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BENJAMIN PAUL BLOOD

Literature

THE
POETICAL
ALPHABET

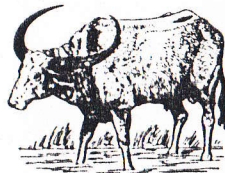
Introduction by
FRANKLIN ROSEMONT

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INTRODUCTION.

Among the most important American precursors of surrealism is the poet, philosopher and pamphleteer Benjamin Paul Blood (1832-1919), indefatigable theorist of the Anesthetic Revelation. By this term he signified nothing less than an *initiation* into the secret of the "genius of Being" experienced in the moment of "coming to" from trances induced by the inhalation of nitrous oxide or ether. On the basis of this experience Blood developed a highly original critique of philosophy. "Naked life," he concluded, "is realized outside of sanity altogether." Along the way he elaborated a hypothetical "pluriverse" as an alternative to the conventional and parochial universe.

Author of several books and pamphlets of adventurous philosophical inquiry, poems of remarkable visionary intensity, and countless "letters to the editor" of local newspapers on an astonishing range of subjects (from Napoleon to spiritualist seances; from current poetry to the single tax theory), Blood, although rarely venturing far from his birthplace — Amsterdam, New York — enjoyed the esteem of many leading thinkers: poets as diverse as William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Alfred Tennyson; the great abolitionist Wendell Phillips; the novelist Harold Frederic; philosophers William Torrey Harris (leader of the St. Louis Hegelians), and James Hutchison Stirling (whose *Secret of Hegel*, 1865, was the first important study of that philosopher written in English); and the psychologist William James.

James was especially prolific in his appreciation. Among his earliest essays was a review, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, of Blood's 1874 manifesto, *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*. His last published essay, "A Pluralistic Mystic," was devoted to Blood, celebrating his "left-wing" voice of defiance." In this essay James avowed that Blood's *Anesthetic Revelation* had "fascinated [him] so 'weirdly' " that he was "conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of [his] thinking ever since." He had cited Blood in other important essays, and quoted him extensively in his detailed discussions of the "anesthetic revelation" in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Like others, James admired Blood not only for the uniqueness and boldness of his thought, but for his magisterial poetic style. "Who of us all," James asked, "handles his English vocabulary better than Mr Blood?" Elsewhere he said that Blood had "the greatest gift of superior gab since Shakespeare."

In spite of such praise, however, Blood has been the victim of an almost complete critical interdiction. Ignored by historians of philosophy and poetry, his work — like that of so many of America's more wayward thinkers — has survived largely thanks to small "underground" circles of enthusiasts.

In the 1940s many European surrealists were forced by the war to seek asylum in the U.S. Regrouping in New York, where they were joined by several American artists and writers, they consciously sought to discover America's contributions to the "surrealist evidence." Blood was one of the major figures brought to light by their efforts. Excerpts from *The Anesthetic Revelation* were reprinted in the surrealists' New York journal, *VVV*. And the *First Papers of Surrealism*, catalog of the 1942 International Surrealist Exhibition in New York, included an essay by Robert Aller-

ton Parker titled "Explorers of the Pluriverse," in which Blood was discussed along with Poe, Melville, Albert Ryder, Charles Fort, Clark Ashton Smith and others.

Thirty-six years later the surrealists continue to avail themselves of Blood's works as a valuable reference point in connection with their own researches.

* * *

Blood's curious incursion into the outermost frontiers of linguistics, reprinted here, holds an unusual place among his writings. Although it antedates the anesthetic experiments which, around 1860, provided the decisive turning point in his thinking, he continued nonetheless to revise and reprint it throughout his life. It has the distinction, in fact, of being the most continuously available of his works. Originally published in 1854 as the appendix to his full-length poem *The Bride of the Iconoclast*, it bore the title "Suggestions Toward the Mechanical Art of Verse." It was reprinted — each time substantially revised — in *Putnam's Magazine* (December 1868), titled "The Alphabet of Poetry"; as part of Blood's "Philosophical Reveries" in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (January 1886), titled "The Human Alphabet"; and finally, in what we might call the definitive (albeit the shortest) version, appended to his posthumously published book *Pluriverse* (1920), titled "The Poetical Alphabet." It is this last version that we are presenting.

"The Poetical Alphabet" — the idea of which dawned on Blood suddenly in his late adolescence — is a brave, enticing, ingenious effort to locate the "bricks," so to speak, of which the castle of *phonetic cabala* is constructed. That he was entirely aware of its humor is clear from his characterization of the "absurd genius of u-flat" (which gives us, incidentally, a near-perfect portrait of Elmer Fudd). But the integral humor of this unique contribution to poetic thought, wildly divergent from all established conceptions of "literary composition," should not prevent us from appreciating its merit as a serious exploration of the most hidden resources of language. Blood's *objective* humor only serves to sharpen his critical faculties, allowing his overall achievement to appear in a rare and disquieting light.

