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THINKING COLOUR WRITING: INTRODUCTION

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How do modern writers *write* colour? How do today's readers respond to the invitation to 'think colour' as they read? How might literary critics develop ways of capturing colour at work in a range of textual formats? To what extent can critical thought on colour in visual media illuminate the textual life of colour? What language does inexpressible colour make for itself in texts? These questions indicate some of the lines of enquiry pursued by the five contributors to this Special Issue on reading colour values in modern writing in French: Eric Robertson, Adam Watt, Emily McLaughlin, Shirley Jordan, and Clémence O'Connor. Together the contributors explore the colour capacity – actual and potential – of their chosen texts; they track the variable agency of colour in writing; and they engage in the migration of colour concepts from critical thought and theory to the practice of reading texts visually and, especially, chromatically.

Modern and contemporary poetry and narrative in French have an intense and sustained relation to visual practice in forms and formats that include ekphrasis and the *livre d'artiste*, yet the question of colour in the literary text remains under-explored by critics and researchers, and, we believe, the colour capacity of texts is consequently undervalued or even occluded. This is something of a paradox in interdisciplinary and increasingly intermedial contexts shaped, *inter alia*, by text and image studies, visuality

studies, emblem studies, screen culture research, and studies of the graphic novel. The persisting under-exploration of textual colour seems anomalous, too, given major contributions to the scholarly understanding of colour in the Western cultural tradition in key areas of aesthetics, philosophy, and art history by experts including John Gage, Michel Pastoureau, Murielle Gagnebin, and Georges Roque, and in the cross-over area of literature and art explored brilliantly by Jacqueline Lichtenstein in *La Couleur de l'éloquence*.¹ The engagement with (primarily) visual colour by Western thinkers of the

¹ John Gage's works include *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993); *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); *Colour in Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006). Michel Pastoureau's works on colour history and colour symbolism include *Bleu: Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) and *Vert: Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2013). Murielle Gagnebin, 'Chromatique et herméneutique' in *Question de couleurs: IXèmes rencontres psychanalytiques d'Aix-en-Provence*, ed. by C. David et al. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991), offers an important philosophical reflection on art-historical colour. Georges Roque, *Art et science de la couleur: Chevreul et les peintres, de Delacroix à l'abstraction* (Paris: Gallimard (Tel), 2009) is a key essay on the traffic between science, aesthetics and art practice. Jacqueline Lichtenstein's magisterial study *La Couleur éloquente: rhétorique et peinture à l'âge classique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989) examines the shift in value that occurs when seventeenth-century art develops reciprocities between reason and sensuality, and colour comes to the fore in a productive relation with line and form. Lichtenstein's work takes 'colour' into the metaphorical realm as rhetorical device (hyperbole, pathos, ornament), an analogue of visual colour.

later twentieth and twenty-first century (Wittgenstein, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Kristeva, Cixous, Derrida, Deleuze, Didi-Huberman) has had minimal translational impact on critical approaches to colour writing, yet can create more porous connections between visual and textual disciplines, as the work of the contributors to this Special Issue demonstrates.² Colour study in the literary field has, to date, tended to default to invocations of traditional colour symbolism and has, at times, limited its scope to statistical analyses of chromatic frequencies in linguistic corpora and textual databases.³

² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible, suivi de Notes de travail* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 210–36 ('La Joie de Giotto'); Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978); Hélène Cixous, 'Bathsheba or the interior Bible', in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 3–15; Roland Barthes, 'La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. IV, 785–892; Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Homme qui marchait dans la couleur* (Paris: Minuit, 2001).

