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Blindness, empathy, and 'feeling seeing': Literary and insider accounts of blind experience

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ABSTRACT

This article charts something of the complicated relation between the sighted reader and the articulation of experiences of blindness by the non-sighted and the becoming-blind. This is achieved, firstly, through an analysis of tropes and folk myths derived from Presocratic myths dealing with conceptions of blindness by the sighted, and secondly through related instances of autobiographical writing by blind subjects that explore or explode such tropes. Throughout the article is an underlying notion of empathic vision, or 'feeling seeing'. For, alongside an enduring fascination with what the blind 'see' (e.g. Sacks, 2003), for the sighted reader there is an allied inquisitiveness concerning what the blind feel.

1. Introduction: the 'pathetic moment'

Although Jorge Luis Borges rarely articulated his experiences as a blind man he marked out the "pathetic moment" in 1955 when, for the purposes of both reading and writing, he became blind. Far from sudden, it occurred as a "slow nightfall" (1999a: 474) that allowed him time to reflect upon the irreversibility of his descent into darkness. Borges is one of several writers experiencing or anticipating that irreversible dread rift in experience, their impending blindness. Central here is the *pathos* of such pathetic moments for the blind or becoming-blind writer, and attendant responses by the reader. But following Smith's (1995) distinction, as sighted readers how do we feel *for*, or *with*, the blind writer? Is the mechanism one of sympathy, the sharing of the feelings of another (feeling-with), or the more specific projective identification of putting oneself in the place of another, empathy (feeling-for)? Through autobiographical writing and introspective accounts of blindness or impending blindness, this pathetic moment is identified as a recurring trope throughout Western literature, from Homer to Helen Keller, via Sophocles, Cicero, Milton and the so-called 'Blind Traveller' James Holman. One argument for the pervasiveness of the trope is that empathy, rather than sympathy, is the primary mechanism at stake. As Knight says of empathy within fiction, "the sort of understanding we want to achieve involves us in the imaginative reduplication of how things are for someone else", and so authors "employ the same folk psychology we use to understand and interpret the actions of others around us" (2006: 272). But as readers of autobiographical accounts of blindness and becoming-blind, what kinds of empathic responses are produced? Rather than mere reduplication, it could be argued, any act of reading involves an asymmetric curiosity. If readers of fictional or autobiographical accounts of blindness or becoming-blind are themselves sighted, does the inherent asymmetry not become heightened almost to salaciousness? Given this asymmetry, what kind of empathic mechanism is involved in first anticipating, and then coming to terms with, the sighted reader's anxious imaginary of blindness? If sighted readers see blindness and the process of becoming-blind as a projection of their own fears, we might question the nature of their empathic response. We might, for instance, follow Garland-Thomson's investigation of disability in popular photography 'The Politics of Staring' where the encounter with images of the disabled body is fraught with "a tangle of distance, anxiety and identification" (2002: 57). Yet, blindness and the process of becoming-blind fabricate their own anxieties about sight loss, distinct from more corporeal concerns of physical disability. That tangle of distance and identification makes for an uneasy empathic relation, suffused as it is with fear and anxiety around the vulnerability of the eyes and the fragile mechanism of sight.

This article therefore charts something of the complicated relation between the sighted reader and the articulation of

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experiences of blindness by the non-sighted and the becoming-blind. For the sighted reader there is a duality of feeling, for alongside an enduring fascination with what the blind 'see' (e.g. Paterson, 2006a, 2006b; Sacks, 2003), a fascination that encompassed philosophical speculations and early psychological inquiry into early ophthalmic interventions and public interest in narratives of recovery from blindness (e.g. Paterson, in press), arises an attendant inquisitiveness concerning what the blind *feel*. This latter aspect is manifested in two ways. Firstly, in terms of literal feeling, the way the hands become more prominent, revealing a heightened tactile acuity in spatial perception and interaction. This is especially pronounced in movement and travelling, with the so-called 'Blind Traveller' James Holman writing a rich multisensory prose in his travelogue that foregrounds the haptic and the auditory such that he sees, as it were, feelingly. Secondly, and more significantly for this paper, metaphorical feeling or an empathic feeling-with by the sighted reader of non-sighted experience, whether as temporary allegoric affliction such as Homer's treatment of Agamemnon in the *Iliad* ('blind rage', a period of unreason), or as irreversible medical condition. The well-worn tropes of the blind figure within literature are revisited through later biography and autobiography of blind subjects, deploying recognisable tropes, techniques or styles that prompt complex and provocative empathic responses on behalf of the blind by the sighted. One such trope is that of an imaginary of blindness as darkness. Borges clearly dispels this assumption when describing the onset of his own full blindness, however: "The world of the blind is not the night that people imagine" (1999a: 474). Yet the sighted imaginary remains irrevocably entwined with darkness, an asymmetrical non-duplication of experience that forms a potentially misplaced cornerstone for readerly empathy.

