggerated in their simple minds so that they wouldn’t have been sadder for him if he had died.” 137)

It is striking that in this quotation the injustice of Claude’s accident is overtly associated with his masculinity. By emphasizing the unfairness of such a terrible accident happening to “a good, decent man”, this comment appears to be suggesting that blindness is a particularly feminizing condition which is in danger of unfairly undermining Claude’s masculinity. Indeed, despite the large numbers of soldiers who returned blinded from the First World War, French literature shows a marked reluctance to describe blinded veterans, which further suggests a widespread unease when faced with a man, particularly a soldier, whose masculinity has been called into question by his loss of sight. In “Les aveugles dans le roman contemporain” (1925) (“The Blind in the Contemporary Novel”), eminent blind academic and Montaigne scholar Pierre Villey notes with surprise that despite the fact that blindness was one of the most widespread injuries in the First World War, French war novelists were oddly reluctant to depict war-blinded men in their novels, and those who did so mostly produced mediocre representations. (662) Whilst the French public were fascinated by the new phenomenon of the war-blinded veteran, novelists writing during the First World War either problematically marginalized or altogether avoided depictions of war-blinded characters in their fiction. Both Paul Margueritte’s *L’Autre Lumière* (1916) and Paul Bourget’s 1917 novel *Lazarine* suggest that once a man has been blinded, he can no longer be considered a “proper” man and is consequently denied the access to both narrative and desire granted to his sighted peers. *Lazarine* in particular exemplifies the sighted novelist’s uneasy relationship with blind characters. This epistolary novel uses letters from several characters to recount the story of the misguided passion between the eponymous heroine and returned (but sighted) soldier, Graffeteau. On one level, Bourget’s depictions of the blind soldier Duchâtel demonstrate that blindness is not the tragedy that most sighted people believe: “‘C’est vrai’, a repris Duchâtel. ‘Quand j’avais mes

yeux, je ne me doutais pas de ce qu'il y avait de vie et d'étourdissante variété dans l'air qu'on respire.' Et se penchant du côté de la fenêtre: 'Tenez. Les lilas commencent à s'ouvrir ce soir'" ("It's true," continued Duchâtel, "when I still had my eyes I had no idea about how much life and dizzying variety can be found in the air we breathe." And leaning towards the window he added: "You see, the lilacs are beginning to come into bloom this evening'" 8). However, Bourget's apparently enlightened attitude to Duchâtel's blindness is undermined by the place of the blind soldier in the novel's narrative. Although Duchâtel is an important figure in the novel, and one who contributes significantly to the plot in several places, the letters he writes in the first part of the story are alluded to but, importantly, not included in the narrative alongside the letters of his sighted peers. Bourget's refusal to grant Duchâtel a voice in the novel can be read as an act of typhophobic erasure: by silencing the soldier because of his blindness, the author establishes a link between blindness and lack which creates a sense of emasculation, even dehumanization, similar to that seen in Maupassant's tale. In this way, Bourget's text suggests that a man who has lost his sight is no longer seen as whole, valid or worthy of readerly attention. It is as though Duchâtel's blindness somehow disqualifies him from inclusion in the narrative, as if he has lost his capacity for action, thought and desire, along with his eyesight.

Duchâtel might be said to offer one explanation for his own marginalization, and thus the marginalization of the blinded soldier more generally in First World War fiction in his discussion of what he misses about reading handwritten letters: "C'est si vivant, une écriture. C'est un geste, une personne. Ça vous regarde, une lettre, avec des yeux, et moi je n'ai plus les miens pour recevoir et pour rendre ce regard" ("Handwriting is so lively. It is like a gesture, a person. Letters gaze at you with their eyes, and I can no longer use my eyes to receive and return this gaze" 86). This celebration of the personality of handwriting functions, via the metaphorical reference to eyes, to suggest that people without eyes are just as unreadable—and by implication as unworthy of being read—as the letters which Duchâtel can no longer decipher. In addition, and discussed in Chap. 5, this reference to "the gaze" adds a sexual dimension to the exchange of letters which Duchâtel is no longer able to engage in, thus further emasculating him.

Bourget's refusal to include Duchâtel's correspondence in the narrative is echoed in his characters' attitude to the blinded soldier. Despite his privileged status as a wounded soldier-hero, he occupies a

marginalized place in the non-disabled characters' consciousness and is less well respected than soldiers who have been wounded in other ways. When Graffeteau and Duchâtel happen to be strolling in the very part of the garden where Lazarine confessed her love to Graffeteau, the latter sees the blind man as less of a presence than a sighted man would be. Graffeteau admits to himself that with anybody else he would have avoided walking in the same place for fear of somehow sullyng his memory of it, but he does not feel affected by the presence of the blind man in the same way: "Mais le fait que l'aspect des choses n'arrivât pas à l'aveugle, donnait à l'amoureux l'illusion de cette solitude" ("But the fact that the way things looked was meaningless to the blind man meant that the lover felt as if he was walking there alone" 87). Duchâtel is not only emasculated; he is also rendered invisible by his blindness: his inability to see transforms him into a non-presence, an empty vessel devoid of all feeling and, significantly, one now deemed incapable—by both narrator and character—of experiencing the sexual desire alluded to by Graffeteau. Later in the narrative, Graffeteau's view of Duchâtel as an unfeeling and unresponsive object is further emphasized in the way he uses him as a means to try to catch a glimpse of Lazarine. His offer to help Duchâtel by guiding him to the church (96) is not made out of altruistic regard for the blind man's spiritual welfare but in order that Graffeteau can fabricate a reason to visit the church and thus stand a chance of glimpsing his beloved Lazarine at the service.

