



PAINTINGS PAINTED BLIND
ON THE THEME OF BLIND TOBIT
R. O. Lenkiewicz

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“Miserable mortals, open your eyes.”

Leonardo Da Vinci
Trattato della pittura. Fol. 77

Brief observations on blindness and culture

Blindness is not a phenomenon independent of the tactics with which cultures write and speak of it. Blindness is a cultural category meaning many different things in many different times and places.

In the 18th Century blindness implicitly meant congenital and possibly curable *lack* of sight; in the 19th Century it meant incurable *loss* of sight. There are diverse aspects of the condition of not seeing, affected by the medical and philosophical speculations current at the time.

The Enlightenment – particularly in France – had a fascination for cures for blindness and an empirical approach to its problems. This led to a *desacralization* of the blind, a different cultural status for blindness. Blindness was linked to the sacred in earlier cultures by the notion of *otherness*, something transcendent and beyond the reach of human knowledge. Greek literature saw the lack or loss of sight as a calamity, a punishment: -

“*Thou wert better dead than living blind,*” the Chorus tells the self-blinded hero Oedipus Rex.

One is reminded of Oedipus mocking Tiresias the sightless prophet whose blindness and powers of divination were divinely given.

Blindness as punishment appears on a number of occasions in the Old Testament. By making outcasts of the blind, and disqualifying them from important religious functions, viewing them as hated by the Gods, societies defined the blind as irremediable, excluded. Christianity alerts us to the relation of blindness to the sacred: - “*Then eyes of the blind shall be opened.*”

The metaphor of salvation becomes a central motif; seeing and faith, blindness and the refusal to believe.

From the 3rd Century hospices opened up. The most famous hospice devoted exclusively to the blind, the ‘Quinze-Vingts’ founded by St. Louis opened its doors in 1260 in Paris – it is there to this day.

As the centuries passed Blind-Beggar mendicants formed groups; they were feared and dis-trusted, linked with imposture; the Victor Hugo crafty scoundrel. The comic pair of blind beggar and sighted valet became a common-place in farce routines – encouraging on so many levels the view of the blind as mysterious, unknowable and dangerous outcasts – utterly different from the *seeing*.

*“One day I said to her, ‘Mademoiselle, imagine a cube.’
‘I see it.’
“Place a point in the centre of the cube.”
‘I have done so.’
“From the point draw straight lines to the angles; into what have you divided the cube?”
‘Into six pyramids, each having as its base one side of the cube and a height equal to half its height.’
“True, but tell me where you see this?”
‘Like you sir, in my head.’”*

Diderot’s meeting with the blind
Melanie De Salignac. 1760

The Enlightenment encouraged a huge increase in philosophical speculation and surgical cures. The ‘difference’ of the blind situated as it was in mystery and an untouchable beyond, becomes natural and accessible to science and the rational. The history of blindness moved away from mythology and symbolism.

John Locke and his successors set out to show that the minds ideas are not innate. Ideas do not have divine or ideal origins, but arise from sensory experience alone, from the minds contact with earthly reality. To prove that the minds eye could be separate from the realm of unchangeable innate ideas, what better example could there be than Berkeley’s “*one born blind, and afterwards when grown up, made to see*”. The famous ‘*Molyneux problem*’, first published in Locke’s work, attracted several generations of philosophers to the question of how a blind person newly cured would perceive the world. It afforded an opportunity to examine, speculatively or experimentally, the origin of ideas. This interest was motivated by the belief that ideas come from sensation; that knowledge is analogous to perceiving and especially to seeing. The sense of sight, more than any other has been associated with the presence of a world exterior to the viewer. Words such as ‘idea’ (from the Greek *eidōs*, sight), ‘theory’ (from the Greek *theōrein*, to observe) and ‘intuition’ (from the Latin *intueri*, to look at) imply that the objects of thought are conceived of as related to images seen by the eyes.

In 1749, the French philosopher Diderot in his ‘*Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*’, questioned many assumptions about the blind. For Locke and Berkeley the blind person is a device for mental clarification. The blind person is used to consider what precisely is the difference in perceptions, judgements, and interpretations involving time, space and the interplay of the senses to those of the sighted.

For Diderot, the blind, with their four senses instead of the usual five present the problem of a different language of the senses. He asserts that observing the

‘newly-cured’ subject will depend on the mental and linguistic sign system by which, while still blind, he had understood his tactile perceptions. In no case does the moment of first sight have any special importance; it brings neither recognition of forms nor a failure to recognise. The origin of perception or ideas could not therefore, be discovered by questioning a blind person about the sudden experience of seeing. Mental processes and the use of signs are far from universal, each of us having at our disposal those signs that our senses and education have provided us with.