While no sustained psychoanalytic approach is taken here, it is worth noting that Freud's references to the dramatically violent eye-gouging of Sophocles' *Oedipus The King* occur in various forms within his writings between 1897 right up to 1938. Why this continued fascination for Freud? The fear of blindness is primal and perennial and, unsurprisingly for Freud, an explanation for its origin lies in infantile sexuality. "Concerning the factors of silence, solitude and darkness," proclaims Freud in 'The Uncanny' (1919), "we can only say that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free" (1985: 376). Quite apart from associating blindness with castration, his allusion to the anxiety of the supposed isolating darkness of sightlessness is recognisable within those imaginations of blindness by the sighted, and the persistent fascination with accounts of the blind and their worldly, embodied, spatial encounters. Applying Freud's ideas about the uncanny to disability and disease, Wilton follows Garland-Thomson's formulation in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) by identifying those seen as having a physical disability to have "incomplete or extraordinary bodies", and along with this the desire for abjection, "to reject those things which are part of the body politic, but which generate anxiety" (in Hubbard, 2002: 122). Although Wilton is writing about AIDS sufferers in Los Angeles, and Garland-Thomson about representations of physical disabilities in American culture, the absence of functioning eyes renders those without sight as similarly incomplete, extraordinary and a source of anxiety for the sighted (e.g. Hull, 2001).

The structure of this paper is twofold. The first section, 'Feeling Seeing', clarifies what definitions of blindness and empathy are being employed throughout the paper, something of their genealogy, and introduces the methodological approaches applied to the literary texts throughout. In the second section, 'Becoming-blind', I discuss three common tropes of blindness, devices employed to articulate some of the emotional resonances around impending, and actual, blindness. This includes the anxieties of coming to terms with encroaching and irreversible blindness, the common but erroneous identification of blindness with darkness, the realisation of the consolations of blindness and the pleasures of touch, and the near-phenomenological rich description of becoming-blind, the actual process of losing sight. These are articulated in biography and autobiography at various historical points and through different writing positions and styles. At times the search for expression of blind experience relies on self-written "insider accounts" (Davidson and Smith, 2009: 903) that utilise introspective means (*specere* being Latin for 'looking', or 'to look at', implying inner vision). At other times the rich imaginary world is only incidentally a blind world. Most commonly, biographical treatments of blind figures simply reproduce the conventional imaginary of the blind by the sighted. Therefore, each of the three tropes concerned with representing blind experience are connected with more detailed autobiographical texts that, in articulating similar tropes of blindness and becoming-blind, also reveal something of the heightened emotional states in the reconfiguration of the sensory body and, in some cases, describing the role of somatosensory experience in the perception of the spatial world.

2. Feeling seeing: a note on empathy, method and meaning in blindness

Firstly, blindness. There being no unitary conception of 'blindness' as such, medical definitions reveal a continuum from an absolute state of No Light Perception (NLP) to 'legal' blindness (measured as 20/200), aggravated by such factors as ophthalmic disease, vitamin B deficiency, onset of age, or accident. But common usage of the word 'blindness' indicates another imaginary altogether, a different imagination of the nonsighted other. As Kleege points out: "Of course, it's the word *blind* that causes all the problems. To most people blindness means total, absolute darkness, a complete absence of any visual experience", yet "only about 10 per cent of the legally blind have this degree of impairment" (1999: 14, original emphasis). Exploring common linguistic usage is revealing. In a dictionary with thirteen entries under 'blindness', only one refers directly to the actual medical definition (Bolt, 2003: 519). The rest? A mixture of metaphors, including such negative affects as blind fear and blind rage, deployed as literary tropes. The remaining definitions are "split between ignorance and concealment" says Bolt (2003: 519). Reaffirming the prejudices of a predominantly sighted readership, they commonly involve *lack*. Blind ignorance (lacking knowledge), blind stupor (lacking awareness), blind prejudice (lacking a critical or questioning attitude), blind taste test (tasting without looking), blind presentation (lacking preparation or information). Reversing this polarity, how is blindness conceived, experienced and represented by the blind? Not the hypothetical point of 'view' of one lacking eyes, or sight, nor as mere literary trope constructed for a sighted reader.

Instead, autobiographical accounts reveal blindness through the words of the blind author. Davidson and Smith (2009) in their study of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) analysed autobiographies as appropriate forms of self-recording and reporting experiences by those with difficulty articulating either to fellow ASD or to 'neurotypical' others. A number of "self-produced 'ethnographic narratives'" (Davidson and Smith, 2009: 903) have resulted. In order to retain a focus throughout their paper on "what life looks like, feels like, and means for those authors" with ASD, Davidson and Smith relied on an interpretive and phenomenological approach, trusting what they term "insider accounts" (2009: 903). Perhaps more than is the case with ASD, qualitative techniques such as interviewing and questionnaires have been successful in researching blindness and vision impairment (e.g. Butler and Bowlby, 1997), and