

# Immunity and Community: The Role of Immune Protagonists in Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995) and Roth's *Nemesis* (2010)

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## *Abstract*

This article focuses on the immune protagonists in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (*Blindness*) and *Nemesis*, portrayed as resistant to the epidemic at the center of each novel. While the doctor's wife in Saramago's novel remains mysteriously immune to blindness, Bucky Cantor, in *Nemesis*, ends up contracting polio. Even though the two immune protagonists seem not to be physically affected by the 'plague', they strive to be heavily involved in the struggle for a better life for the community. Their involvement in the community tests their immunity. The apparently heroic function of the immune protagonists is an indication of this test, but the crucial dilemmas that they face appear to be significant for the question of how to live and survive together. The individual 'self-blinding' in *Nemesis* is negative for Bucky Cantor, while the 'struggle-for-survival' of the doctor's wife in *Blindness* is eventually constructive. It is thus not only the real physical resistance against the 'plague' that asserts itself as positive: it is also the way in which immunity turns into symbolic autoimmunity (*Nemesis*) or into an immunity of the community (*Blindness*).

[O]nce its negative power has been removed, the immune is not the enemy of the common, but rather something more complex that implicates and stimulates the common. The full significance of this necessity, but also its possibility, still eludes us.<sup>1</sup>

Look at her. She thinks she is different from the rest of us. She thinks she's got immunity. But when they come here, they won't make any exception for her.<sup>2</sup>

Partis d'un système immunitaire conçu comme un moyen de protéger l'organisme contre les autres, nous arrivons à un système qui lui permet de vivre avec les autres.<sup>3</sup>

## INTRODUCTION: IMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY

In his last novel *Nemesis*, Philip Roth fictionalizes the aftermath of the polio epidemic in Newark. The epidemic takes place in a realistic frame of reference that differs from the dystopian and post-apocalyptic frame of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*. In both cases, the epidemic can be read as an 'outbreak narrative', according to the term coined by Priscilla Wald (2008).<sup>4</sup>

In *Blindness*, the immune protagonist is an anonymous woman identified by her social position: 'the doctor's wife'. In *Nemesis*, he is a young man named Eugene (Bucky) Cantor. In Saramago's novel, the immune protagonist remains

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1 Esposito 2011, 18.

2 McMullen 1983 [00:25:00-00:25:11 min.].

3 Daëron 2021, 334; "From an immune system conceived as a means of protecting the organism from others, we arrive at a system that enables it to live with others" (author's translation).

4 In the following, I will use the letter *N* for quotations from *Nemesis* and *B* for quotes from Saramago's novel in Giovanni Pontiero's translation; for original quotations from *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, inserted in footnotes, I will use *EC* (all in parentheses, followed by the page number). Unless indicated otherwise, all italicized emphases are in the original.

uninfected by the ‘virus’ of blindness, and in Roth’s he resists polio up to a certain point. Nevertheless, both immune protagonists are primarily concerned with the distressed and sick community.

Neither of the two protagonists has a direct or natural remedy for the ills afflicting the community:<sup>5</sup> they merely attempt to alleviate them. In both novels, the immune protagonists are the only characters who seriously ‘resist’ oppression that comes about in response to the epidemic. Thus, a significant difference is to be emphasized from the outset: in Saramago’s text, the doctor’s wife remains mysteriously immune from the outbreak of the epidemic until its end, whereas, in Roth’s novel, the fight against polio ultimately fails. Roth’s protagonist Bucky Cantor *seems* immune to polio until the fateful day when he realizes through a test that he may have been “a healthy infected carrier” (N 236). He then blames himself throughout his life for the infections he may have caused and for the death of a child under his care. It turns out that Bucky Cantor is not an ‘immune protagonist’ in the strict sense of the word for two reasons. First, he is not the only character unaffected by the disease (several characters other than Bucky Cantor do not contract polio); second, while in *Nemesis*, polio affects the whole community, “the chances [of dying from polio] are slight overall in the community, in the city” (N 113). However, Roth’s protagonist is portrayed as a resister and a resilient defender of children in the community throughout much of the novel. I shall argue that Bucky Cantor also embodies the vulnerability of a man who could be infected at any time. However, there is another notable difference between the two stories. While the doctor’s wife partially succeeds in restoring the society that has been blinded – and thus, in a sense, restoring sight to the population – Bucky Cantor fails to protect the community he is supposed to defend. The fact that he is eventually infected is a sign that his role as protector has failed miserably.