If, then, Bourget uses Graffeteau's relationship with Duchâtel to chart not only Graffeteau's essentially selfish nature but also his—and his society's—disregard for and neglect of a man once he has been blinded, he also objectifies and dehumanizes Duchâtel by positioning him not as a rounded character in his own right but more as a clue or marker in the text to alert other characters, and therefore also the reader, to the novel's unexpected denouement. Towards the end of the story, Duchâtel is so worried about Graffeteau's mental health that he takes the unusual step of going to see Lazarine in person: rather than intrude unannounced into her home, he passes a written note to her via a servant to explain his presence. This is the only moment in the novel where we are at last given direct access to the words Duchâtel writes:

"Mademoiselle, il faut que je vous voie immédiatement. Pardon et respects." – que je vous voie? Dans son trouble, l'aveugle employait

machinalement une formule qui n'avait plus de signification pour lui, hélas! Cet indice n'était pas nécessaire pour prouver à Lazarine qu'un incident très grave l'avait seul déterminé à une pareille démarche, lui, si réservé

("Miss, I must see you at once. My apologies and my respects' – I must see you at once? His emotion was such that without thinking he used a turn of phrase that sadly no longer meant anything to him. This clue was not necessary to prove to Lazarine that something very serious must have happened to convince this timid man to undertake such an action" 255–256)

The reference to "this clue" coupled with Duchâtel's long-delayed entry into writing and the play on the verb "to see", which the narrator is at pains to point out, can be read as a reflexive commentary on blindness's predominantly linguistic, narrative function in the text—in other words, the fact that Duchâtel's words only become significant at a moment of high drama reveals that Bourget is less concerned with the actual situation and lived experience of the blinded soldier than he is with the metaphorical and symbolic potential of blindness for his narrative. Much like Graffeteau, he uses Duchâtel's blindness for his own ends, rather than as a way of representing the situation of the blind man himself. Bourget uses blindness as a device to convey meaning to his readers, as his non-blind characters gradually have their metaphorical blindness removed as they become aware of their feelings for each other. We shall see throughout this study, and particularly in Chaps. 3 and 4, that whilst the use of blindness as a metaphor for various kinds of lack, particularly lack of knowledge, is pervasive in French fiction, there are novelists whose use of language challenges this widespread and problematic use of blindness as a literary device and helps to destabilize a hierarchy of the senses which always positions sightedness at its pinnacle.

Whilst neither the moment of Duchâtel's blinding nor his subsequent rehabilitation are deemed worthy of description by Bourget, Paul Margueritte's *L'Autre Lumière* offers a detailed description of the effects of sudden sight loss on a male protagonist which seems to suggest that Margueritte's novel, unlike Bourget's, will privilege lived experience over the metaphorical potential of blindness. Indeed, throughout the novel, the discourse of the eye-doctor, Brissage, is used by Margueritte to present his reader with a much more positive view of blindness than that expressed by Claude's servants or found in *Lazarine*:

Ne croyez pas, j'en parle avec expérience, que la vue soit indispensable: c'est le plus commode, le plus agréable de nos sens; ce n'est pas le seul. Nous lui accordons une prépondérance exagérée parce qu'il nous dispense d'effort; mais croyez bien que le toucher, l'ouïe, l'odorat, le gout peuvent y suppléer en grande partie. Ces sens s'adapteront par un exercice gradué à renseigner votre frère comme des serviteurs discrets, mais sûrs, auxquels on n'aurait pas jusqu'alors fait assez confiance.

("You should not believe, and here I am speaking from experience, that sight is indispensable; it is the most convenient and the most agreeable of our senses but it is not the only one. We accord it an exaggerated importance because it prevents us from having to make an effort, but know that touch, hearing, smell and taste can replace it to a large extent. These senses will learn little by little to work for your brother like discrete but trustworthy servants who haven't been properly trusted up until now." 161)

By juxtaposing Brissage's wise words with Claude's servants' more ignorant reactions, Margueritte offers a much more balanced vision of blindness than that found in Bourget's novel. Indeed, along with Descaves's *Les Emmurés* and Guibert's *Des Aveugles*, *L'Autre Lumière* represents one of French fiction's most positive depictions of blindness.

