How Blue is Read:

Language and Sensation in Literature and Philosophy

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Abstract: Philosophers and art critics have long argued that the language of color misses or even mars the ineffable sensation of color. But a literary perspective shows otherwise. Starting with examples of colors read but not seen, and then discussing how philosophers have addressed (and often muddled) the so-called problem of color, I propose thinking of color terms as techniques for stabilizing and directing color sensations. I then show how William H. Gass and Maggie Nelson develop a version of this idea in their respective books about blue, which are really books about the relationship between writing and quality.

Let's begin with two thought experiments. First: imagine a man who has seen all shades of blue, from the deepest navy to the palest pastel, save one. Now suppose that this person encounters a meticulously arranged color chart that arrays all of the world's blues from darkest to lightest, but that leaves out the very shade that he hasn't seen, substituting a white blank for the absent color. Will he be able to form an image of this missing blue? Will he, as the original phrasing of the experiment has it, be able "from his own imagination, to . . . raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, though it had never been conveyed to him by his senses?" That's David Hume, in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748).[1]

Second: imagine that a meteorite lands in a small New England town. It has strange properties: it shrinks with each passing day, and disappears when put in contact with silicone; it's weirdly soft; and when placed under a spectroscope it displays colors beyond any known earthly spectrum. As the substance of the meteorite dwindles to nothing, all that remains is the bizarre color—shimmering, luminescent, and unlike any hue you've ever seen. Could someone who witnessed this color be able to describe it to someone who hadn't? That's H. P. Lovecraft, in his 1927 short story "The Colour Out of Space."

These scenarios raise a shared question in different registers: can you imagine a color you've never seen? For Hume, who held that the man in his story *would* "raise up" an idea of the absent color, the case of the missing blue signaled an exception to his empiricist theory of knowledge. All simple ideas come from sensory impressions, Hume argued—except for the idea of this blue. In this brief passage, Hume countenanced a kind of knowledge derived from the imagination. But he then immediately dismissed the anecdote that led him to this alternative as too "singular" to challenge his "general maxim."[2] Yet Lovecraft's story shows that what stands as an exception to Hume's empiricism forms the rule for literature, especially for literary efforts to conjure or represent sensory perception. Barring children's picture books and the occasional collector's edition, literary descriptions of color lack actual color. If you're reading the word *blue* you aren't looking at blue—so in some sense that blue is always missing. Lovecraft puts this situation of literary color front and center, tasking himself and his readers with imagining a sensation foreign to all previous human experience. It would seem to be an extreme case—the color in the story is literally from beyond this world—but in fact it is an exemplary one, insofar as all imaginative writing seeks to convey something beyond the reader's immediate ken. In other words, by creating a color that can *only* be read and never seen, Lovecraft throws light on a condition of all literary depictions of color (and, by extension, of literary depictions of sensory experience more generally).

Lovecraft mines what Hume leaves behind. In this regard my opening pairing captures the larger relationship between the literature and philosophy of color that the rest of this paper will pursue. For though there is a library's worth of philosophical studies of color (what it is, how we know it), and though many of these studies address how color relates to our words for it, philosophers have rarely addressed the particular problems raised by literary color: how it's made and read. This would be a merely parochial concern were it not that much of the philosophy of color has bounced between the barren extremes of realism and

subjectivism, while the writers, in their inscriptions of chromatic experience, have occupied a more fertile middle ground.[3] Just as Lovecraft's story elaborates an epistemological potential that Hume only glanced towards, literary engagements with color provide a more capacious set of terms for understanding abiding philosophical issues that cluster around chromatic sensations: the nature of qualitative experience and its relationship to language, for instance, or how words relate to feelings, and how feelings relate to the world.

