ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Pluriverse

An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism

Benjamin Paul Blood

Pluriverse

Pluriverse, the final work of the American poet and philosopher Benjamin Paul Blood, was published posthumously in 1920. After an experience of the anaesthetic nitrous oxide during a dental operation, Blood came to the conclusion that his mind had been opened, that he had undergone a mystical experience, and that he had come to a realisation of the true nature of reality.

This title is the fullest exposition of Blood's esoteric Christian philosophy-cum-theology, which, though deemed wildly eccentric by commentators both during his lifetime and later in the twentieth century, was nonetheless one of the most influential sources for American mystical-empiricism. In particular, Blood's thought was a major inspiration for William James, and can be seen to prefigure the latter's concept of Sciousness directly.

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An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism

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With an introduction by
Horrace Meyer Kallen

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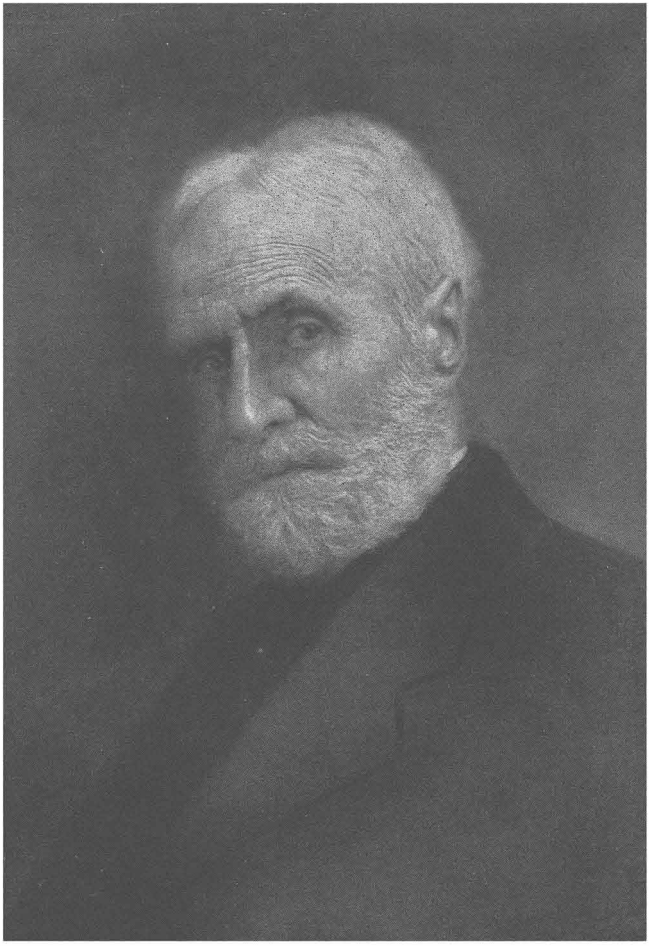

BENJAMIN PAUL BLOOD

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BY

BENJAMIN PAUL BLOOD

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

HORACE MEYER KALLEN, PH.D.

1920

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TO MY FRIEND

SPENCER KELLOGG

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

IT was in the year 1860 that there came to me, through the necessary use of anæsthetics, a Revelation or insight of the immemorial Mystery which among enlightened peoples still persists as the philosophical secret or problem of the world. It is an illumination of the cosmic centre, in which that field of thought where haunt the topics of fate, origin, reason and divinity glows for the moment in an inevitable but hardly communicable appreciation of the genius of being; it is an *initiation*, historically realized as such, into the oldest and most intimate and ultimate truth. Whoever attains and remembers it, or remembers of it, is graduated beyond instruction in "spiritual things"; but to those who are philosophically given it will recur as a condition which, if we are to retain a faith in reason, should seem amenable to articulate expression, for it is obviously what philosophers fail of.

After fourteen years of this experience at varying intervals, I published in 1874 "The Anæsthetic Revelation and The Gist of Philosophy," not assuming to define therein the purport of the illumination, but rather to signalize the experience, and in a résumé of philosophy to show wherein that had come short of it. My brochure was indifferently reviewed, except that William James treated it seriously in the *Atlantic Monthly*. But afterward submitting it to

the poet Tennyson, I immediately received from the laureate a cordial and explicit confirmation out of his own occasional abstractions, while not in a fully normal state, yet impressing me as likely to be of identical illumination. Many other responses came to me in the course of time, announcing similar strangely inexpressible memories, until I learned that nearly every hospital and dental office has its reminiscences of patients who, after a brief anæsthesia, uttered confused fragments of some inarticulate import which always had to do with the mystery of life, of fate, continuance, necessity and cognate abstractions, and all demanding "What is it?" "What does it all mean, or amount to?" Such is what is known esoterically, or among its comparatively few illuminati, as the anæsthetic revelation.

