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The Essayistic Touch: Saramago's Version of Blindness and Lucidity

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In José Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995), a man attempts to re-establish a sense of order and understanding through his written expression amid the disorder of a city unexpectedly struck by a plague of blindness. As comprehension of his surroundings becomes increasingly elusive, writing continues to provide an outlet for this blind man to engage with his surroundings. This fictional writer explains that "um escritor é como outra pessoa qualquer, não pode saber tudo nem pode viver tudo, tem de perguntar e imaginar" (Saramago, *EC* 277). When asked about writing without his sight, he states that "os cegos também podem escrever" and shows pages filled with overlapping words and crooked sentences (Saramago, *EC* 277). While the writer's physical loss of sight may impede his ability to scribe words in straight lines, Saramago insists that his character's creative vision and capacity for insight persist.[1] Similar to the fictional writer he creates, Saramago emerges through his allegorical novel as a visionary writer among society's symbolic blind in a world made unrecognizable by globalization and the postcolonial condition. He proposes an abstract critique of contemporary society in *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* that becomes specified in its companion *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* (2004). Although Saramago titles these works as essays on blindness and lucidity, I argue that he creates two novels with essayistic tendencies in order to facilitate his exploration of philosophical terrain. To better recognize these traits within Saramago's writing, I will first examine the essay as a genre and then offer a close reading of these novels' essayistic elements. This gesture towards the essay allows for Saramago's essayistic voice with its proclivity for social commentary and digressions to exist alongside the multi-vocal expression of his characters.

The Essay as a Genre: A Theoretical Survey

Saramago insists in the inclusion of essay in the titles of these novels and recognizes an essayistic penchant in his work.[2] Positioning his writing between the essay and the novel, Saramago explains that, "Provavelmente não sou um romancista; provavelmente sou um ensaísta que precisa de escrever romances porque não sabe escrever ensaios" (Reis 46). His self-designation as an essayist who writes novels allows for an examination of the essay and the novel as genres, as well as of the essayistic traits within this pair of novels. Before proceeding with an analysis of Saramago's essayistic novels, it is useful to consider definitions of the essay. The essayistic tradition dates back to early philosophical texts of Plato and Socrates, yet its more immediate predecessor is found in the sixteenth-century writings of Michel de Montaigne. Narrative asides and philosophical ruminations characterize the Montaignean essay and also appear in the more recent essayistic practices of Roland Barthes as recognized by various scholars. For instance, French literary critic Réda Bensmaia explains, "what may appear as wandering—a total lack of order—is in fact an *exigency* characteristic of essayistic writing" (6). The essayist's voice guides these wanderings; the essayist emerges as a writer who "assumes the right and the power to succumb to desired words and to begin writing from them" (Bensmaia 26). With the essay's apogee in the late nineteenth century, writers such as William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and José Ortega y Gasset succumbed to this practice described by Bensmaia, which resulted in the creation of essays as texts with both literary and philosophical traits.[3]

In the early twentieth century, Hungarian literary critic Georg Lukács examined these essayistic practices in "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" (1910), which classifies the essay as a form of art. Lukács explains that:

> The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging. . . The essay is an art form, an autonomous and integral giving-of-form to an autonomous and complete life. [It] faces life with the same gesture as the work of art, but only the gesture, the sovereignty of its attitude is the same; otherwise there is no correspondence between them. (Lukács 18)

According to his definition, the essay approximates works of art in its form and gesture, yet it distinguishes itself from art due to its propensity for judgment.

Whereas Lukács' understanding of the essay as a form of art was shaped by his affiliation with Marxist aesthetics and their dogmatic conception of social realism in art, Theodor Adorno recognizes the dual character of art as socially determined and also independent of the social conditions that produce it. In his 1958 "The Essay as Form," Adorno proposes a now classic definition of the essay from a perspective of hermeneutics. He describes the essay as acquiring an "aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art, though it distinguishes itself from art through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance" (153). The essay utilizes concepts related to theory, but does not emerge as a derivative of theory. Instead, the "essay remains what it always was, the critical form *par excellence*; specifically, it constructs the immanent criticism of cultural artifacts, and it confronts that which such artifacts are with their concept; it is a critique of ideology" (166). Adorno's analysis of the essay recognizes its art-like qualities, yet concludes that it is a form caught between the omnipotence of scientific truth and the remnants of abstract philosophical realms. With its aesthetically productive analysis and somewhat pessimistic conclusion about the essay's anachronistic characteristics, Adorno's study of the essay contributes to his broader project of aesthetic theory.[4] Even though distinct historical contexts and schools of thought shaped their definitions, both Lukács and Adorno provide essential contributions to the theoretical conception of the essay that will help elucidate a reading of Saramago's essayistic novels.