But there is one aspect of *L'Autre Lumière* which jars with this positivity. Unlike Lazarine's Duchâtel, Claude is not blinded during the war but by a hunting accident in pre-war France. There are no doubt practical reasons for Margueritte's decision not to set the novel during the First World War, including, for example, a wish to avoid the trope of the self-sacrificing hero often associated with the war-wounded, a desire to include women in the plot and the aim of highlighting the controversial situation which arose after the war whereby civilian blind people did not benefit from the charitable and state support lavished on war-blinded soldiers. Nonetheless, this erasure of the effects of war might also be seen as comparable to Bourget's emasculation of his blind character through his narrative marginalization and his subsequent objectification by both characters and author. In both novels the characters' masculinity is called into question by their removal from the war setting in the case of Claude, or their narrative marginalization in the case of Duchâtel. Although both authors overtly endeavour to present their characters' blindness in a positive light, as a new and potentially rewarding way of being, these apparently unrelated narrative decisions nonetheless

undermine their avowed aims by suggesting that blind men are somehow less masculine, even less human, than their sighted counterparts.

BLINDNESS AND FEMININITY

Like Duchâtel, blind women are also frequently both silenced and asexualized in French fictional depictions of them. The stereotype of the docile and morally irreproachable blind girl is particularly insistently perpetuated by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century romantic literature. In his discussion of two works by Isabelle de Montolieu, Paulson sees her representations as examples of the “virginity symbolism of blindness” and goes on to note that “we find identically idealized presentations of blind young girls characterized by their innocence, goodness, sensitivity, intelligence, beauty and so on” (80). Unlike the blind novelist and autobiographer Thérèse-Adèle Husson, to whom I return in Chaps. 3 and 6, these girls do not grow up to live independent and fulfilling lives: like the partially blind artist Michèle (Juliette Binoche) in Leos Carax’s 1991 film *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (*The Lovers on the Bridge*), they are problematically indebted to sighted men who either marry or cure them, and sometimes do both. Hugo’s Dea and Gide’s Gertrude—whom we will meet in subsequent chapters—can both be read as distant cousins of these idealized depictions, although they both have markedly unhappier endings. Weygand agrees with Paulson’s assessment of Montolieu’s depictions of the blind girl Sophie:

Fille des Lumières par son éducation, sa sagesse et son aisance à pallier son infirmité, Sophie, par la pureté de son âme et de ses pensées – qui rayonne dans toute sa personne – est un être de lumière, pour lequel on ne peut éprouver qu’un sentiment tout platonique de vénération. En cela on peut dire qu’elle préfigure une certaine vision romantique de la femme aveugle, illustrée, par exemple, par le personnage de Dea.

(“Daughter of the Enlightenment by education, behavior, and the ease with which she overcomes her disability, Sophie, through the purity of her soul and thoughts, is radiant from head to toe; she is a being of light, for whom one can only feel a platonic veneration. In this sense, she prefigures a certain romantic vision of the blind woman, illustrated, for instance, by the character of Dea in Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs*.” *Vivre sans voir* 419; *The Blind in French Society* 208)

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of these girls' purification is their lack of autonomous and pleasurable sexuality. Whilst, as I have shown elsewhere, female sexuality was a taboo in the nineteenth century, veiled depictions of it did of course exist (*Taboo* 16–44). That blind girls were denied sexual pleasure of any kind in fiction is a symptom of the disempowering and objectifying infantilization of blind women discussed by Bolt with reference to André Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale* (38–39). Chapter 6 shows that despite the threat which blind female sexuality poses to stereotypical representations of blindness and femininity, and thus to the social order more broadly, it is possible to detect elements of a subversive celebration of female sexual pleasure in French fiction.

REPRESENTING TYPHLOPHOBIA: TRICKERY, PITY AND (SELF)-LOATHING

As we have already seen in the example of *L'Autre Lumière*, in which the servants' simplistic and negative reactions to Claude's blinding are juxtaposed with Brissage's more reasoned and positive response in order to encourage the reader to agree with the latter, it is not necessarily the case that fictional depictions of blindness are either resoundingly positive or depressingly negative. Similarly, it is not the case that my corpus can easily be divided up into books which present negative depictions of blindness and those which present positive depictions. Indeed, those books which deal most thoughtfully and sensitively with blindness are sometimes also those which include ocularcentric attitudes which act as a foil to more typhophilic outlooks. Hervé Guibert's novel *Des Aveugles* is a case in point. It includes two reminders of conventional ways of seeing blindness and blind people which allow the reader to better appreciate the celebration of blindness which occurs within its pages. In Guibert's depiction of the life of a group of blind adults who live and work in the Institut national des jeunes aveugles (INJA; National Institute for the Young Blind) in Paris, to which I return in Chaps. 4, 5 and 7, the director of the institute is one of the novel's few sighted characters. Despite (or perhaps because of) his role as head of France's most important school for the blind, he is shockingly condescending towards his blind charges and employees, and he enjoys the illusion of power which his rarefied sighted status accords him. When he introduces two blind workers—Josette and Taillegueur—to each other, he relishes the moment of