Suggested in part by hints from Swedenborg, and from Robert Burns' sonnet "The Vowels," Blood's "Poetical Alphabet" also deserves comparison with Rimbaud's "Voyelles," and with the work of the great masters of phonetic cabala: Jean-Pierre Brisset, Raymond Roussel, Marcel Duchamp — and in English, Jonathan Swift, Edgar Allen Poe, Lewis Carroll, Samuel Greenberg, T-Bone Slim.

Interesting too would be a comparative study of Blood's views with the views of others who have theorized specifically on the poetic qualities of the alphabet, as such. Stephane Mallarmé, for example, in his essay on "English Words," attempted a characterization of each letter corresponding in many ways to Blood's; compare their approaches to the letter *d* which, according to Mallarmé, "expresses a continuous, non-explosive deep activity like digging, diving or dropping, as well as stagnation, emotional heaviness and darkness." René Ghil, with his elaborate theory of "verbal instrumentation," pursued such speculation with a rigor he considered scientific. More recently, and almost totally unknown in the U.S., Isidore Isou, founder of "lettrism," has proposed his own characterization of vowels and consonants.

Blood's effort appears all the more admirable in that he was able to steer clear of Mallarmé's deep-freeze of static symbols, Ghil's ponderous scientism, as well as the empty closet of mere "lettrism." Armed with a veritably *pataphysical* sensibility, Blood was aware that poetry preceded science — that the true goal was not a "scientific poetry" as such, but to make science serve poetic ends. Here as elsewhere his work is a grand confirmation of André Breton's insight that "language has been given to man so that he might make surrealist use of it."

Franklin ROSEMONT
May 1978

THE POETICAL ALPHABET

A JURY of common-sense men might well be excused for a verdict, over their book oaths, that there is no important sense in what follows here; but the same jury, asked if they had ever heard

The horns of elfland faintly blowing,

would probably make some haste in the protestation that they never had. Common-sense men as such are not philosophers, and they are not concerned with the fact that logical truth is held to the arbitrament of language, the production and determination of which are therefore of prime importance in philosophical explanation.

It was on a June morning in 1854 that I entered the publishing house of James Munroe and Company of Boston (and Cambridge) with a manuscript which soon evoked a discussion as to why the word *icicle* was not a fit name for a tub. That it is not was promptly agreed, but its unfitness grew into so many varieties of discrepancy which no single principle would account for that the seeming levity of the question sank under considerations of philological interest and importance.

Something in the natural sound of the spoken words was the first relevant suggestion; when you set down a tub it responds to that name. The shapes of the two things are also responsive: the tub is short and stubby, while the icicle is spindling and slim.

These points were very well taken — *i. e.*, the differences of sound and form; but numberless other characteristics appeared. The icicle is delicate, it is clear, brilliant, fragile, with at least a suspicion of moisture, while the tub is merely fibrous and dry. All this goes without saying, in a certain æsthetic appreciation, which does not yet generalize the genius which vulgarizes the tub. To illustrate this, consider the use of the words *entrails*, *reins*, *bowels* — all good in scientific and social discourse, but for some unmentionable reason classic culture draws the line at *guts*!

“Well, what is the trouble with guts?”

I expounded here that they were vulgarized by the absurd genius of *u* flat. And did a letter have a genius? and would I refer to my manuscript and oblige with the genius of *u* flat? I responded as follows, to wit:

“*U*, guttural, or flat, is a humorous savage, best described in his own words: a huge, lubberly, blundering dunderhead, a blubbering numskull and a dunce, ugly, sullen, dull, clumsy, rugged, gullible, glum, dumpish, lugubrious — a stumbler, mumbler, bungler, grumbler, jumbler — a grunter, thumper, tumbler, stunner — a drudge, a trudge; he lugs, tugs, sucks, juggles, and is up to all manner of bulls — a musty, fussy, crusty, disgusting brute,

whose head is his mug, his nose is a snub, or a pug, his ears are lugs, his breasts dugs, his bowels guts, his victuals grub, his garments duds, his hat a plug, his child a cub, his dearest diminutive is chub or bub or runt; at his best he is bluff, gruff, blunt; ‘his doublet is of sturdy buff and though not sword, is ‘cudgel proof’; budge he will not, but will drub you with a club, or a slug, nub, stub, butt, or rub you with mud — for he is ever in a-muss or a fuss — and should you call him a grudging curmudgeon he gulps up “ugh, fudge, stuff, rubbish, humbug” in high dudgeon; he is a rough, a blood-tub, a bummer, and a “tough cuss” all around; he has some humor, more crudity, but no delicacy; of all nationalities you would take him for a Dutchman.”