The essay has emerged as a written form at the interstices of fiction and philosophy, experience and meaning, and imagination and knowledge characterized by its flexibility and tendency to escape generic boundaries. Often a meandering form of criticism, the essay functions as a reflective text defined by its perpetual drifting. This apparent lack of order is actually a specific arrangement of details, figures and language so that at least one detail will engage every reader. Tension emerges between this authorial control of the essay and the variety of voices that compose its textual meandering. In other words, a tension exists between the monological and the dialogical as a defining characteristic of the essay (Korhonen 24). The essay fails

to conform to established categories of literature and philosophy. Instead, as Bensmaia aptly concludes, "The essay is not *a* genre like any other, and perhaps not a genre at all: first, because it is not one, but also because it no longer obeys the rule of the game; the rhetorical, juridical rule of genres. Indeed, for the essay it is no longer a question of recounting, nor of edifying, or of instructing; it is a question now, perhaps, of provoking events" (91-92). The essay positions itself as a reflective text that includes narrative, dramatic, or poetic tendencies, as well as ambulatory digressions or fragmentary elements, all of which are present in Saramago's essayistic novels.

Given its literary traits, the essay may be described as "literature *in potentia*" in the terms of Claire De Obaldia, especially since a "good essay is one which skillfully handles the main constituents of the novel - the portrayal of characters and scene" (12). Within fictional works, characters and setting contribute primarily to the progression of the plot. Yet, the creation of unique characters or a specific locale within the essay allows for observations of society, narrative asides, and personal reflections. By grounding the essay in particular people and places, rather than abstract notions, the essayistic commentary becomes more poignant. Neither a fictional nor a philosophical work, the essay exists as an intermediary text oscillating between word and spirit, objectivity and subjectivity, the voice of the authorial self and the multi-vocal expression of others. Characterized by this hybrid nature, the essay has historically employed literary tools in order to present a critique or observation about society. While the essay might be described as almost, yet not quite, literature, novels and other literary works often reveal an essayistic penchant. The essay and the novel function as closely related categories of writing, a connection that becomes particularly evident in Saramago's essayistic novels.

Saramago as an "Essayist"

While the essay has often been dismissed as a second-class genre lacking the critical attention and popular success of novels, Saramago describes himself as an essayist who writes novels because he does not know how to write essays.[5] Unable to write in the format of the essay that he so values, Saramago instead creates novels with essayistic penchants, historical elements, and philosophical tendencies. He proposes revised versions of historical events in *Memorial do convento* (1982), *O ano da morte do Ricardo Reis* (1984), and

História do cerco de Lisboa (1989). Other novels border more closely on philosophy, such as the Platonic inspired *A Caverna* (2000) and the ruminations on being, identity, and death in *Todos os nomes* (1997) and *Intermitências da morte* (2005). Through parables and allegories, novels such as *A jangada da pedra* (1986) propose utopian (or dystopian) views of society. Given Saramago's inclination towards other discursive forms of social commentary, his work could be compared to writings by George Orwell or Jean-Paul Sartre that blend the allegorical, philosophical, and novelistic. These parallels are perhaps most apparent in the dystopian visions of *1984*, *The Plague*, and *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*.[6] While Orwell and Sartre produced essays and philosophical texts as well as fiction, their novels demonstrate an interest in philosophical questions and essayistic practices similar to Saramago's literary production. Neither exclusively philosophers nor novelists, these writers produce texts not easily confined by the definitions of genres.

The historical, philosophical, and essayistic elements characteristic of Saramago's literary corpus facilitate the insertion of social commentary into his fictional works. Emerging from humble origins to achieve success as a writer late in life, Saramago has maintained his long-standing affiliation with the Portuguese Communist Party.[7] In literary works like *O evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* (1991) he criticizes the Roman Catholic Church. His residence in Spain since the early 1990s has perhaps contributed to his belief in Iberian separatism, an unpopular idea fictionalized in *A jangada da pedra*. Rather than explicitly state these ideas in doctrinaire texts, Saramago employs essayistic digressions, philosophical asides, and allegorical tales to more subtly reveal his socio-political observations. As an author who happens to be a communist and not vice versa, he writes primarily to express himself, although his political views, class consciousness, and awareness of capitalism's inequalities never lay far below the surface of his work (Frier 10-11). By gesturing towards the essay, Saramago incorporates personal beliefs into *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* in an implicit manner that allows for a variety of interpretations. While Saramago presents the allegorical meaning abstractly in his first novel, he specifies this intention of his works with direct references to contemporary institutions and society in the second novel.

