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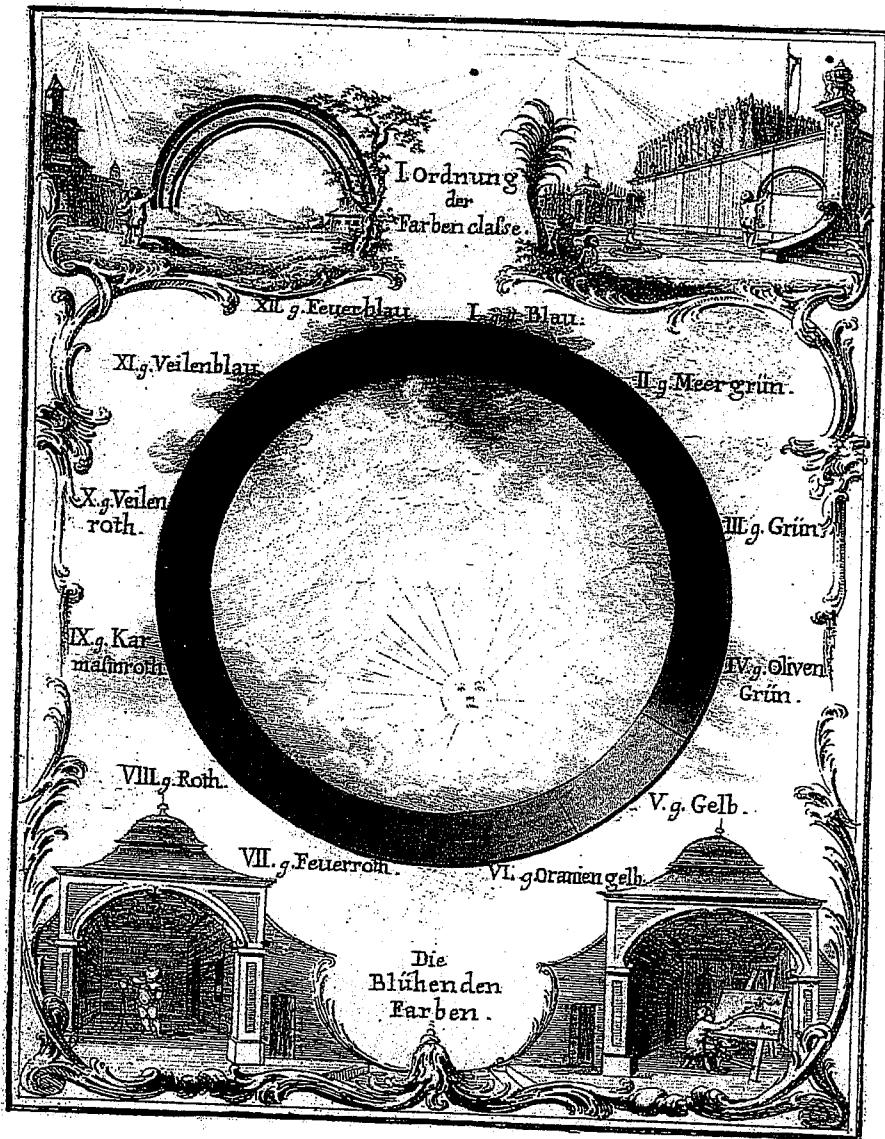
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CHAPTER FOUR

Hanunoo

Why is it that so many colour stories, chromophobic and chromophilic alike, get caught in the spell of gems and precious stones? One answer would be that, for some, these natural fragments are extremely convenient. Specifically, they come from the 'East', or thereabouts. And they come from the 'earth'. Le Corbusier: '... one discovers and dislodges from beneath the piles of coarse earth the most sumptuous nuggets of the East ...'¹ That is to say, these nuggets are *found* rather than made or crafted; they do not speak of skill or the human spirit so much as of good fortune – or perhaps greed, power and lust. Their brilliance does not connote a brilliant culture. On the contrary, possession of such stones (outside the noble and civilized centres of Europe, of course) is usually taken as a symptom of despotism and corruption. They may occur naturally, but they connote artifice and decadence. Here, for example, is Bernard Berenson, aesthete, classicist and chromophobe's chromophobe: 'The princes of Ormuz and of Ind who pass their fingers through sackfuls of precious stones, not only for the pride of power which great possessions give, but also for the touch, and perhaps chiefly for the gaiety and sparkle

of colour, will scarcely be credited with enjoying them as works of art.² Clearly, there is much more to these stones than that. For many, their preciousness is not really the issue – after all, it didn't much matter to Des Esseintes whether his tortoise was coated in real or fake gems. Rather, as even Berenson noted, their chief value lies in their sparkle and luminosity. Here, colour is active; it is alive. Colour projects; it is not a passive coating of an inert object; light appears to shine from within; colour seems to have its own power source. Perhaps this is why gems often stand for colour-in-general. They represent the point at which colour becomes independent and assertive – or disruptive and excessive. For the tripping Aldous Huxley, colours became so intense that 'they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently' on his attention.³ For Le Corbusier, colour was explosive. For Barthes, colour could be 'like a pinprick in the corner of the eye'; it had the power to 'lacerate'.⁴ For Baudelaire, colour had the capacity to think, speak and dream. In Des Esseintes' dream, the colour-flower-woman came towards him and threatened to engulf him. In each case, colour moved forward; it advanced; it was a disturbance, a danger, a threat. It could explode in your face or lacerate your eye. More than that: it was as if *colour was looking at you*.

