

*Color**Nicholas Gaskill*

Most of us experience the real world as colorful. Apples are red or green; the sky is blue or grey; your shirt is white or striped. The mundane objects of our lives come to us with and through their colors. It comes as a surprise, then, that realism – the literary style credited with having a fidelity to the real world – should be so lacking in colors, at least compared to its counterparts at the turn of the twentieth century. Scan the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton for color terms, and you'll get the occasional description of an outfit, a room, a landscape. But these won't be dwelt upon. This is due in part to the fact that the reality that realism commits itself to describing is, at heart, social reality rather than physical or even perceptual reality. If you search James and Wharton for "color" itself, you'll mostly turn up instances of that preeminently social use of the term: Winterbourne "colors" when Daisy Miller bluntly invokes her "reputation"; Lily Bart's "color deepens" when Selden suggests she come up to his room at The Bendick. And so on.

Case in point: William Dean Howells, literary realism's most vocal American spokesperson, wrote a book about a paint manufacturer that included almost no extended descriptions of chromatic surfaces or perceptions. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) in fact attends very little to color, unless you count scenes in which the paint business is made to stand for the pretensions of the upwardly mobile Lapham and his ill-fated forays into Boston's aristocratic circle. Lingering on the chromatic world doesn't seem to fit with Howells's program of giving narrative weight to "the common light of day."¹

The case is entirely different once we turn from the realists to their literary rivals. Here I have in mind the band of aesthetes and decadents that produced what Brad Evans, in a marvelous study of this scene through its short-lived little magazines, calls "American art at its flightiest."² This is the moment of Art Nouveau illustrations and Whistler's chromatic "symphonies," of *Japonisme* and Theosophy, of Oscar Wilde

and J. K. Huysmans – in short, of an international bohemian aesthetic that had its symbolic center in Symbolist Paris but boasted hubs in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. Above all, this aesthetic was anti-Realist. Those who championed it took aim at the style, tone, and subject matter of the dominant figures of American realism, Howells in particular; they rejected the everyday for the extraordinary, the local for the faraway, the uptight for the loose, and the solid for the ephemeral. In these efforts they found color particularly useful. How come?

Color may be an integral aspect of our perception of the world, but we generally don't notice it as such. We see *through* color to things, and only rarely do we attend to color itself: at sunset, for instance, when the colors appear apart from any definite objects (except perhaps clouds), or in a state of heightened sensitivity (mystics and drug-users being the great color-perceivers of world literature). When, in our quotidian course, we do focus color alone, it requires a special act of attention. The more we concentrate on the color, the further we're taken from the usual objects of perception. The more you attend to the red or green, the more the apple itself fades away and you're left with a fleeting sensory impression. Here is a phenomenological hint for realism's relative antipathy to color. Insofar as literary realism relies for its success on activating the perceptual skills that readers hone in their everyday lives – as Elaine Auyoung argues in *When Fiction Feels Real* (2018) – prolonged attention to chromatic sensation can only get in the way.³

But if your goal is precisely to get in the way of realism, to revel in ephemeral and exotic sensations and to delight in the artifices of art, then color is just the thing (meaning it's even better than *things*). And sure enough, the literature and culture of the 1890s, when international aestheticism was at its peak, is positively saturated. Even our names for the period fix on color: the Yellow Nineties (after that paradigm of the aestheticist little magazine, *The Yellow Book*), or the Mauve Decade (after Thomas Beer's 1926 study of fin-de-siècle America). There's Wilde's paean to "mere colour, unspoiled by meaning" and the "study in green" he included in *Intentions* (1891).⁴ There's also Huysmans's glittering gems, Rimbaud's colorful vowels, the overwhelming hues of Mallarmé's poetry, and the many US texts that took their cues from these writers, including Robert W. Chambers's *The King in Yellow* (1895), the "color poems" of Beatrice Irwin and Yone Noguchi, Stephen Crane's most well-known work, and Stuart Merrill's *Pastels in Prose* (1890). Howells himself, when he forayed into what he called "modern poetry," dubbed his efforts "Monochromes."

