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Thérèse-Adèle Husson, *Reflections. The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary France*. Translated and with commentary by Catherine J. Kudlick and Zina Weygand. New York and London: New York University Press, 2001. xv + 155 pp. Foreword by Bonnie G. Smith. Notes. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8147-4746-9.

Review by Lynn Sharp, Whitman College.

*Reflections* offers an intriguing exploration of one woman's experience with and opinions on blindness. Well-titled, this volume comprises a series of thoughtful considerations. The foreword, by Bonnie Smith, considers the connections between histories of the disabled and of women. Catherine Kudlick and Zina Weygand introduce not only Husson and her writings but blindness as a topic of history. Most importantly, Thérèse-Adèle Husson's "Reflections on the Physical and Moral Condition of the Blind" gives readers an insight into the mind and world of a young blind woman in the 1820s. A shorter piece, "Notes on the Author's Youth," gives a brief autobiographical portrait of Husson. Husson's texts are followed by further "Reflections" of Kudlick and Weygand, presenting the facts and some speculation about Husson's life as a blind writer and her attempts to make a living, first on her own, then with her blind musician husband, in a less than sympathetic Paris. This text is the second in the History of Disability series, which seeks to move disability studies into the main stream of history

This text is a good candidate to do just that. Kudlick and Weygand clearly hope to draw more than just professional historians into Husson's world. The introductions and the editors' contributions provide detail and context suitable to the general reader, or student, rather than to historians of nineteenth-century France. The text could easily be used in a course on European or French culture and society, on gender, even a Western Civilization class. Yet it brings knowledge to the field of French social and cultural history as well, from the workings of the Quinze-Vingts royal hospital for the blind to the ways that society structured the blind to remain dependent, not on each other or themselves, but on society itself. More importantly, it challenges readers to consider how "normal" society constructs itself via whom it excludes and how it defines those who fall within the "norm." This insight into the structuring power of "normal," while hardly new, nonetheless brings a powerful reminder that not only behaviors but the very abilities of the body fall into this category and must be analyzed.

Thérèse-Adèle Husson opens a window into the world of the blind. She states in her dedication that "Reflections on the Physical and Moral Condition of the Blind" is aimed particularly at "women in a state of blindness" (p. 16). Yet she speaks to sighted readers as well, explaining to them the importance of touch and hearing and claiming that the blind are better judges of both things and character because they are not fooled by their eyes. Husson discusses an eclectic series of topics but the most significant and extensive is her "education plan," which offers advice on the moral shaping of the blind, most especially blind women. Husson insists that young blind children should be taught virtue and resignation, as well as to show that they are not unhappy, so that they may "inspire cheerfulness and pleasantness," and so others will take a positive interest in them (p. 45). Here Husson shows how dependence on others, the need for aid and sympathy, limited the freedoms of the blind. She counsels blind women, if they have some money, to "live and die keeping hold of their precious freedom," rather than marry, for a blind man could not make a good husband and a sighted man who wanted to marry a

blind woman would likely do so for the wrong reasons (p. 55). Her "Reflections" conclude with a moralizing list of how to behave in the world. As Kudlick and Weygand point out, this list was structured as much by Husson's hope to please a potential benefactor, the Quinze-Vingts Hospital, as by her own beliefs.

Husson's "Notes on the Author's Youth" turn the reader from a discussion of the ideal to reality as Husson experienced it. She tells readers of her pleasant but neglected childhood, her belated education under the patronage of several interested local nobles, and her courageous move to Paris to spare her family from the burden of keeping her and to seek her fortune as a writer. She tantalizes her readers with references to "sufferings of every kind" and "the horrors of misery" that she experienced on arriving (p. 72). Yet even once she finds a way to survive, she does not easily find approval: Husson's text hints at what was expected of the blind and how far she transgressed those expectations. She tells us she married a blind man, "to the astonishment of those who took an interest in me" (p. 73).

Weygand and Kudlick delve into these tantalizing hints in their search for the real Thérèse-Adèle Husson in their "Reflections on a Manuscript, a Life, and a World." Once Husson married, she and her husband continually sought parish aid and were listed as indigent and needy. He played at the Café des Aveugles; she wrote novels. It was not enough to keep a house together, particularly once children came along. Despite their desperate straits, and Husson's pleas to the Quinze-Vingts, the couple was not chosen to reside at the Institution, a rejection that Weygand and Kudlick consider likely due to their marriage. The editors offer insight into the historical process of discovery as well, explaining to readers how they came to know what little they could uncover about Thérèse-Adèle and offering extensive speculation on the details of her life that do not come to light from the meager facts available. In many ways this speculation is the heart of the book, as the editors try to move from one life to a vision of the blind in general and their social identity in 1820s France. Readers will either be fascinated by or suspicious at this much open speculation in an historical work. Weygand and Kudlick open their interpretive process to the reader's gaze. In what seems to this reviewer a brave and honest approach, they admit that they had to guess, suppose, and imagine again and again as they attempted to rebuild what might have been Husson's world. The insistence that the blind should not marry each other, the meager possibilities of aid for anyone, much less an ambitious young woman who (by marriage and possibly in other areas) transgressed the rules set up by "normal" society for the blind, the insistence by directors of the Quinze-Vingts that residents wear uniforms so they could be controlled and identified, all clarify the difficulties facing a young blind woman in post-Revolutionary France.

Kudlick and Weygand, with their careful introduction and "Reflections on a Manuscript, a Life, and a World," make clear connections between Husson's own life and the historical context of Restoration France. They explore questions of class, gender, identity, and even identity politics of the blind and how these cultural factors might have shaped this young woman's life. Via consideration of Husson's writings and the political and especially religious norms of the day, Weygand and Kudlick ground Husson's ability to shape her own independent self-identity in both a rise of self-expressive writing and in the use of moral formulae of the day to which she paradoxically did not subscribe. Of key importance to Husson's education and thus ultimate freedom was the network of women dedicated to a life of study, charity, and religiosity, that of the teaching nuns first in Nancy and, probably, later in Paris.

This text is one of a very few to offer through primary sources the historical experience of disability, a subject still too rarely discussed. In her foreword, Bonnie Smith sums up Disability Studies, and its importance in "challenging ways to understand human difference and 'normalcy's' relationship to it" (p. xii). This relatively new field<sup>[1]</sup> insists that the subject of disability is far from being a marginal one. Instead, societies are structured by their very insistence on "normal," on defining it and excluding certain bodies from it. Henri-Jacques Stiker's impressionistic *A History of Disability*, first published in French in 1982, explored this phenomenon from biblical to present times. He lamented, upon the book's republication in 1997, its failure to create the ongoing discussions of disability and normalcy in the field

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of history that he had hoped it would.[2] Although Weygand and Kudlick do not delve into discussions of disability theory, their text is nonetheless an important contribution to the discussion. Their voices, and that of Thérèse-Adèle Husson, will make readers more aware of how the interrelationships between the body and society structure not only the "disabled" but the "normal" body as well.

## NOTES

[1] Born in 1982, the Society for Disability Studies became independent from the Western Social Sciences Association in 1986.

[2] Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, tr. William Sayers. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. For Stiker's thoughts on his work and its place, see xx-xxi. Stiker's work was published in another series on Disability Studies, "Corporealities: Discourses of Disability" from University of Michigan Press. That these innovative series exist suggest that the subject is indeed moving into the mainstream.

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