Metaphors of Blindness and Lucidity in Saramago

The first essayistic novel introduces the open-ended allegory of a "cegueira branca" that affects all of society except for one woman. Blindness emerges as the majority condition whereas sighted moves to the minority. The sudden onset of blindness reminds readers that ablebodiedness is a temporary condition at best. Rather than view this condition as a physical impairment, this blindness could be read metaphorically as a comment on the postcolonial condition or globalization. As Harold Bloom notes, "the open nature of the allegory in *Blindness* allows the reader to wonder if this is not another parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of Fascism, or of its first advent" (xviii). While Bloom connects the allegory of blindness to past, present, or future Fascism, other critics present alternative symbolic interpretations. For instance, Maria Alzira Seixo reads this epidemic of blindness through a postcolonial lens by proposing the novel and the earlier *A jangada da pedra* as allegorical responses to the Portuguese colonial wars in Africa.[8] While this white blindness creates a sensation of discomfort, confusion, and anxiety, its metaphorical meaning is never explicitly defined. This condition initially appears as an unexpected and inexplicable physical phenomenon where the recently blind person enters "numa brancura tão luminosa, tão total, que devorava, mais do que absorvia, não só as cores, mas as próprias coisas e seres, tornado-os, por essa maneira, duplamente invisíveis" (Saramago, *EC* 16). The sensory effects of blindness transform physical interaction with the world as colors, things, and beings become engulfed by whiteness.

At first, the novel describes this blindness as a medical epidemic that could be contained through quarantine and other precautions. Comments about the blindness soon become less grounded in medical terminology and more connected to philosophical musings, social observations, and political commentary. Individuals recently rendered blind ponder the relationship between fear and blindness:

> O medo cega, disse a rapariga dos óculos escuros, São palavras certas, já éramos cegos no momento em que cegamos, o medo nos cegou, o medo nos fará continuar cegos, Quem está a falar, perguntou o médico, Um cego, respondeu a voz, só um cego, é o que temos aqui. Então perguntou o velho da venda preta, Quantos cegos serão precisos

> para fazer uma cegueira. Ninguém lhe soube responder. (Saramago, *EC* 131)

Placed in isolation by the government to prevent the spread of blindness, these individuals identified by physical attributes rather than names consider possible reasons for this loss of sight. Verging on the philosophical, one voice claims that fear blinds, while another posits that they were already symbolically blind when the plague of blindness struck.

Ruminations on blindness reveal its potential allegorical implications in social and political realms. The blind discuss the connection between societal organization and sight: "E como poderá uma sociedade de cegos organizar-se para que viva, Organizando-se, organizar-se já é, de uma certa maneira, começar a ter olhos, Terás razão, talvez, mas a experiência desta cegueira só nos trouxe morte e miséria" (Saramago, *EC* 282). This dialogue continues as it further explores the relationship between blindness, life, death, political organization, and society. In another moment, the doctor's wife, who never loses her sight, emerges as "uma espécie de chefe natural, um rei com olhos numa terra de cegos" (Saramago, *EC* 245). These exchanges composed of proverbial statements establish a tie between the ability to see and a sense of societal organization or political leadership, which reinforces stereotypical understandings of sight and blindness. This loss of vision could thus be read as an allegory for the loss of social and political order within this current era of globalization and postcoloniality.[9]

As Saramago's first essayistic novel ends, this possible metaphorical meaning of blindness becomes more evident. After surviving life in quarantine and navigating their way through the chaotic city under the guidance of the doctor's wife, the first blind man and others in the group regain sight. They wonder: "Por que foi que cegamos, Não sei, talvez um dia se chegue a conhecer a razão" (Saramago, *EC* 310). Never afflicted by the blindness, the doctor's wife enters this conversation and brings the novel to a close:

> Queres que te diga o que penso, Diz, Penso que não cegamos, penso que estamos cegos, Cegos que vêem, Cegos que, vendo, não vêem. A mulher do médico levantou-se e foi à janela. Olhou para baixo, para a rua coberta de lixo,

> para as pessoas que gritavam e cantavam. Depois levantou a cabeça para o céu e viu-o todo branco, Chegou a minha vez, pensou. O medo súbito fê-la baixar os olhos. A cidade ainda ali estava. (Saramago, *EC* 310)

She raises the possibility that people are always metaphorically blind. They often fail to fully perceive the world. By maintaining her sight during the blindness epidemic, the doctor's wife occupies a minority position, which allows her to reconsider the dichotomies of sighted and blind to become more attuned to the implicit and metaphorical meanings of vision within society. Overcome by a whiteness of light as others regain their sight, the woman thinks physical blindness has finally struck her, yet the city is still there when she lowers her eyes. With her philosophical musings on blindness and sight, she parallels Saramago's notion of these concepts.