I let it drift along for years, for there seemed nothing to be made of it, or out of it, except that it drove me more and more to the realization of philosophy as "of all our vanities the motliest," while yet the confirmations of the homogeneity of the experience came faster and more various.

For there comes a wondrous and congratulatory sense of *reminiscence* with the experience itself, which exalts this immediate mental phenomenon to the solemnity of fate and prehistoric necessity; a sense of life and the world falling of its own weight into the vacuity of the future, rather than as an ejected superfluity or surfeit of the past; a sense that it was always so, and has to be so. It is this reminiscence of the *immemorial*, the "time out of mind," which only later could have become the Adamic and aboriginal, that makes it supernally the

Revelation. It is this, too, that *secularizes* the ancient mystery, and leaves it congenital and familiar with the humor and pathos of life; that gives the weirdness and thrill to occasions of birth and death and marriage; that makes the rustic halt and keep his countenance at the most absurd occurrence; that puts a sting of danger into the homeliest of proverbs; that makes us cheer when the awkward horse wins the race, and when Portia's picture is found in the leaden casket; when fair Titania yields the flower of her cheek to the hairy and grotesque Bottom; when we call the heaven-inspired weak-minded person a "natural."

This singular insight obviously belongs to, or implicates or calls for, what is known as philosophy. But turning thereto, one finds philosophy itself in such a vagarious and unsettled condition, as having no tribunal nor generally acknowledged authority, that its promiscuous precepts have no judicial standing. In fact, philosophy, at least of the unprofessional sort, has largely deserted the field whereon alone this topic can be exploited. What it most needs is language; but almost disqualifying logic, philosophy seems to have turned for light and guidance to biology and the inarticulate instincts of mere life.

The plain truth is that the modern student of philosophy has been baffled, daunted and discomfited by a fake esotericism, arbitrarily technical in terms and presumptions, wholly problematical in its own coteries — delighting, as Kant protested, in the confusion of the plain man. The thoughtful spirit finds the interest of the problem unabated, although so

many novelties invite the popular attention that there is left even for him but little of that fine old leisure in which philosophy was once the pride and the prestige of the race.

It is this problem, and the Revelation of it, which is the import and background of my book.

In the popular sense the book begins with a proposition of positive science, one that the astronomers rarely consider, although it involves the determining element in all their wonderful calculations, the proposition that a numerical or limited set of movable stars, pervaded by a uniform attraction, would all come together in one conglomerate mass; and that those which we do observe must be either held apart by others still beyond them, and these others still by others indefinitely without end, or else by some arbitrary and superstitious and unscientific agency.

And the fact is clearly apparent, to common sense, that if the stars in their multitude do thus go on and on interminably, there can be no comprehension nor comprehender of them as a whole, or as a one, or as all; and that no pressure or formation or management can come to them from without. But this inference, seemingly so sure, is conditioned upon the natural understanding that the space which contains the stars would go on, whether with or without them; and this understanding has been rudely shaken by "idealism," a doctrine that outer things are at least partly determined by the knowing of them, and that space is not physical extensity, but mental or spiritual freedom to extend.

This doctrine (which Mr. Herbert Spencer rankly characterized as insanity) badly shatters the in-

tegrity of all objective things; and it is abetted scientifically by the microscope — for instance in the important matter of size — showing that all sizes are determined by the lenses of vision, which they surely are. Color and form and tangibility also are found to be referable to organic structure; the difference of things is not a property of things themselves, etc., so that for an *explanation* of vision and distinction and space we have to go behind both the eye and the mind, to "metaphysics."

And although reality as a whole (a one, an all, or totality) may not be known by a comprehension from without — since full comprehension must include the spirit which comprehends — yet the psychologists insist that it can be comprehended from within by self-relation; that it is at once in-itself and for-itself, a subject-object, and they appeal to the common "self-consciousness" as its empirical proof.