In *Heaven and Hell*, his follow-up to *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley takes up this question of gems and their place in the literature of drugs and visions. He quotes an account of a peyote-induced hallucination in which the author saw 'fragments of stained glass' and 'huge precious stones', both of which 'seemed to possess an interior light'.⁵ He goes on to list examples from Hindu, Buddhist and Judeo-Christian descriptions of paradise which are saturated with images of 'rivers . . . full of leaves the colour of sapphire and lapis lazuli', of countries 'covered by jewels and precious stones', and of lands adorned with 'stones of fire'. He quotes Ezekiel's vision: 'Thou hast been in Eden, the garden of God. Every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, the topaz and the diamond,

the onyx and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald and the carbuncle, and gold . . .' He concludes that 'Heaven is always a place of gems.'

For Huxley, it was not in itself the rarity of these stones that explained their place in the literature of paradise; it was, again, their colour. For this colour – intense, heightened, pure, unqualified – offered a glimpse of the 'Other World', a world beyond Nature and the Law, a world undimmed by language, concepts, meanings and uses. In a way, Huxley's other world may be as much an Oz as it is an Eden – at least there is very little he says about this realm that doesn't sound a bit like Dorothy's 'somewhere-that-is-no-longer-Kansas. In Huxley's writing, mescaline or LSD takes you to the 'antipodes of the mind', a largely unexplored continent populated by 'exceedingly improbable' metaphorical mammals and marsupials – about as improbable as the inhabitants of Dorothy's vision. On the near side of the rainbow, in the land of the laws and orders of consciousness, there are also similarities between Huxley's and Dorothy's pictures. Dorothy's Kansas, as we know, is grey; Huxley's Kansas is language, as language greys the world around us. 'Colour turns out to be a kind of touchstone of reality. That which is given is coloured', he says, but the intellect, the conceptual structures and the symbol systems we impose on the world are in themselves abstract and colourless. And they in turn drain our perceptions of the colour that is around us. Furthermore, while the given is given to us in colour, this colour is weak and insipid compared with the brilliant and 'self-luminous' colours of the mind's antipodes:

The non-symbolic inhabitants of the mind's antipodes exist in their own right, and like the given facts of the external world are coloured. Indeed, they are far more intensely coloured than external data. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that our perceptions of the external world are habitually clouded by the verbal notions in terms of which we do our thinking.

This is the key: intensity of colour is a measure for Huxley of our distance from language, just as for Dorothy it is a measure of her distance from Kansas.

Huxley's cosmology of colour is beautifully concise and clearly phrased, as was Charles Blanc's, and it is also worth quoting at greater length:

Everything seen by those who visit the mind's antipodes is brilliantly illuminated and seems to shine from within. All colours are intensified to a pitch far beyond anything seen in the normal state, and at the same time the mind's capacity for recognising fine distinctions of tone and hue is notably heightened . . . At the antipodes of the mind, we are more or less completely free of language, outside the system of conceptual thought. Consequently our perception of visionary objects possesses all the freshness, all the naked intensity, of experiences which have never been verbalised, never assimilated to lifeless abstractions. Their colour (that hallmark of givenness) shines forth with a brilliance which seems to us praeternatural, because it is in fact entirely natural – entirely natural in the sense of being entirely unsophisticated by language or the scientific, philosophical and utilitarian notions, by means of which we ordinarily re-create the given world in our own drearily human image.

In many respects, Huxley's vision is rather like Blanc's; it's just that it has been turned through 180 degrees. For both, there is language or the Idea at one pole; at the other pole, there are colours and precious stones. For Blanc, the job is to keep the poles apart, to avoid the Fall; for Huxley, it is to dive from one pole to the other, using whatever means necessary to get there. For both men, gems and shiny things are significant because they represent that which exists beyond the reach of language. In fact, Blanc does describe gems as a kind of language, but it is a paradoxical,

metaphorical and mute one, the language of the formless, a language entirely alien to human consciousness. For Huxley, precious stones are precious because they 'may remind our unconscious of what it enjoys at the mind's antipodes'. For both, in different ways, these shiny objects are unspeakable.

There is a parallel of sorts between Huxley's and Blanc's polarization of colour and language and Yves Klein's chromophile story of the 'war between line and colour', which exists as a storyboard he made in 1954 for an animated film. The main difference is that Klein imagined using the coloured light of the cinema rather than coloured stones to make his point (but isn't the mesmerizing illuminated screen of the cinema something like a modern equivalent of the sparkling gems of older times?). Klein's account is a very sketchy historical elaboration of the principal that underpinned his entire output as an artist, namely that 'colour is enslaved by line that becomes writing.'⁶ That's a good phrase. Articulating more than a simple inversion of the standard *disegno-versus-colore* opposition, Klein also inverted the assumption, implicit in many academic accounts, that language precedes drawing, that the idea precedes the mark. Like Huxley and Blanc, Klein understood colour as a reminder of a remote and original state of being. As for Huxley, for Klein this was also a kind of unspoilt earthly paradise. But unlike Huxley and Blanc, who began their accounts in their presents and worked back to the moment of colour, Klein began with a screen of pure, uninterrupted colour – first white, then yellow, then red, then a deep ultramarine blue – and proceeded to disrupt it, scene by scene, with linear images of one kind or another – prehistoric hand prints, cave drawings, animals, hunters with bows and arrows, abstract engravings, hieroglyphics and so forth. His handwritten notes supply the narrative:

Taking advantage of a need tested by the first man to project his mark outside himself, line succeeded in introducing itself into

the heretofore inviolate realm of colour. Cain and Abel murder: dream-reality. Rapidly mastered, pure colour – the universal coloured soul in which the human soul bathed when in the state of the 'Earthly Paradise' – is imprisoned, compartmentalised, sheared, and reduced to a slave . . . In the joy and delirium of its victory by trickery, line subjugates man and imprints him with its abstract rhythm that is at once intellectual, material, and spiritual . . . Nevertheless, throughout the centuries, colour – tainted, humiliated, and conquered – prepares a revenge, an uprising that will be stronger than anything . . . Thus the history of the very long war between line and colour begins with the history of the human world. Heroic colour makes signs to man every time he feels the need to paint. It calls to him from deep within and from beyond his own soul . . . It winks to him but is enclosed by drawing inside of forms. Millions of years will pass before man understands these signs and puts himself suddenly and feverishly to work in order to free both colour and himself . . . Paradise is lost. The entanglement of lines becomes like the bars of a veritable prison . . . Man . . . is exiled far from his coloured soul.

Klein's account, like Blanc's, is written in a biblical register, only with references to the second generation of the Old Testament rather than the first. Klein also directly echoes Huxley's image of a paradise of pure, inviolate colour and his image of consciousness as a dimming of that colour. Enclosed by the abstraction of line which becomes writing, colour can only wink its presence. Colour might not have been abolished, but it only exists for us in a conquered and subjugated state. Nevertheless and in spite of this, colour retains its subversive potential; incomprehensible and mute, it offers a glimpse (a wink) of freedom. It is the exact opposite of the chromophobic anxiety of the contemporary architect we

met in chapter 1. For Klein, as for Cézanne and Huxley, our main problem is that we have fallen out of colour and into line, writing and language.

To attend to colour, then, is, in part, to attend to the limits of language. It is to try to imagine, often through the medium of language, what a world without language might be like.

Many commentators have taken the image of childhood as a model, if not for a language-free universe then at least for a world in which language has not yet fully established its grip on experience; this world is also, more often than not, saturated in colour. Baudelaire again: 'Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and colour.'⁷ And again: 'A friend of mine was telling me one day how, as a small boy, he used to be present when his father was dressing, and how he had always been filled with astonishment, mixed with delight, as he looked at the arm muscle, the colour tones of the skin tinged with rose and yellow, and the bluish network of the veins.' Or the critic Dave Hickey recalling the Saturday-morning Kiddie Cartoon Carnivals of his youth: 'What we wanted to see . . . was that wall of vibrant moving colour, so we could experience the momentary redemption of its ahistorical, extra-linguistic, sensual embrace – that instantaneous, ravishing intimation of paradise that confirmed our lives in the moment.'⁸ (Here again, perhaps, is a hint that the colours of the movies, be they cartoons or otherwise, are a modern substitute for the extra-linguistic embrace of gems.) Stories of adulthood tend more often to lament a world of colour eclipsed by the shadow of language; they present images of luminous childhood becoming clouded by the habits of adult life. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 'Frequent tears have run the colours from my life.'⁹ Or Faber Birren, author of *Color and Human Response*: 'Youngsters are more responsive to color than to form and will delight in it through sheer pleasure. As they grow older and become less impulsive, as they submit to discipline, color may lose some of its intrinsic appeal.'¹⁰ The most melancholy tale of colour-loss is told by Søren Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*:

How strangely sad I felt on seeing a poor man shuffling through the streets in a rather worn-out, light yellowish-green coat. I was sorry for him, but the thing that moved me most was that the colour of his coat so vividly reminded me of my first childish productions in the noble art of painting. This colour was precisely one of my vital hues. Is it not sad that these colour mixtures, which I still think of with so much pleasure, are found nowhere in life; the whole world thinks them harsh, bizarre . . . And I, who always painted my heroes with this never-to-be-forgotten yellowish-green colouring on their coats! And is this not so with all the mingled colours of childhood? The hues that life once had gradually became too strong, too harsh, for our dim eyes.¹¹

The irony for Kierkegaard, and the pathos of the story, is that the yellowish-green colour he once painted his dashing heroes now turns up only on someone too poor to participate in the exercise of taste, someone excluded from the more refined discriminations and choices of culture. It is not that the poor man's eyes are less dim than ours. Rather, he has to suffer the humiliation of an incongruous brightness that would seem in absolute contrast with the rest of his dull and shuffling existence. He must wear the coat as a yellowish-green sign of his exclusion and failures. But then again, maybe it's not quite that straightforward. Maybe the poor man is able, in his exclusion from culture, to remain in colour in a way that the sophisticated Kierkegaard can only dimly recall, can now only experience in terms of something that life once had but has long since lost. Whichever way we decide to have it, the poor man is nevertheless marked by colour; whether he wants it or not, he wears a yellowish-green coat of otherness.