Despite these differences, there are also many similarities between the two protagonists: because of the equally heroic qualities that the story bestows on him (integrity, a sense of fairness and responsibility), Bucky Cantor can be considered as being very similar to the (truly) immune protagonist that is the doctor’s wife. I will thus treat both the protagonists of the two novels under study as ‘the immune protagonists’.

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5 In each novel, the ‘plague’ (in the figurative sense of the epidemic) has an unknown origin, a scenario that occurs in some epidemic narratives (and also in pandemic fiction). Moreover, as Doctor Steinberg says to Bucky Cantor: “We don’t know who or what carries polio, and there’s still some debate about how it enters the body” (N 104). In Saramago’s novel, there is a similar absence of knowledge about the contagion.

My hypothesis is that the community tests the immune protagonists' immunity. The symbolically heroic function of the immune protagonists in the narrative and the path they take within the narrative framework are the indication of this test.

The conceptual relationships between community and immunity are complex, as the contentious debates over herd immunity and vaccination during the Covid-19 pandemic have demonstrated.<sup>6</sup> Although to some extent, these concepts can be viewed as inversions of each other, as Esposito (cf. 2002, 3-61) suggests, the concepts of community and immunity are interrelated. According to Esposito, immunity belongs primarily to the lexical domain of legal-political privilege or exemption, while what characterizes community corresponds to the notion of the *gift* and thus to what connects us to one another. But the concept of immunity cannot be understood only as the exact opposite of community. I shall argue that there seems to be a link between purely medical immunity and a properly legal-political immunity which would correspond to a kind of 'privilege-immunity'. However, the model of immunity that I uncover in my reading of these texts is a rather different one: it concerns the political and ethical *resistance* that the immune characters pass on to the dominated, enclosed or suffering communities.

I use a comparative study approach to examine these two immune protagonists: I will describe, analyze and interpret the pertinent similarities and differences between the two narratives. I will thus divide the study in two main parts: I will study the immune protagonists, first, on an individual level as mere characters and, second, on both an individual and collective level as embodiments of collective resistance (that is, of the resistance but also the failures of the community). After having examined to what extent the *immune* protagonists can be deemed heroic characters (first section), I shall consider the politics of community and the dilemmas at play in both novels (second section). Finally, I will extend my interpretation by analyzing two main types of immunity – the overprotective type of 'self-blindness' (third section) and the type of collective resilience (fourth section). This will eventually allow me to conceive a literary<sup>7</sup> theory of resilience and symbiotic immunity.

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6 The fact that a community seeks immunity in a pandemic context demonstrates that the two concepts cannot be considered separately. This critical issue of herd immunity was raised during the Covid-19 pandemic. For a detailed analysis of the damaging consequences of the ideology inspired by the notion of herd immunity and by social Darwinism, see Marie-Laure Salles-Djelic (2020) "Quand l'idéologie avance masquée. Immunité collective, néolibéralisme et darwinisme social".

7 On the very notion of the "immunity of literature", see Johannes Türk's book (2011).

## HEROIC IMMUNITY? FROM 'PRIVILEGE' TO RESISTANCE

The immunity of the immune protagonists may appear as an individual 'privilege', but at the same time, they are 'naturally *immune*'.<sup>8</sup> One might think that the first striking thing about the two immune protagonists is their (medically) natural ability to overcome 'disease', be it blindness or polio. However, they fear being infected by blindness or the virus at every turn, but they also fear constantly for the well-being of the community.

In both novels, the immune protagonists, despite their guaranteed immunity, risk exposure to the disease that afflicts the rest of society. In *Nemesis*, Bucky Cantor is personally legitimized by a doctor himself to "contribut[e] to the welfare of the community" (*N* 105). In *Blindness*, the doctor's wife is described by the narrator as "[...] a kind of natural leader, a king with eyes in the land of the blind" (*B* 256).<sup>9</sup> The privilege of 'not being blind' in Saramago's text (of not having succumbed to the contagion of blindness) is not, however, used by the female protagonist to exert authority over the blind: although she might have the upper hand in the asylum where they are locked up, she chooses not to exercise her exemption to dominate the others.

One of the dilemmas that might arise for the two immune protagonists is the question of how to protect others without exercising too much authority. However, the immune protagonists not only have a privilege with regard to the disease, they are also the driving force of resistance to the disease and its negative consequences. The doctor's wife, for example, is not afraid to declare herself blind: when the ambulance comes to pick up her already blind husband, she pretends to go blind so as not to abandon him.<sup>10</sup>

The immune protagonists are in a way considered role models by a portion of the community. But it is important to identify which characters make up the community in each book. On the one hand, in *Nemesis*, this community consists of the boys of the Weequahic neighbourhood of Newark. It is these boys and their sports camp that Bucky Cantor is supposed to watch over. He is very concerned about his duty as a man of integrity and has an excessive sense of "responsibility"

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8 Because they have this immunity without any need for vaccination, the two immune protagonists can be considered 'naturally' immune to the disease.