All these topics have long since been treated with a desperate persistence and an astonishing ingenuity, which have necessitated and must condone the possibly tiresome chapters which follow. But however these chapters may disqualify the philosophy of the past, they do not assume to replace it by a better on the same lines. The leading expectation of this book is to signalize the anæsthetic revelation.

The most overt and beaten path into philosophical curiosity is at its division of reality into static and dynamic, as these notions are exemplified in eternity and time, and in the duplexity of the one and the many. To this duplexity we now devote our first working chapter.

BENJAMIN PAUL BLOOD.

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INTRODUCTION

I

WHEN, in *As You Like it*, Shakespeare makes Touchstone ask William, "Hast any philosophy in thee, Shepherd?" the thing that Touchstone means is a certain wisdom and vision of life, serenity and resignation mingled, such as Jacques possessed and Hamlet yearned for, and whose perfect example in the works of Shakespeare is Prospero. Its varieties in the tradition of European thinking are not numerous, systems of philosophy exhibiting always the temper of serenity or of resignation, with the missing member of the twain replaced by acquiescence or ecstasy or sorrow or security or bitterness. The overruling quality in each system, the essential of its tone, no matter what its type, is tranquillity. The mind may be that of Seneca or of Schopenhauer; in and through its philosophy it has found repose, its problems solved, its seekings successfully at end.

This aspect of the temper of philosophy has, however, another side, a complement psychologically and historically antecedent, logically later, a sort of father-brother who divides the mastery of the house of thought. Philosophy is a quest no less than it is an attainment, a battle no less than it is a peace. Its wont is that of an appetency and a yearning,

as its use is that of a fulfilment which is the consummation and dissolution of appetency and yearning. Its history is of system replacing system, argument argument, in the ambition to affirm that state of enlightenment and security which outlaws both system and argument, and constitutes what Benjamin Paul Blood, the subject of this essay, calls "the satisfaction of philosophy." There is, as he truly perceives, a satisfaction beyond philosophy which philosophy seeks, which only philosophy can seek, and which, it may be ventured, only philosophy can attain. To the relation between that satisfaction and the hungry reasoning that pursues it there pertains a high comedy, perhaps the most piteous and ironic of all the comedies into which the human spirit propels itself. It is the comedy of a deliverance, whereof, always, "the rest is silence." There is hardly a supremely great thinker who does not exemplify it. Plato, aiming by dialectic at possession of the absolute good which is the ineffable repudiation of all dialectic; Plotinus, at endless trouble to demonstrate the indemonstrability of the ineffable One; St. Thomas, Spinoza, Hegel, Bergson, any philosopher you will; each is in one way or another at great pains to reason out the ultimate nescience of reason, the swallowing up and termination of reason: to reason out a state where the act of reasoning no longer signifies and its end and beginning are joined in one. The attainment of this state is somehow an initiation. Its being is a mystery. Its attributes are totality and eternity and goodness. Its apprehension is a revelation of the instancy of time, of the interpenetrative simultaneity

of the primary and the ultimate inwardness of being, of nature at once immemorial and inveterate, the first thing and the last thing, and the real essence of man.

Much of the ratiocination of the philosophic tradition consists of recounting the aliency of mankind from this, its proper essence, and of providing the instruments and the technique of its self-recovery. Sometimes these instruments are forged and authorized by the discrediting of reason and the justification of faith or instinct or intuition. Sometimes they are provided by the transmutation of reason itself. But however they are fabricated, their use is to establish and sustain a security already assumed, regarding the goodness, the unity and the eternity of being, and requiring rather the rejection of its contraveners than its own demonstration. Ultimately, this security is the ultimately desirable revealing its self, and in the act convicting those whom it illuminates of its veridiction. It is ever an object of faith rather than of proof, and faith, as Mr. Blood says in the "Anæsthetic Revelation," "comes not by doubtful tests, but is ever a foregone conclusion."