My central claim in this essay will be that imaginative writing enables us to analyze the links between language and color without assuming a stark opposition of our chromatic sensations and the words that name them. This opposition has traditionally taken many forms, from the mundane observation that we can see more than we can readily say, to the idea that the coarseness of our color terms actually does violence to the experience of color. It even runs through a good deal of literary writing, including "The Colour Out of Space." But where philosophers and theorists have insisted on this gap as a consequence of the distance between felt experience (always private) and linguistic communication (always public), literary writers have necessarily taken a different tack. Lovecraft describes the alien hue in his story as "unnamed and unnamable," but his eponymous color does not exist apart from the verbal descriptions and evocations within the tale, and the insistence that it eludes words is just an authorial strategy for working the story's weird effects.[4] When the question of color's opposition to language is posed from the perspective of literature, then, it entails the question of how that opposition is produced and, even more, of the uses to which it is put. To explain what I mean here, I'll discuss some philosophical debates around the meaning of color words and how they are tied to the so-called "problem of color" in modern philosophy. Then I'll turn to two very different writers—William H. Gass and Maggie Nelson—who have addressed this problem in their work to the end of thinking about how words connect to the

world and, in particular, how literary figurations of color extend and transform color experience.

The Problem of Color

To what does a color term refer? A sensation? A private experience of chromatic quality? A property of objects? Something with a physical basis, like the amount and type of light that bounces off an apple and hits the eye (what philosophers call "surface spectral reflectance")?[5] Or does "red" mean something else entirely, unrelated either to phenomenal feeling or physical objects but instead bound up with the generalizations of language? These ambiguities made seemingly simple words like "green" and "blue" the subject of extensive analysis in the early days of analytic philosophy, when Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein puzzled over how language means.

For Russell, the meaning of a color word was linked to its corresponding sensation. As he wrote in "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918), "You cannot understand the meaning of the word 'red' except through seeing red things. There is no other way in which it can be done."[6] Sure, you can look up the word in the OED, which will tell you that it is the color with the greatest wavelength, or the hue of ripe tomatoes, but these verbal definitions alone will not get you any closer to *red*'s real meaning. For that, you have to find some actual red, and look at it.

From this perspective, Lovecraft's attempt to build a story around a color that has never been seen would be literally meaningless: the titular color could have no significance for readers since they could never see it. In fact, this forms a central part of Lovecraft's strategy. Once the meteorite disappears, the lingering color enters a well and poisons the nearby crops, which assume "strange colours that could not be put into any words" (p. 348). The family whose farm is affected slowly grows mad through exposure to the well and its

alien resident, and Lovecraft specifies the source of this madness by calling the color "a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it" (p. 368). Lovecraft emphasizes this profound alterity precisely because he wants to cultivate these feelings of unknowability to achieve an atmosphere of metaphysical horror. The conceit of a color beyond the earthly spectrum forces readers to try and imagine the unimaginable—only to fail. But it's that failure, and the feelings that accompany it, that Lovecraft puts at the center of his tale.

In that case is it right to say that the color is meaningless within its context? It has a use; it contributes to the story's larger aims and atmosphere. Perhaps Russell's account isn't enough. Better to turn to Wittgenstein and his extended meditations on the meaning of color terms and the logic of color concepts in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Consider his famous example of the "beetle in a box": "Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle.' No one can look into any else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word 'beetle' had a use in these people's language?"[7] What would the meaning of that word be?

Before going any further, try substituting "blue" for "beetle." We all have a feeling of blue that we keep in our private box, and we call this feeling "blue." Russell held that the meaning of this word had to be the sensation, the feeling of seeing blue, the actual beetle in my personal box. But Wittgenstein thought differently: "The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty.—No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is" (§293). To find the meaning of "blue," then, we must ignore the feeling of blueness and look to the systems of rules and actions (the "language-games") that determine how the word is used. On

this account, I know the meaning of "blue" not because I can tie it to a specific qualitative experience but because I can use "blue" in a way that is intelligible to others. I apply it to the sky and not to leaves, to things seen rather than things smelled.

We might then think of Lovecraft's story as evidence for Wittgenstein's argument against Russell, because the color out of space *is* intelligible as a color, despite our not having a shared sensory reference point for it. It has luminescence, it can grow more or less intense, it is "like" other colors, and it can be remembered once experienced. That is, Lovecraft speaks of it in the way that we speak about colors; he situates it within a familiar language-game, and so makes it intelligible even in its stated unintelligibility. After all, if Lovecraft's representation of the color were *truly* "beyond" our language, it would just be nonsense.