9 "Uma espécie de chefe natural, um rei com olhos numa terra de cegos" (*EC* 245).

10 First, the doctor's wife just wanted to protect her husband. She was not thinking of the community. Later, in the asylum, she had no other choice. She did not choose her role of resister and helper; she arrived there by accident.

(N 101): in this sense, he has much in common with the antihero of Albert Camus's novel *La Peste* (1947), Dr. Rieux. On the other hand, the community corresponds in Saramago's novel to the oppressed blind people confined to an asylum and separated from already contaminated (but not yet blind) people. However, the protected community, at the beginning, composed of the six main characters of *Blindness* that we follow from the beginning to the end of the book, soon expands: "For the moment there are only six of us here, but by tomorrow we shall undoubtedly be more; people will start arriving every day" (B 46).<sup>11</sup>

Both protagonists have extraordinary qualities that make them in some way heroic characters. The doctor's wife holds a leadership role. Not only is she the only woman who can see, but her visual immunity remains secret. Apart from her husband, the doctor-ophthalmologist, no one knows about her "sixth sense, some sort of a vision without eyes [...]" (B 201).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, "[...] it is quite extraordinary how she manages to [...] orient herself [...]" (B 81):<sup>13</sup> that ability proves crucial in the continuation of the story; she not only orients herself, she also orients the others.

The immune protagonists embody a particular form of *care*. Not only are they listened to (unlike the doctors in each novel), but they also tend to take precedence over medical authority. Even if the immune protagonists are not medical professionals (a fact they are constantly reminded of), they seem to be the only characters that can be trusted: the doctor's wife and Bucky Cantor are both close to the medical function from a narratological perspective. There is a complex relationship between the immune protagonists, medicine itself and its practitioners. Nevertheless, the protagonists also embody 'political' and 'ethical' resistance. They try to take care of others. In *Blindness*, the doctor's wife quickly replaces her husband with that of a 'caregiver' (cf. Tronto 1993). If the immune protagonists are heroes, it is only in the sense that they represent a heroic figure for the community of children (*Nemesis*) and for the oppressed blind people (*Blindness*).

Two types of defence – medical self-defence and the resistant defence of the community – are linked in the two novels. The immune protagonists' first function is not primarily self-defence but co-resistance, that is ethical and political 'resistance'. Both immune protagonists help to facilitate the resistance of the community, a form of resistance that counters both the virus and hostile controlling forces

11 "[...] Por enquanto só estamos aqui estes seis, mas amanhã de certeza seremos mais, virá gente todos os dias [...]" (EC 53).

12 "[...] ela deve ser dotada de um sexto sentido, algum tipo de visão sem olhos [...]" (EC 196).

13 "[...] é extraordinário como ela consegue [...] orientar-se [...]" (EC 87).

that attempt to mitigate its spread. To enable resistance, however, they must also at times defend themselves. Being forced into self-defence, Bucky Cantor and the doctor's wife face dilemmas through their resistance.

## FACING DILEMMAS THROUGH RESISTANCE

One model of immunity that emerges in literature (cf. Türk 2011) is that of an immune character who *resists* for and with others, thus transmitting their resistance to the community members. This resistance concerns a significant part of the community that tries to defend itself and thus to promote self-defence against 'evil'.

Nevertheless, in a very similar way, the two immune protagonists face 'dilemmas' involving the complex relationships between immunity and community. At least four dilemmas arise for the immune protagonists, each of which I will now describe. These dilemmas – sometimes presented as tragic (*Nemesis*) and other times as parabolic (*Blindness*) – may recall ethical and sociopolitical dilemmas encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Dilemma n° 1: *How to avoid ('the evil' of) contagion? Between the biopolitical paradigm and the consideration of the community***

In *Nemesis*, polio does not affect most of the population. As a leader and a driving force of the diegesis, Bucky Cantor feels responsible for the spread of the contagion. Even if he was not watching the children, they would still run the risk of contracting the disease; they would not be protected in any way and could be contaminated. He thus asks Dr. Steinberg, the father of Bucky Cantor's bride-to-be Marcia, if he has succeeded in "kill[ing] the polio germs" (N 104) through sanitary measures:

[W]hat's important is that you cleaned up an unhygienic mess and reassured the boys by the way you took charge. You demonstrated your competence [...] your equanimity – that's what the kids have to see. Bucky, you're shaken up by what's happening now, but strong men get the shakes too. [...] To stand by as a doctor unable to stop the spread of this dreadful disease is painful for all of us. (N 104)

Dr. Steinberg is reassuring. He gives Bucky legitimacy in his mission to take good care of the children: "To the contrary, you're making things better. You're doing something useful. You're contributing to the welfare of the community" (N 105).