These writers didn't just describe color; they tried to make language colorful. Where earlier US writers had relied on a general link between color and the imagination – see Melville's white whale, Hawthorne's scarlet "A," Poe's Red Death, and the colored beads of Emerson's "Experience" – authors at the turn of the century doubled down on this association in their repeated rhetoric of giving words themselves the qualities of bright hues. "Some modern poets aim, as much as possible, at writing, so to say, in color": this is Richard Le Gallienne, a regular contributor to *The Yellow Book*, defending Beatrice Irwin's recital of her Symbolist-inflected poetry at the Hudson Theater in New York, 1910. Le Gallienne also included Yone Noguchi among these "modern poets" who aim at "spiritual suggestion through the mysterious medium of color." He held that such writers subordinate precise intellectual statement to vague and indefinite suggestion to the end of crafting poems with no more "definite meaning than a Japanese fan or a butterfly's wing" – yet with as much chromatic splendor. They "suggest in colored words as nature suggests in her colored flowers and skies."⁵ The major elements of the *fin-de-siècle* literary scene are all here: the internationalism (a British poet living in New York writing about an artist hailing from India, northern Africa, and Europe, and then name-checking a Japanese author living in California), the otherworldliness (Irwin hoped to hasten a "coming color era" marked by spiritual renewal), the countercultural stance (Le Gallienne's pose of explaining modern poetry to the philistine critics of the *New York Times*), and above all the embrace of the vague and ephemeral that found its surest figure in color.

Le Gallienne's editorial participated in a wider vogue for "pure" or abstracted color at the end of the nineteenth century, one that traversed the avant-garde and mass culture alike and that influenced the claims anti-Realist writers made for literary chromatics. Visual artists led the way: from Whistler's "symphonies" to Kandinsky's "improvisations," modern painters staged their innovations as the progressive liberation of color from figuration and line. A Whistler canvas, in other words, is *about* an arrangement in color – not fireworks or his mother. Color alone creates the effect. Likewise, the architect John Wellborn Root, citing Whistler, imagined an "art of pure color" based on the principle that "each color has a distinct emotional effect," and he saw his own experiments in structural polychromy as steps toward this art.⁶ Several artists felt so inspired by the promise of pure color that they abandoned the static hues of painting to invent an art of abstract colored light projections called

“color-music.”⁷ Even composers, starting with Richard Wagner, embraced “chromaticism” as a sign of aesthetic novelty.

Color provided a lever for abstraction in a variety of arts; that much is widely recognized. What is less acknowledged is that these artistic experiments relied on and were in dialogue with a much wider array of cultural practices devoted to chromatic effects. I’ve charted these practices and their relation to US literature at length in *Chromographia* (2018); for now, it should suffice to say that before color could be “liberated” by artists seeking to upset traditional realism, it had to be made into an object in its own right, something with its own logic and affordances, and this work was done as much by psychologists, chemists, manufacturers, and anthropologists as by painters and writers.⁸ At the material level, the success of affordable synthetic dyes in the second half of the nineteenth century meant, on the one hand, that a vast array of affordable colors became newly available for industrial production and, on the other, that color itself came to be regarded as an important and independent factor of commodities. You could buy that toaster in cobalt blue or Nile green (but make sure it matches your fridge – or maybe you need a new one?). At the mental level, psychologists in the USA and across Europe established color perception as a distinct domain of cognition, with the implication that the human mind had a faculty devoted entirely to responding to color. Tips about how to create emotional effects through chromatic arrangements migrated from the psychology lab to the dry goods window and the artist studio. In the back of all this was an idea, popularized by ethnologists, that the human “color sense” improved with training and decayed with neglect and that, as a result, one’s responsiveness to color betrayed one’s wider ability to manage the sensory rush of modernity.

These cultural practices acted as material counterparts to the phenomenological effect noted above. Just as the individual effort of concentrating on color distorts the contours of the commonplace world and transforms an elusive chromatic quality into an object of attention, so too did the collective work of making color a matter of business, science, and art give it a newfound solidity and pave the way for its use as a literary tool. In particular, the links between color and emotion drawn by psychologists made pure color an especially attractive domain for writers hoping to elevate indirect suggestion and vague feeling over straightforward, common-sense narrative.

When authors aimed at “writing in color,” then, they didn’t just want brighter hues or more elaborate color images. The lingering attention paid to chromatic phenomena by these writers facilitated a mood and a

sensibility that, while not entirely foreign to realism, couldn't be sustained or elaborated within the dominant Howellsian mode. Frederic Jameson's account of literary realism is helpful here. In *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Jameson defines realist fiction as a dialectic between "*récit*," or the narrative impulse that orders events and so makes possible a sense of personal identity, and "affect," or "the body's present," an impersonal temporality that is activated by, among other things, color. Though affect is necessary for realism – as Jameson demonstrates through elaborate readings of some color-heavy passages from Zola – its temporality has to be held in tension with that other temporality of *récit* for the narrative to remain realist.⁹ The writers who set themselves against Howells's program revved up affect by intensifying color. They took the newly formed discourses around abstract color and bent them toward rejecting the temporalities, sensibilities, and subjectivities of realism.