With Russell and Wittgenstein, then, we're back at the apparent paradox mentioned earlier: that Lovecraft uses language to convey the ineffable. What makes this appear paradoxical is the belief that language is a matter of public meaning and color sensations are bits of private experience, and that the public and private don't mix. Russell thought that the public word had to refer to the private feeling, but Wittgenstein showed that it didn't; his beetle example demonstrates that "if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant" (§293). As Wittgenstein shows throughout *Philosophical Investigations*, there are other grammatical models, other senses of description, and for these we do well to turn to literature, which has always been more capacious in its treatment of language than analytic philosophy.

Before turning to specific examples, I want to loosen the knot of the paradox by examining the metaphysics that underpins it. For behind the question of what color terms refer to is the question of what color *is* and where it's located. Here the philosophical debate is split between those who put color in objects and those who put it in our minds. The former camp, the "realists," usually define color in terms of reflectance properties measurable

through scientific instruments but not detectable to the naked eye, at least not precisely. The latter, the "subjectivists," locate it solely in our perception, though they draw two different conclusions from this position: either that color is epiphenomenal and therefore reducible to the physical properties of the brain (a kind of cognitive science version of the physics-based "realist" view), or that color is an exemplary instance of a type of phenomenon rooted in our first-person perspective on the world and irreducible to third-person or physical explanations. Such phenomena are often called *qualia*, and they've played a key role in defenses of consciousness against the eliminativists.[8]

There's something very odd about these positions, when taken together. Our choices are either that color is something "objective" but totally unlike what we experience it as, or that it's just as we experience it, but not "real." This inability to include one of our most salient perceptual experiences within the world's contents marks what philosopher Mazviita Chirimuuta calls the "problem of color." In *Outside Color* (2015), Chirimuuta argues that this problem arose as a consequence of the modern division of external reality and internal knowledge.[9] Unlike qualities such as size, shape, and mass (the "primary qualities" of Galileo, Descartes, and John Locke), experiential colors seem hopelessly tied to the perceiving subject and so unable to provide objective knowledge about nature. Like smells, sounds, and tastes, then, colors were cast as "secondary qualities," phenomenal manifestations of the movement and interactions of a colorless, odorless, mute material world.[10] How did this happen? Chirimuuta argues that color only became a problem when "theoretical emphasis [was] placed on physical reality abstracted away from the presence of perceivers . . . and when doubt [was] cast over the capability of our senses to picture *this* reality, as happened in the seventeenth century" (p. 36). Within such a framework, the senses were given the impossible task of representing an inert reality explicitly defined as separate from sensation. As a consequence, color—now aligned with the mind in opposition to nature,

and with shifting sensation against stable laws—became a ready example of all that is private and un-quantifiable in our conscious lives.

Chirimuuta's analysis reveals the problem of color in modern philosophy to be a vivid illustration of the complications arising from what Bruno Latour has termed the Modern Constitution, the distribution of facts and values, qualities and quantities, human agency and non-human matter that distinguishes modern thought in the West. To save color and color terms from their problematic status, then, we can turn to those, like Latour, who have claimed that in fact "we have never been modern."[11] That is, even though the materialist metaphysics that spurred scientific investigation assumed an ontological divide between inside and outside, actual scientific practice has always made a muddle of such dichotomies. In Latour's terms, what the Moderns keep separate in theory—a mute world of Nature opposed to the human world of Society—they mingle in their actions. The rhetoric of *purification* that characterizes the separation of an "inner" realm of value and quality from an "outer" realm of fact and quantity is undercut by the processes of *hybridization* that have never ceased to mix what the Moderns try to isolate.

Philosophers such as Chirimuuta and Evan Thompson have recently used the "hybrid" nature of color—its dependence on both the perceiver and the "objective" world—to rewrite modern metaphysics outside of the subject-object dichotomy and thus to dispense with the problem of color.[12] I want to build on this work by extending it to what would seem to be the more difficult division between sensation and language.

This is where a literary perspective can help. Because the history of color words shows that they were never tools for simply denoting pre-existing sensations or objective properties in objects. Rather, as George R. Stewart has shown, terms like "red" or "vermillion" or "light reddish-brown" all emerged within specific color practices and served the role of focusing attention on particular aspects of how the world appears and thus of

facilitating perceptual encounters that linked the world and observer in new ways.[13] Physicists squinting at the spectrum, naturalists straining to distinguish a scarlet robin from a European robin, paint manufacturers streamlining production, artists and writers keying hue to expression: its within such practices that color words are created. And in each case their purpose has been to stabilize and instrumentalize perceptual properties emergent within a hybrid activity. They offer hinges between the self and the world, each in the making.