Blindness and lucidity appear as metaphorical ideas throughout the companion novel of *Ensaio sobre a lucidez*. Published after *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, this work can be read as a correction or, more accurately, a clarification of references and intended meanings. In contrast to the first essay's abstract allegory of blindness, its counterpart revolves around a perceived attack on democracy that emerges with the widespread casting of blank votes. With its more specific references to democratic politics, economic practices, and governmental institutions, this novel develops in a more explicit and seemingly forced manner. Following the Adornian definition of the essay as a form of judgment and social criticism, *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* has a stronger essayistic tendency than its companion novel. Its more narrowly defined allegorical meaning forces a re-evaluation of the first novel through the lens of this second work. Through this paired reading, the novels emerge as works critical of contemporary society, democracy, and the amnesiac trends of collective memory. As Adorno mentions, this critical function characterizes the essay and distinguishes it as a tool for the critique of ideology (166). Saramago suggests this critical element of these fictional works through his inclusion of the term "essay" in their titles.

These novels function as complimentary works due to their essayistic tendencies as well as the potential parallels between blindness and blank votes. Both the white blindness ("cegueira branca") and the blank ballots ("votos em branco") threaten society as plagues

identified with the word white.[10] Initially, the president and the prime minister in *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* discuss these events as rare occurrences tangentially linked by their color and nothing more:

> Que extraordinário país este nosso, onde sucedem coisas nunca antes vistas em nenhuma outra parte do planeta, Não precisarei de lhe recordar, senhor presidente, que não foi esta a primeira vez, Precisamente a isso me estava a referir, meu caro primeiro-ministro, É evidente que não há a menor probabilidade de uma relação entre os dois acontecimentos, É evidente que não, a única coisa que têm em comum é a cor, Para o primeiro não se encontrou até hoje uma explicação, E para este também a não temos. (Saramago, *EL* 89)

Viewed as anomalies, political leaders dismiss a more substantive link between these events. Yet, they approach both the blindness and the blank votes as illnesses in a metaphorical sense. Metaphors associated with blindness often demonize the physical impairment similar to the representations of cancer and AIDS studied by Susan Sontag. Occasionally, these metaphors romanticize blindness as vision, which recalls Sontag's examination of romantic metaphors linked to tuberculosis. Saramago tends to reproduce these stereotypical metaphorical meanings of blindness in his novels. For instance, the sensorial impairment of blindness emerges as a metaphor for the lack of sociopolitical vision within contemporary society.

Conceived as illnesses, the blindness and the blank ballots represent a contamination of society that must be controlled and contained. Medical agencies isolate the blind during the first epidemic, whereas the entire city is placed under "quarantine" when the government flees the capital following the outbreak of blank votes. Left without established political structures, the quarantined blind and the politically abandoned city residents must organize among themselves to re-establish some form of order. During the second crisis, government officials search for answers and draw comparisons to the earlier epidemic of blindness. Ministers begin to link these mysterious events during council meetings:

> Digamos que pôs a estopa e eu contribuí com o prego, e que estopa e o prego juntos me autorizam a afirmar que o voto em branco é uma manifestação de cegueira tão destrutiva como a outra, Ou de lucidez, disse o ministro da justiça . . . Disse que o voto em branco poderia ser apreciado como uma manifestação de lucidez por parte de quem o usou." (Saramago, *EL* 176)

One minister implies that the blank vote could be as destructive as the earlier outbreak of blindness. In contrast, the minister of justice suggests that the blank votes could be an act of lucidity, a comment that subtly critiques electoral politics in contemporary democracies and reveals Saramago's critical perspective.

The connection between blindness, lucidity, and the blank vote becomes more apparent when government officials receive a letter from the first man struck blind in the earlier plague. He accuses the doctor's wife of being responsible for both the blindness and the current epidemic of blank ballots. As the only person to escape blindness, the doctor's wife emerges as a suspicious figure according to this man and, after reading his letter, the government agrees. Police officials begin to investigate her as a causal figure linking the two events. In the first novel, the doctor's wife emerges as a leader among the blind. She takes on tasks beyond her limited training as a loyal housewife who accompanies her husband to the quarantine site. As she treats wounds, obtains food, and defends the virtue of the other women by killing one of the men who sexually violated them, the doctor's wife assumes a responsibility and an authority not previously enjoyed. When she reappears in the second novel, the doctor's wife is viewed with suspicion as the likely figure behind the earlier blindness and the current epidemic of blank ballots. The government interrogates her, the newspapers decry her as responsible, and the state kills her at the novel's end. Other characters from the first novel also become introduced into the second novel through the letter and the resulting investigation. This intertextual connection between these essayistic novels allows for a clarification of their allegorical and critical function.

