EDUCATION OF THE BLIND: HISTORICAL SKETCH OF ITS ORIGIN, RISE AND PROGRESS

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Education of the Blind: Historical Sketch of Its Origin, Rise and Progress by M. Anagnostopoulos

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It has been my purpose to give in the following pages a brief and succinct historical outline of the origin, rise and progress of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, the first establishment of the kind founded on this continent, and now entering upon the last year of its first semi-centennial.

But, in order to take a comprehensive view of the work of the education of the blind, it will be necessary to glance at the springs of its original inception in France, to go back to the early stages of its development, and to trace the course of the marvellous stream of beneficence, which has transformed a desolate wilderness into a fair and blooming garden.

The present sketch will therefore treat concisely of the following topics: —

First, of the general condition of the blind in the past, and the neglect formerly endured by them.

Second, of the early attempts at their education made in different countries.

Third, of the organization of the Paris school by Valentin Haüy.

Fourth, of the establishment of similar institutions in Great Britain and on the continent of Europe.

Fifth, of the foundation and development of the New England institution.

Sixth, of the education and training of Laura Bridgman; and,

Seventh, of the establishment of schools for the blind throughout the United States of America.

A brief comparison of the distinctive features of the systems of instruction and training for the blind in this country and in Europe will bring this sketch to a close.

I. — Condition of the Blind in the Past.

History has preserved sundry particulars regarding blind persons who have of themselves acquired great knowledge in various branches of learning, and won distinction in science, literature and art; but these were phenomenal cases, — mere shooting stars on the horizon of deep darkness, ignorance and neglect. The great mass of this afflicted class were everywhere mere objects of charity, which, however wisely it may be administered, wounds the spirit while it soothes the flesh. From Bartimeus to Lesueur — the first pupil of Haüy — the blind were left to procure a precarious subsistence by begging at the entrance of the temples, in the churchyards, or by the wayside. Their infirmity was considered a sufficient cause to prevent them from participating in the activities of life, and from enjoying the blessings of instruction or the benefits of industry. Discouraged by the apparent incapacity of the blind, men shrank from the task of endeavoring to combat the ills which their affliction had entailed upon them, and to rescue them from the evils of idleness and the horrors of intellectual darkness. They were even allowed,

at times, to become the objects of harsh and inhuman pastimes in the hands of ignorant and vicious people. The following instance may give some idea of the condition and treatment of the blind during the fifteenth century: —

In the month of August, 1425, under the reign of Charles VII., four blind men, cased in full armor and provided with clubs, were placed in a fenced square of the Hôtel d'Armagnac with a large hog, which was to be the prize of whoever should kill it. The struggle having begun, the poor sightless creatures, in endeavoring to hit the animal, struck each other with such violence that, but for their armor, they would certainly have killed each other. With this cruel sport the savage and unfeeling spectators were much diverted.

It is curious that a pagan and uncivilized nation should have set a good example to enlightened christians in this respect. It is stated, in Charlevoix's history, that in Japan the blind were long ago made to fill a comparatively useful sphere. The government kept a large number of them in an establishment, and their business was to learn the history of the empire through all the remote ages, to arrange it systematically by chapter and verse in their memories, and to transmit it from generation to generation, thus forming a sort of perennial walking and talking library of useful historical knowledge.

II. — Early Attempts at the Education of the Blind.

During the sixteenth century, thoughtful and benevolent men sought to devise processes for the instruction of the blind, but with no great success. Several un-

fruitful attempts were also made in the early part of the seventeenth century to prepare some sort of books for them, both in engraved and raised letters. Among others, Jérôme Cardan had conceived that it would be possible to teach the blind to read and write by means of feeling, and cited, in support of this view, several facts reported by Erasmus.

The first book which called attention to the condition and miseries of the blind was published in Italy, in 1646. It was written by one of the learned sons of that favored country, in the form of a letter addressed from S. D. C. to Vincent Armanni, and was printed in Italian and French under the title *Il cieco afflitto e consolato*; or, *L'aveugle affligé et consolé.*

In 1670, padre Lana Terzi, a Jesuit of Brescia, who had previously devoted a few pages to the education of the deaf, published a treatise on the instruction of the blind.

Jacques Bernouilli, being at Geneva in 1676, taught Mademoiselle Elizabeth Waldkirch, who had lost her sight two months after birth, to read; but he did not make known the means which he employed.