Metaphysical problems arise when color is detached from practice, including the linguistic practices of naming, describing, and invoking color. And so despite color's reputation for resisting verbalization, there is good reason to see color language as essential in fixing our attention on "pure" or "abstract" color, the likes of which, of course, we never experience outside of imagination (or some elaborate technological intervention). Without the language of color priming us to think of color as an abstract entity, the idea of ineffable *qualia* would, paradoxically, have far less intuitive force. Language, in other words, is not foreign to qualitative feeling but instead one of the essential historical technologies for giving it shape and substance.

When Lovecraft invokes the indescribable nature of the color out of space—or when Aldous Huxley claims that the colors of the world blaze brighter when he's on mescaline because the drug frees him from language, or when Julia Kristeva hails color as a disruptive force that unsettles social and semiotic codes, or really when any writer turns to color to figure a qualitative immediacy opposed to the mediations of language—the attempt depends on modern notions of abstract color built, in part, through color terms themselves.[14] The question, then, is not how literary color approximates visual color (either capturing or distorting it) but instead what writers *do* with color and how their achievements feed back into our perceptions.

Two Blues

I have suggested that literature offers a useful vantage from which to approach problems in the philosophy of color, especially qualia and the meaning of color terms, and that it does so in part because it makes vivid a variety of linguistic strategies that force us to modify how such problems are posed. Wittgenstein countered the charge that his "beetle in a box" example denied qualitative experience altogether by insisting that his goal, rather, was to "reject the grammar which tries to force itself on us" in philosophy, to "make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way . . . : to convey thoughts" (§304). Literary engagements with color experience offer far more grammars to test the relation between word and world than basic propositions like "Stop signs are red." I'll now turn to two books, both on blue, that adopt terms and concepts from the philosophy of color to examine the relation of words to qualitative experience.

The first is William H. Gass's *On Being Blue* (1976), a puzzling book, especially for those expecting a straightforward discussion of its titular hue. For though Gass's subtitle is "a philosophical inquiry," he announces his theme in the opening chapter as the "five common methods by which sex gains an entrance into literature"—blue as in blue movies. Then, after devoting over half his pages to analyses of sex scenes, dirty words, and euphemisms (the first three methods), he drops in a brief but brilliant discussion of the philosophy of color before abruptly pivoting to what he claims was his concern all along: literary language, or what he describes as "the use of language like a lover . . . not the language of love, but the love of language, not matter, but meaning, not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs."[15] Commentaries on the book have tended to make virtue of this seeming miscellany without drawing the threads together.[16] But what fascinates me is how these various parts connect, how sex and color and literature all, for Gass, come under the category of qualitative experience, and how Gass's account of quality as the perception of

relations reworks the stark opposition of color and its names. In short, *On Being Blue* links the problem of color to the problem of literature, such that an explanation of how literary language invokes states of feeling—how, in his words, it becomes "sexual"—doubles as an account of philosophical qualia.

The first step is to show that the philosophy of language has not yet developed fine enough tools to account for literature. Gass joins Wittgenstein in pleading for a more expansive taxonomy of "grammars," and he illustrates his point through a hilariously sober analysis of the injunction, hurled at some "small offensive fellow," to go "fuck a duck" (p. 47). The point, in the end, is that philosophy, for all its parsing of use and mention, has not yet acknowledged the only distinction that really matters for Gass: the one between language that we dispose of after using and language that we keep around, between pedestrian phrases like "pass the butter" and the literary constructions to which we return.