It is rather remarkable, in so far as the muscular effort of utterance might be relevant, that the continuous or long *u* serves for the very opposite effect, as we see it in the *true*, the *pure*, the *sure*, the *beautiful*, the *gude*. “True blue” is a proverb of the highest worth.

As for the Dutchman above, it may be recalled that formerly we had a religious association called the Dutch Reformed Church. For a long and struggling time its sturdy independence clung stoutly to the name Dutch, but with assured prosperity came a more amenable style, and the Dutch prefix was omitted from what is now called the Reformed Church.

Yet it was not wholly the *u* flat in Dutch that disqualified it for devotional suggestion, but the *tch* was exceptionable: *itch*, *bitch*, *pitch*, all defile; but when the bard of natural history congratulates himself that

The gray bitch holds to the death,

we realize a manly poetry which the tea-table would resent.

All the reading of my serious years has been attended by this side consideration: that each of the sounds represented by the several letters of the alphabet is specially effective in conveying a certain significance; and wherever language is popular and happy it is so in accordance with these early intuitions. That I was not singular in this sensitiveness I was assured by hints dropped by Swedenborg and the poet Burns; but I had not as yet chanced upon the "Kratylus" of Plato when I anonymously issued a characterization of the meanings of all the alphabetic sounds. The subject of that essay came up to me again, some years afterward, on the occasion of Mr. Stephen Pearl Andrews's issuing his theory in the *Continental Magazine*. Seeing his article therein, I sent him my essay, and received in return his cordial astonishment at the fact that I, an unread tyro, had come by nature or instinct upon mainly the same results which he claimed to have deduced as scientific necessities. He said his next article in the *Continental* should include the gist of my essay; but, sadly enough, the magazine had come to its final end. In 1868 I made some extracts from my essay for *Putnam's Magazine*, and that periodical also soon after went under in the current of literature. In all this time I knew nothing of the "Kratylus," and I do not know even now whether Mr. Andrews was better informed than myself. These

statements are to be considered — and, fortunately, it is the custom of gentlemen to believe one another — otherwise what follows might seem at best only a lesson improved; but when it truly appears that as a youth of inconsiderable reading I in English unknowingly concurred with Plato in Greek, in the interpretation of the sounds of a half dozen of the letters, the fact has philological value as an unprejudiced approval of Plato's observation. For my own part I can cheerfully forego the originality for the comfort of the coincidence. There is good assurance that Plato did not borrow from my list, in the fact that in any case he left several of the more significant letters behind him; and even those meanings which he did express seem to have only a brawny immediacy which would be useless in the far and fine suggestions of modern poetical art.

The use of words of mere onomatopoeia — buzz, hiss, wheeze, sneeze, splash, slush, hum, roar, jingle — requires little or no skill; but the meagre and savage art which produced these imitations was precursory and prophetic of a later and more delicate and more complex suggestiveness, reaching beyond mere sounds to the faintest modes and qualities of fibre, surface, lustre, distance, motion, humor, solemnity, contempt — characters won out of all the phenomena of life, and answering to the fullest knowledge, or intuition, or inspiration, of all the mental phenomena of the world at the moment of its use — to the true estimate of the comparative age and æsthetic value of thought and things — in brief, to the universality of experience. The essence we would precipitate rises as an aroma out of the process of the growth and

decay of all things, and it is effected by considerations the faintest and most remote, in the attenuations of which a great poet may transcend the apprehension of his less devoted readers.

I give here my alphabet as at first printed, with a few merely abstract sketches taken from my quite elaborate essay — little known and long forgotten. The reader shall judge whether or not it deserved its fate.

MAN'S NATURAL ALPHABET

- ā: vastness, space, plane.
- ǎ: flatness.
- b: brawn, bulk, initial force.
- c: soft, as s; hard, as k.
- ch, tch: a disgusting consistency.
- d: (initial) determination, violence.
- d: (final) solidity, end.
- e: convergence, intensity, concentration.
- h: } ethereality, fineness of fibre.
- t: }
- g: (hard) hardness.
- gl: hardness and polish.
- gr: hardness and roughness, grit, grain.
- ī: thinness, slimness, fineness.
- ī: inclining directions.
- k: fineness of light and sound.
- l: polish, chill, liquidity.
- m: monotony.
- n: negation, contempt.
- o: volume, solemnity, nobility.
- p: volume without fibre, pulp.
- q: queer, questionable.
- r: roughness, vibration.
- s: moisture.
- sh: wet confusion.
- u: crudity, absurdity.
- v, w, y: vehemence, general emphasis.
- z: haze, dry confusion.