In Saramago's novel by contrast, blindness affects most of the population. The fight against the 'virus' is organized in a much more repressive way. The government in *Blindness* quickly views the fight against the virus under a warlike paradigm. It seeks to exert control over people's lives and introduces extremely authoritarian measures: "[...] the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means in this present crisis" (B 42).<sup>14</sup>

Although it is impossible, in Saramago's novel, to avoid the contagion, everything is done to *fight* it, as is shown by the presence of the military forces dedicated to 'control' blind people. If the shift from relative freedom to a political regime characterized by violent measures of overtly military and even biopolitical control<sup>15</sup> may have been brought about by the epidemic of blindness, the question for the doctor's wife is: *how to find a solution to fight social chaos while not resorting to violence?* This is the second dilemma that I will study.

### **Dilemma n° 2: How to protect the community while not resorting to violence?**

The question facing the immune protagonists in the context of enemies to defeat is crucial in both novels. Nevertheless, it manifests in different ways. In Roth's novel, the virus is described as an "invisible" (N 271) enemy that must be defeated by the "invincible" (N 280) figure of Bucky Cantor. In *Blindness*, the doctor's wife is tested by the divisions within the community, especially between the two Wards. Women are forced to surrender sexually to get food (they are raped and used as sex slaves), but the doctor's wife does not force anyone to submit to this cruel law. Commenting on this very dilemma, Monika Kaup (2021, 191) notes that "[i]n the asylum, the collective decisions, first, to agree to the criminals' demand for sex slaves, and next, to attack the criminals in self-defence are reached via a tense debate in each case". After facing a profound moral dilemma, the doctor's wife kills the oppressive leader (the man with the gun) and feels no guilt afterwards. She has fallen into violence, but violence was necessary: the community eventually regulates the actions of the doctor's wife.

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14 "[...] O Governo lamenta ter sido forçado a exercer energicamente o que considera ser seu direito e seu dever, proteger por todos os meios as populações na crise que estamos a atravessar" (EC 73).

15 In the film adaptation of *Blindness* directed by Fernando Meirelles, interestingly, the voiceover says "that the disease was immune to bureaucracy" (Meirelles 2009 [00:41:09-00:41:14 min.]). It showcases that, as in the novel, the spread of blindness is unstoppable: all authoritarian and repressive efforts made to stop it are in vain.

**Dilemma n° 3: *How to reconcile individual and collective well-being (in *Nemesis*)?***<sup>16</sup>

In *Nemesis*, Bucky Cantor is caught between several obligations. He must comply with the moral imperative to do his job fairly and ethically – *taking care* of the children of the Weequahic playground and ‘caring’ for his own well-being. Roth’s immune protagonist fails to embody the resistance of the community. Indeed, as the polio epidemic reaches its peak, a reinforcement of public health measures leads to the closure of the playground. Bucky Cantor has to symbolically concede defeat in “*his war*” (N 174) against the virus:<sup>17</sup> “Yet he *had* been given a war to fight, the war being waged on the battlefield of his playground [...]” (N 173). Taking advantage of the post vacated by one of his classmates who has left for the war, Bucky Cantor sets out to find his beloved Marcia. He seizes the opportunity to get engaged, escaping the contagion of polio in Indian Hill, a heavenly place apparently devoid of any harm.<sup>18</sup> Before he accepts, he is confronted with a profound dilemma. Has he failed in taking care of the children? If he owes many people, according to the notion of moral debt, he must nevertheless first think of his own happiness. This leads to another dilemma that can be found in the two novels: *How to be responsible and not feel guilty?*

**Dilemma n° 4: *How to be responsible and not feel guilty?***

Although Saramago’s protagonist feels guilty at certain points in the story, she manages to overcome her guilt, which is a crucial difference between the two novels, both characterized by the “Judeo-Christian guilt”<sup>19</sup> and the attribution of the

16 Saramago’s novel also raises the question of the balance between collective and individual well-being. However, I preferred not to deal with this question so as not to weigh down the comparative approach. To these four dilemmas, one could have added a more crucial one in *Blindness*: ‘how to survive together?’ – I will talk about this at the end of this article, but from a biological perspective.