It is such a foregone conclusion that Mr. Blood pursues. His pursuit differs in many important respects from the traditional one. But most of all in this — that he makes it *knowingly*. "The Hound of Heaven," he declares in his device for *Pluriverse,* "is on his own trail, and the vestige still lures the scent of a foregone conclusion." What he means — and takes the whole of this one book to say — is that the mystery of existence is not a hidden

thing like a face behind a mask, but is existence itself, its actual process, both as search and as satisfaction. That, therefore, men seek what they already possess, like a dog hunting its own tail. There is nothing behind, Mr. Blood would reiterate. The face and the heart of being are in identical place and of identical substance; men are self-deluded when they attempt, as philosophers or otherwise, to uncover an essence or a principle different in nature from that which science apprehends or the daily life encounters. And he would say it as one speaking with authority, authority ineluctable as the "anæsthetic revelation," its source and sanction, wherein, at the moment of awakening from anæsthetic sleep, there gets accomplished that "stare of being at itself," of which all revelation must consist. The reliance on experience of this kind, which can be suggested, pointed to, designated, perhaps even shared — "signalized" is Mr. Blood's word — but cannot as yet be analyzed or described, makes of him a mystic; and indeed his doctrine abounds in the qualities wherewith mysticism is distinguished — notably the rejection of ratiocination as the ground for security, the warranting of security upon ineffable experience, the subsequent use of ratiocination to persuade of the inescapable authority of this experience. But also, Mr. Blood's teaching in certain respects differs from the mystic type to the point of uniqueness. He holds the revelation, overwhelmingly convincing as it is, a thing *commonplace* and *secular*, confirming instead of outlawing, the daily life of men. The world it yields him seems somewhat ambiguous, but it is a "pluriverse" far more

definitely than a "universe." In a word, Mr. Blood is a mystic of the commonplace, his certainties are certainties of the ineffable truth and reality of the changeful flux and disparity and multiplicity of the daily life.

The latter variation from the tradition particularly impressed William James. Discussing Mr. Blood's philosophy in the *Hibbert Journal* (July, 1910) he celebrated him as a "pluralistic mystic." "The practically unanimous tradition of 'regular' mysticism," he wrote, "has been unquestionably *monistic;* and inasmuch as it is the characteristic of mystics to speak, not as the scribes, but as men who have 'been there' and seen with their own eyes, I think that this sovereign manner must have made some other pluralistic-minded students hesitate, as I confess that it has often given pause to me. One cannot criticise the vision of a mystic — one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some amount of evidential weight. I felt unable to do either with a good conscience until I met with Mr. Blood. His mysticism, which may, if one likes, be understood as monistic in this earlier utterance (the Anæsthetic Revelation) develops in the later ones a sort of 'left-wing' voice of defiance, and breaks into what to my ear has a radically pluralistic sound." This sound is somewhat tempered in "Pluriverse," but it is resonant and definitive enough to justify the book's title, even though the existence it designates is not shown with certainty to be either monistic or pluralistic.

II

The causes of Mr. Blood's divergence and novelty are more easily guessed at than accounted for.

They were not in variety of scene and society. He hardly ever ventured far from home. Born in the second decade of the last century, most of his long life of eighty-six years was spent in and about the dingy town of Amsterdam, New York. He held almost as close to his native scene as Kant and there was as little therein to motivate and to explain his thinking as there was in Königsberg to explain the latter's. His life is marked by a normality unusual in a mystic. Neither do his ancestry nor his education enlighten us. His breed was Scotch-Irish, that pre-Revolutionary type of tough mind, obstinate will and rigid faith which had early in the eighteenth century been driven by famine from Ulster to these shores. It carried with it a resentment against Britain which animated the Revolution and saved it from disintegration during more than one crisis. It imported a pattern of congregational organization that influenced the form of polity which, after the Revolution, the country adopted. These things aside, it was not further distinguished. It had the normal endowment of practical competency in affairs, and speculative regularity in theology. The bulk of it pioneered, constituting the westernmost wave of the European strain that has now won and possessed the North American continent. A percentage settled, took root, found an equilibrium of life capable of transmission and continuity, and used up its surplusages of energy in feud, evangel or philosophy.