If in many of these stories the exposure to language robs a life of its colour, are there then other stories in which it happens the other way around? Are there equal and opposite stories in which exposure to colour robs a life of its language, stories in which a sudden flood of colour renders

a speaker speechless? Not many, it seems, and perhaps for obvious reasons. But this does almost exactly happen in *Shock Corridor*. Emerging from his intense and violent colour-psychosis, the once-vain reporter suddenly finds himself quite unable to speak and thus, ironically, unable to utter the name of the murderer he has just discovered. At the end of the film, he is left sitting silently in the corner of a room in a catatonic state, and it is as if his exposure to colour has done this to him. In this movie an explicit relationship is made between the exposure to colour and the loss of language, but a similar relationship is at least implied in many of the other colour stories discussed so far. That is, in just about every encounter with intoxication, delirium, sleep, fainting spells and other lapses into unconsciousness that are the currency of these stories, there is also a story of being reduced to silence, a story in which the power of speech is lost, at least for a moment.

The idea that colour is beyond, beneath or in some other way at the limit of language has been expressed in a number of ways by a number of writers. At the beginning of *Colour and Culture*, John Gage refers briefly to 'the feeling that verbal language is incapable of defining the experience of colour'.¹² In *Color Codes*, Charles A. Riley notes that 'colour refuses to conform to schematic and verbal systems.'¹³ For Stephen Melville, colour 'can . . . seem bottomlessly resistant to nomination, attaching itself absolutely to its own specificity . . .'¹⁴ Dave Hickey notes that 'when colour signifies anything, it always signifies, as well, a respite from language and history.' And he recognizes the paradox: 'I already knew, of course, that the condition of being ravished by colour was probably my principal disability as a writer, since colour for a writer is, finally, less an attribute of language than a cure for it.' Leonard Shalin, in his study of art and physics, writes: 'Colour precedes words and antedates civilisation, connected as it is to the subterranean groundwaters of the archaic limbic system,' and he cites the case of the infant's ability to 'respond to brightly coloured objects long before they learn words . . .'¹⁵ And Julia Kristeva,

reflecting on Giotto's frescos at the Arena Chapel in Padua, begins her tantalizing discussion of the artist's colour with the recognition that while 'semiological approaches consider painting a language,' they are limited insofar as 'they do not allow for an equivalent for colour within the elements of language identified by linguistics.'¹⁶ She concludes that 'if ever it was fruitful, the language/painting analogy, when faced with the problem of colour, becomes untenable.'

Kristeva quickly dumps semiology for psychoanalysis, and in doing so she too brings the discussion of colour into realms with which we have become familiar: the unconscious, the extra-linguistic, the infantile, the non-self. If the terminology she employs is highly technical, her story of colour is in other respects not so different from Cézanne's (whose work she acknowledges), Huxley's or Dorothy's (whose work she doesn't mention). Colour, for Kristeva, is linked to 'subject/object indeterminacy', to a state before the self is formed in language, before the world is fully differentiated from the subject. And colour always exists as a disruption in the symbolic order, even when 'in a painting, colour is pulled from the unconscious into the symbolic order . . .' Colour is unique in art in that it 'escapes censorship; and the unconscious irrupts into a culturally coded pictorial distribution'. (There are echoes here of Yves Klein's words as well as his colours.) Consequently, 'the chromatic experience constitutes a menace to the "self".' Or, as Kristeva then puts it: 'Colour is the shattering of unity.' It is as if colour begins not just to interrupt the process of self-formation, but to throw it into reverse; it is as if colour serves to de-differentiate the self and de-form the world. In this, colour 'enjoys considerable freedom', and one of the terms Kristeva uses most often in respect of colour is 'escape'. Colour 'escapes censorship'. It is through colour that 'the subject escapes its alienation within a code . . . that it, as a conscious subject, accepts.' And it is through colour that (with Cézanne and others) 'Western painting began to escape' the regimes and hierarchies of Academic art. And of course, the idea

of an escape through or into colour is one way of describing just about all the stories we have looked at: escape from the West and from words; escape from Kansas and from concepts; escape from sanity and from the self; escape from angels, angles and architects.

For Jacqueline Lichtenstein, it is also the autonomy and irreducibility of colour, and in particular its irreducibility to language, that marks it out as suspect, deviant and dangerous. Colour is 'a pleasure that exceeds discursiveness. Like passion, the pleasure of *coloris* slips away from linguistic determination'.¹⁷ And although the Academies of the West would have it otherwise, this does not indicate a deficiency in colour so much as the insufficiency and impotence of language:

How can anyone speak of *coloris*? . . . How can we name a pleasure that eludes all assignation? The defenders of painting's dignity as a liberal art have amply deplored this lack since the Renaissance: the emotion that overcomes the viewer – who is ravished by the charms of *coloris*, dazzled by the shimmering ornaments of the vision before him – always show up as a turbulence in the ability to express it. Surprised, arrested, seduced, the individual is further dispossessed of the powers of speech; his ruin involves the crumbling of all discursive modes, the sudden failing of language.