In at least one instance, realism defined itself by attacking literary chromaticism. The target was Harriet Prescott Spofford, and the aim-takers were Howells and Henry James. Spofford, like Poe, achieved literary fame in the mid-nineteenth century for stories charged with psychological intensity and riddled with heightened colors. Indeed, the lingering descriptions of bright hues are often the means by which she depicts the interior states of her characters. In "The Amber Gods" (1860), for instance, the narrator Giorgione (known as Yone) introduces herself to the reader with an excited presentation of yellow point-lace and amber beads; "I like yellow things," she explains. After further aligning herself and her family with color – "Sunbeams like to follow me" and "Papa adores rich color" – Yone tells how she uses this connection to seduce her cousin's suitor, a painter whom she makes "the master of gorgeous color."¹⁰ Then the love turns sour, Yone falls ill, and the narrative ends with her alarmed realization that the hands of the family clock have stopped moving and that, in fact, she's dead.

The drama of the tale comes in its overheated and digressive telling of these events, and this is where color comes in. For the most part, the palette of "The Amber Gods" follows the usual colonialist script: bright hues bespeak "tropical luxuriance" and faraway places inhabited by dark-skinned people, and characters are parsed according to whether they respect "proprieties and civilities" or revel in "rich and voluptuous" sensations (16).¹¹ In allowing one of the chromophiles to tell her story, Spofford mines these associations to create an amorphous and highly charged literary atmosphere. As Dana Luciano notes in a remarkable reading of the tale's queer temporalities, "Yone seems committed to the pursuit of

distraction.”¹² Her mind wanders; she falls in and out of time; and the narrative frequently stalls in moments of lavish description. A long passage on the color of Yone’s eyes – “Yellow hazel? Not a bit of it! . . . There’s a dark sardine base, but over it real seas of light” – gives way to a memory of seeing her eyes in the mirror when she was angry, then back to the colors of her face, then a recognition that she’s going on too long and that her auditor probably thinks she’s self-indulgent, and so on (5). In Jameson’s terms, Spofford exaggerates affect at the expense of *récit*. In Luciano’s, color queers the narrative. Both characterizations help attune us to the aspects of literary color that return in force in the 1890s.

Howellsian realism aimed at suppressing precisely this wandering, affective charge of color. And in fact Spofford blamed Howells directly for her turn away from high-keyed psychological fiction. Reflecting back on her career, she wrote that she “did not continue in the vein of ‘The Amber Gods’” because “public taste changed”: “with the coming of Mr. Howells as the editor of the *Atlantic*, and his influence, the realistic arrived.”¹³ The young Henry James dealt a more direct blow in a review of Spofford’s novel *Azarian* (1864). He lambasts the book for its descriptive style, which he terms “ideal” in contradistinction to the “realistic system” exemplified by Balzac, and he casts this contrast in terms of color: Balzac “set down things in black and white, not, as Miss Prescott seems vaguely to aim at doing, in red, blue, and green.”¹⁴ This wasn’t just a metaphor. James targeted Spofford’s colors in the same way that later critics fixated on Stephen Crane’s.¹⁵ He asked, “What is the possible bearing of such phrases as ‘vermeil ardency,’ or ‘a tang of color?’”; and he defied readers to make sense of “the ‘fine scarlet of the blackberry vine,’ and ‘the gilded bronze of beeches.’” (275). These colors were unintelligible to James, at least as descriptions of the world. Like the “chromatic epigrams which mark the Tennyson prose school” (James blamed Tennyson for the “ideal” style), Spofford’s phrases flaunted the imagination of the writer at the expense of doing what James felt novelists should: say something *real* (269, 274, 276).

At the heart of James’s criticisms is an insistence that words aren’t hues. “If the dictionary were a palette of colors, and a goose-quill a brush, Miss Prescott would be a very clever painter,” he quips. “But as words possess a certain inherent dignity, value, and independence . . . her pictures are invariably incoherent and meaningless” (270). We’ve seen how Le Gallienne cast the whole modern movement as an attempt to write in color – to do what James scorns Spofford for doing. And though the tenor and style of Spofford’s work differs from that of Noguchi or Lafcadio Hearn, their shared embrace of color points to a broader set of

affinities for vagueness, imagination, sensuality, and a playful relation to language that deliberately courts incoherence. And why shouldn't it? This connection aligns with the now-familiar story of how modernist aesthetics emerged when poets in England read Parisian poets who had read Poe. Literary chromaticism didn't so much disappear as abscond to France, where it bloomed alongside concurrent experiments in abstract color.