17 Another war – World War II – is at play in Roth’s story, which is set in 1944. However, Bucky Cantor does not fight in that (real) war because he has been exempted from fighting in it – another privilege for him, though he would have liked to fight in that war.

18 Villate Torres (2018) suggests about Indian Hill, in which Bucky Cantor joins his beloved and wife-to-be Marcia: “Un lieu aussi pur apparaît aux yeux de Bucky comme immunisé contre la polio. [Such a pure place appears to Bucky to be immunized against polio]” (301; author’s translation).

19 Seth (2020) suggests: “Paradoxalement, en refusant Dieu, Cantor est victime de la vieille notion de culpabilité si profondément ancrée dans la tradition judéo-chrétienne.

disease to the will of God. As a “maniac of the why” (N 265), Bucky Cantor “has to convert tragedy into guilt” (ibid.):

He has to find a necessity for what happens. There is an epidemic and he needs a reason for it. He has to ask why. [...] That it is pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic will not satisfy him. That it is a proliferating virus will not satisfy him. Instead he looks desperately for a deeper cause, this martyr, this *maniac of the why*, and finds the why either in God or in himself or [...] in their dreadful joining *together as the sole destroyer*. (ibid., my emphasis)

When he leaves Newark, Bucky Cantor is berated as an “opportunist” (N 138) by O’Gara (who heads the playground of Weequahic) not without anti-Semitism – he deliberately calls him “*Cancer*” instead of “Cantor”: “All you’re doing is running away, *Cancer*, a world-champion muscleman like you. You’re an opportunist, *Cancer*. [...] And then, with revulsion, he repeated, ‘*An opportunist*,’ as though the word stood for every degrading instinct that could possibly stigmatize a man” (N 138, my emphasis). The accusation of being an “opportunist” can be read literally. O’Gara accuses Bucky Cantor of taking advantage of the privilege and opportunity afforded him to have a wife from a wealthy social class and seek her out in a polio-free land. However, if we ignore the anti-Semitism of the insult, we can also read the word ‘opportunist’ with a *biological* frame of reference. That is, we can understand that the opportunist (who possesses a kind of ‘privilege-immunity’) is associated with a disease (cancer) and seen thus as a kind of opportunistic disease. If we take seriously this association of illness and opportunism, we could say that, like an ‘opportunistic infection’ – i.e. a disease caused by relatively unaggressive germs that exploit a weakness of the immune system to survive – Bucky Cantor may have symbolically taken advantage of a kind of failure in the community’s ‘immune system’. To his great misfortune, by fleeing his (vain) moral duty, he has ‘attacked’ (on a literal medical level) the natural defences of a child weaker than himself: Donald Kaplow. As Seth (cf. 2020, 39) states, Bucky Cantor turns from defender into contaminator in an unexpected reversal. His falsely strong health has infected the one who, above all, should not have been contaminated – the child that he was supposed to protect. He has precisely the narrative function of an ‘opportunistic disease’ – an apparently harmless disease for a healthy immune system – in that his deceptively unaggressive privileged health may have infected the young child.

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[Paradoxically, by denying God, Cantor falls victim to the old notion of guilt so deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition]” (40; author’s translation).

Bucky Cantor, the champion of hygiene, integrity, health and protection, has indeed found in Indian Hill the realization of carnal desire with Marcia. The fact that he contracts polio, according to Cantor's own interpretation, may be seen as a punishment for escaping far from Newark and not demonstrating his sense of Judeo-Christian sacrifice to the end.

I have been arguing that the narrative paints Bucky Cantor – by way of a biological reading – as a kind of opportunistic disease. I will now extend this argument by showing how the reversal of the protective logic becomes a kind of auto-immune logic (on the symbolic level) for Roth's (no longer) immune protagonist.

## SELF-BLINDNESS AS A COUNTER-MODEL OF IMMUNITY

In *Nemesis*, many members of the community accuse Bucky Cantor of not having made the right decision. Many, like O'Gara, make him a kind of 'scapegoat'. Bucky Cantor thus reveals the weaknesses, failures and successes of the community. He embodies the risk of the overprotective paradigm, the risk that the community will find scapegoats<sup>20</sup> (Jews, for example) for symbolic and real ills of the community. Bucky Cantor's immunity (i.e. his own self-protection and the fact that he wants to protect others) turns against him by way of a self-defeating logic.

