

## Littoral Blindness: Writing across sight lines

“I write without seeing. I came. I wanted to kiss your hand and then leave. I will leave without this reward. But perhaps I will be rewarded enough if I show how much I love you [...] I am writing that I love you [...] but I do not know if my pen lends itself to my desire.” *Denis Diderot*

As a discussion about blindness, this is also, unavoidably, a discussion about knowledge and light. But what, if any, is the pertinence of this qualification? Does not every conversation occur in and between visual perception and conscious apprehension? The relationship between knowing and seeing *appears* inescapable in every attempt to explain or interpret. It is a connection that permeates religion, preoccupies philosophy, and pervades everyday speech. Indeed, this essay could easily be deemed an attempt to bring to light, offer insight, show, reveal, expose, unveil, illuminate, highlight, make clear, etc. Conversely, I will be judged to have failed if my attempts are (God forbid) unclear, blurred, indistinct, dull, drab or even perhaps dim. I cannot foreswear clarity on this difficult topic, however, because I cannot foresee what I will write, or, perhaps more sensibly, *what will be written*. The *apparently* self-evident opposition between seen and not-seen, lit and unlit, is itself an illusion, a necessary fantasy. We will explore how seeing is not *at odds* but rather *in discussion with* non-seeing, drawing on literary examples of blindness and its critical analysis in deconstructive writing by, among others, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous.

What is seeing and where does it happen? If it is conscious understanding as well as sensory perception, then what is the phenomenology of vision? Not since Plato's allegory of the cave has philosophy dared to trust *eyesight* alone. The prisoners of the cave make the critical mistake of assuming that what they see is all there is to see. They interpret shadows as reality and fail to realise that there is a world of sunlight, others and objects on the other side of the fire. Their shortcoming is not, however, their inability to see the beyond the shadows but their investment in sight-as-reality. 'Real' seeing takes place not merely outside the cave, we learn, but outside in the market-place of concepts, that is, in dialectics. Importantly, seeing requires an effort, to overcome the "bewilderment" of the eye, whether descending into darkness or ascending into light. This is an effort also true of the "mind's eye", which must "learn by degrees to endure the sight of being".<sup>1</sup> The allegory insists not on vision but on vision-of-visibility; not on seeing light but on seeing-with-intellect-as-light. A double movement is required, into and away from the literal light of the sun, into and away from the light of contemplation.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, 'The Allegory of the Cave', in *Republic*, Book V, Chapter XXV, Francis MacDonald Cornford (trans.), Oxford University Press, London, 1941, p. 227.

Vision is similarly mistrusted by Saint Augustine, who feared the dangerous temptations into which the senses could lead us. He preferred to trust memory, which he believed capable of recalling feelings that were never experienced via the senses, such as joy and sadness.<sup>2</sup> Augustine believed this provided evidence of pre-existing concepts whose independence from the senses proved they must have been put in place by the Creator. Faith in God is thus a turning towards the light of God and a turning away from the worldly light (of temptation). Augustine submits to blindness in placing faith in a love-beyond-vision; earthly sight is sacrificed for spiritual sight. We will consider later the significance of tears in relation to Augustine.

### Feeling eyes: Seeing with touch and tears

Derrida explores this simultaneous movement away from and towards vision in *Memoirs of the Blind*. He contemplates how the “dazzling ascent” of the prisoners in Plato’s allegory is an “anabasis” and an “anamnesis”<sup>3</sup>, that is, a movement up and back. For the blind man, he argues, it is the hand that stores memory; the hand reaches out in order to recollect, and is less easily distracted than the eye. The blind man explores in three tenses, “to foresee there where they do not see, *no longer see*, or *do not yet see*”.<sup>4</sup> Derrida is struck by how the captives in Plato’s cave do not reach out towards the shadows on the wall of the cave but rather “lose themselves in the echoing of voices”. The hand, rather than the voice, suggests Derrida, reaches out for ‘sight’ when the eyes cannot see. He examines how this ‘seeing’ capacity of touch is epitomised in drawing.