awkwardness which occurs when they grope inelegantly for each other's hands: "La maladresse des aveugles lui donnait une sensation agréable de sa propre force physique" ("The clumsiness of blind people gave him a pleasing sense of his own superiority and physical force" 76; 67). This condescending attitude to blind people, which is perhaps born out of a deep-rooted fear of blindness, is given a more sustained representation in Guibert's evocation of the parents of the enigmatic blind boy Kipa. Although blind from birth, Kipa has always been treated as sighted by his parents, who live in a state of advanced denial similar to that evoked by Kuusisto: "Ils n'avaient jamais admis que Kipa était aveugle, ils n'avaient jamais voulu prononcer ce mot" ("They had never admitted that Kipa was blind, they had never wanted to pronounce that word" 44; 34). They hide the existence of the INJA from their son and spend the novel pretending that he can see. Their (self-)deception is such that they begin to believe in the fiction they have created. Kipa goes along with their pretence but is nonetheless inexplicably drawn to the institute by its intriguing sounds and feel. He improbably secures a job there as a postal delivery boy and sighted guide, and he spends the novel pretending to read and describe things to the institute's blind inhabitants. Kipa's intriguing relationship with the language of blindness is explored in more detail in Chap. 4. It is his parents' attitude which interests us here because it reminds us that blindness can be seen as so unthinkable, so impossible to live with, that a refusal to even acknowledge its existence is deemed a more viable solution than acceptance of it. Of course, Kipa's parents are a fantastical plot device used by Guibert to foreground *Des Aveugles's* powerful call for a re-evaluation of blindness, but their attitude is striking, and thus effective in the novel, precisely because it reflects, albeit in a profoundly exaggerated way, a horror of blindness which still exists in sighted society.

As we have already seen in Maupassant's story, the fear of blindness represented by Kipa's parents can lead sighted people to relegate their blind compatriots to the position of second-class citizens whose blindness reduces their personhood and places them on a par with animals or inanimate objects. Not only can this lead to the marginalization of blind people but also, and more worrying, it contributes to the surprisingly widespread belief that blind people are easily tricked and that this trickery is somehow legitimate, even understandable, when inflicted by sighted people. We have already seen an example of this in the cruel

behaviour of the peasants in Maupassant's short story, and although their malicious behaviour is undoubtedly exaggerated by the author as part of his wider project to emphasize the ignorance of the rural under-class, similar, albeit less extreme, examples are frequently found in depictions of sighted society's interactions with blind people. In *Des Aveugles*, Josette is tricked into buying an apple-green mink coat rather than the white one she and Taillegueur want. Just like the poster-seller in the same novel, who manages to sell his bin ends by passing off posters of Swiss chalets as images of David Bowie, the coat seller callously takes advantage of Josette's blindness to sell her something no one else wants to buy. Josette, unlike the sighted narrator and reader, remains ignorant of these deceptions, and whilst this raises the intriguing question of whether what Josette thinks she looks like is more important to her than what she actually looks like, it also demonstrates the extent to which blind people can be manipulated by sighted people because of the predominance of conspicuous display in Western society. Happily, not all blind people are so easily tricked. Chapter 6 shows how Thérèse-Adèle Husson responds to a similar kind of sartorial trickery.

Although ostensibly less hurtful than deceit, reactions of pity are frequent in fictional representations and are just as objectionable because they too are based on the assumption that blind people are somehow less than whole, less than human. This widespread, and generally instinctive, pity felt by sighted people towards blind people is encapsulated in the reaction of the narrator of Honoré de Balzac's *Facino Cane*. At first he is appalled by the toneless music being played at the wedding meal he is attending. It is only once the narrator realizes that the three terrible musicians are wearing the uniform of the *Quinze-Vingts*, Paris's hospice for blind adults, that he feels able to make allowances for their playing. As well as making reference to the tired stereotype of the blind musician which occurs frequently in French fiction and which is related to the myth of supersensory compensation which I discuss below, this incident also alludes to the "founding myth of blind education" explored by Kudlick ("Guy de Maupassant" 42), which tells how philanthropist and founder of the INJA, Valentin Haüy, rescued a group of blind musicians from humiliation. Both of these references reinforce the suggestion that Balzac's narrator's response reveals that non-blind people often respond to blind people with a kind of patronizing pity. A similar incident occurs in *Les Emmurés*. Unlike Balzac's mediocre blind musicians, the novel's blind protagonist, Savinien, is an accomplished pianist

and organist. But this does not stop non-blind audience members reacting to him with pity. Each time he plays at the concert hall he is surrounded in the interval by women who talk to him and about him with a mixture of pity and curiosity which culminates in a depressing return to the kind of horror expressed by Claude's servants: "‘J'aimerais mieux être sourd.’ ‘Moi, paralytique.’ ‘Moi, morte’" ("‘I'd rather be deaf.’ ‘I'd rather be paralysed.’ ‘I'd rather be dead’" 126). Later in the same novel, Sauvinien's non-blind wife, Annette, uses the mixture of pity and curiosity manifested by strangers at the sight of her blind husband to enhance her own flagging feelings of pride and self-worth. If she loves Sauvinien it is not so much for him but for what his blindness vicariously confers on her. During their honeymoon she refuses to eat alone with him in their room. Instead she enjoys showing off her devotion to her blind husband in public:

Depuis qu'ils voyageaient, les marques d'étonnement, d'intérêt, qu'on ne leur marchandait pas, la chatouillait, lui étaient une caresse morale, infiniment douce.