³ Haibing Zhang, 'Symbolic Meanings of Colors in *The Great Gatsby*', *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol 10, no. 6, 2015, 38–44. *New Directions in Colour Studies*, ed. by Carole Biggam et al. (Amsterdam and London: John Benjamins, 2011), crosses fields as diverse as social practice, heraldry, linguistic evolution, onomastics, and

Yet, sporadically, over time, qualitative approaches to colour writing have emerged: the work on modernist writing undertaken by Jack Stewart in English studies over thirty years (much of it gathered in Stewart's monograph study *Color, Space and Creativity: Art and Ontology in Five British Writers*) engages extensively with colour as part of (modernist) literature's aesthetic and philosophical project.⁴

The representation of colour has been receiving invigorated attention most recently in cultural studies, in contemporary postcolonial thought, and in screen studies, opening up perspectives that can, in turn, nourish exploratory readings in French and Francophone literary studies. In *Blue Mythologies* (2013), a highly original series of readings in the nexus of material cultural studies, historical study, and creative writing, Carol Mavor pursues a series of evocative and deeply felt reflections on the aesthetic and affective charge of blue.⁵ Whether she is viewing the cobalt cityscape of Jodhpur or appraising the cyanotypes created by the British botanist Anna Atkins in the mid-nineteenth century, Mavor teaches us important lessons about how to relish colour, visually, haptically, and affectively. Each of Mavor's 'blue mythologies' is a site of cultural, poetic, and autobiographical practice that empowers the reader, in turn, to attend with curiosity and with care – and creativity – to colour instances in art, in nature and the natural sciences, in the human face, in landscape, and in the built environment. Mavor

psychology, but the primary focus of this survey volume is on evidence-gathering and on interpretations based on frequencies and the statistical distribution of colour instances.

⁴ Jack Stewart, *Color, Space and Creativity: Art and Ontology in Five British Writers* (Madison, N.J. and Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).

⁵ Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies* (London: Reaktion, 2013).

shares ways of encountering colour that arrest and inspire the beholder, and that invite us to approach and immerse in the flesh of colour. Whilst ‘blue’ is the terrain explored here (and possibly the most privileged focus of colour exploration for critics, artists, and filmmakers, from Yves Klein to Kieślowski and Derek Jarman), Mavor’s most recent reflections on blue emerge out of her work on blue and black in their corporeal contexts in film (Resnais, Marker) and in critical thought (Barthes).⁶ In French film studies, attention to colour has produced searching and exquisite work by Emma Wilson on blue and the postmodern subject in her study of *Trois couleurs: bleu* in Kieślowski’s trilogy.⁷ Wilson meditates on blue as affective process in her appraisal of *La Vie d’Adèle*, Abdellatif Kechiche’s film based on Julie Marot’s graphic novel *Le Bleu est une couleur chaude*.⁸ From philosophical and visual cultural perspectives, Claude Imbert has explored black not merely as ‘the seal of modernity’ à la *Baudelaire*, but as a source of modernist equivocation, and as a transformational force – or agency – for viewers.⁹ What unites these writers on colour across the fields of blue and of black is a creative approach which allies materiality and affect, and which spurs forms of supple critical thinking that are

⁶ Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of ‘Camera Lucida’, ‘La Jetée’, ‘Sans soleil’ and ‘Hiroshima mon amour’* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁷ Emma Wilson, ‘Three Colours, Blue: Kieślowski, Colour and the Postmodern Subject’, *Screen* (1998), vol. 39, no. 4, 349-62.

⁸ Emma Wilson, film review of *La Vie d’Adèle*, *Paris Update*, 13 October 2013.

⁹ Claude Imbert, ‘Manet, Effets of Black’, *Paragraph*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2011, 187–98 (p. 189).

exploratory in approach and empathic in their affective engagement with their colour subject.

Film studies and cultural studies are drawing fresh critical attention to colour, but work on colour in textual and literary studies is more sporadic.¹⁰ It is, perhaps above all, in the field of politics and postcolonial thought that colour – predominantly skin colour – has received the most urgent and sustained attention. Richard Dyer’s important cultural study of the invisibility of white in film and in photography – *White* (1997) – probes the systemic Western ‘naturalization’ of whiteness that is evidenced by the perpetuation of the blind spot of white in white people’s constructions of themselves. Dyer argues for attention to the occluded (‘blanked’?) racial significance of representations of white in sources not explicitly about race.¹¹ Whilst this has important implications for work in French and Francophone studies, postcolonial thought tends to remain within what Shirley Jordan here, in her reading of Marie NDiaye, terms ‘racialized paradigms’ of colour. Jordan sets out to liberate colour and colour thinking from those paradigms, and to explore the critical and creative practice of colour in relation both to visual culture and to the poetic visuality of the literary text. Influential for Emily McLaughlin’s study of

¹⁰ In screen studies the pioneering work of Sarah Street on colour process in British film-making has given rise to the monograph study *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation, 1900-55* (London: British Film Institute, 2012), and to two volumes co-edited by Street, Simon Brown, and Liz Watkins: *Colour and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive* (London: British Film Institute, 2013); *British Colour Cinema: Practices and Theories* (London: British Film Institute, 2013).

