

On Being Blue. A Philosophical Inquiry by William Gass. David R. Godine, 1976, 91 pp. \$8.95.

On Being Blue is a remarkable piece of rumination: it toes, wades, pulls its skirt up and immerses itself in the word 'blue.' Blue noses, blue laws, blue devils, blueblood; Gass begins by producing wonder, and we say: *I didn't know the word 'blue' could be used in so many different ways.* Bluebird, blue coats, blue collar, bluing. . . .

Gass' work is first, then, an homage to the word 'blue'—a celebration of it, in all its astonishing multiplicity. Much of the book consists of just this: in bathing in the word 'blue':

The common deer in its winter coat is said by hunters to be in the blue. To be in the blue is to be isolated and alone. To be sent to the blue room is to be sent to solitary, a chamber of confinement devoted to the third degree. It's to be beaten by police, or, if you are a metal, heated until the more refrangible rays predominate and the ore is stained like those razor blades the sky is sometimes said to be *as blue as*, for example, when you're suddenly adrift on a piece of cake or in conversation feel a wind from outer space chill your teeth like a cube of ice. Ah, but what is form but a bum wipe anyhow? Let us move our minds as we must, for form was once only the schoolyard of a life, the simple boundary of a being who, pulsating like an artery, drew a dark line like Matisse drew always around its own pale breath. Blue oak. Blue poplar. Blue palm. There are no blue bugs of note, although there are blue carpenter bees, blue disk longhorn beetles, blue-winged wasteland grasshoppers, one kind of butterfly, bottle-fly, the bird, and not a single wasp or spider. The muff, the fur, the forest, and the grot.

That is a single, entire paragraph from *On Being Blue*; it is representative. But beneath this seemingly random pastiche of uses of 'blue,' Gass has a somewhat subtle point to make. He begins—though the argument is difficult to discover beneath the opulence of his surface language—by noting that "blue words"—and now he means not only those actually containing the term 'blue,' but those which are blue in character as well, are used in a variety of ways. One of these ways is as dirty words. But the blue-words for sex have a loveliness, a decency, a thoroughgoing sensuality that is not to be

found in our ordinary dirty words. With this, Gass launches a perceptive commentary on the "critical impoverishment" of our vocabulary of obscenities:

There are a number of difficulties with dirty words, the first of which is that there aren't nearly enough of them; the second is that the people who use them are normally numbskulls and prudes; the third is that in general they're not at all sexy. . . .

We lack words for all the small essential parts of sex: nibbling diagonally, mouthing earlobes, the way a moist tongue leaves a track across a soft expanse of flesh. We have only rude, coarse, short, ugly words, the language of Joyce, Hemingway, Mailer, Jong: "Prick, cock, screw, balls, bust, bang, suck, lick. . . the list is endless, and endlessly uninteresting."

Now it might seem that Gass is forgetting how hard it was to get these words *into* the language, or at least how hard it was to make a place for them in genuine literature. As Edmund Wilson points out in his 1929 essay on *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, we English-speakers, unlike the French, have had no vocabulary for talking about sex since the 18th century; by pioneering the description of sex, D.H. Lawrence made an inestimable contribution to our literature. Does Gass wish to undermine or reject this contribution? No, what Gass is pointing out is that ultimate tragedy of all genuinely inspired movements: the legacy of the freedom-seeking pioneers has calcified into a rigid, repressive code. The natural rhetoric Lawrence, followed by Joyce, made possible for us has hardened into a conventional, repetitive, unimaginative, hate-filled schedule of official dirty words, and with only this sparse and soulless street-vocabulary, we never quite succeed in talking about *real* sex at all. Our dirty words are not obscene, but dull. Consequently, Gass laments, "sexuality reaches literature as an *idee fixe*. . . an outright lie." This is no prudish tirade against obscenity in literature, but quite the opposite claim: the limp and disappointed discovery that our dirty words aren't really dirty at all.