Dr. Burnet, bishop of Salisbury, gives, in his "Journey in Switzerland," a detailed account of Mademoiselle Walkier, of Schaffhousen, whose eyes had been burned when she was a year old. She spoke five languages, and was a theologian, a philosopher, and a good musician. This young person had learned to write by means of hollow characters cut in wood, which she at first passed over with a pointed iron. She had afterwards made use of a pencil, and finally, when Bishop Burnet was at Schaffhousen, in October, 1685, he saw her write very rapidly and very correctly.

Two years later appeared Locke's famous "Essay on the Human Understanding," in which was discussed the problem proposed to him by Molyneux, — a scholarly writer and member of the Irish parliament, — whether a person blind from his birth would, upon being suddenly restored to sight, be able to distinguish, by his eyes alone, a globe from a cube, the difference between which he had previously recognized by feeling? The question was answered in the negative, both by the author of the essay and by his "learned and worthy friend."

In 1703, Leibnitz took up the subject, and his conclusions were at variance with those of Locke and Molyneux.

A few years later, that sightless mathematical wonder, Nicholas Saunderson, appeared on the literary horizon of England, and made such advances in the higher departments of science, that he was appointed, "though not matriculated at the university," on the recommendation of Sir Isaac Newton, to fill the chair which a short time previous had been occupied by himself at Cambridge. Expounding from the depths of the eternal night in which he lived the most abstruse points of the Newtonian philosophy, and especially the laws of optics, or the theory of solar refraction, and communicating his ideas with unequalled perspicuity and precision, he filled his audience with surprise, and became the object of general admiration.

In 1729, while Saunderson was still at the zenith of his fame at Cambridge (having just been created doctor of laws by a mandate of George II.), Locke's answer to Molyneux's problem was receiving confirma-

tion from the experience of a boy blind from birth, whom Cheselden, the celebrated anatomist, had successfully couched for cataracts and restored to perfect sight at the age of thirteen. This youth was not able at first to recognize by vision the objects which were most familiar to his touch. It was long before he could discriminate by his eye between his old companions, the family cat and dog, dissimilar as such animals appear to us in color and conformation. Being ashamed to ask the oft-repeated question, he was observed one day to pass his hand carefully over the cat, and then, looking at her steadfastly, to exclaim, "So, puss, I shall know you another time." This case, the most remarkable of the kind, faithfully detailed by the surgeon himself in No. 402 of the "Philosophical Transactions," led to similar experiments afterwards, the conclusions of which did not differ essentially from those of Locke.

The spirit of free inquiry, which had been unchained in the preceding century, having passed by a natural transition from expatiation in the regions of taste and abstract philosophy into those of social science and human life, became bold and restless, longing for greater triumphs than those achieved heretofore. The French *savans*, who were endeavoring to dissipate the clouds of authority and the foggy mists of error, were on the alert for events touching upon important psychological questions, and calculated to help the cause of humanity.

In 1746, Condillac took up Locke's problem and the experiments of Cheselden, and discussed with much clearness and dialectic skill the mental processes of the blind.

Simultaneously with his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* was first published a volume of the poems of Dr. Blacklock, of Scotland, who, although deprived of sight in early infancy, went through the usual course of studies at the university of Edinburgh, and distinguished himself by his proficiency in classical literature, in *belles-lettres*, in metaphysics, and in all other branches of knowledge. The productions of his muse are marked by elegance of diction, ardor of sentiment, and accurate descriptions of visible objects. His writings will be searched in vain, however, for poetry of a very high order. He says of himself, what doubtless is true of all persons similarly situated, that he always associated some moral quality with visible objects.

The following year appeared in Dublin a biography of Saunderson from the pen of his disciple and successor in the professorship at Cambridge, William Inchlif or Hinchliffe. This work contained a minute description, with illustrative drawings, of the appliances used by the sightless mathematician, and was most eagerly read in France.

The abbé Deschamps, treating of the education of the deaf-mutes, also sketched the outlines of the art of teaching the blind to read and write.

Meanwhile Lenôtre, the famous blind man of Puiseaux, appeared on the stage, and, by the originality which stamped everything that he did, attracted universal attention. He was the son of a professor of philosophy in the university of Paris, and had attended with advantage courses of chemistry and botany at the *Jardin du Roi*. After having dissipated a part of his