¹¹ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

colour in Yves Bonnefoy's poetics is Michael Taussig's *What colour is the sacred?* (2010), with its entwined histories of colour and colonialism, and its spiralling out of its roots in anthropology to draw in literary texts from Proust to Burroughs.¹² Georges Didi-Huberman's philosophy of white and his exploration of monochrome primacy in conceptual and experimental art forms (*Blancs soucis*, 2013) inform Eric Robertson's reading of scenarios of trauma across a range of media that are also profound creative journeys into what it is to be human.¹³ Colour thinking in Merleau-Ponty and in Wittgenstein, and the earliest art-historical engagement with haptic values (Alois Riegl), shape Clémence O'Connor's discerning study of chromatic values in the embodied expressivity of Béatrice Bonhomme's poetry. Adam Watt turns to Paul Valéry's landmark essay of 1919 on Leonardo to find a methodology that might travel from the reception of colour in the visual medium to the understanding of colour expression in writing in Valéry's own early works, and beyond.

Finally, this Special Issue aims to encourage textual researchers and literary critics to invest more sustained attention to colour in literature where attention to date has been occasional. In the formative field of contemporary visibility studies, Mieke Bal's *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* focuses on the visual tropes of modernist writing, yet Bal passes quickly over the place and power of prismaticity: it is almost as if the ancient quarrel between line (in this case, the anti-linear, anti-telic values of modernist form) and colour were being revived, with colour once more the secondary or

¹² Michael Taussig, *What colour is the sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis* (Paris: Minuit, 2013).

subaltern value.¹⁴ We need to challenge Bal's occlusion of chromatic values and argue for the structuring/de-structuring agency of colour in the modernist aesthetic. Recently, Davide Vago has sought to address colour values in Proust's writing in an important work which, as well as opening up colour consciousness in *À la recherche* ambitiously, offers an important point of departure in terms of how colour study might be undertaken in literary studies, both on a grand scale and in ways attentive to textual specificity. But, as *Proust en couleur* (2012) searches for an overarching colour methodology so it reveals the constraints of overly systematizing the equivocations of colour expressivity and the limitations of a metric study of colour values.¹⁵

Colour values in poetry and poetic narrative engage critics exceptionally. One 'exceptional' instance, in both senses of the word, is Michael Sheringham's essay 'Language, Colour and the Enigma of Everydayness' on chromatic inscription in later twentieth-century French poetry.¹⁶ Sheringham lays the colour ground on which French and Francophone studies can build, as Emily McLaughlin demonstrates in her reading of Yves Bonnefoy's poetry and art writing. Sheringham reviews the major currents in colour theory and thought from Goethe to Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, via Ernst Jünger, tracking the turn to subjectivity and to affect in philosophical and aesthetic discussions of

¹⁴ Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Davide Vago, *Proust en couleur* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012).

¹⁶ Michael Sheringham, 'Language, Colour and the Enigma of Everydayness' appeared in M. Syrotinski and I. MacLachlan (eds), *Sensual Reading: Reading in Relation to the Senses* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011), pp. 127-52.

colour values. At the heart of Sheringham's concerns is the question of how colour resists language and also how it ceaselessly requires and solicits language: this idea is significant for our working with both the explicit capacity and the immanent capacity of colour in the literary text. Questions of colour saturation, the eruptive agency of colour, and, frequently, colour reticence – processes of elision and restriction in the chromatic economy – are central to the readings developed here.