Other details in the second novel help to clarify the potential allegorical meaning of these works. Through a narrative digression in his second novel, Saramago situates the nameless capital city from the first epidemic of blindness in a specific locale:

> Queridos Compatriotas, ou Estimados Concidadãos, ou então, modo mais simples e mais nobre se a hora fosse de tanger com adequado trémolo o bordão do amor à pátria, Portugueeeeesas, Portugeeeeeses, palavras estas que apressamo-nos a esclarecer, só aparecem graças a uma suposição absolutamente gratuita, sem qualquer espécie de fundamento objectivo, a de que o teatro dos gravíssimos acontecimentos de que, como é nosso timbre, temos vindo a dar minuciosa notícias, seja acaso, ou acaso tivesse sido, o país das ditas portuguesas e dos ditos portugueses. Tratou-se de um mero exemplo ilustrativo, nada mais, do qual, apesar da bondade das nossas intenções, nos adiantamos a pedir desculpa, em especial porque se trata de um povo universalmente famoso por ter sempre exercido com meritória disciplina cívica e religiosa devoção os seus deveres eleitorais. (Saramago, *EL* 95-96)

With this brief reference to the Portuguese people, Saramago narrows the subject of his critique. As an allegory directed towards Portugal, the epidemic of blindness might refer to the disorderly chaos of post-colonial Lusophone Africa or to the dictatorial rule of Salazar's Estado Novo. The blankness initially characterized by blindness and subsequently by empty ballots evokes the amnesiac tendencies of society, which could facilitate the return of Fascism. The blank ballots also suggest the contemporary failings of Portuguese democracy. Given the nation's history of imperial ambitions, colonialism, and dictatorial rule, this comment ironically describes the Portuguese people as universally famous for having always exercised civil discipline and religious devotion in their electoral practices.

The intended metaphorical meaning becomes further clarified with a listing of international political and economic organizations. As part of their response to the blank ballots threatening democracy in the capital city, government officials consult various institutions, an action that contextualizes the *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* within contemporary western society. The diversity of included entities seems exhaustive:

> O governo se preparava para consultar diversos organismos internacionais sobre a anômala situação da antiga capital, principiando pela organização das nações unidas

> e terminando no tribunal da haia, com passagem pela união européia, pela organização de cooperação e desenvolvimento econômico, pela organização dos paises exportadores de petróleo, pelo tratado do atlântico norte, pelo banco mundial, pelo fundo monetário internacional, pela organização mundial do comércio, pela organização mundial da energia atômica, pela organização mundial do trabalho, pela organização meteorológica mundial e por alguns organismos mais, secundários ou ainda em fase de estudo, portanto não mencionados. (Saramago, *EL* 265)

To better understand the anomaly of blank votes, government officials contact not only the United Nations and essential regional bodies like the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but also economic institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, and finally other organizations addressing key issues of atomic energy, workers' rights, and meteorological change. These references to current political, economic, and social organizations shaping international policy situate these novels within the present moment. Given the temporal setting of these works, the wanderings of the authorial and the textual voices provide insight into Saramago's thoughts on contemporary society.

The Essayistic Penchant of Saramago's Style

With the self-designation of these novels as essays, Saramago gestures towards political commentary, social observation, and philosophical ruminations. This essayistic penchant of his novels emerges in both their subject matter and their stylistic conventions. As critics like Adorno remind us, essays reveal literary and philosophical tendencies, and are often characterized by a wandering nature. Although good essays establish a specific setting and develop characters, the propulsion of a plot, when it exists, is of secondary importance (De Obaldia 12-13). Digressions constitute the essay yet pose distractions in fiction. Essayistic novels like Saramago's works on blindness and lucidity combine plot development with meandering thoughts. These asides allow for the emergence of a reflective and observant essayistic voice within fictional prose. Early in *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, for instance, a detour from the narrative verges on the philosophical:

> A consciência moral, que tantos insensatos têm ofendido e muitos mais renegado, é coisa que existe e existiu sempre, não foi uma invenção dos filósofos do Quaternário, quando a alma mal passava ainda de um projecto confuso. Como andar dos tempos, mais as actividades da convivência e as trocas genéticas, acabamos por meter a consciência na cor do sangue e no sal das lágrimas, e, como se tanto fosse pouco, fizemos dos olhos uma espécie de espelhos virados para dentro, com o resultado, muitas vezes, de mostrarem eles sem reserva o que estávamos tratando de negar com a boca. (Saramago, *EC* 26)

This aside contemplates the origins of moral consciousness by viewing it as an entity that has always existed, rather than an invention of philosophers. After opening this examination of morality and consciousness with an apparently impartial statement, the verbal form shifts to first-person plural. Introducing a more colloquial tone, the use of *nós* personalizes phrases that could have verged towards the aphoristic. Moral consciousness becomes related to a self-awareness grounded in the materiality of skin color, salty tears, vision, and voice. The narrative progression seems placed on hold while the essayistic voice develops as a personal and reflective expression. These wanderings from the plot reveal Saramago's ambitions as an essayist who writes novels.