In the ‘*Lettre sur les aveugles...*’ Diderot introduces us to the remarkable blind philosopher and Cambridge Professor of Mathematics and Fellow of the Royal Society, Nicholas Saunderson. In the first part of the text, Diderot argues that the form of the senses shapes metaphysical ideas: -

“I have never doubted that the state of our organs and of our senses has a large influence on our metaphysics and our ethics, and that our most purely intellectual ideas, if I may say so, stick very closely to the form of our bodies”.

Diderot suggests that the dualistic separation of thought and matter would be unfamiliar to the blind: -

“As they see matter in a far more abstract way than we, they are less far from believing that it thinks.”

Diderot claims that a blind Descartes would locate the soul in the fingertips, that is, at the point of contact with matter, the point at which through the sense of touch the object and consciousness of the object appear to be united.

Sight, on the contrary, separates the place of consciousness from the matter perceived, creating the battle between the abstract and the concrete, relegating matter as cut off from thinking faculties: -

“But if it is all the harder for a blind man seeing for the first time to judge correctly objects that have a larger number of forms, what would prevent him from taking an observer, all dressed up and immobile before him in an armchair, for a piece of furniture or a machine; and a tree, whose leaves and branches were stirred by the wind, for a moving, animated, thinking being? How many things do our senses suggest to us, and how hard it would be, without our eyes, to suppose that a block of marble neither thinks nor feels.”

Up until Diderot's *'Lettres sur les aveugles...'*, the difference between the blind and the seeing was not crucial, blindness was simply the absence of sight. After the *'Lettres...'*, the blind were seen as having a different representation of the world, different ideas, and a different language.

Diderot takes the reader to Saunderson's deathbed. An intelligent clergyman, Mr Gervase Holmes, is called to his side and they hold a discussion about the existence of God. Holmes begins with the 'Argument from Design'.

"Ah, Sir", said the blind philosopher, "leave aside that beautiful spectacle which was never made for me. I have been condemned to spend my life in darkness, and you cite prodigies which I do not understand, and which are only proof for you and for those who see as you do. If you want me to believe in God you must make me touch him."

A number of philosophers, scientists and doctors of the 18th Century preoccupied themselves with the difficulties that characterised attempts at distinguishing between thought, perception and the world at large. Diderot's contemporary, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, observed: -

"If we attend duly to the operation of our mind in the use of this faculty, we shall perceive that the visible appearance of objects is hardly ever regarded by us. It is not at all made an object of thought or reflection, but serves only as a sign to introduce to the mind something else, which may be distinctly conceived by those who never saw. Thus, the visible appearance of things in my room varies almost every hour, according as the day is clear or cloudy, as the sun is in the east, or south, or west, and as my eye is in one part of the room or in another: but I never think of these variations, otherwise than as signs of morning, noon, or night, of a clear or cloudy sky. ...a thousand such incidences might be produced, in order to show that the visible appearances of objects are intended by nature only as signs or indications; and that the mind passes instantly to the things signified, without making the least reflection upon the sign, or even perceiving that there is any such thing. It is in a way somewhat similar, that the sounds of a Language, after it is become familiar, are overlooked, and we attend only to the things signified by them."

Diderot's '*Lettres...*' was the starting point for the understanding that a person who has grown up blind has developed a different sort of identity from a sighted person; not just socially, but in mechanical and neurological senses too. His brain and nervous system have become physically different.

“A blind person is simply someone in whom the specialist function of sight is now devolved upon the whole body, and no longer specialised in a particular organ,”

John Hull
Touching the Rock, p.217

In the newly sighted, learning to see demands a radical change in neurological functioning and – contrary to what seems to be commonly supposed – for an adult who has been blind since childhood to recover his sight is a traumatic experience. There are even some who have taken their lives or gone back to living as if they were blind.

As Brian Magee the philosopher has observed: -

“What would it be like for us if we were suddenly to acquire an additional sense that was on a par in importance with seeing? The experience would be disorienting, terrifying, traumatic. We would, all of us, have the greatest difficulty with it. So, far from welcoming a whole new dimension of awareness into the thrilling embrace of our relationship with the world, we should more likely try to reject it.”

On Blindness. P.166

A Note on Painting Blind

“I have grown to believe that a really intelligent man makes an indifferent painter, for painting requires a certain blindness – a partial refusal to be aware of all the options.”

Mrs Talmann, in
THE DRAUGHTSMAN’S CONTRACT
Peter Greenaway

It is not doubted that the artist is prey to a proliferation of choices from the invisible, but is that enough to make him a blind man?