("Since they had been on their travels, the signs of surprise and interest which they were freely given delighted her like a kind of infinitely sweet moral caress." 347)

As Chap. 5 describes, unlike Savinien, Annette cares deeply about how other people perceive her. She delights in how strangers seem to admire the devoted way she looks after Savinien. Indeed, Descaves's use of the word "caress" in this context clearly and ironically suggests that she gains more satisfaction from her public displays of devotion to her blind husband than she does from Savinien's attempts to embrace her when they are alone. Annette's attitude is less surprising when it is considered in the context of French nineteenth-century views about marriage between non-blind people and blind people, which I discuss in Chap. 6. A subtler variant of the feeling of pity manifested both in the behaviour of Annette and in others' reactions to it can be found in an insistence, by either narrator or protagonist, that *despite* their blindness (which, this formulation suggests, incapacitates their character in some way), the protagonist *nonetheless* is able to accomplish an activity usually reserved for a sighted person. Thus in François-René de Chateaubriand's novel *Atala* (1801), the narrator insists on the fact that the leader of the Natchez, Chactas,

is chosen to lead the beaver hunt, “quoique aveugle” (even though he is blind” 10).

Despite non-blind people’s belief that blind people are easily tricked, blind characters are often painfully aware of how they are treated by non-blind people, even if they are usually powerless to change this behaviour. Thus Savinien particularly appreciates the down-to-earth friendliness of the local shopkeeper because it contrasts with what he is used to: “La patronne lui épargnait les marques de commisération ou de curiosité: c’était déjà quelque chose” (“They spared him the usual signs of commiseration or curiosity. That was something at least” 135). Of course the fact that the narrator even mentions the shopkeeper’s behaviour emphasizes its rarity. Prévost’s blind piano tuner Saint-Florent offers a more detailed insight into the tiresome repetitiveness with which blind people become the object of a curious non-blind stare:

Nous sommes habitués, monsieur, à la curiosité un peu fatigante que nous inspirons volontiers aux personnes qui entrent en relations avec nous. Elles ont peine à comprendre qu’un aveugle aille et vienne à travers l’existence, surtout qu’il exerce un métier ou un art, et c’est la source de mille étonnements qu’il nous faut subir, de mille questions auxquelles il nous faut répondre. Malgré mon heureux caractère d’alors, je ne m’y prêtais parfois qu’avec une certaine impatience.

(“We are used, sir, to the rather tiring curiosity which we willingly inspire in people who get to know us. They find it hard to understand that the blind can come and go through life, and especially that they can have a profession or a trade, and this is the source of a thousand surprises which they feel the need to share with us, of a thousand questions which we have to answer. Despite my sunny personality I did sometimes used to oblige with a certain amount of impatience.” 66)

Non-blind people such as Kipa’s parents are not the only ones who see blindness in a negative way: French fiction includes several examples of blind protagonists who also display signs of anti-blindness sentiment, and these signs are arguably all the more disturbing because they have been internalized by blind people themselves. Despite his love of sound, especially music, Prévost’s piano tuner misses both the sight as he had as a boy, and, more importantly, the memory of it, which he neglected in favour of his non-visual senses. In this quotation he is describing his

frustration at being unable to imagine the physical appearance of his beloved from the sound of her voice:

Je l'écoutais avidement, je faisais appel à toute la force de mon imagination. Vaine tentative! Ce que j'essayais de construire s'écroulait à mesure et dissolvait dans la nuit. Dix fois, je redemandais à Julie les explications qu'elle recommençait avec une infinie patience; dix fois, j'échouais dans ma tâche torturante. Combien je regrettais alors de m'être laissé prendre tout entier par les joies de l'oreille, de n'avoir pas imité ces aveugles qui se font décrire par leurs guides les paysages qu'ils traversent, les statues et les monuments, les personnes, devant lesquels ils passent, afin de ne pas perdre tout à fait la notion de l'univers visible! Pourquoi avais-je laissé s'éteindre en moi la vue intérieure, le souvenir?

("I would listen to her carefully, I would call on all the strength of my imagination. But in vain! What I tried to build would steadily crumble and dissolve into darkness. Ten times I asked her for explanations which she provided with infinite patience, ten times I failed in my tortuous task. How I regretted having been so obsessed by the joys of hearing, not having emulated those blind people who ask their guides to describe the landscapes, statues, monuments and people to them so that they don't altogether lose the notion of the visible universe. Why had I let my inner sight go out, my memories fade?" 88–89)

Saint-Florent's nostalgia for sight reveals that even well-adjusted and happy blind people are subject to the ocularcentric impulse which valorizes the beauty found in physical appearance. As well as missing his sight, Saint-Florent further denies the reality of his blindness by being proud that he does not look blind. In this way he foreshadows Guibert's Taillegueur, who refuses to use a white cane because it is a symbol of disability through its suggestion of weakness and vulnerability. This rejection of a visible sign of blindness can be read as evidence of Taillegueur's reluctance to associate himself with the stigmatized group to which he would prefer not to belong:

Taillegueur refusait d'avoir la canne blanche: il disait qu'elle était bonne pour les infirmes, pas pour un gars vaillant comme lui. Il tenait dans la main droite un gourdin taillé dans le tronc d'un noyer et de la gauche un bout de roseau taillé en sifflet dont il tirait un cri de chouette.