Derrida explores the blindness inherent in drawing. Put simply, it is impossible to draw while looking at one’s drawing *and* at the subject of one’s drawing at the same time. It is necessary to look away from the subject, at the drawing, in order to draw under guidance of the eye, or else to draw ‘by feel’, while holding one’s gaze on the subject. Either way, vision is not sufficient; drawing requires memory, intuition and touch. Derrida recalls his own efforts to write “without seeing”:

“A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. It is as if a lidless eye had opened up at the tip of the fingers [...]”<sup>5</sup>

He reminds us how language is “already blind” because it functions (‘sees’) when “spoken and heard”. Words are symbolic representations of sounds which therefore

<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* Book X, R.S. Pine-Coffin (trans.), Penguin, London, 1961, pp.214-217.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

have no visibility 'of their own'. Furthermore, what needs to be spoken is that which cannot be seen, and thus language "speaks to us, in truth, all the time of the blindness that constitutes it."<sup>6</sup> It follows that writing without seeing is a doubly blind experience, "at once visual and auditory, motile and tactile". This inter-sensory communication emphasises that there is no direct representation of vision, only reinscriptive estimations, from light wave to optical image, to line, to letter, to word, etc.

There is at the heart of seeing incompleteness and separation. The image or representation contains a lost as well as a recalled part of the gaze. Artistic depiction exceeds the memory of the gaze, and its excess is precisely invisible. Even the photograph occludes certain details, outside and beyond the frame. One has only to consider the strange sense of separation one feels when looking at a photo of oneself; the inability to recall the precise moment of its capture. Derrida considers this sense of disappearance in relation to the self-portrait:

"The failure to recapture the presence of the gaze outside of the abyss into which it is sinking is not an accident or weakness; it illustrates or rather figures the very chance of the work, the spectre of the invisible that the work lets be seen without ever presenting."<sup>7</sup>

The image is defined in a certain way by what it fails to recapture. It contains a certain blindness, just as the written word fails to contain its own visibility which relies on sound and speech. Representation is thus built upon invisibility. Derrida describes this invisibility as "the ruin" of the drawing, which he figures as an operating absence, the drawing's "setting to work".

"In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is [...] what *remains* or *returns* as the spectre from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed. The figure, the face, then sees its visibility being eaten away [...]"<sup>8</sup>

Derrida concludes *Memoirs of the Blind* with a consideration of tears. He examines how weeping is an involuntary response peculiar to humans, with no biological purpose. The appearance of tears, notes Derrida, corresponds with emotional revelation; weeping is neither mad nor rational. He is intrigued by how tears veil the eyes whenever consciousness apprehends something beyond vision. In doing so, the eyes are, like consciousness, simultaneously clouded over and opened up; the experience is beyond seeing and rationality. Derrida alludes to the despairing tears of Nietzsche, and describes Augustine's *Confessions* as a "book of tears". Weeping goes beyond seeing and, as Augustine knew too well, beyond memory. Tears are therefore the "essence of the eye", argues Derrida – a watery, partial blindness that is not darkness but revelation,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

“imploration rather than vision in sight”. We will return to the significance of tears in the following section.

### **Burying the epiphany: Joyce’s ‘The Dead’**

We have begun to open up some of the ways in which representation occurs at the intersection between seeing and non-seeing. What role does this liminal quality of vision play in fiction? In other words, how does literature reckon with the impossibility of its own attempt to show, depict, enlighten, etc.? As we have already noted, words are representations of sounds and become fully ‘visible’ only when spoken or heard. Reading involves “voluntary blindness”, notes Timothy Clark, because it requires one to turn away from objects and, rather, translate ciphered signs into sounds. “Sighted people live in the world. The blind person lives in consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> Clark points out how nothing is ever ‘there’ in the text until it is brought into existence through reading. Vision, on the other hand, reveals everything in the instant of the gaze. Writing reveals and conceals simultaneously; it is a maze of signs through which the reader requires consistent guidance. The writer can at any moment elide this complicity by presenting the reader with something that cannot be “concretised”.<sup>10</sup> A crucial detail may be held back or an expectation subverted, interrupting the ‘visibility’ of the text. We will explore two literary examples, each of which exploits this ‘blinding trick’ in a markedly different way.