Silence. The silence that colour may provoke is a mark of its power and autonomy. Silence is how we have to voice our respect for that which moves us beyond language. 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent', said Wittgenstein, who also saw in colour the outer limits of language. Silence is spoken by the body, through our gestures and postures. The body is one of the means by which we express ourselves when we run out of words. Colour is thus connected to the body in at least two ways: it is applied to the body as make-up, and it is allied with the body in its resistance to verbalization. Moreover, with make-up we

not only make our bodies more visible and vivid, we also make them more expressive and articulate.

We often confront the world with a wave rather than a word, by showing rather than saying. Pointing. Sampling. Picking things up and putting things down. Even our words betray our dependency on mute gestures of one kind or another: when we explain something, we 'point it out'; when something is explained, we 'grasp' it. How often, when it comes to colour – when, that is, we need for some reason to be specific about colour – do we revert to a gesture? How often do we find ourselves having to point to an example of a colour? Dulux, a division of Imperial Chemical Industries and one of the largest commercial paint manufacturers in England, ran a series of television advertisements to promote their extensive range of household colours. Significantly, they were silent films; there was no dialogue in the group of scenes that made up each of the short narratives. These were films about pointing. In one, a young woman was seen on a bus; a few rows in front of her sat a man wearing a bright yellow hooded sweatshirt. An idea silently spread over the woman's face; she manoeuvred to a seat directly behind the man. The next scene saw the man and the woman leaving the bus and walking off in different directions. It was raining, but the woman was smiling and seemed so happy that she didn't notice – unlike the man, who hunched his shoulders and put his hood up to keep the rain off. As he did so, he revealed (to us but not to himself) a mini-disc-sized hole in the top of his hood. The woman, meanwhile, had gone into a hardware shop and was showing the bright yellow mini-disc of sweatshirt to the man at the counter. The final scene showed the woman back in her flat (happy, of course, but now it was getting irritating), painting the room the bright yellow sweatshirt colour.

A second version of the advertisement showed a pair of pale lavender underpants on a washing line. We saw the underpants as they were stolen by a lone anoraked figure . . . and we ended up in a pale lavender front room. The same point was being made, obviously enough. But beneath

the commercial drive of its surface narrative, the stories of the yellow shirt and lavender underpants were also philosophical tales about the inadequacy of words. They asked how it is possible for us accurately to represent colours to each other, when verbal language has proved itself entirely insufficient. And they suggested that, almost automatically, we reach outside language with the help of a gesture. We point, sample and show rather than say. And in our pointing, sampling and showing we make comparisons. In doing this, we call for the help of something outside ourselves and outside language, and in the process we expose the limits of our words. However complex and sophisticated our powers of description, these films tell us that they are no match for the greater complexities of the world and of colour.

Pointing and sampling, in this context, are quite alike. When we point to something over there, we acknowledge that that something is beyond both our reach and our words. When we sample something, we bring it within reach, but it can remain beyond words. Otherwise, we could describe it and wouldn't need to steal it. The silent story of the lavender underpants, and all stories like it, are stories about the difference between saying and showing. In a world dominated by the power of language, we often underestimate the significance of showing. And equally, we underestimate how often we resort to pointing. It has been argued that all attempts to explain something verbally will end up, at some point, with an index finger.

To fall into colour is to run out of words. This is the kind of sentence that should be found at the end of a chapter or book, not in the middle. But there are other ways in which words fail us when it comes to colour, and so there are still reasons to continue. We have to shift the ground a bit, however, and begin to talk less of 'colour' and more of 'colours'. What is the difference? If colour is single and colours are many, how can we have both? Plotinus said colour is 'devoid of parts', and this is probably among the most significant things ever said on the subject.¹⁸ For Plotinus,

then, colour was single; it was indivisible. But in being indivisible, colour also put itself beyond the reach of rational analysis – and this was exactly his point. To analyze, after all, is to divide. If colour is indivisible, a continuum, what sense can there be in talking of colours? None, obviously . . . except that we do it all the time. Colour spreads flows bleeds stains floods soaks seeps merges. It does not segment or subdivide. Colour is fluid. Barthes thought so, and that is how it appears in *Shock Corridor*. Colour is indivisibly fluid. It has no inner divisions – and no outer form. But how can we describe that which has no inner divisions and no outer form, like a fog seen from within?

Colour may be a continuum, but the continuum is continuously broken, the indivisible endlessly divided. Colour is formless but ever formed into patterns and shapes. From at least the time of Newton, colour has been subjected to the discipline of geometry, ordered into an endless variety of colour circles, triangles, stars, cubes, cylinders or spheres. These shapes always contain divisions, and these divisions, as often as not, contain words. And with these words, colour becomes colours. But what does it mean to divide colour into colours? Where do the divisions occur? Is it possible that these divisions are somehow internal to colour, that they form a part of the nature of colour? Or are they imposed on colour by the conventions of language and culture?

This is tricky. Colour has become colours in numerous different ways, and its division has occurred in the service of numerous different purposes. In fact, there are two principal and common ways in which we divide colour. One is verbal and the other visual. On the one hand are the basic colour terms we all learn as children and use everyday. On the other hand are the basic colours, or primary colours, we also learn at school and use to produce other colours. These two and apparently simple ways of slicing up the colour continuum are quite separate; they belong to different domains but are easily confused, not least because the list of primary colours often overlaps with the list of basic colour terms.