So, in this Special Issue we take an exploratory approach to the visuality of narrative and poetry produced in the aesthetic and cultural crosscurrents of literary experimentalism of the later nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Our approach is intermedial, but also transcultural, and often transhistorical. The primary textual material examined includes the writing of canonical modernist writers (Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust) and texts by leading contemporary writers (Bonnefoy, Bonhomme, NDiaye). The five readings examine primarily the colour practice of writers, and, in the process, they work also to uncover the conceptual colour work of these writers all of whom engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and, obliquely or more directly, probe the implications of that dialogue for colour-in-writing: Valéry with Leonardo, Cristofano Allori, and Zurbarán; Proust with Paulus Potter and Albert Cuyp; Bonnefoy with Piet Mondrian and Claude Garache; NDiaye with JMW Turner; Bonhomme with Mario Villani. All of the readings shed crucial light on the colour philosophies and chromatic methodologies (however fragmentary and provisional) of the writers themselves as they work with colour, or write in response to the chromatic thought and practice of fellow artists and writers.

Narrative and poetry written in a period of deep reflection on the visual arts in transnational and transhistorical contexts raise key questions about interdisciplinary innovation as creative projects that constantly cross and complicate the boundaries of medium and discipline. Responding to the intense and complex engagement of writers with colour from the later nineteenth century to the present, the contributors to this Special Issue explore texts and their colour relations across an exceptional range of media: from seventeenth-century Spanish painting to Dutch Golden Age and Flemish Baroque art; from English Romanticism, French Impressionism and Symbolism, through Cubism, to international Abstraction and Conceptual Art; from experimental and aleatory music to American modernist poetry, early twentieth-century feminist writing, and twenty-first-century installation art.

Placing colour at the centre of the study of French literary modernity across the late nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the contributors probe the transformative interrelation of colour and structure and begin, through this prism, to re-evaluate literary modernity as a transcultural phenomenon. Their individual readings expose the complex, uneven and paradoxical relationship of writers with colour: from the celebration of colour and the recognition of its meliorative value, through resistance to colour, to the critique or intentional restriction of colour. In the process, fundamental questions are posed and probed. How do colour and structure interrelate in modern narrative and poetry? How do colour and modern consciousness coincide? How do writers write the connection between colour and material objects, and how might they appraise the relation of colour both to the materiality and to the abstraction of language? Together, the contributors consider colour in relation to questions of ethics, affect,

perception, consciousness, and creativity; they work to explore how colour, often with an extreme economy of means, amplifies and intensifies, punctuates and punctures, writerly meditations on exile, pleasure, loss, landscape, consolation, beauty, violence, ageing, and mourning. This Special Issue aims to spark reflection on how literature researchers *of all periods* might deepen their engagement with colour – in its fullness and in its sparseness – in the verbal medium, and how this might generate fresh, adventurous reading (and viewing) practices. As well as opening up the colour capacity – actual and immanent – of writing, we aim to spur readers to realize (both senses) their critical capability as readers, and researchers, of colour.

Working in supple ways across art history, cultural history, poetry, and music criticism, Eric Robertson investigates the ethical, the political, and the aesthetic resonance of monochrome values in abstract and conceptual art and in ‘difficult’ poetry. His exploration of the morphing and the modulation of white (and of some black) draws on Romantic history painting, on the poetry of Mallarmé and on Apollinaire’s dialogue with Orphist art, and on conceptual and installation art. Reflecting on colour and light in the representation of the plight of the shipwrecked, victims of political and colonialist cynicism, Robertson discusses the deconstructive energy of *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (1818–19). He scrutinizes the values of white in Géricault’s painting as these hover between representations of the still living and the dead, and are offset by the luminous dark skin of the slave who waves the *tricolore*. Robertson meditates on *blanc* as white and as blank, and thus as a colour that impels, ceaselessly, acts of creativity. Focusing on *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, Robertson is concerned with the movement of the values of white between sail, star and page, between material and ineffable, and

across the space of visual, auditory, and cognitive signals. Alert to the intermedial and transcultural agency of *blanc*, he reveals the monochrome transposition from *Un coup de dés* to Apollinaire's elliptical 'Liens' where visual abstraction and the imponderability of white shape poetry of sublime beauty and luminosity. Working from Georges Roque's proposition that colour is abstract and generates further abstract or abstractive working, Robertson tracks the modernist momentum of white from Kandinsky to Jean Arp, and focuses on monochromatic values both as structuring form and as fathomless enigma, thus calling into question the centuries-old separation of colour (*colore*) and line (*linea*) that reaches back at least to Aristotle.