James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’ conjures the unseen in a moment of (unforeseeable) revelation, while Maurice Blanchot’s *The Madness of The Day* refuses access to the see-able. Joyce’s story is a text of concealment up until the point of its final disclosure. The potency of this revelation stems from the invisibility of the concealment; neither the reader nor the characters see beneath (or foresee beyond) the surface of the incidents of the narrative. Indeed, the hidden secret is thrust up by the very superficiality of events: the social obligations of the family Christmas gathering, ritualistic gestures, niceties, toasts, songs, speeches, etc. The goings-on of the party are a noisy covering-up or glossing-over of characters’ inner reflections and, correspondingly, outdoors, heavy snow swathes the country. Through the ‘omniscient’ narrator, we glimpse fragments of the hidden thoughts of the protagonist, Gabriel, but even these moments are interrupted by noises.

“What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?  
A murmur in the room attracted his attention.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Clark, ‘Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology’, in *The Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 26, ‘The Blind Short Story’, Timothy Clark and Nicholas Royle (eds.), *The Oxford Literary Review*, Durham, 2006, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Clark, ‘Not Seeing the Short Story’, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> James Joyce, ‘The Dead’, in *Dubliners*, Penguin, London, 1992, p. 193.

And later:

“He could not see her face [...] It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps [...]”<sup>12</sup>

The blindness of this text is also a deafness, an inability to listen beyond the noisy distractions. It is when Gabriel’s wife, Gretta, escapes from the noise, in order to listen *deliberately* (to a song), that she recalls a painful memory, a disturbing vision. The detail and significance of Gretta’s memory remains invisible, and can be sensed only through the intuition of her husband, who detects “a mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something.”<sup>13</sup> The symbol is blind: unseen, unheard and indecipherable. Nonetheless, this sense of something lost or secret within his wife agitates in Gabriel a feeling of desire, utterly oblivious to Gretta’s sadness. “Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory.”<sup>14</sup> The intimacy conjured by Gabriel is in fact a further separation away from his wife’s grief. While he is away in a dreamscape of birds “twittering in the ivy”, holding her “warm palm”, and quenching their “tender fire”, Gretta is secretly mourning a dead man. Equally ignorant of Gretta’s sadness, the reader shares Gabriel’s blindness, which intensifies the latent potency of the revelation to come.

It is not until the couple reach the silence and darkness of their hotel that the opportunity arises for candid conversation. Indeed, darkness is insisted on by Gabriel, who instructs the porter, “We don’t want any light”. It is only in the gloom that Gabriel begins to see his wife. When he catches sight of himself, it is a “face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror”.<sup>15</sup> In this eerie detachment from his own reflection, it is evident that Gabriel has averted Narcissistic blinding. Whereas Narcissus is blinded because he can see only himself,<sup>16</sup> Gabriel begins to see beyond himself; his next question, which is also the next line in the text, addresses directly and compassionately the cause of Gretta’s upset.

“What about the song? Why does that make you cry? [...] A kinder note than he had intended went into his voice.”<sup>17</sup>

Gretta reveals that the song reminds her of Michael Furey, a boy she used to know. The spectral figure that has haunted the text from its commencement begins to emerge.

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<sup>12</sup> James Joyce, ‘The Dead’, p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Speech is Blind’, www.YouTube.com, added 27/01/07, viewed 7/4/08, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya46wfeWqjk>

<sup>17</sup> James Joyce, ‘The Dead’, p. 220

Gabriel responds jealously, asking questions which he attempts but fails to articulate ironically. He sees a new vision of himself:

“He saw himself as a ludicrous figure [...] a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts [...] Instinctively he turned his back more to the light lest she see the shame that burned upon his forehead.”<sup>18</sup>