After he contracts polio, Marcia still wants to marry him, but he runs away from her. In their last conversation, Marcia accuses him of "finding [...] comfort in castigating himself" (N 139). As an ultimately defenceless man, who is now "against [him]self [...] making things worse by scapegoating [him]self" (N 272), he only wants to protect himself from the woman he is destined to marry. He also enjoys her "to save [her]self from [him]" (N 260) because he is now disabled. Marcia analyzes Bucky Cantor's tendency for overprotection as a delusion and a

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20 The 'logic of scapegoating' is developed by René Girard (cf. 1982) and taken up by Roberto Esposito with regard to community self-immunization. Esposito argues that, in times of crisis, the community is forced to 'operate and divide itself' (cf. Esposito 2002). The logic of scapegoating is also to be found in Saramago's work but in a different way. In *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, which is a sequel to *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, the former heroes also become scapegoats. As Vieira (2011, 123) notes, "[in *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*,] the protagonists of *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, [...] are used as scapegoats for the situation. Since she did not go blind, the doctor's wife is identified as the head of the supposed conspiracy behind the wave of blank votes and the novel ends with her assassination, together with that of the dog of tears".

self-blinding with regard to the ability they still have to be happy, despite polio and the resulting disability: “You’re speaking nonsense! [...] By telling me to leave you alone. Oh, Bucky, you’re being so blind!” (N 259). The logic of the self-blindness of the hero seems very close to that of symbolic self-protection that provokes self-destruction.<sup>21</sup> However, as he becomes a kind of tragic hero in his own eyes – his failure as an infected man fulfilling his sense of the tragedy of the community as well as the vanity of self-sacrifice – Marcia decides to leave him; she considers that “[t]he only way to save a remnant of his honor was in denying himself everything he had ever wanted for himself” (N 262). Bucky Cantor’s guilt complex is simultaneously self-protective and – from the point of view of his own happiness – self-destructive: his self-protection leads (on the psychic level) to his self-destruction.

Noteworthy, then, is the connection between symbolic self-destruction and self-blinding<sup>22</sup> from the perspective of the paradigm of rationality. Self-blindness and blindness can be conceived as a partial failure on the part of the immune protagonist in Roth’s novel to protect the community and its cohesion. It is possible to extend this self-destructive logic of opportunistic disease which I analyzed in the previous part, to that of autoimmunity. ‘Self-immunization’ (i.e. self-destructive self-protection) is linked to the philosophical logic of Jacques Derrida (cf. 2001 and 2003) and Roberto Esposito (cf. 2002). Drawing a parallel between philosophical and biological (or immunological) theories of living, Derrida defines self-immunization as the tendency of an auto-protective impulse to be self-

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- 21 As Giannopoulou (2016, 29) notes, “[m]oral earnestness to the point of self-destruction is a staple of Roth’s characters”. She quotes an interview with Philip Roth by Georges Searles, in which Roth asserts: “I have concerned myself with men and women whose moorings have been cut, and who are swept away from their native shores and out to sea, sometimes on a tide of their own righteousness or resentment” (Searles 1992, 55).
- 22 As Fastelli (cf. 2021, 3-13) points out by drawing a connection between pandemic and blindness in the work of Saramago and Roth, and as John Maxwell Coetzee (cf. 2010, 12-15) and – in his wake – Giannopoulou (cf. 2016, 15-31) had already suggested, Philip Roth’s protagonist was in a way self-blinding man: both compare him to the tragic figure of Oedipus. In my analysis, I take from Giannopoulou’s commentary this emphasis on Bucky Cantor who is blind to his own rational blindness.

destructive as well.<sup>23</sup> This paradigm may also apply to the self-destructive self-protection of the community.<sup>24</sup>

So, what defines self-blinding (in its philosophical sense), if not the propensity to self-destruct of that which is *immune*? I argue that blindness, self-blindness and self-destruction are ‘counter-models’ that represent the limits of the “immunization paradigm” (cf. Esposito 2002, 3-61). Thus, the anti-heroic fallibility of Roth’s character and the way he turns into a negative character (first and foremost in his own eyes),<sup>25</sup> can be correlated to the symbolic self-blinding of his auto-immunization.