It's at this point that Gass turns to the problem of color and implies that the same troubles that philosophy has with literature are evident in its handling of hue. The difficulty, in each case, is getting *quality* into view. Gass begins with blue's awkward position within empirical philosophy. He notes that "very early the philosophers kicked quality out of science" because they cared for "measures, not immersions," and thus that a conflict arose "between the way we customarily experience color and the way we have historically tended to think about it" (pp. 64, 62, 70). His analysis chimes with Chirimuuta's more recent discussion, and like her, Gass proposes that we think of color as *relational*. He argues that "hue is not the simple effect of a stimulus" but "the actual perception of a whole series or set of relations," not a basic impression, but the result of a complex mental calculation (p. 64). This relational view sets Gass at odds with Hume, whose missing blue experiment depends on the assumption that "each shade produces a distinct idea, independent of the rest" (Hume, p. 12). And it equally departs from Hume's philosophical descendants who link the

qualitative feeling of red to a specific thing in the world. To elaborate this perspective, Gass cites the work of Edwin H. Land, inventor of the Polaroid camera. Land's technology depended on the insight that our perception of color resulted from the relative balance of different wavelengths of light over an entire scene and thus that "within the frequencies which make up spectral yellow, . . . the whole range of colors can be experienced." "Clearly," Gass concludes, "color is the experience of a ratio" (p. 67). (This, by the way, is why that famous dress on the internet appears white and gold to some, blue and black to others.)[17]

For Gass, what holds for color holds for all sensory qualities, and for consciousness, the bin where quality was thrown when kicked out of the physical world: "the qualities we taste in wine, touch and feel along the thigh while loving, hear as singing, sniff from the steaming pot, or observe articulate the surface of a painting, are, in fact, relations"—relations that assume a felt unity in perception (p. 67). Likewise with emotional tones and affective atmospheres: *feeling* blue and *being* blue as well as *seeing* blue. Indeed, Gass goes all the way: he not only reworks the problem of color to make blue as real as rocks, but also claims the same reality for the whole range of our perceptions, including aesthetic perceptions. Not that everything you feel is real in the same way, or that any experience you have when reading a poem is relevant, but that emotions and qualities are tied to actual fields of relations and testify in particular to the relational interactions between mind and world. They are not "merely subjective." As Gass writes, "My emotions may be mistaken sometimes, but each is the integration of a very complex and continually changing set of relations only temporarily stabilized." None of them "is purely public, purely private; each of them is cognitive, the sum of whatever we know and are at any moment" (pp. 81, 82). Moreover, because they are rooted in the world's activities, one can learn to perceive them better, and so become a more sensitive observer not just of one's own feelings but of the relational scene.

Gass cares most for the feelings found in literature, which he defines as analogous to color—that is, as the qualities that accompany the perception of relations, in this case the relational arrangements of words and sentences. He writes that the blues of "great poems" are not discarded like the blues of daily speech or philosophical examples because "the word in each case finds its place within a system so supremely organized it cannot be improved upon" (p. 56). Reading too is a mental calculation of ratios and relations, one that involves the sounds and overtones of words as well as their meanings.

From Gass's unabashedly modernist perspective, writing becomes "blue" when it makes itself a vessel for qualitative feeling through the exquisite arrangements of sound and sense it forms on the page. Or as Gass puts it in the concluding pages, the secret to "making sentences sexual"—making them "colorful" or literary—"lies in seeing [them] as containers of consciousness, as constructions whose purpose it is to create conceptual perceptions" (pp. 86–87). Unlike the "red" in the proposition "Stop signs are red," the blues in literature exist not to point to an existing stimulus but to create new "conceptual perceptions": colors and qualities as foreign to the eye as those of Lovecraft's tale, even as they appear recognizable. Gass has this commitment to the creative power of the literary imagination in mind when he advises writers, in the final pages of the book, to "give up the blue things of this world in favor of the words which say them" (pp. 89–90).

For Maggie Nelson, who has called Gass's book a "provocation" for and "companion piece" to her *Bluets* (2009), this subordination of the material world smacks of puritanism—and she tosses it out along with the modernist notions of autonomy it supports.[18] "I will not choose between the blue things of the world and the words that say them," she writes, and indeed the style and approach of *Bluets* differs radically from *On Being Blue*, even as it explores a similar constellation of themes: sex, blue, writing, and how if at all literature connects to quality.[19] Nelson, whose work blurs the line between fiction and autobiography,

invests far less importance in the *separateness* of literary language, while still focusing on how the act of writing arranges feelings by arranging words. Where Gass's blues stand for modernism, Nelson's clarify the aesthetics behind twenty-first-century autofiction.

