

Preface

By Alain Corbin

There are works of history that satisfy the desire for a temporal change of scenery and stimulate reverie; others, more rare, deeply move their reader. This is the case with Zina Weygand's book. It obliges each of us to interrogate that share of the irrational that remains deep within us when we confront blindness.

Our culture of universals, so magnified during the celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, distances us from the Anglo-Saxon culture of difference. There results an inevitable backwardness. In France, specialized histories of disabilities and handicaps are few and far between. In this barely cleared field, Zina Weygand is a vital figure. For several decades now, she has been methodically studying the representations and circumstances of blind people in the past.

The point of departure for her research concerns the inheritance of the Age of Enlightenment. From Locke to Condillac, the adherents of sensationalism posited that sensory experience was at the center of cognitive processes. They expected that an operation on a newborn that would permit the child to see would reveal the truth of the sensible. This crucial experiment, Zina Weygand assures us, was the founding myth of Enlightenment philosophy. Diderot, from the publication of the *Letter on the Blind* to the drafting of his final *Additions* thirty-four years later, struggled, for his part, to penetrate the world of the blind, thenceforth desacralized by surgery. Thanks to him, the sightless person became "the subject of a dialogue between equals."

This discussion of difference led to a rereading of the hierarchy of senses and to the promotion of touch. It gave rise to a hymn to vicariance—the substitution of one sensation for another. This new way of seeing transformed attitudes. While the image of a blind citizen "capable of

attaining culture, employment, and dignity” slowly began to take shape, the sensitive soul was moved by disabilities. Philanthropy and a passion for pedagogy, not to mention the rise of silent reading among cultivated elites, led to the desire to educate the congenitally blind.

Zina Weygand quickly understood the need for a genealogical approach. To accurately measure the importance of the revolution that took place in the Age of Enlightenment, it was necessary to plumb historic depths. Fables, medieval theater, romance literature, not to mention fairground exhibits, reveal the great complexity of images, sentiments, and attitudes. Blindness long inspired terror. The figure of the blind buffoon, clumsy and coarse, exorcised this sentiment. Derision was directed at the drunken beggar, cynical and debauched, often duped by his guide. The disability, a visible mark of a hidden defect, also aroused repugnance. Blindness, along with its companions, ignorance and vice, symbolized blindness of spirit, a dimming of the intelligence.

At the same time blindness solicited compassion. It called for charity. Confraternities of the blind multiplied in the thirteenth century. The good Louis XI founded the *Quinze-Vingts*. On Holy Thursday, he washed the feet of disabled people. These last benefited from the privilege to beg freely, something not taken away from them until the dawn of the nineteenth century. According to an exchange of gift and counter-gift, it was expected that the misfortunate pray for their benefactors. The miraculous cure of the newborn in the Gospels made of him an individual who was doubtless better able than others to reveal the grandeur of God.

At the dawn of modern times, admiration grew for those who, already in antiquity, were celebrated for their rich interior visions. Deprivation of the spectacle of the world and useless knowledge facilitated spiritual illumination. The blind man of the thirteenth-century mystical theologians knew much more than did scholars, whom he was capable of confounding. In the century of the optical revolution and the *Lessons of Darkness*, there emerged the figure of the “blind subject, alone and singular,” and on many occasions, Rembrandt celebrated the dignity of the solitary blind man.

Another tension, one that has to do with social issues, structures Zina Weygand’s book. A moving cohort of visually impaired members of the elite stands in contrast to the crowd of the indigent blind, and the

reader gets a good sense of the profound gap between them. At the end of the eighteenth century, steadfast souls outlined a model of cultivated sightlessness from which Valentin Haüy, protagonist of the book and creator of collective teaching for those blind since birth, took inspiration.

February 19, 1785, the date of the establishment of the first free school, divides this history into two periods. From then on and through numerous incidents, the desire to educate, to encourage free speech, to allow blind people to attain happiness, to ensure their right to carnal relations preys on the minds of responsible parties. At the end of the *ancien régime*, demonstrations at court, spectacles staged for learned societies, public functions, and participation in religious ceremonies paved the way and won people over. The sad performance that, as late as 1771, had marked the festivities of Saint Ovid's fair became a thing of the past.

The fact remains that, with the political torment of the ensuing century, the history of the education of the congenitally blind, so carefully traced by Zina Weygand, is one of contradictory episodes. What persists is a faith in the possibility of apprenticeships, even when belief in the social usefulness of victims of blindness wavers. The incessant rearrangement of the taxonomies of jobs they are said to be capable of is evidence of this hesitation. Hopes peaked between 1791 and 1794. What followed was a long decline of the dream of citizenship. The desire for social control tended to replace the desire for promotion. But the concern for education and social integration expressed in the Law of July 29, 1794, was never abandoned.

Recourse to archives enables Zina Weygand to paint a moving picture of the situation of blind children admitted into the institutions reserved for them. Their fate varied to a rhythm of displacements and disgraces. The Consulate and the Empire elaborated formidable regulations that we must measure by the yardstick of those who organized life inside secondary schools. The precision and rigor of the schedule, the putting to work, the elaboration of a range of punishments, the constant surveillance to control behaviors offends our current sensibilities.

Zina Weygand also makes the crowd of blind people who contributed to the picturesque of the early nineteenth-century city come to life before our eyes. Singers and wandering musicians, animal trainers, peddlers, fortune-tellers, distributors of lottery tickets, and prostitutes make up a gallery of types whose variety reflects the multiplicity of causes of

blindness. From 1749, the date of the publication of the *Letter on the Blind*, at the end of the *monarchie censitaire*,¹ a process, far from linear, reshaped the history of blindness. As the decades passed, there arose a collective belief that the visually impaired individual could have a private life and could bloom in fields beyond that of music alone.

Talented historian of culture that she is, Zina Weygand is able to reveal the process that allowed blind people to leave the sphere of otherness behind while revealing what a slow process it was. She is even better at displaying the simultaneous representations at work between 1800 and 1850. Three strata, in part consisting of cultural flotsam, are essential to the reading of moralizing novels and of melodrama. The burlesque, the derision that stigmatized the blind person, was still in evidence, as were the feelings of the sensitive soul, forged in the previous century. The main thing was nonetheless the sudden appearance of the romantic vision of blindness. The latter revived, in its own way, recent attitudes toward the ability to perceive invisible realities. The character of Dea gives meaning to *The Laughing Man*, the great nocturnal novel by Victor Hugo. It symbolizes the abandonment of all references to the blackness of the soul.

The book concludes with the touching presence of Louis Braille. He gave the visually impaired access to silent reading and to written communication with the sighted. Here the talent of Zina Weygand becomes particularly evident. Her dense writing, limpid and without artifice, takes its strength from the quality of her restraint. In simple phrases, without ever falling into dithyrambs, she justifies the magnitude of the cult dedicated to the benefactor of the blind.

Zina Weygand's book does not only participate in the *grande histoire* of disabilities and handicaps. Beyond that, it contributes to the history of the senses, of their hierarchy, their equilibrium, their correspondences, and also to the history of vicariance, a fundamental concept throughout this work.

The emergence of spectatorial attitudes has been much studied: the elaboration of new ways of seeing, the intensification and subsequent relaxation of a policing of the gaze, the revival of procedures of ocular infractions between the end of the ancien régime and that of the nineteenth century. Zina Weygand's book participates decisively in this abounding sensorial anthropology.