While deviations from the plot appear in both novels, they become more evident in *Ensaio sobre a lucidez*. With the increased presence of narrative digressions and the more specified nature of its intended allegory, this novel contains a stronger tendency towards the essay in both style and content. Paragraphs more frequently begin with "ora" (now) and include insertions such as "íamos dizendo" (we were saying). Common in speech, these informal expressions function in writing to call attention to a particular aspect or to guide the narration. They often indicate the start of a digression or the return to a main narrative thread. For instance, "ora" opens a detour pondering the polygraph design ("Ora, um polígrafo não é uma máquina apetrechada com um disco") before returning to the main plot contemplating the function of truth and lies as indicated by the insertion of "íamos dizendo" (Saramago, *EL* 57). In other contexts,

the inclusion of "ora, regressando. . ." marks the end of a digression and the return to developing the plot (Saramago, *EL* 98).

At one point, the narrator contemplates the function of these narrative digressions:

> O inconveniente destas digressões narrativas, ocupados como estivemos com intrometidos excursos, é acabar por descobrir, porém demasiado tarde, que, mal nos tínhamos precatado, os acontecimentos não esperaram por nós, que já lá vão adiante, e que, em lugar de havermos anunciado, como é elementar obrigação de qualquer contador de histórias que saiba do seu ofício, o que iria suceder, não nos resta agora outro remédio que confessar, contritos, que já sucedeu. (Saramago, *EL* 139)

In this aside, the narrator employs a colloquial tone and the plural first-person verbal forms to observe the challenges of narrating a story. The events composing the tale do not wait for personal detours, collective pauses, or other meanderings. Any storyteller must acknowledge the artifice of his creation and attempt to accommodate for halts in the narrative even as the plot progresses. With his digression about digressions, Saramago fills exactly this role by pausing to examine the construction of the narrated story as he notes that the events of this fictionalized "real life" do not necessarily pause. Rather than contribute to the novel's plot, the inclusion of inserted phrases like "ora" and self-reflective digressions help establish his personalized, essayistic voice.

Both Saramago's essayistic voice and the plurality of voices belonging to other characters and discursive practices inform his novels positioned between the literary and the philosophical. A tension exists between the monological voice of Saramago and the dialogical voices populating his texts. In order to respect this tension characteristic of the essay as a genre, descriptions of the essay "must try to suspend [the] choice between all solutions that take the essayistic voice either as a pure expression of the author or as a textual heteroglossia, or mixing of voices, without any signature of the author at all" (Korhonen 24). Saramago's essayistic voice exists in this space of tension. He asserts his authorial role while allowing other voices to surge to create a multi-vocal textual experience. A plurality of voices

defines his distinctive writing style, a form of textual heteroglossia that nevertheless contains his authorial mark. Saramago highlights fluidity, rhythm, and other oral traits as defining features of his prose, explaining that:

> All the characteristics of my current narrative technique (I would prefer to say my style) derive from one basic principle, according to which everything that is *said* is intended to be *heard*. By this I mean that I see myself as an oral narrator when I write, and that I write those words to be read as if they were being heard. Oral narrators do no use punctuation, they speak as if they were composing music, and they use the same materials as musicians: sounds and pauses, high notes and low notes, others shorter or longer. (Frier 7, originally in *Cadernos II,* 15 Feb 1994, 49)

His writing approximates oral tendencies by emphasizing the sonority of words and phrases. As his prose attempts to follow the natural rhythm of speech, Saramago abandons artifices of written convention such as punctuation and paragraph separation to create a vocal polyphony.

By not limiting his writing to a single voice, Saramago creates a signature style that emphasizes the incorporation of multiple voices "heard" by the reader. As Saramago records and mediates this plurality of voices, his essayistic voice emerges among these various vocal expressions through narrative asides, philosophical digressions, and stylistic conventions. In his 1998 Nobel Prize lecture, Saramago underscores the importance of other voices as he concludes that, "A voz que leu estas páginas quis ser o eco das vozes conjuntas das minhas personagens. Não tenho, a bem dizer, mais voz que a voz que eles tiverem. Perdoai-me se vos pareceu pouco isto que para mim é tudo" (Saramago, "De como. . ." par 14). This lecture functions as a sonorous realm where Saramago's own voice echoes his character's vocal expression. His literary work similarly exists as a compendium of voices reflected through his narrative voice. Rather than construct a sole authorial voice, Saramago's narrative style creates a dialogue between his own voice and the plurality of voices belonging to his characters.