The “burning” of Gabriel’s forehead recalls the earlier “tender fire” of his lust, and also the shameful burning eyes of the protagonist at the end of ‘Araby’, another story from *Dubliners*.<sup>19</sup> Gabriel’s eyes are not burning because, as we find out a few lines later, they are doused by tears. When Gretta reveals that Michael Furey died as the result of his devotion for her, Gabriel is terrified by a sense of an encroaching “impalpable” being. He does not (cannot?) speak to Gretta, but responds by means of “caress”. The climax of the story, in accordance with Nicholas Royle’s characterisation of the epiphany as “a doubling and splitting”,<sup>20</sup> is a moment of haunting and blinding. The narrative voice (or ‘eye’) via which the reader has sustained vision through the text is suddenly fractured and undermined. Perhaps the best formulation of ‘epiphany’ is precisely the end of narrative, the beginning of perception.<sup>21</sup> Gabriel does not ‘see’ but rather ‘un-sees’; he perceives the invisibility of Gretta’s secret past, and the spectres of “the dead”.

“[...] he thought of what she must have been like then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange pity for her entered his soul.”<sup>22</sup>

This new, “strange” feeling – upon glimpsing the un-seen – is what Derrida refers to, in relation to the self-portrait, as “the love of ruins”.

“How to love anything other than the possibility of ruin? Than an impossible totality? Love is as old as this ageless ruin – at once originary, an infant even, and already old.”<sup>23</sup>

Gabriel realises the incompleteness of his gaze upon his wife. This rupture reveals a haunting lack, a mortal insufficiency. The “unbeseen”<sup>24</sup> of Gretta’s past is also the “unbeknownst” of the future, the ‘seen’ invisibility of death, of “one by one

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> The ending of ‘Araby’ is discussed by Maud Ellmann, in ‘Drawing the Blind: Gide, Joyce, Larsen, and the Modernist Short Story’, in *The Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 26, ‘The Blind Short Story’, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Royle, ‘Spooking Forms’, in *The Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 26, ‘The Blind Short Story’, p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> I am recalling here Derrida’s suggestion that the blind man is the best witness because “witnessing substitutes narrative for perception [...] No authentication can show in the present what the most reliable witness sees [...]”, in *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> James Joyce, ‘The Dead’, p. 223.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

becoming shades".<sup>25</sup> Maud Ellmann notes how Gabriel's tears blind him to everything but the image of Michael Furey,<sup>26</sup> the figure of ultimate sacrifice – he who dies for his beloved.

"He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years the image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live [...] The tears gathered thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree."<sup>27</sup>

Under the "veil of tears", suggests Derrida, man goes "beyond seeing and knowing" and begins to "think the eyes". The weeping eye "neither sees nor does not see" but "implores" an unspeakable revelation of otherness.<sup>28</sup> Gabriel weeps for the impossible sight(s) of Michael Furey's eyes; the reflexive gaze of Gretta's eyes; and his love for her *beyond seeing*. Indeed, he weeps for eyes that see, no longer see, and do not yet see.<sup>29</sup>

It is with tears and snow, suggest Ellmann, that "Joyce buries the boundary between the living and the dead".<sup>30</sup> Calling attention to the fact Joyce never published another short story, Ellmann argues that the brilliantly executed 'blurring' effect of 'The Dead', its unveiling of the unseen, heralded an end to the "naturalistic aesthetic" of short fiction. He cites Beckett's 'A Wet Night', a parody of the snowy ending of 'The Dead', in which rain (rather than snow) falls "in a uniform untroubled manner" "upon the bay, the littoral, the mountains [...]". Ellmann suggests that Beckett's use of 'littoral', literally meaning 'shoreline', deliberately evokes 'literal' with a view to mocking the insistence of (and upon) realism. The spirits and ghosts of the 'The Dead', he argues, exceed the 'littoral' of the short story and demand a new kind of writing that has its eyes open to visions of the unseen.