The intermedial reading of white proposed by Robertson crosses the boundaries of exploratory art and experimental music (Cage), and opens up the synaesthetic capacity of white. Robertson turns to the Hungarian-French artist Simon Hantaï whose 'silences rétiniers' relate the white of visual perception to the material gesture of touching and tying/untying and to the acoustic analogue of white resonating in relation to the colours that surround it. A major interlocutor of Robertson is Georges Didi-Huberman, whose *Blancs soucis* (2013) essays explore the equivocations of white. Robertson, pursuing his reflection on colour in the context of extreme human suffering, explores the 'black milk' of Paul Celan's holocaust poetry and the dynamic interrogation of binary values in colour thought and practice. He considers, in this context, Pierre Soulages's use of black as an instrument of luminosity, and concludes his journey where it began, with a meditation on art's power to evoke the extremes of agonistic human experience through variations on a palette of white, grey, and black. Robertson probes the equivocal conjunction of monochrome and luminous values in the multi-medial work *Drift* (2014) created by

Caroline Bergvall to represent narratives of maritime trauma. Thus, Robertson's reading of Bergvall folds back upon his opening exploration of those two iconic shipwreck narratives immersed in dark and light: Géricault's *Medusa* raft and Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*.

The transhistorical and transcultural significance of colour writing links Eric Robertson's intermedial exploration to Adam Watt's reading of chromatic values in Proust's early ekphrastic response to Dutch Golden Age painting and in Valéry's poetic responses to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Florentine and Spanish painting. Watt, problematizing Adorno, brings together two canonical writers of the twentieth century in terms of their textual treatment of colour. Both Proust and Valéry engaged acutely with the Western tradition in painting and put colour to work in their earliest inter-artistic encounters. Watt opens his reflection by focusing on the writers' pictorial sensibility and their responses to artworks contemplated *in situ*: at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier for Valéry, and at the Louvre for Proust. Watt investigates how writers, engaging with colour in painting in their serendipitous everyday encounters, invent colour: how they 'make it new' (to invoke Pound) in their own, writerly medium. Watt finds in the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens's concept of 'consummation' – the reasoned imagination that founds the complex, variable affinity of writer and painter – an approach to reading the interrelation of colour and form.

Watt discerns in Valéry's thinking around Leonardo a frame that might explain, retrospectively, the writer's chromatic response to works of the Florentine late-Mannerist painter Cristofano Allori (1575–1621) and of the Spanish Golden Age painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) in the prose poetry of his 'Glose sur quelques peintures'

(*Chimère* (1892)). Watt scrutinizes the texture of Valéry's colour writing as it surges and recedes, and he allies the haptic and the kinetic values of colour writing with a keen sense of the acoustic values of colour-words, in ways that connect with Robertson's multi-sensory reading of white (and black). As well as attending to the precision of Valéry's response to Allori's portrait of a young page, Watt reveals the points of divergence between poet and painter, the instances where the writer innovates chromatically in the very absence of a pictorial colour trigger. This is a key question for all the contributors to *Thinking Colour Writing*: colour absence, colour immanence, and chromatic reticence provide a central focus for critical enquiry (we ask, for example, what happens when colour, explicitly referenced, *goes away* in a text). Watt draws attention to Valéry's treatment of the theme of time and decay via chromatic recession and the fading of *candeur* in the poet's visual reading of Allori. Turning to Valéry's response to Zurbarán, Watt uncovers the alliance of colour-writing and form in prose poetry that alternates, in *chiaroscuro* manner, between dark and light phases, and that reveals the deep chromatic empathy of Valéry with Zurbarán's painting.