Nelson's opening pages both play with the boundary between fiction and reality and align *Bluets* with Wittgenstein's inquiries into color, language, and sensation. The debt to Wittgenstein comes through most vividly in the form: a series of numbered propositions that pose questions, consider examples and counter-examples, stage small dialogues, and ultimately enact a kind of "therapy" (Wittgenstein, §133). The opening sentence—"1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color"—uses this form to invite readers to approach the work under the sign of fictionality or speculation: *suppose*. Then things get complicated. Watch the italics in the rest of the proposition: "Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkins as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then* (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow* personal." The italicized speech—initially marking the supposed comments within the supposed scene—falls back into Roman type on the word *personal*, as a way of denoting emphasis but also of positioning the speaking self ambiguously between a self-consciously fictional mode of writing and a more confessional or descriptive style. When, in the next proposition, the Roman type continues—"2. And so I fell in love with a color"—it's not clear whether we are still in the realm of thought experiment. And this is precisely the place that Nelson wants us: not itching to determine "real" or "fiction" (things of the world or the words that say them) but in an indeterminate space of their mixture in the work of writing (p. 1).

Within this space, Nelson tweaks Gass's link between language and the relational nature of color to ask how, if at all, writing helps in forming and modifying attachments to

the world around us. At first, the answer seems "no." The speaker is depressed and lonely in a new city, and she yearns for a man who has left her. The opening pages pair the speaker's dazed attempts to separate herself from her feelings for this man with the philosophical problem of color. Her therapist says, "*If he hadn't lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is*. She is trying to get me to see that although I thought I loved this man very completely for exactly who he was, I was in fact blind to the man he actually was, or is. // 45. This pains me enormously" (p. 17). The subsequent propositions route the disparity between the speaker's love and the true nature of the beloved through "the confusion about what color is, where it is, or whether it is" (p. 19). Pulling from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, she wonders if the "so-called systematic illusion of color"—the way "we suppose the experiential quality to be an intrinsic quality of the physical object"—is "also that of love" (pp. 20–21). From this angle, color offers no consolation, and modernist paeans to the transformative power of the literary imagination, like Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937), fall flat. The speaker implores, "please don't talk to me about 'things as they are' being changed upon any 'blue guitar.' What can be changed upon a blue guitar is not of interest here" (p. 5). Quality and writing, experience and its transcription, are kept resolutely separate.

Later in the book, Nelson nuances this position by considering a touchstone of philosophical accounts of writing, Plato's *Phaedrus*. Socrates famously calls writing *pharmakon* in that dialogue, which as Jacques Derrida observed can signify both "poison" and "cure."[20] Nelson notes that it can also mean "color." After tracing this lexical web—another instance of the problem of color accompanying the problem of writing—the speaker initially sides with Socrates in worrying that the written word kills memory, erasing past feelings in the way photographs from one's childhood can replace actual recollections.

Perhaps, the speaker offers, this is why she has avoided "writing about too many specific blue things," for fear of losing her former lover even in memory (pp. 77).

Soon, however, the speaker drops this idea. She suggests that "writing is not really *pharmakon*, but more of a *mordant*—a means of binding color to its object—or of feeding it into it, like a tattoo needle drumming ink into skin" (p. 84). Writing here neither kills nor saves memory but instead shapes and directs our qualitative attachments to the world. It fixes attention on quality and, in so doing, enables a different set of actions, just as the color nomenclature of scientific and technical practices equip practitioners to modify and do something with their perceptual experience. Against what Nelson calls Gass's puritanism, which boils down to an attempt to *purify* writing by drawing it into itself, Nelson offers words that facilitate hybrids, words that take us deeper into our own feelings and help us to grasp—and to change—how those feelings fasten us to the world.