"[...] Joyce seems to have realised that the short story was too blind, too dead-ended, to accommodate those furies that have crossed over the littoral of death and life."<sup>31</sup>

### Seeing beyond sight: Blanchot's *The Madness of The Day*

If we are to accept that 'The Dead' delineates a threshold for modernist short fiction, then has this boundary been crossed or redrawn by new ('post-modern') approaches? We will respond to this question by focussing on Maurice Blanchot's *The Madness of The Day*. This text exemplifies the abandonment of the "naturalistic aesthetic"

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<sup>25</sup> James Joyce, 'The Dead', p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> Maud Ellmann, 'Drawing the Blind: Gide, Joyce, Larsen, and the Modernist Short Story', p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> James Joyce, 'The Dead', p. 224.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Maud Ellmann, 'Drawing the Blind: Gide, Joyce, Larsen, and the Modernist Short Story', p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

by parodying the blindness of its form. *The Madness of The Day* is blind and blinding; it does not see, refuses to see, and offers no hope of sight. And it does so, paradoxically, by engendering the *excess* of vision.

In his essay 'Not Seeing the Short Story', Timothy Clark cites Blanchot's argument that non-literary language is characterised by its concretisation, that is, its unequivocally constitutive nature. Clark refers to a telephone message as an example of 'concretised' language, which "reconfigure[s] at once the people, places and meanings referred to".<sup>32</sup> The literary text, on the other hand, is defined by its very divergence from this 'knowability'. This 'essential blindness' of literature, Clark argues, is at odds with the theory of short fiction that suggests it is a form that 'reveals all'. Thanks to its brevity, the short story can be read in a single sitting, and therefore seen 'as a whole'. Every part of the text is 'visible' to every other, the theory goes, and so its conclusion or epiphany ties up all loose ends. But is it really possible to see everything, to finish absolutely? Clark interrogates the notion of "seeing-the-whole" with a return to Blanchot:

"the illusion that there is still questioning to be done when there is nothing more to be said; in this sense, [it is] the most superficial, the most misleading [question]. On the other hand, this question is the most profound, because it seems that it can be thought and formulated only if we do not cease taking a step back toward that which still demands to be thought, even when everything, the whole, is thought."

In other words, no matter how complete the text appears, its completeness is always illusory; there are always further questions to ask, more stories to tell.

*The Madness of The Day* can be read as a meditation on what it would mean to see-the-whole, to glimpse a complete vision, to see everything. The narrator of the story insists that he is "not blind"; he sees "the world" and "this day", outside of which "there is nothing".<sup>33</sup> What would it mean to see everything, the wholeness of the day? We are forced to question the temporality of vision, which can only capture the instant of the gaze, that unknowably tiny particle of time. The gaze is in a state of continuous transformation, constantly dying and recreating anew. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurately thought of as a movement or process, a verb rather than a noun. *Seeing* is the condition of the gaze; the 'vision' or 'sight' can be nothing more than a representation or memory. To "see the day" is unthinkable; it could not be achieved, neither by the cessation of time, nor the accumulation of vision(s). Seeing must keep *happening*, in the 'tri-chronic' way outlined by Derrida: *seeing, no longer seeing, not yet seeing*.<sup>34</sup> It cannot be completed, stopped or rationally controlled. Thus, 'seeing the day' is the opposite extreme of seeing 'in the cold, hard light of day'; just as the accusative '(you must be)

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy Clark, 'Not Seeing the Short Story', p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of The Day*, George Quasha (ed./trans.) Station Hill Press, New York, 1981, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 6.



seeing things' is contrary to (actually) 'seeing things'. To 'see the day' is to go mad, or (if there is any distinction) to become God. "I said to myself, God, what are you doing?"<sup>35</sup> and later, "Oh, I see the day, oh God".<sup>36</sup>