The descendants of this percentage are to be found, from its migratory beginnings to the present day, all along the Appalachian range, from the Adirondacks and Catskills to the Ozarks. Thus, the ancestral farm, situated in the town of Florida, had been in the possession of the Blood family some one hundred and thirty years when it came at last in the hands of Benjamin Paul, to work as his fathers had worked it before him, for the family's provision and continuance. His education appears to have been as normally American as his breed — the public schools of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Academy, a period at Union College. No precocity is recorded beyond a far from unusual speculative propensity in adolescence, a sensibility to language, and the itch of authorship. The last seems to have found relief in letters to such locally-known newspapers as the Amsterdam *Gazette* or *Recorder*, the Utica *Herald*, the Albany *Times*. The letters dealt with an astonishing diversity of subjects, from local petty politics or the tricks of spiritualistic mediums to principles of industry and finance and profundities of metaphysics. Almost the whole of Blood's mental life, from his eighteenth year to his eighty-sixth, has found record and expression in these letters. The qualities of thought and style which had attracted William James to him, appear, prior to 1874, to have been but foreshadowed in them. Their fulness seems to have come into being only with the composition of "The Anæsthetic Revelation."

Nor does the range of Mr. Blood's independent reading appear to have been wide. His references and allusions show an intimate knowledge of Shake-

speare and of Plato, and a customary familiarity with the Bible. He has read the German philosophies current during his young manhood — notably Hegel. He is conversant with Hegelians at home and abroad. He knows the American transcendentalists, particularly Emerson, to whom he defers. He has sharp things to say about W. T. Harris, *quondam* Commissioner of Education, for whose *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* he rewrote a number of philosophical letters, and he pounds the "Universology" of Stephen Pearl Andrews as if it were important. On the other hand, he is, after 1874, in epistolary contact with a great many men of personal eminence and literary distinction — with Stirling, the English interpreter of Hegel, with Edmund Gurney, with Sir William Ramsay, with James, with Emerson, with Tennyson. Most of the correspondence touches the inwardness of the anæsthetic revelation. Mr. Blood had sent about copies of this tract — printed, like all his things except his letters, at his own expense — and for a time conducted an extensive correspondence anent its subject-matter. The exchange of letters led in cases eventually to a circulation — in the instance of William James to an exchange — of photographs, and to subsequent amenities of which two are evidential: Tennyson's "the face is that of one born to grapple with difficulties metaphysical and other," and James's, "I am so delighted to find that a metaphysician *can* be anything else than a spavined, dyspeptic individual fit for no other use."

It may be that the constitutional vigor recorded by the photographs is the beginning and end of the idiosyncracy of Blood's genius. He is declared never

in the course of his long life to have known illness of any kind or to have been confined to his bed as an invalid. He is that unusual event in the tradition of mysticism and metaphysics, a healthy mystic. The point of departure for his mysticism seems to have been an anæsthesia induced by nitrous oxide or ether. Its effect on him was not unlike that of a religious conversion. The experience which came in waking from this artificial slumber reset his consciousness and made of him a poet and philosopher and mystic. His first and most beautiful attempt to signalize it he composed at the age of forty-two as "The Anæsthetic Revelation," after, he declares, "experiments ranging over nearly fourteen years." His second and final attempt is "Pluriverse," a modification, expansion and elaboration of the essentials of the first. The interval between them is filled with letters to the press, letters and still more letters (signed mostly "Paul"), a poem or two, the more or less voluminous correspondence already mentioned, and the quiet almost anonymous life in Amsterdam, New York. He was waiting, he wrote his friends, waiting for the necessary terms and expressions, fearful always of being "too soon at last." He had high hopes of what might come of an adequate expression of his insight: "Thus you may see," he declared in a letter to the Springfield *Republican* shortly after William James had died, "that this mumbling and mouthing mystery of the cosmos still hovers over hospital and laboratory, awaiting articulation; like the wild hawk of Walt Whitman, untamed and as yet untranslatable, it sounds its barbaric yawp over the books of the world. If I can

express it, as I may in a year or two, or in a decade or two, as it shall happen, my book will be more than one of the 'Books of the Week,' for therein the fact may appear that Sinai and Calvary were but sacred stepping-stones to this secular elevation where free thought may range hereafter, when the old scares of superstition shall have vanished to the limbo whence they came."