Surveying readings of Proust's rich colour seam published since the 1950s, Watt notes an enduring tendency of critics to default to traditional colour symbolism and to foreground frequencies in the colour lexicon at the expense of a fuller, more profound reading of the shape and movement of colour writing, its protean and pliant qualities. Here, Watt explores a question that is central to this Special Issue: that is, the need for critics to tackle, urgently, the agency of colour in texts, and specifically to attend to colour processes: their thickening or thinning (haptic value); their quickening and slowing (kinetic value); and, always, the supple quality of colour writing. Watt examines

colour in the ekphrastic poetry that Proust produced in response to Dutch seventeenth-century painting, focusing on the poems inspired by the art of Albert Cuyp and of Paulus Potter. Watt reveals Proust's poetic practice of amplifying vague or elliptical pictorial elements through attentive, but always intermittent colour work: he highlights the *punctum* value of 'rose' in the early ekphrastic poems with pink's prospective value for *À la recherche*. Thus, Proust the poet is active in supplementing, developing, and extending the colourwork of visual artists in their medium. A mixed chromatic economy of power and rareness in the *Portraits de peintres* highlights, for Watt, the tendency of verbal colour in Proust's poems to fade and recede: he links this once more, as he has done in his reading of Valéry, to pervasive themes of finitude and decline.

Nuanced colour-writing and the practice of the Barthesian *punctum* – deft and fleshed, intermittent and intriguing – provides an important bridge between Valéry and Proust, these two major figures of French and European modernist aesthetic theory and practice, and as we shall see, creates a methodological *fil conducteur* across the contributions to this Special Issue.

Emily McLaughlin begins her reading of Yves Bonnefoy's *Début et fin de la neige* (1991) by exploring colour values through considerations of agency and affect across a range of humanities disciplines, from art history and anthropology to cultural studies and literary criticism (John Gage, Louis Marin, Michael Taussig, and Michael Sheringham). Central to McLaughlin's reading is Sheringham's problematizing of colour reception in critical thought, and his view that colour experience always exceeds the capacity of critical thought to account for it. McLaughlin weaves Sheringham's reflections on colour and affect with Michael Taussig's appraisal of colour experience as

foundational and formative in enabling the human subject's immersion in deeper, more attuned visual practices that can begin to counter the deleterious effects of material modernization. For McLaughlin, Taussig's reflections – on how experiencing colour, and thinking about colour, can teach us about being in the world – resonate with the poetic vision and the writerly practice of Yves Bonnefoy. Of all modern French poets, Bonnefoy is the most probing of human engagement with nature and with the real; his poetry invites us to attend to the world with care and appreciation. McLaughlin's is the first ecocritical reading of the unbreakable connectedness of materiality and consciousness in Bonnefoy's poetry. A major interlocutor of modern and contemporary painters, Bonnefoy is an exquisite colourist in poetry and in the poetics of his art writing. McLaughlin begins by making the case for reading Bonnefoy's colour practice in *Début et fin de la neige* as 'punctual' in the etymological sense – and in the Barthesian sense – of (colour) eruptions and fractured (chromatic) instances. Drawing on Taussig's vision of colour as expressive of the mystery of materiality, McLaughlin approaches Bonnefoy's writing in terms of a series of chromatic signs or intimations, attentive to the disruptive agency of colour that is formative of Bonnefoy's later poetry. Above all she reads for the equivocation in this writing of colour because Bonnefoy allies disruptive colour with a sense of the generous capaciousness of the chromatic experience in bringing together visual and haptic dimensions. Developing her ecocritical perspective, McLaughlin examines the immersive quality of the colour experience of Bonnefoy's poetry and investigates this through a reading of some of the poet's major essays on colour in painting. Bonnefoy's absorbed attention to colour is highlighted in his essays on Claude Garache and on Piet Mondrian, where the art writer probes the interrelation of chromaticity and crisis and where colour

captures and amplifies the contradiction between the thickness of presence and the unknowability of the absolute. McLaughlin focuses on the piercing intensity of the colour *punctum*, its transformative energy, its uncontainable force, as she intertwines the critical thinking of Taussig and of Barthes. Colour, its in sporadic, interruptive energy, causes human certainties to be undone and normative interpretations to be challenged. Colour, McLaughlin concludes, is the force that fleetingly and fragmentally, as Bonnefoy's late poetry reveals, punctures the persistence of transcendental values and affirms, in their place, the value of existence as contingent and participative, constantly drawing us into its provisionality and its process.

