

Book Reviews

phrases on the back cover, it seems to hark back to a stereotype of Catholicism which is, to all appearances, far less complex and contradictory than what Camporesi himself demonstrates here.

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WILLIAM R. PAULSON, *Enlightenment, Romanticism and the blind in France*, Princeton University Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. ix, 259, £21.00.

William Paulson has produced an odd sandwich of a book. It opens with an off-putting 'Introduction' which takes many words to inform us, yet again, how the approach to discourse analysis developed by Michel Foucault transcended the blindness of the traditional 'history of ideas', but which also, finally, distances this work from the Foucault of *Madness and civilization* on the grounds that blindness is, after all, something objectively real. This may seem to many readers to make heavy weather of a fairly straightforward matter, particularly as Paulson writes in a prose style laced with the worst Foucaultian affectations. And then the book closes with some rather free-associating chapters, loosely draped around blind characters in French Romantic novels, which inter alia explore, using Freudian literacy criticism, Balzac's and Hugo's theories of infantile sexuality, and so forth. None of this is very auspicious.

The "meat" of Paulson's monograph is, however, first rate. It consists of a succession of lucid, powerful, and original analyses (in a mode surprisingly close to the much maligned old-style "history of ideas") of blindness as it figured in Enlightenment natural philosophy, ethics, accounts of human nature, and practical philanthropy. As Paulson rightly stresses, the *philosophes* were less interested in the blind *per se* than in blindness as the occasion for thought experiments concerning epistemology and ontology. Starting from Locke's discussion of the "Molyneux problem" (can we truly conceptualize that for which we have words but no direct sense of experience?), Paulson shows how Locke's conundrum was developed in different directions by Condillac and Diderot. For Condillac, the reality was rescued by positing "touch" as the primary agency of sense, of which sight was a kind of sophisticated modification. For Diderot, the thought experiment of sensory deprivation (a blind man, a deaf man, and so forth) led to the radically relativistic perception that there was no terra firma world out there, but that our visions of reality were all prejudices grounded upon particular configurations of subjective sensations. Thus for Diderot the blind man would still be a "seer", though not quite in the literally "socialized" sense current from Homer and the Bible to Milton.

Paulson is also highly perceptive upon the moral uses made of blindness in Enlightenment fables and novels. Blindness is a metaphor for superstition and folly; yet he who relieves blindness—the expert oculist—is no less often portrayed as a huckster (especially one exploiting erotic opportunities) or a charlatan than as a true leader of the *Aufklärung*. Sight and insight do not always coincide. In a similar way, Paulson plausibly suggests that the new Enlightenment optimism about educating the blind was at best a mixed blessing. For it led to the blind being set apart in segregated institutions, and the stigmatizing label of the "blind personality" being struck upon them. Here the parallel with Foucault's account of madness seems well grounded, and a useful parallel is suggested for Harlan Lane's recent account of the history of deaf-mutes.

The history of blindness has been curiously neglected. This volume makes an excellent beginning, while showing how much remains to be done. The medical historian will note how sketchy and sometimes inaccurate is Paulson's account of ophthalmology and eye-surgery; there is much scope for integrating philosophical analysis and medical history here.

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MARTHA H. VERBRUGGE, *Able-bodied womanhood: personal health and social change in nineteenth-century Boston*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. viii, 297, illus., £25.00/\$29.95.