

Two Poems on Colour

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Christopher Norris is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Cardiff University. He worked on literary criticism, on the question of realism and antirealism in philosophy, on Derrida and deconstructionism and on the philosophy of science. In the past few years he has also authored several philosophical poems. In this issue we present two poems he wrote that are dedicated to color.

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Missing Hues

«Wherever in the image of red and green stripes the observers looked, the colour they saw was ‘simultaneously red and green’, Crane and Piantanida wrote in their paper. Furthermore, ‘some observers indicated that although they were aware that what they were viewing was a colour (that is, the field was not achromatic), they were unable to name or describe the colour. One of these observers was an artist with a large colour vocabulary».

(Natalie Wolchover)

All shades conspire to hint at missing hues¹.
What though they're out of mind and out of sight?
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

That's how the sense of shades unknown accrues
Each time the quick-spin colour-wheel turns white.
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

Let parrot-charts find room for cockatoos,
Pale plumage waving subtly in the light:
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

Here, too, the colour-watcher may seek clues
To moods beyond the simply dark or bright.
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

¹ This poem was first published in C. Norris, *A partial Truth*, The Seventh Quarry Press Swansea, Wales 2019, pp. 43-4.

Then there'll be spectral variants of the blues
With chords that set a darkling mood aright.
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

Some say those shades are ones that artists use
Though nowhere marked on colour-charts packed tight.
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

Perhaps it's here that Newton pays his dues
To Goethe's *Farbenlehre* fancy-flight.
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

So let your theory-choice depend on whose
Account allows that hues are infinite:
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

Yet spectrum-hoppers cannot pick and choose
Where best to land from some great theory-height.
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

As bands dissolve so we should quit fixed views.
Let nuance reign, let differences be slight!
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

Why fear lest colour-boundaries blend and fuse?
Why let fixed views impose their nuance-blight?
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose.

From what's most fugitive let's take our cues,
What's squint, oblique, opaque, half-glimpsed, not-quite:
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

For then maybe we'll figure what ensues
When nuance dawns as clearly as it might.
Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose;
All shades conspire to hint at missing hues.

Giverny

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«You'll understand, I'm sure, that I'm chasing the merest sliver of colour. It's my own fault. I want to grasp the intangible. It's terrible how the light runs out. Colour, any colour, lasts a second, sometimes 3 or 4 minutes at most». (Claude Monet)

«Monet is only an eye, but, good Lord, what an eye!» (Paul Cézanne)

«The critic Florent Fels encountered . . . a proud, small old man, who dodged the obstacles in his path uncertainly. Behind the thick lenses of his spectacles, his eyes appeared enormous, like those of an insect searching for the last light» (Ross King, *Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the painting of the water lilies*)

Four minutes at the most, and then they die².

Years since I dreamed I'd get the colours right.

No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Nice of Cezanne to praise me up, but why

Make something wondrous of an old man's plight?

Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Ten minutes – more or less – and I'd get by

On memory plus technique as best I might.

No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Photography is one new trick I try

² This poem was first published in C. Norris, *The Matter of Rhyme: verse-music and the ring of ideas*, De La Salle University Press- Sussex Academic Press, Manila- Eastbourne 2018, pp. 1-3.

To conjure up their hues again despite
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Time was when those four minutes used to fly
Yet hues would iridesce throughout their flight.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

My dear friend Clemenceau says I'll raise high
The nation's cultural stock, but I take fright:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

I'd rather he just spare a passing sigh
For all the hues now lost to vision's blight.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Giverny's my dream-world, yet a far cry
From what that vision once strove to requite:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

The critics praise my lilies but apply
Mere words that spell them out in black and white.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

The mind's its own place and disdains what I
Spy in each change of hue, however slight:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Mark how the pigments shade-shift as they dry
Through some strange interzone of day and night.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

That eye of mine sees colours go awry
Through cataracts that further cloud my sight.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

I scarcely know where water ends and sky
Begins, so it's sheer chaos I invite:
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

How splendid our precursors who defy
The chaos by their colours clear and bright.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Some days there are when all that fake bonsai
And suchlike oriental stuff seems trite.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

Georges says he'll fix it so the state will buy
And house my lilies if I just sit tight.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

For what's the point of some cut-price Versailles
If likeness isn't your ambition's height?
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

A torment to me, that I won't deny,
Yet still I prize those flickerings of the light.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die;
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.