Shirley Jordan engages with the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of colour wash in Marie NDiaye, breaking with the critical tradition of exploring colour solely as skin colour in NDiaye's work. Jordan sets out to probe chromatic practices and values in ways that reflect NDiaye's experimental approach to visuality in dialogue with the colour philosophy of Goethe. Jordan reveals NDiaye's discerning approach to the painterly process of colour and in particular to colour wash and chromatic hues related to the expression of dysphoria. Thus, Jordan's approach to NDiaye's textual working of colour offers a way of moving beyond a purely political reading of NDiaye and uncovers a subtle verbal colourist at work, one who seizes something of colour's capacity to disturb and intrude, and rarely to comfort, far less to decorate. Jordan reveals the fluctuating economy of colour in NDiaye's texts as she tracks colour's capacity to surge and to recede. Jordan discerns the complexities of verbal colour in three narratives as they relate to the alterations of affect and empathy, and to the shifts of cognition and consciousness. She is alert to colour's agency as it moves and morphs in texts, highlighting the kinetic

values of chromatic writing: colour is process and flux rather than inert substance in NDiaye's aesthetic. Appraising the labile colourscape of NDiaye's texts, Jordan tracks the writer's sustained treatment of hues of yellow and green, and in the process she draws our attention to two colours that often escape critical attention. (Carol Mavor's innovative readings of blue (twice) and of black, cited here by Jordan, are a reverse reminder that certain *other* colours – green and especially yellow – are regularly subordinated or occluded in critical readings of colour-writing.)

Jordan's focus on the *work* of colour in NDiaye's texts draws in the colour-work of the nineteenth-century British painter, JMW Turner, and the later nineteenth-century American feminist writer and social reformer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Jordan reveals NDiaye's writerly experiment in thinking colour in relation to deep inner states of being. Taking first the figuration of the 'woman-fish' in NDiaye's *La Naufragée* (1999), Jordan investigates the narrative's post-human context and its focus on the alternative seeing that is inspired and informed by the thirty-seven Turner colour reproductions that fill the left-hand page. The implications for colour-writing are significant here: in NDiaye's writing chromatic values are unleashed and allowed to merge and melt together, the woman-fish's experience developing an analogue with Turner's abstractive colourscares. Jordan reveals in NDiaye's writing the chromatic vortex that develops in the pulsating swirl of emotion and sensation, and describes the post-human experience of seeing as experienced by the woman-fish. In considering how Turner-informed colour writing shapes later texts of NDiaye, specifically *Rosie Carpe* (2001) where troubled and troubling movements of yellow permeate material things and atmosphere, Jordan shows us how colour infiltrates and inflects the experience of ethical adversity or psychic unease. Yellow soaks in and

seeps out, giving shape, movement, texture, as well as colour, to the writing of dysphoria. Here Jordan makes a crucial link between NDiaye and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who identifies, in the synaesthetic exploration of yellow in her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the colour of states of feminine psychosis. As Jordan explores the mutating states of colour – yellowness and, in *Autoportrait en vert*, greenness – she demonstrates how NDiaye’s colour-practice in the self-portrait subverts the hegemony of postcolonial constructions of ‘colour’. Thus Ndiaye undoes routine and recuperative critical preoccupations with race and skin colour, and opens up a force field where chromatic values inform and impel the exploration of desires and anxieties. Invasive and enigmatic, colour in NDiaye does no one’s bidding, but is at once outward and inward, powerful and elusive. It is here, perhaps, that Jordan, challenging the hegemony of epidermal readings of NDiaye’s work, reinvigorates postcolonial thinking around colour.