(“Taillegueur refused to carry a white cane: he said it was alright for the infirm but not for a well-set-up fellow like himself. He held in his right hand a club carved from a walnut trunk and in his left a length of weed fashioned to make a whistle from which he could produce the cry of an owl.” 76–77; 68)

But Taillegueur’s attitude to blindness is more complicated than this. Whilst hating the way in which non-blind society has marginalized blind people, he is the only character in the novel who has any knowledge of the political and social history of blindness. As such he knows how to cynically exploit non-blind people’s fear of blindness and their subsequent tendency to make allowances for blind people. He pushes at sartorial and behavioural boundaries and, as Chap. 7 describes, almost literally gets away with murder. His blind lover, Josette, admires his tricky way of negotiating his blindness but her own internalized typhlophobia means that she cannot reconcile Taillegueur’s kind of activism with her own more passive acceptance of her subservient social position, and she consequently believes that he is far too knowledgeable really to be blind. His impatience with those blind people who, like Josette, fail to exploit their blindness is somewhat surprisingly foreshadowed in the thoughts of Thérèse-Adèle Husson. I look in detail at Husson’s *Reflections* in Chap. 6. Here it is enough to note that she demonstrates a certain resistance to the prevailing myth that blind people are deserving of pity in her criticism of those who do not have her own positive approach to blindness: “‘May the blind people who are distraught by their destiny be pitied!’ Charlotte said, ‘They always have an air of sadness about them. The profound distress on their faces can only inspire pity’” (*Reflections* 18). Indeed, Kudlick and Weygand suggest that Husson’s refusal to subscribe to the myth of blindness as an affliction to be pitied was one reason why she struggled to find favour with the nineteenth-century public (*Reflections* 138).

THE BLIND SENSORIUM

Blind people are pitied for many reasons, but foremost amongst these seems to be the erroneous assumption that lack of visual perception leads to a less intense, less accurate and less rewarding relationship with the world. This belief stems from the widespread conviction that sight is the most used and thus most useful of the senses, and thus that it exists at the top of the hierarchy of the senses. The resultant overvalorization of

the sense of sight is further enhanced by the belief, explained by Bolt, that the five human senses can be divided into the “contact” senses (i.e. touch, taste and smell) and the “distance” senses (i.e. sight and hearing) (*The Metanarrative of Blindness* 72). Given that, as Bolt shows, hearing is sometimes indistinguishable from touch through sound vibrations, sight is in fact the only sense which does not rely on contact with the body. As such, it has traditionally been deemed the most noble sense because it is the most detached from baser human experience. As well as featuring at the top of the hierarchy of the senses because of its perceived efficacy, then, sight is also celebrated for its nobility. The consequence of this ocularcentric privileging of sight over the other senses is, as Bolt points out, that “the senses available to the culturally constructed group of the blind are lowly, corrupt, and detached; they are epistemologically and ethically inconsequential” (*The Metanarrative of Blindness* 73). As well as being pitied, then, blind people are also despised or feared for their reliance on the so-called baser senses.

Paradoxically, however, ocularcentric notions of blindness also tend to accord blind people extraordinary senses which somehow compensate them for their lack of sight. Whilst it is of course possible that a person who is not using their vision will become more attuned to what they hear, touch and smell, there is no evidence to suggest that the average blind person hears, smells or touches with more precision than the average non-blind person. Pierre Villey offers a convincing explanation:

Nous savions sans aucun doute qu’il ne suffit pas de devenir aveugle pour qu’aussitôt l’acuité des autres sens se trouve doublée. Nous savions que la suppléance ne cache aucun miracle, qu’elle n’est pas une sorte de compensation providentielle et mystérieuse par laquelle la Nature dédommagerait ses victimes. Nous tenions pour certain qu’elle est due exclusivement à l’exercice intense auquel les sens survivants sont soumis.

(“We knew beyond any doubt that going blind is not in itself enough to increase the strength of the other senses. We knew that the ability to replace one sense by another is not miraculous, not a mysterious and providential kind of compensation by which nature would reimburse its victims. We knew with certainty that it was due only to the intense use which the other senses are subjected to.” *Le Monde des aveugles* 64)