Diphthongs:

- au: vaulting, curving upward.
- ou: roundness, downward.
- oi: coil — external
- ei: coil — internal.
- ia: downward and away — flourish.

As the compositor locates his types before him in his case for his own convenience rather than as following the conventional order of the alphabet, so we must treat firstly the five vowels, on which all the other letters expend their force.

ā. — “Far, far away, over the calm and mantling wave” — so begins the boy’s first romance — the poetry of the ocean, of vastness, space, plane. The word *ocean*, is used only for rolling and dashing effects; the *wave*, *the main*, *vast waters*, *watery waste*, or *plain*, are the poetical synonyms of ocean. *Lake*, *vale*, *straight*, *chase*, *race*, *trail*, *trace*, *away*, give distance and plane. Near at hand, long *a* gives effect to *slate*, *scale*, *flake*, *plate*, *cake*, etc. *Waver*, *shake*, *quake*, show horizontal vibration.

ǎ. — The flat *a* shows its effect in *mat*, *pack*, *strap*, *slap*, *platter*, *flap*, *pat*, *flat*, *clap*, etc.; *dash*, *splash*, *thrash*, give flat and lowdown effects. A stone much broken, yet retaining its bulk, is said to be *crushed*, but if its form is borne down it is *mashed*, *smashed*, etc. Burns, in his poem, “The Vowels,” calls *a* “a grave, broad, solemn wight”; this character belongs to *a* only as in *ah*, or *o* flat.

e. — Swedenborg said that the angels who love most use much the sound of *o*, while the more intellectual and penetrating use more the sound of *e*. Burns’s notion of *e* was that of intense grief, as in

"greeting" (that is, in Scotch, weeping). The general use of *e* is for concentration and convergence, or intensity, the bringing of thought to a focus. All the pet names and endearing diminutives end in *e* — the *wee* things — the *lee-tle*, *tee-ny* things. The child dwells on the *e* in *pe'-ep*, or *pe'-ek*, and in *me'-an*, *ke'-an*, *sne'-aking*, etc. Not so the baby when he gives you his rattle-box; he opens his mouth and his heart with the instinct of the dative case, and says "tah!" — outward and away. So when he gets the wrong thing in his mouth his mother cries "Ka! spit it out"; whence possibly, the Greek *kakos* — bad, as applied to things. The introspective Hamlet says, "making night hideous and *we* fools of nature," instead of *us*, the objective case. *Zeal*, *squeal*, *screech* — to *be*, to *see*, to *feel*, are strong by the use of *e*.

i — I, short, as in *pin*, has a *stiff*, *prim*, *thin*, *slim*, *spindling* effect, as of the "bristling pines"; or when "Swift Camilla" "skims along the main." It has a thinning, perpendicularly attenuating effect. A "light skiff" is well mentioned; and a "thin whiff."

O hark, O hear, how thin and clear!

Short *i* has a very lightening effect in sounds: as in *tinkle*, *clink*, *link* — thin metallic sounds of a perpendicular vibration. But flat, or horizontal vibration uses *ā*, as in *clank* — as of a sheet of zinc slapping the floor; how different from the *clang* of a bar of steel! *Tin* is a good word for that metal in the thin shape most commonly known; but in the native bulk and volume we call it *block*.

i — Long *i* gives inclination. "The clouds *con-sign* their treasures to the field." "In winter when

the dismal rain comes down in slanting *lines*." *I* long and *a* give a poetical curve, downward and away:

"Once in the flight of ages past."

"Many an hour I've whiled away."

"Swilled by the wild and wasteful ocean."

"Some happier island in the watery waste."

"O when shall it dawn on the night of the grave?"

"Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste
Where stood Jerusalem."

"O, wild enchanting horn."

o. — Plato seems to have done miserable injustice in characterizing for simple roundness the vowel *o* — the noblest Roman, or Greek either, of them all. Roundness is well enough — although roundness proper is represented by *ou* diphthong — but roundness is merely the key to *volume*, *solemnity*, *nobility*, and *wonder*. Read this most solemn sentence in all literature, and see at once the more serious meaning of *o*:

*For man goeth to his long home, and the mourners
go about the streets.*

Not all the trappings and the suits of woe can so pall the sunlight in the homes of men as does the fit reading of this sombre verse. Burns's idea of *o* was expressed in "the wailing minstrel of despairing woe." Swedenborg's insight was rather one of adoration or devotion. But these comparatively incidental expressions give way before the philological art of more modern writers. All things *noble*, *holy*, *adorable*, or *sombre*, *slow*, *sober*, *dolorous*,