Reflecting on the capacity of poetry to explore colour through the porous and protean space of its discourse, Clémence O’Connor exposes the intimate mesh of colour, perception and memory in the work of the contemporary French poet Béatrice Bonhomme. She begins her reading of colour-in-poetry by probing the philosophical connections between chromatic values and subjectively-experienced reality in the thought of Merleau-Ponty and in Wittgenstein’s fragmentary *Remarks*. O’Connor speculates that fragmentariness of colour thinking in Merleau-Ponty and in Wittgenstein captures the incomplete, unresolved quality of lived colour experience and enacts its impossible demands on language. O’Connor suggests a deep affinity between colour thinking and poetry’s own capacity – supple and always striving – for colour expressivity. Turning to Béatrice Bonhomme’s engagement with phenomenology and her pursuit of the material

and analogical potential of interart relations, O'Connor traces affinities between the poet and her chosen painters in the pursuit of process and an aesthetic of powerful visuality. *La Maison abandonnée* (2006), at the centre of O'Connor's reading, is a *livre d'artiste* that places the vivid colour of Bonhomme's poetry in textual counterpoint to the muted visual tones of Christine Charles's accompanying pastels. Colour experience inaugurates the poetic journey of the speaker as she contemplates the frescoes or the graffiti that cover the walls of the abandoned house of the book's title. At the core of Bonhomme's aesthetic is the idea that colour collides or coincides with senses beyond the visual, especially touch. Opening up this angle, O'Connor explores colour as a catalyst of the writing process and tracks its generation of a series of chromatic notations that connect the primary immediacy of colour to the here-and-now of felt experience. Spatiality and its shaping of colour experience is key to O'Connor's exploration of the synaesthetic resonance of Bonhomme's colour work in its synthesizing of visual experience with haptic and acoustic values. She foregrounds the iterative process – in terms of chromatic resonances and verbal echoes – that shapes Bonhomme's aesthetic. So, O'Connor exposes the *adéquation* between the febrile expression of the frescoes and the unfolding expressivity of the writing as it works between poetic prose and verse poetry. Colour expression in Bonhomme's works reveals the generative momentum of the poet's desire to assuage loss, seek forms of consolation, and create anew. Colour releases the charge of poetry's redemptive violence as it embraces destruction in order to vitalize and vivify. Or, in the words of O'Connor, Bonhomme's highly chromitized poetry is driven by the urge to 'de-conceptualize and re-embody' colour. Here synaesthesia defines an aesthetic that ceaselessly interrogates the normative boundaries between sight, sound and touch,

and, in the process, constantly scrambles distinctions between high culture and popular culture, between erotic yearning and the work of memory, and between philosophical enquiry and experiential joy.

Colour is integral to poetry's non-mimetic project, one of un-doing and liberating, thus O'Connor brings out the de-structuring value of colour and implicitly challenges the 'old lie' that colour and line occupy a relation of mutual opposition and, even, antagonism. Colour, as O'Connor demonstrates, is inextricably linked to the movement of memory, and profoundly related to the process of poetry-making. Linking *La Maison abandonnée* to slightly later works by Bonhomme like *Mutilation d'arbre* (2008) and *Passant de la lumière* (2008), O'Connor extends her exploration of colour's vibrant materiality and its elusive beauty. This final contribution connects with the findings of all the contributors here in its appraisal of the complex movement and the precarious value of colour in modern writing in French.

Across the readings that make up this Special Issue, then, we explore the colour capacity of texts (and the colour consciousness of critics); we track the processes of colour writing as it shapes and reworks the thematic and the formal 'ground' of a range of narrative and poetry texts; we are alert to the disruptive and transformational agency of colour, and work to reveal the ceaseless potential of colour writing to break free from traditional and symbolic recuperations. Very often, and compellingly, our attention is arrested by colour in its elision, its elusiveness, its fragments, and thus its close integration with the de-structuring momentum of modernist and postmodernist writing. In opening an exploration of the fertile traffic, actual and potential, between critical thought (with its predictable concern with visual colour) and the colour practice of writers, we

offer these readings as a model and as an invitation to other researchers, across French and francophone studies and the wider humanities field, to bring to the study of colour-writing innovative critical insights and a keen sense of their own creative adventure.