Nelson builds on the mordant model in the concludes pages of *Bluets*. In an echo of the early scene with the therapist, in which object and feeling were disjoined, the speaker realizes that "les bluets," a small blue flower common in the French countryside, "can translate as 'cornflowers'" (p. 90). The discovery surprises her. She thought she'd never seen a bluet, but cornflowers are common. When she dreams of receiving a bouquet of these blossoms, she feels that "it is perfectly all right that that is their name. They do not need to be bluets any longer. . . . They do not signify romance. They were sent by no one in celebration of nothing. I had known them all along" (pp. 90–91). In this scene, the problem of reconciling feeling to object—love to the "bad man" it attaches to—is displaced to a word, which does not supplant the speaker's memory so much as redirect it, modify it to pull away the romance, and bring the speaker back to what she had known all along. From this perspective, it makes sense that the final propositions in *Bluets* are given over not to any triumphant renewal of love or happiness (the sorts of resolutions the speaker rejects throughout the book) but to a

commitment to finding the right words. After one final address to the beloved, recalling a time when “I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world,” the speaker checks herself for “talking as if love were a consolation,” when in fact, as Simone Weil wrote, “it is light.” The final proposition then begins, “All right then, let me try to rephrase” (p. 95).

The idea that arranging words through writing might serve to configure one’s attachments, to bind feelings to objects and to link self and world through memory and emotion, differs sharply from the common idea that public language misses or even mars color experience, along with the range of qualitative experiences for which it often stands. Nelson’s mordant realizes the alternative most concretely, but Gass too, despite his praise of autonomy, lands on a similar formulation when he writes that “every loving act of definition reverses the retreat of attention to the word and returns it to the world” (p. 87). Gass may trumpet the imagination with a novelist’s enthusiasm, while Nelson focuses on how writing aids in processing and arranging the relations that limn a life, but both see writing and quality as entwined. Both refuse to choose between blue and its names.

I began with colors unseen, colors conjured only through words or “raised up” by the imagination. What I hope to have shown is that such colors, rather than being the exceptions that Hume suggested, are actually fundamental to literary colors, which in turn shed light on the wider relation between language and sensation. In this case private feeling is not alienated from public speech but intimately shaped by it. We may never see Lovecraft’s imagined color in any literal sense—it is, after all “out of space” and therefore outside of the usual coordinates for perception. But it nonetheless helps us to bring into focus how language and imagination shape perceptual habits and contribute to the ongoing realization of color in the tangle of self, world, and word. When philosophizing about red and blue, we do well to attend to how they are written and read.

[1]This essay began as a presentation at Case Western Reserve University. I'm very grateful to Michael Clune for the invitation to speak and to the audience there for their helpful questions and comments. The essay subsequently benefited from audience feedback at the Post*45 conference in Oxford.

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 12–13.
[2] Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 13.
[3] For a useful overview of these positions, see Alex Byrne and David R. Hilbert, eds., *Readings on Color*, vol. 1, *The Philosophy of Color* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) and Barry Maund's entry on "Color" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
[4] H. P. Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space," in *Tales* (New York: Library of America, 2005), pp. 354. It's worth noting that Lovecraft's well-documented racism almost certainly played a role in his conscription of color to invoke feelings of terror, fascination, and aversion. See Siddhartha Deb, "The Shadow over H. P. Lovecraft," *The New Republic* (Mar. 19, 2021).
[5] Alex Byrne and David R. Hilbert, "Color realism and color science," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 26 (2003): p. 9.
[6] Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 20.
[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §293.
[8] For color and *qualia*, see Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly* 32.127 (1982): 127–36, and Nicholas Humphrey, *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006).
[9] M. Chirimuuta, *Outside Color: Perceptual Science and the Puzzle of Color in Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015). In 1920, Alfred North Whitehead developed a similar metaphysical critique using the example of a sunset's red glow. See *The Concept of Nature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), pp. 26–48.
[10] See, for example, John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book II, chapter VIII, §9-15, pp. 134–37.
[11] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
[12] Evan Thompson, *Color Vision: A Study of Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[13] George R. Stewart, Jr. "Color in Science and Poetry," *Scientific Monthly* 30.1 (January 1930): 71–78).
[14] Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell* (London: Vintage Books, 2004); Julia Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy," in *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).
[15] William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: New York Review Books, 2014), pp. 10, 11, ellipses in original.
[16] See the nonetheless illuminating discussion of Gass's book in Brian Dillon's *Essayism* (London: Fizcoraldo Editions, 2017), pp. 43–46.
[17] Search the web for "The Dress" to find the image and endless discussion of it.
[18] Dara Weir, "Interview with Maggie Nelson," in *Jubilat* #24, p. 43.
[19] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2009), p. 25.
[20] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).