'Colour has not yet been named', said Derrida. Perhaps not, but some colours have. We have colour names, and so we have colours. But how many? A great many more than we can name, to be sure. The human brain can distinguish minute variations in colour; it has been said that we can recognize several million different colours. At the same time, in contemporary English, there are just eleven general colour names in common usage: black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, grey. A lot has been said about these. They coincide with the hypothesis, put forward by the anthropologists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in 1969, that all natural languages have between two and eleven basic colour terms. Furthermore, the Berlin-Kay hypothesis maintains that there is a consistent hierarchy within these terms: if a language has only two colour terms, they will be black and white; if it has three colour terms, they will be black, white and red; if it has four colour terms, they will be black, white, red and yellow or green; if it has five colour terms, it will include both yellow and green; and so on through blue and brown until purple, pink, orange and grey, for which Berlin and Kay found no consistent hierarchy in their test results.

The first thing to note about these eleven terms is that they constitute a rather irregular group. It combines several different types of colour: the achromatic black, white and grey; the spectrum colours red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple; and the non-spectrum colours pink and brown. Grey, pink and brown are distinct in that each can be described in terms of mixtures of other colours: a pale or whitish red, a kind of darkish yellow, etc. Black and white are distinct insofar as they are considered opposites, whereas only relatively technical colour usage treats, say, orange as the opposite of blue. Black and white also tend to be thought of as singular colours, as absolutes, as two end-points between which lies a sea of grey. (Thus the simultaneous experience of two different whites – when, say, we see a sheet of white paper come into contact with a white desktop – seems a little disruptive, and we want to know which of these

whites is *really* white.) However, for all their dissimilarities, when put next to other common English colour terms – ‘mauve’, ‘scarlet’, ‘beige’, ‘turquoise’ and so forth – it is clear that the Berlin-Kay terms do seem somehow more basic: they are less specialized and, for the most part, less easy to rephrase in terms of combinations of other colours.

There seems to be no obvious reason not to go along with the idea of basic colour terms. This does not mean, however, that we necessarily have to go along with the idea of basic colours. The linguist John Lyons has summarized and developed some of the criticisms that have been made of the Berlin-Kay hypothesis, although he contends that the main problem lies not with the hypothesis itself but with careless popularizations of it.¹⁹ Much of Lyons’s critique is developed using the example of Hanunoo, a Malayo-Polynesian language, although he also shows that you don’t have to travel very far to find other anomalies. Literary Welsh, for example, has no words that correspond exactly with the English ‘green’, ‘blue’, ‘grey’ or ‘brown’; Vietnamese and Korean make no clear distinction between green and blue; and Russian has no single word for blue, but two words denoting different colours. Then there is purple. Newton had a problem with it, which we will return to, and so do the French, as they also do with brown. *Violet* and *brun* are both basic colour terms in French, a language which, like English, also scores the full eleven on the Berlin-Kay scale. But if the French *violet* corresponds to our ‘violet’, it would seem that it is not quite the same as our purple. Likewise, their *brun* might more or less correspond to our ‘brown’, at least in the abstract, as a colour term; but when used descriptively rather than referentially, when applied to things in the world like shoes, hair and eyes, brown and *brun* part company. French shoes may be brown, but they aren’t *brun* so much as *marron*. And French hair, if it’s *brun*, is dark rather than brown.

Derek Jarman: ‘This morning I met a friend on the corner of Oxford Street. He was wearing a beautiful yellow coat. I remarked on it. He had bought it in Tokyo and he said that it was sold to him as green.’²⁰

If French basic colour terms appear not to have exactly the same basis as English basic colour terms, it is as nothing compared to Hanunoo. This language has four basic and rather broad colour terms, which nevertheless correspond in their focal points to our black, white, red and green. It is thus consistent with the Berlin-Kay hypothesis. So far so good. However, citing the research of the anthropologist Harold Conklin, Lyons points out that chromatic variation does not in fact seem to be the basis for differentiation between the four terms. Rather, ‘the two principal dimensions of variation are lightness versus darkness, on the one hand, and, on the other, wetness versus dryness, or freshness (succulence) versus desiccation.’ This sounds odd; it requires some effort of the imagination to picture a language that makes no essential distinction between colour and texture or, more specifically, between variations of colour and degrees of freshness. Or does it?