The paradigm of self-blindness leads me to propose an interpretation of blindness at the core of Saramago’s novel. I argue that there is a connection between natural blindness and blinding oneself that has to do with a self-destructive tendency. In Saramago’s novel many, sometimes contradictory, thoughts about blindness are propounded by the protagonists and the secondary characters. I will focus only on those of the doctor, who is a kind of philosopher and often reflects on the ‘wisdom of blindness’. In the doctor’s view, blindness has a philosophical primacy over being blind: “[...] it even used to be said there is no such thing as blindness, only blind people when the experience of time has taught us nothing other than that there are no blind people, but only blindness” (*B* 324).<sup>26</sup> The doctor hints at a possible connection between natural blindness and blinding oneself, which also has to do with voluntary self-deception: “[...] Let’s open our eyes, We can’t, we are blind, said the doctor, It is a great truth that says that the worst blind person was the one who *did not want to see* [...]” (*B* 298, my emphasis).<sup>27</sup>

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23 We could also cite the idea of *apoptosis*, or programmed cell death, described by Jean-Claude Ameisen (1999; cf. also Vitale 2018).

24 “Community as common *auto-immunity*. No community is possible that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection” (Derrida 1998, 51); “Communauté comme com-mune (sic.) *auto-immunité*: nulle communauté qui n’entretienne sa propre auto-immunité, un principe d’autodestruction sacrificiel ruinant le principe de protection de soi” (Derrida 2001, 59).

25 Despite (and perhaps, mainly because of) his failure, he arouses the reader’s empathy.

26 “[...] costuma-se até dizer que não há cegueiras, mas cegos, quando a experiência dos tempos não tem feito outra coisa que dizer-nos que não há cegos, mas cegueiras” (*EC* 309).

27 “[...] Abram os olhos, Não podemos, estamos cegos, disse o médico, É uma grande verdade a que diz que o pior cego foi aquele que *não quis ver* [...]” (*EC* 283, my emphasis).

The connection between self-blinding – whether it is voluntary or not – and self-destruction,<sup>28</sup> under the paradigm of rationality and enlightenment, is of paramount importance but too complex to be conceptualized here in detail. I can at least assert that the application of some biological theories, such as autoimmunity, to literature can be useful for seeing – at a philosophical level – the complex relations between community and immunity. At a more general level of reflection, we can say that self-blindness and blindness in a crisis can be seen as negative counter-models of the community’s immunity, a kind of symbolic ‘autoimmunity of the community’.

Self-blindness, when it concerns the whole community, is highly negative. The question then arises of creating another mode of rationality that conceives of immunity as convincing and non-authoritative impulse implying collective resilience. The fundamental difference between the two novels is not indeed whether the protagonist remains immune to the ‘plague’ until the end of the story. The difference lies rather in the way the two characters deal with symbolic violence. In *Nemesis*, the symbolic violence of the community turns against the protagonist Bucky Cantor, who is not resilient, unlike the novel’s narrator Arnie Mesnikoff who also contracted polio but managed to live with his disability. In *Blindness*, the symbolic violence eventually subsides: it is averted by the resilience of the doctor’s wife who guides the collective resilience that leads to collective immunity, i.e. immunity of the community.

## HOW TO SURVIVE TOGETHER? (COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE IN *BLINDNESS*)

One of the questions that *Blindness* raises is: how can we organize ourselves to survive together? How can we deal with the ‘struggle-for-survival’?<sup>29</sup> To put it in the words of the female immune protagonist in *Blindness*:

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28 The link between reason and destruction has already been brought to light by Horkheimer and Adorno (cf. 1944), through the dialectic of enlightenment to which Saramago seems to allude when speaking – in the last sentences of his 1998 Nobel lecture of “the monsters generated by the blindness of reason” (Saramago 1999, 9).

29 Monika Kaup (cf. 2021, 144-195) suggests that “[t]he small collective of survivors tracked in post-apocalyptic fiction is formed by the peculiar logic through which the respective catastrophes unfold, in this case the first to be quarantined” (ibid., 177). The question of organization for survival is crucial in almost all epidemic (or pandemic) narratives – whether post-apocalyptic or not.

[I]f we stay together we might manage to survive, if we separate we shall be swallowed up by the masses and destroyed, [...] I don't know to what extent they are really organised, I only see them going around in search of food [...] nothing more [...].<sup>30</sup> (B 256)

This necessity for a 'struggle-for-survival' is primarily a matter of concrete material survival: it implies the need for self-organization on the part of people who want to find food and who, instead of fighting, choose the path of harmony by organizing themselves: "[...] And how can a society of blind people organise in order to survive, By organising itself, to organise oneself is, in a way, to begin to have eyes [...]" (B 296).<sup>31</sup> This crucial struggle-for-survival leads to the necessity not of separation but of self-organization. As Monika Kaup (cf. 2021, 144-195) suggests in her commentary on *Blindness*, self-organization is the way for the newly blind to survive. But it must be thought of at the very level of their representation of the world:<sup>32</sup> "Newly sightless, they must find a new type of cognitive organisation that allows them to know their world, a process in which neither blind minds not [sic] worlds are pre-given but [...] are brought forth in the process of living" (ibid., 185). Applying the autopoietic and enactive theories of Maturana and Varela<sup>33</sup> (which mainly involve self-organization) to her reading of Saramago, Kaup observes that the immune doctor's wife enables the six other protagonists and survivors to orient themselves. There exists among the six protagonists who survive from Ward One – until the end of the story – a kind of co-resistance:

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30 "[...] Voltemos à questão, disse a mulher do médico, se continuarmos juntos talvez consigamos sobreviver, se nos separarmos seremos engolidos pela massa e destroçados, [...] Não sei até que ponto estarão realmente organizados, só os vejo andarem por aí à procura de comida e de sítio para dormir, nada mais [...]" (EC 245).

31 "[...] E como poderá uma sociedade de cegos organizar-se para que viva, Organizandose, organizar-se já é, de uma certa maneira, começar a ter olhos [...]" (EC 281f.).

32 I do not go into the details of Kaup's admirable and compelling analysis. However, I would like to point out that the necessity of self-organization and enaction of blind people is both phenomenological (involving "the co-constitution of blind minds and worlds" (Kaup 2021, 185)) and social ("[i]t is social coupling and linguistic coupling among the blind that results in the formation of blind collectives, as well as their coordinated drift via collective ontogenies" (ibid.)).

33 Maturana and Varela (cf. 1980 and also 1987) developed the concept of autopoiesis (i.e. self-organization) to explain and describe the property of living organisms to generate their own structural and functional organization, in permanent interaction with their environment.

Notably, because the group of survivor protagonists includes the woman who can see, they are *exempted from the disorientation that defines the universal condition in the city of the blind*. While the doctor's wife and her group enjoy the relative safety of their real home, conditions in the entire city of the blind reach an apocalyptic state [...]. But just when the city seems on the brink of an outbreak of new infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, the blindness pandemic ends as miraculously as it began. (Kaup 2021, 187, my emphasis)

The doctor's wife, then, provides the impetus and direction that will enable part of the blind community to be resilient. The protagonist's sight, however, cannot replace the strength of the bonds that unite those who share the 'vulnerability of blindness' and yet seem to have 'nothing in common'.<sup>34</sup> What they have in common is the true bond of the community that gives them resilience – while not making them immune to blindness – and the strength to learn to live together again.

In so far as she is inseparable from the community, the immunity of the doctor's wife is not as stable as one might think. At the end of the story, she orients the blind members of the small blind community but she no longer *leads* them. When all the blind people regain their sight, she feels as if she has gone blind. This ending is enigmatic, as enigmatic as her tears in the middle of the story, which make her believe that she is really blind. Should we see in the nostalgia of the doctor's wife a nostalgia for the bonds of the *community*? Is it an act of mourning a community that, once immune to blindness, shall no longer be able to forge solid human bonds? At the very least, we could say that the character supposed to represent immunity may be in the grip of nostalgia for the community. Conversely, when the community is led by immunity (for instance, the doctor's wife who *orients* the others in the last part of the narrative), the members of the community strive to become immune to their blindness. It is especially when the relationship between the community and immunity is out of balance that there is a risk of symbolic or real violence. Community and immunity must remain interrelated, for better or worse.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The models or counter-models of immunity embodied by the immune protagonists in *Blindness* and *Nemesis* are very different. In Roth's novel, the logic of

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34 Having "nothing in common" is the very definition of "community" according to Alphonso Lingis (cf. 1994), on whom Patrícia Vieira builds her interpretation (cf. 2011, 99-124) of Saramago's narrative, as well as that of Roberto Esposito (cf. 2002).

overprotection eventually prevails. Contrary to all expectations, it is ultimately the opposite that happens in Saramago's novel.

Both immune protagonists *represent* the critical issues of the community. They remain highly vulnerable and cannot directly resolve the tensions within the community. They are neither exempt from the 'evils or ills' of the community nor from its self-destructive slippages (when immunity is disrupted on the symbolic level and leads to autoimmunity). By facing these misfortunes, bearing them to the highest degree and embodying the interrelationships and entanglements between community and immunity, the immune protagonists offer solutions of temporary resilience that do not always find a way out.

Used moderately, immunization can lead to a shared life that seeks to build on the resilience of the community. This should lead us to the notion of a shared immunity or a "co-immunity",<sup>35</sup> an immunity that intertwines ethical and political issues.

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35 I refer here to the concept coined by Peter Sloterdijk (cf. 2009, 699-714).

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