Reading *The Madness of The Day* for the first time leaves one with a feeling of deficiency, of having missed something. It forces one to go back and search again for a point of closure, a hidden joke, or some kind of escape route out of its perpetual see-saw of seriousness and farce, joy and despair. Cixous describes *The Madness of The Day* as "a text of evasion" which "bites its tail and begins the way it ends".<sup>37</sup> This evasiveness and refusal to finish is symptomatic of Blanchot's attempt to embody a 'totality of vision': there can be no beginning and no end. The elision of time is not, of course, a stopping point; instead, the "inside and outside flow into each other", "night and day can be exchanged", and "enclosures do not look like enclosures".<sup>38</sup> Cixous highlights how Blanchot "refuses access to the reader" by masterfully controlling the text, with a calculated recycling of words. Paradoxically, the text's consistency-in-madness reveals that it is patently *not mad*. Blanchot does not subvert interpretation, but averts every attempt, so that "when we finish reading we have not read anything".<sup>39</sup>

*The Madness of The Day* blinds the reader, but what can we make of the narrator's vision? Only three paragraphs in, he claims "I am not blind", but he later gives account of an attack in which glass was crushed in his eyes, and "I nearly lost my sight". What does it mean to "nearly" lose one's sight? The narrator's sight was surely either lost for a period of time and then regained, or only partially disrupted, that is, not lost at all. We are offered no evidence of a chronological change from seeing to not-seeing or vice versa. Michael Newman suggests that Blanchot's choice of glass, as the cause of the blinding, is also significant:

"*verre* can mean both glass and lens, emphasising that it is that which one normally sees through, which loses itself in transparency, which is pushed, in this case, into the eyes."<sup>40</sup>

We can regard the narrator's blinding, then, not merely as a nearly-blinding, but a non-blinding or an un-blinding. What "unnerves" the narrator is what Derrida describes as "the visibility of that which is visible".<sup>41</sup> This is a blindness of transcendental seeing, a feeling of straying "into a thicket of flint" and glimpsing the "shocking cruelty of the day".<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Blind*, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Apprenticeship and Alienation: Clarice Lispector and Maurice Blanchot', in *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, Verena Andermatt Conley (ed./trans.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Michael Newman, 'The Trace of Trauma', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, Carolyn Bailey Gill (ed.), Routledge, London, 1996, p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Routledge, London, 1979, p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*, p. 11.

“To see was terrifying, and to stop seeing tore me apart from my forehead to throat [...] I heard hyena cries [...] (I think those cries were my own).”<sup>43</sup>

Just as Gabriel’s blinding, in ‘The Dead’, brings about a self-alienation in which he loses control of his vocal intonation and finally sees himself as a “ludicrous figure”, the absolute-blinding of *The Madness of The Day* reduces the narrator to ravaged, animal form. This moment recalls irresistibly another text of blinding and madness, *King Lear*, in which the man who finally sees everything *as it is*, is “unaccommodated” (of vision-that-blinds) and “no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal”.<sup>44</sup> Derrida observes how this form of “vision-beyond-seeing” induces a madness that may be contained, “for those who want to be reassured”, within “visions” or “scenes”<sup>45</sup> (such as Lear’s *vision* in the *scene* on the heath; or the snowy *scene* at the end of ‘The Dead’). There is no reassurance in *The Madness of the Day*, which refuses to distinguish “vision” from “vision-of-vision”.

What is the blinding wound at the heart of *The Madness of The Day*? This is clearly a dangerous question. Dare we do what Cixous warns will send us mad, a “subversive” reading that attempts to “lift certain veils” from the text?<sup>46</sup> Or in so doing, do we risk the petrifying stare of the Medusa, the hideous glare of one who has lost, who *is* loss, and whose unveiling is ours as well? We will take precautions and keep the blindfold on. Reading in good faith, that is, blindly, we will proceed by studying the inside of the blindfold. We see folds, and we see nothing. The folds of the text are what Derrida calls its “invagination”; the blackness beyond is the empty space of narrative denied. We will now consider each in turn.

Derrida examines how the opening of the text “I am not learned; I am not ignorant” reappears in the penultimate paragraph, as part of the narrator’s response to his interrogators.<sup>47</sup> He evaluates how this linking-up of beginning and end undermines what comes (or came) in between.