As a matter of fact the composition of "Pluriverse" took nearly a decade. What fell between it and "The Anæsthetic Revelation" appears to have mattered little. Both essays signalize the same essential experience. Each sucks up from the philosophic atmosphere of its generation the prevailing metaphysical tone. In each this tone is tempered by a certain resilient straitness which is of the unrelenting taste and predisposition of "Paul" alone. By these the monism of the "Anæsthetic Revelation" is keyed down with the observation that "each and every one of us is the One that remains." By these the high flights of Hegelian rationalism of the same document are made to culminate in the pronouncement that "the naked life is realized outside of sanity altogether; and it is the instant contrast of this 'tasteless water of souls' with formal thought as we 'come to' that leaves in the patient an astonishment that the awful mystery of Life is at last but a homely and a common thing." By these, again, the pluralism of "Pluriverse" is mitigated with the hope "that the fond monism that we have dialectically disparaged may be at least transcendentally rehabilitated." As the monism is a reverberation of the transcendentalism current in the latter half of the nineteenth,

so the pluralism is an absorption of the Jamesian metaphysic of the twentieth century. Analogously, as the gist of philosophy was declared to have been confirmed or paralleled in revelation during the seventies and eighties of the last century, so it is, in its intellectualistic aspects, both required and rejected in the generation of James and Bergson. Whatever the age, the conclusion — foregone — is the Revelation, "given you as the old Adamic secret, which you then feel that all intelligence must sometime know or have known; yet ludicrous in its familiar simplicity, as somewhat that any man should always perceive at his best, if his head were only level, but which in our ordinary thinking has grown into a thousand creeds and theories dignified as religion and philosophy."

III

If, in his serene obscurity, Mr. Blood can be said to have had a vocation, it was to celebrate this revelation "ludicrous in its familiar simplicity." His style as celebrant has the hymnic quality, and the meaning of his diction — particularly when most metaphysical or when closest to the revelation — that tang of suggestion and overtone which ally it to the utterance of feeling by music rather than to the denotation of ideas by words. This quality he shares with all mystics, as is natural he should. The range and the depth of the mystical experience, its completeness of emotional transformation and intellectual readjustment, the total loosening and overturning of the psyche which the experient under-

goes, cannot fail to initiate in any man or woman a mode of rhythmic vocalization and imaginative statement at once exalted and colorful. But here again Blood varies from the type in that the power of such utterance is in his work something more than occasional. His style is conscious, not reflex, an effect of will rather than of passion. He is not, as his reader must see, a constructive writer, even in a work so sustained as "Pluriverse"; James describes him as "aphoristic and oracular rather . . . sometimes dialetic, sometimes poetic and sometimes mystic in his manner, sometimes monistic and sometimes pluralistic in his matter." Nevertheless there is that even in his dryest passages which never fails to capture heart and ear with a felicity of cadence and of precision that points to the disciplined mastery of medium attainable only through the training and perfecting of a gift inborn. Blood, like Poe, has a philosophy of style, a far profounder and more subtle philosophy, with declared affinities to the observations of Burns and of Swedenborg and the suggestive analysis that Plato made in the "Cratylus." The ideas constituting this analysis appear to have occurred to Mr. Blood altogether spontaneously, when he was a young man just out of his teens. They are incorporated in the Supplementary Essay to "Pluriverse" under the title "The Poetical Alphabet."

That the subject-matter of the essay is not remote from the preoccupations of the book is conclusively established with the declaration that "logical truth is held to the arbitrament of language, the production and determination of which are therefore of

prime importance in philosophical explanation." And forthwith the problem is attacked in the form of the question "why the word *icicle* is not a fit name for a *tub*." Its answer is an exhibition, not an analysis or an explanation, of felt and observable harmonies between things and the names of things. These names, in their sound and in their form, are somehow the reverberations and the shadows of the things they stand for. How, Mr. Blood has not been at pains to work out, and perhaps never was equipped to do so. The matter is one for the precise technique of the psychological laboratory. But its principle — the rule underlying observations of writers so diverse as Plato and Swedenborg and Burns and Blood, and tongues so different as Greek and Swedish and English — however difficult to demonstrate, should not be difficult to state. It might be formulated as follows: The human organism, as a unit and in its separate organs, is something like a sounding-board. Knowingly or unknowingly it as a rule responds to, refracts and gives back whatever stimulus impinges upon it. The specific responses and reproductions which it is conscious of are only a tiny fraction of the generalized reverberations which it is not conscious of. There are "emotion," constantly modifying the breathing and the state of the vocal chords and of the other organs involved in the production of sound and speech. Now between all bodily activities and their causes and occasions both physiologists and psychologists have observed a certain vibrational similarity, or even identity. This is most noticeable in both conscious and unconscious imitations of rhythms and movements, but