While characterizing much of Saramago's work, this tension between authorial and textual, which Korhonen describes as a constitutive element of the essay, becomes particularly noticeable in this pair of essayistic novels. When read alone, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* establishes a fictional setting without specific spatial or temporal referents that could represent any geographic location or historical moment. Voices emerge as the defining characteristic and organizing feature in this realm. As the men, women, and children arrive at the asylum, their voices become the elements that distinguish them from each other and also document their presence. Saramago constructs both the physical space of this quarantined building and the individual identities of its blind internees by writing in his characteristic style:

> Em voz baixa, a rapariga continuava a consolar o rapazinho, Não chores, vais ver que a tua mãe não se demora. Fez-se depois um silêncio, e então a mulher do médico disse de modo que se ouvisse ao fundo da camarata, onde era a porta, Aqui, estamos duas pessoas, quantos são vocês. A inesperada voz fez sobressaltar os recém-vindos, mas os dois homens continuaram calados, quem respondeu foi a rapariga, Acho que somos quatro, estamos este menino e eu, Quem mais, por que não falam os outros perguntou a mulher do médico, Estou eu, murmurou, como se lhe custasse pronunciar as palavras, uma voz de homem, E eu, resmungou por sua vez, contrariada, outra voz masculina. (Saramago, *EC* 49)

Instead of separating the conversation with quotation marks and obvious indicators of the speaker, Saramago moves from one voice to another as he creates a world understood through sound rather than sight. People become identified through their vocal qualities, such as a girl's low voice, an unexpected voice among the recently arrived, and a man's murmuring voice. The simple act of determining the number of people in the quarantine becomes difficult. Since people exist primarily through vocal expression, silence takes on a more loaded meaning in this realm of the blind. As evidenced by the two men whose presence is only vaguely recognized until they murmur "estou eu" and "e eu," remaining silent implies a negation of the self within the group

context. Without asserting their voices, people virtually cease to exist within this sightless world.

These voices in *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* serve to mark the existence of characters, organize the space they inhabit, and distinguish them from one another. Although used to differentiate between characters, these voices are also relatively anonymous. A particular voice may be described as low, unexpected, masculine, or murmur-like, and belong to a nameless man, woman, or child. At times, the voice of authority asserts itself in this world of the blind, appearing as "uma voz forte e seca, de alguém pelo tom, habituado a dar ordens" (Saramago, *EC* 49). Not associated with a specific name or individual, this voice is distinguished as a source of authority accustomed to giving orders due to its tone. With the disappearance of vision, space, and time as organizing elements within the asylum, voices fill the void with diction and tone indicating societal functions, positions, and relations.

In this realm of the blind, characters become recognizable by their voices rather than by faces. While the doctor's wife retains her sight, at first she reveals this fact only to her husband and later to the group she organizes. Occasional slips suggest her ability to see. For instance, in this dialogue, she recognizes the face of a male oppressor: "Estou a reconhecer a tua voz, E eu tua cara, És cega, não me podes ver, Não, não te posso ver, Então por que dizes que reconheces a minha cara, Porque essa voz só pode ter essa cara" (Saramago, *EC* 177). Whereas the man identifies the doctor's wife by her voice, she recognizes him based on his face. When questioned about this switch, she maintains the illusion of her blindness by responding that she cannot see him, but the particular qualities of his voice could only come from a specific face. Voice becomes linked with face and identity in this exchange, indicating the importance of the voice, especially in a world without sight or specified notions of space and time.

Even after individuals regain their sight and the story continues in *Ensaio sobre a lucidez,* the voices of government officials, police investigators, characters from the earlier novel, and other city residents emerge as a key element of this fictional realm, yet not as the defining characteristic. Perhaps this importance of the voice exists throughout these novels because Saramago is keenly aware of the social dimension of language. Exploring language as a social product and practice in Saramago's novels, Mirian Rodrigues Braga notes that, "em seus textos há reverberações dessa dimensão na voz narrativa, em

que narradores e personagens se recusam à fala monológica, ao egocentrismo, estabelecendo um diálogo no qual todas as vozes podem ser ouvidas, porque reconhecem a função social da linguagem" (105). Braga observes the dialogical tendencies in Saramago's work while stressing the importance of the social function of language. These multi-vocal dialogues exist in tension with the monological practice of the author, characterizing the essayistic penchant of Saramago's work.