Perhaps from time to time we all speak Hanunoo. Certainly, there are artists and even the occasional philosopher for whom there is nothing at all strange about it. Hokusai, for example: ‘There is a black which is old and a black which is fresh.’²¹ Or Ad Reinhardt: ‘Matte black in art is / not matte black; / Gloss black in art is gloss black / Black is not absolute; / There are many different blacks . . .’²² Or Wittgenstein: ‘Mightn’t shiny black and matt black have different colour names?’²³ Or Adrian Stokes: ‘An object is red or yellow, on the one hand, on the other it shines, glitters, sparkles.’²⁴

For Lyons, the lesson of Hanunoo and other languages is that colour names are so tied into cultural usage of one kind or another that any abstract equivalence is effectively lost. In some cases, they cease to be colour names in the ordinary sense. To conceive of colour in terms independent of, say, luminosity or reflectiveness is in itself a cultural and linguistic habit and not a universal occurrence. Ditto the separation of hue from tone. Indeed, Hanunoo and other languages have no independent word for ‘colour’ at all. Such basic colour terms as we have, to put it another way, even terms like ‘colour’, are the products of language and

culture more than the products of colour. Lyons: 'I am assuming . . . that colour is real. I am not assuming, however, that colours are real. On the contrary, the main burden of my argument is that they are not: my thesis is that they are the product of the lexical and grammatical structure of particular languages.' A similar argument is made by Umberto Eco in his essay 'How Culture Conditions the Colours We See'. He too brings on Hanunoo and, like Lyons, uses it to help account for the perceived lack of fit between the colour terms of different languages, such as Latin and ancient Greek, and of our own. He concludes that in these languages 'the names of colours, in themselves, have no precise chromatic content: they must be viewed within the general context of many interacting semiotic systems.'²⁵

Russian, we are told, has two words for blue. That is to say, Russians appear to deal with blue in roughly the way we deal with red and pink. Certainly, what we call light blue is optically as distinct from dark blue as pink is from red, perhaps more so, and yet our language allows no such independence for bits of blue. 'Pink' is the only basic colour term in English that also denotes a specific part of another basic colour term, one end of 'red'. But there seems to be no necessary reason for this in terms of our experience of colour. When we see light blue, do we see something different from what a Russian speaker sees? And while we are on the subject of light and dark, what about dark yellow? Yellow is certainly the lightest of the spectrum colours, but when yellow is darkened, where does it go? Does it get wrapped up in a kind of brown? Or is it lost to the insecure empire of orange? And if we can just about imagine yellow drifting and darkening towards orange and brown, why can't we imagine it turning towards green in the same way? What happens to yellow as it travels towards green? And how distinct is green from yellow? More distinct than orange is from yellow and purple is from blue and from red? Probably, but then why don't we have a name or names for the colour-space between green and yellow?

Imagine a rectangular grid made up of 320 equal units, 40 wide and

8 high.²⁶ Each unit is a single flat colour. The whole grid is arranged from right to left like a spectrum. From top to bottom, there are eight steps of tonal variation from near-white to near-black. A series of irregular four- or five-sided shapes is placed over the grid in different positions, like mini-continent on a map. Each shape represents the extent of the focal point of a Berlin-Kay basic colour term, as selected by speakers of twenty different languages. The shapes representing yellow, orange, red and brown are quite small, covering on average only four or five units of the grid. The shapes representing green, blue and purple, on the other hand, are much bigger, covering twelve to eighteen units. (Pink is somewhere between the two; black and white are each concentrated on a single unit, as might be expected.) This suggests that there is a high level of agreement among different speakers as to the focus of yellow, orange and red, but much less general agreement as to what constitute the foci of other colours. There are two other features of this map that are worth noting. First, these mini-continent occupy in total less than a third of the map's overall surface, indicating that an enormous range of colours are thought of as composite, or are simply not thought of very much at all. Second, while most of the colour-continent have only narrow channels between them, there is a much larger uncharted area between yellow and green. Curiously, it is in this area, in this sea of yellowish-green, that Kierkegaard found his tramp and Jarman's friend bought his coat. For the philosopher C. L. Hardin, author of one of the most comprehensive and rigorous studies of the science of colour, this gap, this nameless colour between yellow and green, remains an anomaly (as does the entire existence of pink, incidentally). Nevertheless, he offers a tentative and, for a philosopher-scientist, a rather weird explanation for this space: he thinks it is not a very nice colour, or that people tend not to like it, so nobody has bothered to name it.

Wittgenstein asked: 'How do I know this colour is red?' To which he replied: ' . . . because I have learned English.'²⁷ To put it another way: How

do I know this is *mabi:ru*? Because I have learned Hanunoo. William Gass on the relationship between colour names and colours, starting with blue:

The word itself has another colour. It's not a word with any resonance, although the *e* was once pronounced. There is only a bump now between *b* and *l*, the relief at the end, the whew. It hasn't the sly turn which crimson takes halfway through, yellow's deceptive jelly, or the rolled down sound in brown. It hasn't violet's rapid sexual shudder, or like a rough road the irregularity of ultramarine, the low puddle in mauve like a pancake covered with cream, the disapproving purse to pink, the assertive brevity of red, the whine of green.²⁸

Gass acknowledges his debt to the pigmented letters of Arthur Rimbaud: 'I invented the colour of vowels! – *A* black, *E* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green.'²⁹ And how did Rimbaud know *I* was red? Because he had learned French, presumably.