Despite Villey’s assertions, the belief persists amongst non-blind people that blind people’s non-visual senses are blessed with supersensory

perception. This widespread misunderstanding of the blind sensorium, which I shall refer to as the compensation myth, is dangerous because it contributes to negative perceptions of blindness despite its apparent celebration of the powers of the non-visual senses. As Bolt has shown, “cultural representations of extraordinary senses serve, at best, to render magical the talent and achievements of people who have visual impairments and, at worst, to justify the ascription of various animal like characteristics” (*The Narrative of Blindness* 67). Both of Bolt’s scenarios result in the distancing of blind people from their sighted peers, which maintains the myth that blind people are somehow intrinsically other. Despite the empirical evidence to the contrary presented by Villey amongst others, French fictions of blindness persist in perpetuating this myth in their representations of supersensory blind characters. Thus in popular novelist Guy des Cars’s 1951 novel *La Brute*, for example, the fact that the eponymous hero has written a book despite being both blind and deaf is explained by the suggestion that he substituted “les trois sens qui lui restent: le toucher, le goût et l’odorat à ceux qui lui font défaut depuis sa naissance” (“the three senses which he has left: touch, taste and smell, for those which he has been missing since birth” n.p.). Indeed, later in the story, Vauthier’s lawyer, whose job it is to exonerate him from the erroneous accusation of murder that he faces, uses the blind man’s highly developed senses of smell and touch, along with problematic generalizations such as “il adore les parfums, comme tous les aveugles” (“he adores perfumes, as all blind men do” n.p.) as compelling evidence of his innocence.

As well as insisting that a blind person’s non-visual senses possess supersensory qualities, ocularcentric depictions of blindness also frequently endow blind characters with an occult ability to see beyond the realms of non-blind knowledge. This ability, which is crystallized in the myth of the blind seer—which has its roots in the allegedly visionary powers of well-known blind men Homer and Tiresias—is one of the most enduring examples of what Kleege refers to as blindness’s “negative cultural associations” (*Sight Unseen* 4), and one to which I return at length in Chap. 3. Indeed, according to Schor, “the blind person as seer is the central figure of the literature of blindness” (“Blindness as Metaphor” 88). Milner concurs (74), explaining that modern depictions of the blind seer stem from the belief that because they are less distracted by artifice, more isolated from the world and thus more in tune with their own thought processes, blind people are somehow more discerning

and thus more perceptive than their non-blind peers. Of course, like all the ocularcentric visions of blindness discussed thus far, this myth has no basis in fact and serves more to highlight the superficiality of appearance-obsessed society than it does to provide any reliable guide to a blind person's lived experience. But, as we shall now go on to see, it is nonetheless widely used by novelists as part of their metaphoric armoury.

BLINDNESS AS METAPHOR: *LA SYMPHONIE PASTORALE*

If André Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale* is ostensibly the story of blind orphan Gertrude's adoption, rehabilitation and subsequent cure, it is also a paradigmatic example of the problematic ways in which an author's use of blindness as a metaphor can reinforce the negative stereotypes of blindness discussed above. As the narrator of Romain Villet's *Look* points out,

pour Gide, la cécité n'est ni l'absence d'un sens, ni la perception du monde qu'on se fait par les quatre autres; c'est une allégorie pour parler du rapport à l'invisible qu'entretiennent ceux qui ont comme vu Dieu de leur propres yeux

("for Gide, blindness is neither the absence of one sense nor the way in which the world can be perceived by the four others; it is an allegory about the relationship that people who claim to have seen God with their own eyes have with the invisible" 31)

Despite some cursory references to Gertrude's education and to blind history more generally, courtesy of the doctor Martins, *La Symphonie pastorale* is indeed much more concerned with the metaphorical blindness of its first-person narrator than with his protégée's physical blindness. As such, and as Bolt has shown, Gide's depiction of both Gertrude's actual blindness and the pastor's figurative blindness does much to reinforce the metanarrative of blindness. When Gertrude is first discovered, her blindness renders her simultaneously animal- and child-like. She is crouching in the hearth, an "être incertain, qui paraissait endormi" ("an uncertain being, who seemed to be asleep" 15). Later she lets herself be taken from the house like "une masse involontaire" ("an involuntary mass" 17–18). At the beginning of the novel, then, Gertrude's blindness is a metaphor for her lack of humanity, civilization and knowledge. But as the narrative progresses, this set of associations

is challenged by the pastor's evocation of his inability to understand his feelings for Gertrude, which he expresses through a vocabulary of not seeing, which reminds us of the myth of the blind seer: "Je te l'ai dit, Gertrude: ceux qui ont des yeux sont ceux qui ne savent pas regarder" ("I have told you, Gertrude, it is those who have eyes who do not know how to see" 91).

Paradoxically then, and in a manner which reminds us of the myth of the blind seer, in Gide's novelistic universe, blindness seems to lead to knowledge, whereas sight leads to an inability to "see"—that is, to "understand" things clearly. Whilst this reversal of the seeing-knowing association might be read as a celebration of blindness, Gide's representation of Gertrude is so obscured by other stereotypes of blindness that it is hard to retrieve a positive image of blindness from his writing. Thus, for example, the pastor further emphasizes Gertrude's wisdom by evoking the familiar notion that blind girls are better able to concentrate than their sighted peers, who are too easily distracted by the visual appeal of the world around them. Similarly, according to the pastor, blindness can also lead to the light of religious revelation by guarding against sin: "Le parfait bonheur de Gertrude, qui rayonne de tout son être, vient de ce qu'elle ne connaît point le péché. Il n'y a en elle que de la clarté, de l'amour" ("Gertrude's perfect happiness, which shines from her whole being, comes from the fact that she does not know sin. In her there is only light and love" 107).