In contrast with the first essay's tendency towards the universal, the second novel becomes more grounded in time and space. Saramago tentatively places this fictional world within contemporary Portuguese society and its capital city. With these additional marks of space and time, the plurality of voices functions as another element of the fictional realm, yet no longer as its sole characteristic. Voice, space, and time constitute this world of "lucidity" where the physical ability to see does not prevent a metaphorical blindness from plaguing society. This intended allegorical meaning becomes more apparent as the novel closes: "Então um cego perguntou, Ouviste alguma coisa, Três tiros, respondeu outro, Mas havia também um cão aos uivos, Já se calou, deve ter sido o terceiro tiro, Ainda bem, detesto ouvir os cães a uivar" (Saramago, *EL* 329). Blind men hear the sound of bullets that kill the doctor's wife. Without well-founded reason or substantial proof, the government arranges for her assassination, as well as the death of the police investigator who attempts to reveal the truth of this unfounded blame. These characters concerned with humanity and truth become the victims of the supposedly democratic government because they recognize the lies created by government discourse and media rhetoric. Their awareness threatens official plans. With the deaths of the doctor's wife and the police commissioner, the ability to see societal truths within this fictional realm diminishes as a metaphorical state of blindness resurfaces. The presence of two blind men experiencing the world through sounds suggests the resurgence of blindness on a physical level as well.

Concluding Thoughts

Saramago ends his duo of essayistic novels on a pessimistic note with blind men hearing an assassination that lends itself to a critical view of society. Criticism emerges as a distinguishing feature of these works, evoking Adorno's notion of the essay as the ideal tool of critique. While fictional elements such as characters, scenes, and plot define

these novels, essayistic traits also infuse Saramago's writing. *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* reveal characteristics of the essay as a genre situated between literature and philosophy, knowledge and imagination, and the monological and the dialogical. These essayistic novels create the possibility for societal critique in an abstract, allegorical manner that often necessitates interpretation. Saramago invites readers into dialogue with his work, resulting in a bond of textual friendship. While textual refers to a distancing of itself from meaning as presence, friendship implies a degree of familiarity and closeness (Korhonen 16-17). Essays provoke both a distancing and a familiarity among readers, a duality experienced in Saramago's essayistic novels. Welcomed by the compelling plot yet at times distanced by his philosophical ruminations, readers must extract their own understanding from the allegories and parables contained within Saramago's multi-vocal texts and narrative digressions. By engaging readers, these essayistic novels provide a more memorable and potentially forceful societal commentary, especially when compared to politically committed texts of a social realist or Marxist tradition. For Saramago, as for the blind writer in *Ensaio sobre a cegueira,* writing presents one viable option for understanding, reflection, commentary, and critique in the current era of globalization and postcoloniality. Following his recent death, Saramago's perspective will be missed among the voices of contemporary literature.

Notes

1. The representation of blindness in Saramago tends to rest on the notion of blindness as vision contested by recent work in disability studies. See Davis, Linton, and Siebers for an introduction to this theoretical and critical realm. Interpretations of Saramago's work often result in stereotypical readings that reinforce the binary division of the world into the sighted and the blinded, or the abled and the disabled. While this paper is not primarily informed by disability studies, I recognize the necessary contributions of this scholarship to our understanding of disability, and more specifically blindness, within literature and society.

2. Although Saramago titles his novels as "essays" about blindness and lucidity, foreign translators often opt to abandon this distinction, perhaps for editorial or commercial reasons. The English versions *Blindness* and *Seeing*

drop the designation as essays and further deviate from the original titles as "lucidity" becomes the more literal term "seeing."

3. See recent critical works by De Obaldia, Atkin, and Korhonen for further examination of the history and characteristics defining the essay.

4. For additional information on Lukács, Adorno, and the definition of the essay, see Chevalier's encyclopedia entries on Lukács and Adorno, De Obaldia's examination of the essayistic spirit, and Korhonen's opening chapter on essaying the essay.

5. Barthes expresses this typical plight of the essayist since, in his words, "I have produced *only* essays" (De Obaldia 16). Saramago, in contrast, might lament that he has only written novels.

6. Other critical works highlight intertextuality in Saramago. See Park for a comparison of *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* to Saramago's earlier novels. Rollason proposes a comparative reading of Sarmago's *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* and Orwell's *1984* focusing on the manifestations of totalitarianism. Kumamato and Ornelas outline convergences and divergences between *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* and Sartre's *The Plague*. Fernández puts Saramago in dialogue with Kafka and Carpentier.

7. See Frier and Rollason for information on Saramago as a controversial figure.

8. Seixo asks why Saramago has not written directly about the Portuguese colonial wars in Africa and responds with a postcolonial reading of these novels in light of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Another contemporary Portuguese novelist, Antonio Lobo Antunes, has written about the wars in Angola in *Memória de Elefante* (1978) and *Os Cus de Judas* (1979). See Peter Conrad's recent *New Yorker* article for an overview of Lobo Antunes's work and a brief comparison of its content and style to Saramago.

9. See Comaroff, Murray, and Vale de Almeida for recent anthropological and sociological perspectives on the postcolonial condition, globalization, and the disorder of urban centers.

10. Rollason describes the intertextual link between these two novels, focusing on the parallels between the "cegueira branca" and "votos em branco" in the final section of his article.

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