To remedy this—though Gass' precise prescription is far from clear—what we need to do is open ourselves to the sensual, sexual vocabulary of *blue*. Beckett, for instance, is "a very blue man"; from *Molloy*, Gass quotes a "very blue passage," something about rotating a number of sucking stones among the pockets of one's trousers and one's greatcoat. This, Gass says, is "the push toward blue in fiction," and is the real penetration of privacy: it allows us to see under the skirt.

But what can it possibly mean to speak of “the blue in fiction”? Surely it has little to do with words or phrases in which the term ‘blue’ actually occurs. Detouring through some rather simplistic sketches of theories of vision from Plato and Aristotle to Berkeley and Thomas Reid, Gass proposes a theory which goes something like this: Perceived colors have correspondences with particular kinds of things or states of affairs, which is what gives rise to their traditional significances. For instance,

Because blue contracts, retreats, it is the color of transcendence, leading us away in pursuit of the infinite.

Color-comparisons are only “somewhat subjective”; we will probably all acknowledge with Kandinsky that a trumpet’s sound is red (or, more precisely, vermilion), while “no one is going to call the sounds of the triangle brown, or accuse the tympanist of playing pink.” Unfortunately, no serious reader in theories of vision or color will find satisfaction here; a serious theory of vision or color requires serious scientific and philosophic scrutiny, and if Gass provides any such thing, it is deeply obscured by his own ornate use of language. Nevertheless, his intuitive explorations strike us as right:

Some spices are true scarlets, I suppose, as pepper seems to be, and surely the richness of fine food often borders on brown.

We find that eggplant does not taste as purple as its skin, and that “no watermelon tastes red.” (We can of course begin to play the game too. Just what color does a watermelon taste? Everyone I’ve asked has said: ice blue.) But while this may seem to be just a curious bit of gameplaying in mixed sensory metaphors, I think it is the key to Gass’ whole investigation of *blue*: blue is no mere color-term, but a pervasive characteristic of our lives.

If color is one of the contents of the world as I have been encouraging someone—anyone—to claim, then nothing stands in the way of blue’s being smelled, or felt, eaten as well as heard.

Orange can be rung from a steeple sometimes, but what our literature needs is blue. It is the color of “the inside side” of sex, and that is why our sex-descriptive vocabulary should be extended to include the blue:

There is a swim of blue in the toothbrush glass. The loneliness of clothes draped over the backs of chairs is blue; undies, empty lobbies, rumpled spreads are blue, especially when chenille and if orange; not body warmth or body smell or the acidulous salts of the vagina—no, blue belongs to the past—to the minutes after masturbation, to thought, to detachment and removal, fading, to the inside side of sex. . . .

It is this that our crude rude ordinary sex-language does not allow us; it sees only the red and thumping outside side of sex. It is in this way that our language—the literary language of Hemingway, Mailer, Jong—is critically impoverished: it lacks blue.

Perhaps Gass' theory seems opaque; it is. There is no clear, explicit argument here, no supporting evidence, no counterargument, nothing that would pass as analytic rigor. And whatever is here is made obscure by Gass' overly elaborate language. But this book is something more than a mere erratic rumination; while Gass' honeyed language may be the book's greatest obstacle, his sensitivity to the language is perhaps also its greatest reward. Perhaps it succeeds in curing just the ailment it was aimed to mend; if I were to pay the highest compliment to it, I would call it *blue*.

—M. Pabst Battin

October Light by John Gardner. Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 434 pp. \$4.00.

John Gardner's latest novel, *October Light*, is constructed on a framework of American contradictions—contradictions in our history, our literature, our politics, our social attitudes, our economics, our aesthetics, our races, sexes, generations—in our native strengths and our ineradicable weaknesses, in our confusions over property and the pursuit of happiness, in our commitment both to the selfless ideals of democracy and love and to the gritty isolation of rugged individualism. I am tempted to identify the book as our most unexpected and curious self-study published during the United States Bicentennial year.