In an attempt to justify his adulterous, paedophilic and semi-incestuous passion for Gertrude, the pastor again reinforces the stereotype of the asexual and infantilized blind girl by trying to suggest that he was "blind" to his actions precisely because Gertrude's blindness prevented him from seeing her as a sexual being:

Je me disais, c'est une enfant. Un véritable amour n'irait pas sans confusion, ni rougeurs. Et de mon côté, je me persuadais que je l'aimais comme on aime un enfant infirme. Je la soignais comme on soigne un malade, – et d'un entraînement j'avais fait une obligation morale, un devoir.

("I said to myself, she is a child. True love would not occur without embarrassment and shame. And I was convinced I loved her as one loves a disabled child. I looked after her as one looks after a sick child and I made my enthusiasm into a moral obligation, a duty." 100)

If the pastor makes a knowing reference to the myth of the innocent and asexual blind girl discussed above in order to excuse his own sin, Gertrude also mobilizes well-worn myths of blindness in her attempt to convince the pastor that their love is not as impossible as he seems to think. Her assertion that “on n’épouse pas une aveugle” (“blind girls don’t get married” 94) demonstrates, as Bolt points out (40–41), that Gertrude has internalized the metanarrative of blindness: not only does she refer to herself using depersonalizing nominalization but she also denies her own sexuality. But, like Husson, Gertrude uses the trope of the blind spinster for her own ends: she distances herself, and her relationship with the pastor, from the baser desires of sighted girls in an attempt to convince him that their love can continue precisely because her blindness prevents it from becoming a threat to his union with his wife Amelie. Indeed, despite *La Symphonie pastorale*’s sustained and problematic use of blindness as a metaphor for ignorance, the novella also offers a somewhat unexpected celebration of blindness for its own sake.

Gertrude demonstrates a positive approach to her own blindness which is reminiscent of that of Husson. Indeed, the pastor goes so far as to see her blindness as an advantage:

Il semblait qu’elle prétendît tourner à profit sa cécité, de sorte que j’en venais à douter si, sur beaucoup de points, cette infirmité ne lui devenait pas un avantage.

(“It seemed that she thought she could use her blindness to her advantage. Indeed, I was beginning to wonder whether her blindness might not be becoming something of an advantage to her.” 66)

Whilst at least some of the pastor’s attitude can be explained by his need to absolve himself of his sins towards Gertrude by attempting to blame her, or her blindness, for his weakness, his comments nonetheless suggest that her blindness is not necessarily the tragedy that the novel’s early depictions of her suggest. As such it reminds us that whilst almost all the stereotypes of blindness discussed thus far in this chapter have been negative, there also exist positive ones. We have already seen how the myth of the “blind seer” endows blind people with enhanced religious or supernatural powers. In a similar way, we know that the myth that blind people have “extraordinary senses” (Bolt 67), to compensate for

their lack of sight, celebrates the power of blindness whilst problematically marginalizing blind people by setting them apart from their sighted peers. The pastor's reaction to the news of a possible cure for Gertrude reveals that he has been taken in by both the positive and the negative stereotypes of blindness. He knows he should be happy about the news, but he nonetheless senses that Gertrude is better off blind:

Mon cœur devrait bondir de joie, mais je le sens peser en moi, lourd d'une angoisse inexprimable. A l'idée de devoir annoncer à Gertrude que la vue lui pourrait être rendue, le cœur me faut.

("My heart should be jumping with joy but I can feel it weighing me down, heavy with an inexpressible anguish. At the thought of having to tell Gertrude that her sight might be restored to her, my heart fails me." 130)

As with all of the pastor's reactions, this one is of course primarily self-ish: he is worried, and with good reason, that if Gertrude regains her sight she will see him for what he is. But his reaction also reveals that the stereotypes of blindness found in literary texts are confusing and often contradictory.

Gide is only one example of a writer who uses blindness as a literary device without making more than a fleeting or superficial reference to the reality of living with blindness. As well as having the pernicious effect of perpetuating a generally negative understanding of blindness in the reading public, this widespread tendency on the part of writers to use blindness in this way also encourages readers to neglect literal readings of blindness and to overwhelmingly privilege interpretations which read metaphorical meaning into blindness. Paulson's analysis of Victor Hugo's references to blindness is a case in point. In his chapter of *Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Blind in France* devoted to Hugo, Paulson makes no attempt to consider Hugolian depictions of blindness for their own sake. Instead, he asserts that "an approach to Hugo's writings on blindness must be in large measure psychoanalytic: we shall explore the symbolic implications of sight and its absence in the context of the origins of sexuality and the strife between fathers and sons" (168). Indeed, Paulson sees the character of Dea, whose blindness I examine in Chap. 3, not as a blind character in her own right but rather as a helpful critical device, "a microcosm of the strategies for writing about the blind" (159), which he argues had been in operation since the beginning

of the eighteenth century and which he discusses in his study. In the chapters that follow, I hope in my readings to eschew the kind of metaphorical approach to blindness embraced by Gide and Paulson. Instead I show how a range of French fictional depictions of blindness seek to challenge the negative stereotypes of blindness which are illustrated in the examples I have discussed in this chapter.

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