“This creates an exceedingly strange space: what appeared to be the beginning and the upper edge of the discourse will have been merely part of a narrative that forms a part of the discourse in that it recounts how an attempt was made – in vain! – to force a narrative out of the narrator.”<sup>48</sup>

This means, argues Derrida, that we identify the first “I am not learned; I am not ignorant” as a quotation of the one that appears later, which in turn means that

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, R.A. Foakes (ed.), Thomas Nelson & Son, Walton-on-Thames, 1997, p. 279.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On: Border Lines’, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Apprenticeship and Alienation’, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

everything in between is also “quotation” or “requotation” “with no original performance”.<sup>49</sup> Everything read up to this point is thus transformed into the account of a failed account, that is, a refusal to account when narrative is demanded.

“I had been asked: Tell us ‘just exactly’ what happened. A story? I began: I am neither learned nor ignorant [...] they listened with interest, it seems to me, at least in the beginning. But the end was a surprise to us all. ‘That was the beginning,’ they said. ‘Now get down to the facts.’ How so? The story was over!”<sup>50</sup>

This “invaginated structure” of the text prohibits access to the “whole story” because every fold “opens a pocket”.<sup>51</sup> We can only study the folds of the inside of the blindfold of the text, just as the narrator ‘holds his own’ against the “deadly lights” when his eyes are bandaged. There is no beginning or end, and everything is (indecipherably) part of everything else. This lack of logical or chronological progress corresponds, Derrida argues, with the narrator’s refusal to comply with the demand for “an *I* capable of organising a narrative sequence [...] [of telling] ‘exactly what happened’”. It is precisely this demand for narrative, Derrida continues, that “society, the law that governs literary and artistic works, medicine, the police [...] claim to constitute”. What these institutions require, as Blanchot demonstrates, is not an experience of truth but a preconceived story, a vision-within-bounds.

We will examine this refusal to narrate in relation to the conditions of vision, and the reasons why today’s authors (of literary fiction) are compelled to ‘write blind’. The refusal of narrative as we speak of it here is the refusal to equate perception with narration. We must recall here Derrida’s assertion that the blind person is the best witness because “witnessing substitutes narrative for perception” and thus “stems from dissociation”.<sup>52</sup> The narrator of *The Madness of The Day* bears witness to this dissociation, which is to also to say he tells the *whole truth*. The ‘whole truth’ is at once impossible and compulsory; it cannot be shown, only restored *as best one can remember*. The sighted witness who swears to tell “nothing but the truth” cannot help but tell a nothing-in-the-truth. Recalling-to-sight is what Cixous calls “a limit experience”.<sup>53</sup> Our hypothesis is this: All literature, if it is to see beyond the “ordinary economy of everyday life”<sup>54</sup> (such seeing-beyond perhaps serves as a working definition of ‘literature’) must see *more than the has-been-seen*, must do *more than remember*. It must allow us to glimpse the difference – a mad glimpse, no doubt – between seeing things and seeing things *as they are*.

The instinct that impels writing is not an urge to disclose ‘what happened’, but rather to confront that which is unspeakable. I will recount two examples from (recent)

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On: Borderlines’, p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Apprenticeship and Alienation’, p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

personal experience which I could not help but write about. The first could be described as a 'near-death experience' (near death? as opposed to?), wherein I was nearly run down by a run-away van. The driver had forgotten to apply the handbrake, and the van careered silently down the hill, across the pavement, and through a shop-front window literally three feet behind me. The experience, for me, was a loud crunching noise; the woman walking a few paces behind was not so lucky. I saw nothing. I saw smashed glass, the back of a van, a woman's leg. All that was real; take note. It happened. But what *exactly* happened? I do not know, but I was haunted by unseen/un-experienced trauma, the three steps that separated (are still separating?) me from some other fate. What could I do but write? The second example was hearing from an ophthalmologist that I am losing my sight. I was paid by a newspaper to tell my story, but I did not sufficiently impart an emotional response. One cannot foresee the (un-seeing) unseen, not without going mad. I did not tell them that. I wrote them a story and they were happy. I have written the truth here instead; a discussion of knowledge and light. Seeing? No. No seeing, never again.

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