

Blue Reread

William H. Gass *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*
1976, reissued 2007 David R. Godine (Jaffrey: New Hampshire)

Of the title's two parts, both mislead. *A Philosophical Inquiry*, because the author never chose it and doesn't believe it. *On Being Blue*, not because there are no blues, but because the name is so coyly unassuming for a hymn written to, and with, 'sentences which follow their own turnings inward out of sight like the whorls of a shell, and which we follow warily, as Alice after that rabbit, nervous and white,' for 'such are the sentences we should like to love—the ones which love us and themselves as well'.

On the former charge, one can't entirely blame the publisher. William Gass had been building up a reputation for fiction since the Fifties, mostly short stories; but this meditation was too plainly plotless to be a novella, and too knowing to be altogether a reverie. When not moonlighting as a storyteller, Gass sunlights as a scholar whose fascination with metaphor stretches back to his doctoral dissertation: in 1976 he was with the Department of Philosophy at Washington University. So the deed was done: a gently sprawling manifesto for sensuous (and sensual) language became *A Philosophical Inquiry*, and three decades later, as a postgraduate in philosophy on another continent, I'd wonder how he ever got away with it.

Interviewed by Stephen Schenkenberg in 2009, Gass recalled notifying his colleagues about a book with 'Philosophical' and 'William Gass' on the cover, and some smutty words inside. 'But there were some who said, "Yeah, it's about time that philosophy became... not this cold thing... Goey is what we want!" So it's had a kind of underground life. And it's sold more copies than any book of mine.' Gass writes for dwellers in 'the country of the blue', a place named originally by Henry James and colonised, it seems, by all who love language and love it like a lover: those attuned to 'the rumple of sentences like slept-in pajamas', who 'float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come'.

'Blue pencils, blue noses, blue movies, laws, blue legs and stockings, the language of birds, bees and flowers as sung by longshoremen...' Threaded through this slender book is the theme of the blue, colouring both objects in the world and our moods when in a world of 'dumps, mopes, Mondays'. Vernacular English and experience are

full of blues, and Gass chronicles many of them, covering an emotional spectrum from depression to erotic frisson. 'Among the ancient elements, blue occurs everywhere: in ice and water, in the flame as purely as in the flower, overhead and inside caves, covering fruit and oozing out of clay.' Since blue occurs everywhere, there is no strict object of this 'inquiry'. It is a guidebook to a world tinted blue: a world seen with a sensuous gaze and seductively described.

This, of course, demands contrast with things which are differently shaded. Many passages dwell upon the 'blue' that means 'sexual', and show a dismay at merely descriptive pornography which culminates in the observation that 'a stroke by stroke story of a copulation is exactly as absurd as a chew by chew account of the consumption of a chicken's wing'. There is a section on 'blue' language, meaning obscene language, that ends in complaint about sex which is not even 'frankly employed to produce erection', but 'simply sworn'. Gass is hardly unique, among philosophers or otherwise, in seeking a distinction between the inarticulately sexual and the artfully erotic. Yet others stop there. Gass wants us to see the blue in everything.

On Being Blue was not Gass's only publication in 1976. 'The words on checks and bills of lading, in guides and invoices, the words which magnify themselves on billboards, broadsides, walls and hoardings, which nuzzle together in *billets-doux* and heart-to-hearts...' These words were listed for the attention of academics, in a paper which employs the making of snowmen, and the metamorphosis through which a carrot becomes a nose, as an extended metaphor for the strange and magical things which happen to words when *style* becomes the point and language becomes poetic. 'The responsibility of any science, any pure pursuit, is ultimately to itself, and on this point physics, philosophy, and poetry unite with Satan in their determination not to serve. Any end is higher than utility, when ends are up.' It's easy to see how Gass's publisher might have thought *On Being Blue* contained more than trace elements of his philosophy.

Scanning recent issues of the same scholarly journal will uncover no style akin to Gass's exhilarating prose. Academic philosophy in the English language has grown ever fonder of detailed technical exactness over sweeping grace and elegance—to the point at which, a few years ago, the President of the Florida Philosophical Association could make an address called 'Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?' Perhaps he's a secret sympathiser with the gooey underground.

Robert F. J. Seddon
Derby, 2013

RFJSeddon.net