This is confusing. To discuss colour terms is, it seems, to talk about language more than it is to talk about colour. Basic colour terms may be universal, but they are also mainly useless when it comes to the study of colour. Gass's beloved blue is everywhere, and everywhere it is different. The word *blue* holds the entire disorganized and antagonistic mass of blues in a prim four-lettered cage. His essay is a wonderful drunken tumble into the chaos of the colour. It is confusing. But the other common way of dividing up colour into colours – the slicing up of the spectrum into bands or wedges and the further division of these shapes into primaries and secondaries – is no less confusing. 'Light itself is a heterogeneous mixture of differently refrangible rays', noted Isaac Newton in 1665, in the middle of a remarkable century which provided much of our modern understanding of optics.³⁰ Newton wasn't alone in his investigation of the properties of light: the law of refraction had been discovered nearly 50 years earlier by Willebrand van Snel van Royen, and the same law

had been formulated independently by René Descartes, whose 'Origin of Rainbows' had published in 1637. If, with Pierre de Fermat, these scientist-philosophers provided the first clear outlines of a systematic theory of light, Newton's great contribution – at the age of 22 – was to colour it in.

When Newton refracted white light through a glass prism and produced a coloured spectrum, he was doing science. But when he divided the result into seven distinct colours, what we now call the colours of the rainbow, he was doing something else. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet: there is something wrong with the tail end of the list; it doesn't sound quite right; it's confusing, to children, adults and Berlin-Kay alike. Either Newton's English had a different set of basic colour terms or something else was at stake. In fact, it is known that Newton had a strong interest in musical harmonies, and that he divided the spectrum into seven colours in order to make it correspond to the seven distinct notes in the musical scale. For Charles Blanc, it made more sense to divide God's palette into six colours, as it did for the designer of the Apple Computer logo, whose partially eaten spectrum gazes at me every time I sit down to write. The spectral Apple has horizontal bands which begin with green at the top and end with blue; when Ellsworth Kelly made a series of multi-panel paintings entitled *Spectrum*, he used thirteen vertical bands with a (different) yellow at each end. The highly observant John Constable, on the other hand, often settled for a three-colour spectrum in red, white and blue rainbows. Newton, as John Gage has noted, thought of settling for five colours; painting from the medieval period and since has represented the spectrum sometimes in two colours, sometimes in four, sometimes in more. For me, the rainbow spreads its colour evenly at both edges but has a kink in the middle, where yellow meets green, where Kierkegaard met his tramp, where colour has no name.

The rainbow is a universally observable and consistent natural phenomenon, and yet its representations, both verbal and visual, are strikingly inconsistent. Rainbows are always seen through the prism of

a culture; they are marked by habits of language or the conventions of painting. Kelly's spectrum and the Apple spectrum are highly schematic; they reduce a great undivided analogical sweep to six or thirteen discrete units. These units are not necessarily named, but they are isolated from one another. They relate to a system. Newton did more than name the colours of the rainbow. He also took the band of differently refrangible rays and joined up the two ends. In doing this, he made the first colour circle, the first diagram of colour and colours. It is brilliant, concise and in many ways very practical. At least, a later, tidied-up, more symmetrical version of Newton's colour circle has been immensely useful. This is the six-colour colour circle, the one based on the three primaries, red, yellow and blue; the one passed down in art classes throughout the West. It's useful for painters or, at least, for some painters, some of the time. But this particular colour circle is not much use to printers, or to those who mix their colours through the cathode-ray tube, or to those who work the paint-mixing machines in hardware shops. The printers' primaries are yellow, cyan, magenta and black; televisions mix red, green and blue light; the colour circle of commercial paints has four effective primaries in red, yellow, blue and green. We have different primaries for different jobs; different primary colours for different types of painting; primary colours for mixing inks and for mixing light.

In the same way as there are basic colour terms there are basic colours. They are universal – but they are also contingent. Colour is universal, and colours are contingent. Is that right? The world is colour, and it is full of colours. We see in colour, and we see colours. Colour is nature, and colours are culture. Colour is analogical, and colours are digital. Colour is a curve, and colours are points on that curve. Or colour is a wheel, and colours are the infinite and infinitely thin spokes inserted in the wheel. These spokes, rotated in another dimension, *Flatland*-like, become planes (as on a Rolodex), those flat areas of individual colour that we see around us all the time. These may be bad analogies, but there aren't any good

ones. And it doesn't really matter anyway, as we seem to get by. Colour is Dionysiac, and colours are Apolline. How does that sound? Colour is Nietzschean 'primal oneness' and colours are the 'principal of individuation'. This at least doesn't sound too distant from the ways in which Cézanne, Corb, Huxley and Kristeva wrote about colour.

Colour is in everything, but it is also independent of everything. Or it promises or threatens independence. Or is it the case that the more we treat colour as independent, the more we become aware of its dependence on materials and surfaces; the more we treat colour in combination with actual materials and surfaces, the more its distinctiveness becomes apparent? There is a belief that objects would somehow remain unchanged in substance if their colour was removed; in that sense, colour is secondary. I might just as easily say that colours remain the same even when objects are removed; in that sense, colour is primary. When colour is more than tinted chiaroscuro, when it is vivid, it is also autonomous. It separates itself from the object; it has its own life. That car may happen to be bright yellow, but no more than that bright yellow may happen to be a car. I can imagine the car another colour, but no more than I can imagine the yellow another shape. William Gass again: '... shape is the distance colour goes securely.' And: '... every colour is a completed presence in the world, a recognisable being apart from any object.' Stephen Melville again: 'We ... know colour only as everywhere bounded ... But colour repeatedly breaks free of or refuses such constraint ...'³¹