The artist makes his first mark – just the point, the touch of the mark; the form, image, the *thing* is not yet drawn – it is invisible in those seconds. That dab, that touch, the image is not yet visible...The artist *sees* some bit, some section, but it is not on the paper: -

*“What is it to draw?” asks Van Gogh.
“How do we do it? It is the act of clearing
a path for oneself through an invisible
iron wall.”*

The artist draws from memory – the image in the brain – fleeting, fragmentary – not from nature.

As the artist makes marks he begins to go blind.

*“An artist,” says Baudelaire, “accustomed to rely
on his memory and imagination will find himself
at the mercy of a riot of detail clamouring for justice
with the fury of the mob in love with equality.
The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail,
the greater the state of anarchy.”*

Memory can be *sighted* – perception can be *blind*.

*“I write without seeing. I came. I wanted to kiss your hand...
This is the first time I have ever written in the dark...
not knowing whether I am indeed forming letters.
Wherever there will be nothing, read that I love you.”*

Diderot.
Letter to Sophie Volland, June 10th, 1759

It is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw. The mark starts from itself by leaving itself.

Working blind is not as sightless as it seems – it is not a conjuring trick. The *skill* of two-dimensional mark-making in order to simulate the three dimensional world is an ancient one. Walking does it; breathing in and out makes a billion patterned vapours invisible in the air.

For most of us seeing is like the way we breathe, we inhale and exhale the visual event; but it rarely goes deep into the lungs.

This *skill* is valued less and less nowadays, and probably rightly so. There is a sightless quality to any investigation. Inquiry has to design its own road; building it towards an uncertain destination.

Blindness is inherent in creative activity – so much more is left out than put in – so much refusal to see is involved in seeing.

R.O.Lenkiewicz
The Library at Lower Compton
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A Note on TOBIT

The term 'Apocrypha' is popularly understood to describe the fifteen books or parts of books from the Pre-Christian period that the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Eastern churches accept, wholly or partially, as canonical Scripture but Protestants and Jews do not.

An 'apocryphon' is literally a 'hidden writing', kept secret from all but the initiate, being too exalted for the general public. These books did not find their way into the final Jewish Palestinian canon of Scripture. Despite their Jewish origins, they were preserved for the most part in Greek by Christians as a heritage from the Alexandrian Jewish community.

After the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, Christians and Jews began to unite in recognising the historical importance of these texts.

TOBIT

"A delightful story of the afflictions of a pious Israelite and the adventures of his dutiful son, who makes a journey in the company of a disguised angel and returns with a bride, and the means to restore the father's health and wealth".

Tobit learns from his son Tobiah whom he has sent out to fetch back a poor man to share their meal, that another Jewish corpse lies unburied in the market place. Tobit rescues and buries the corpse spending the night by a courtyard wall where sparrow droppings fall into his eyes. Tobit is blinded; he is reduced to having his wife Hannah support them, and accuses her of stealing a goat from her employers. Incensed by his groundless charge she reminds him that *his* righteousness brought about their poverty.

Tobit prays to God to take his life. God hears their prayers and sends the angel Raphael to help them. Tobit, convinced that he is dying, instructs his son to collect money owed to him some twenty years earlier, from his friend Gabael. Tobit assures himself that his son's guide, the disguised angel is of good character, giving them advice for their long trip.

That night Tobiah, encamped by the river Tigris, hauls in a huge fish. On Raphael's instructions, Tobiah guts it, saving its gall. Raphael suggests that Tobiah should marry the beautiful Sarah, a relative with whom they will be spending the night. To save time, Tobiah asks Raphael to go on to Gabael's house to collect the money. A just and noble man, Gabael willingly hands it to the angel and even comes to celebrate Tobiah's wedding.

Meanwhile, Tobit and Hannah worry over the welfare of their son, frequently going out of the house to look down the road. Eventually Tobiah and Raphael return, and Tobit stumbling and running embraces his son.

The angel reveals his true identity, asking that Tobiah apply the fish gall to his father's eyes. His sight immediately returns. Tobit lives to 112, kind and charitable to the end. His son goes from strength to strength and dies peacefully aged 117.

The characters in this story are basically good and ordinary people, who have none of the heroic stature or prominence of other exile characters such as Daniel, Esther or Judith. The Book of Tobit unfolds the drama of two little people, Tobit and Sarah, pitted against a system of apparent fate and a seemingly indifferent God.

Sonnet to Darkness

Any place that's closed, or any room
that solid walls shut in on every side
give shelter to the night when daylight comes,
defends her from the sun's ferocious play.

Fire and flame can drive her from her home
and every day she's hunted by the sun,
but even little lights can stain her beauty;
a firefly or two and it is gone.

In any open field the burning sun
falls on a thousand seeds, a thousand leaves,
until a farmer turns them with his plough.

But man is planted only in the dark
and therefore night is holier than day;
man's worth more than any farmer's crop.

Michelangelo