But what exactly did James think had gone wrong in Spofford's approximations of painting? And why did later poets revive her cross-media jump? When James observed that the dictionary is not a palette, he was insisting that language is meaning – *social* meaning – and so can't be used in ways that betray its referential function. We can recognize in James's exhortation to Spofford "to be *real*" not only a call to transcribe "facts" instead of fancies, but also an instance of what Roland Barthes proposed in "The Reality Effect" (1968) as the central feature of realist style (274). "Semiotically," Barthes explains, "the 'concrete detail' is constituted by the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified being expelled from the sign" so that what is actually connoted is "the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents)."¹⁶ When Flaubert mentions a barometer or Michelet a little door, these signifiers function in the narrative primarily to elevate a reality of referents over a realm of signifieds, things in the world over our ideas about them.

According to Françoise Meltzer, the exact opposite happens in Symbolist poetry. Writers such as Mallarmé and Rimbaud wanted to evacuate the referent altogether, Meltzer argues; they wanted not things but the *Idéal*. To this end, they turned to color as an abstract entity with no exact reference in the world of objects. "If we examine symbolist verse carefully," Meltzer writes, "we note a curious phenomenon: color is overwhelmingly used to create abstractionism, to erase, in fact, the cumbersome catalogues of *signifiés* to which common language is shackled."¹⁷ Where realism elides the signified to heighten the sense of material reality, Symbolism discards the referent to intensify the sense of immateriality. In practice, this meant either attributing color to invisible things like moods ("La solitude bleue et sterile" of Mallarmé's "Don du Poème") or allowing colors to overwhelm their objects until they achieve the solidity we associate with material things (as in "L'Azur"). Recall our opening phenomenological example. What makes color antipathetic to our commonplace perceptions of material reality is that it has no place in that reality except as an abstraction. Yet – and here's the real appeal of color for these writers – as a sensuous quality color "lends sensory overtones to the

abstraction.”¹⁸ When conveyed through words rather than paint, color promised to make the immaterial palpable.

Such was the promise of literary chromaticism that attracted US writers in the 1890s, especially those associated with the faddish little magazines known as “ephemeral bibelots.”¹⁹ Enamored of Symbolism, Decadence, and other French styles, this international coterie used color to push American writing into realms of reality not recognized by the realism of the major monthlies. The nature of the realms varied, from the merely foreign and faraway to the lunatic and otherworldly, but in each case color functioned as a literary device for evoking affects and attitudes at odds with the major currents of late-nineteenth-century US literature.

Stuart Merrill’s *Pastels in Prose* (1890) offers the most direct link between the bibelot crowd and Paris. One of the first people to use the phrase “ephemeral bibelot,” Merrill was an American who moved to France, fell in with Mallarmé’s circle, and wrote most of his own poetry in French.²⁰ But he was also a friend of Howells, who penned a generous introduction to *Pastels*. The collection assembles prose poems from Charles Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Alphonse Daudet, Judith Gautier, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and almost twenty of their contemporaries, translated by Merrill and interspersed with illustrations by *Vogue* cofounder Henry W. McVickar. A flip through the volume yields color aplenty. In one poem, a Poet “goes forth” and “sees, above the blue and pink mountains, heavens of purple, gold riven with long flashes, aureoled with confused cities scintillating in somber distances.”²¹ An early entry is titled “A Story in White”; another, by Huysmans, “Camaïeu in Red.” But the passage that best illustrates how Symbolist color works comes in “Words” by Émile Hennequin. “In our crazed brains words are visions,” the text begins, “visions ecstatic, visions chimerical, . . . visions without models and without object” (203). The speaker goes on to elaborate how words – and the Ideal realm to which they gesture – give more pleasure than things: “there is no wine that realizes the intoxication imagined by the word Wine; . . . no blue, no red that figures the tints with which our imaginations are colored” – indeed the whole material world is regarded as a set of “diminished realities” which poetry translates into something more ethereal and intense.²²

It didn’t take much to tip this emphasis on invisible visions into mysticism, with the paradoxical result that even literal color came to stand for – or give access to – realms beyond the usual senses. Beatrice Irwin is the extreme instance. Not only were her poems Symbolist in spirit and laden with overwrought color descriptions (“A smitten sexless red, without

a name!"); Irwin also recited them while reclining on stage amid changing washes of luminous color that had been timed to create "correspondences of Form, Color, and Sound."²³ She regarded these "color-poem evenings" – which one can only imagine as literary versions of Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance, in which the poet's words and meters replace the dancer's movements and billowing costume – as tools for hastening a "coming color era." In *The New Science of Color* (1915), she elaborated her vision of this era as one in which color would be recognized as a "force" on the order of electricity or sound that, once harnessed, would yield physical, spiritual, and communicative rewards. Irwin predicted that eventually "speech may be replaced by a color code," and "we shall look back upon words with the same pitying, amused smile as that which we would now bestow on cave paintings."²⁴

The art critic and poet Sadakichi Hartmann, yet another cosmopolitan figure who fostered the proto-modernism of 1890s US bohemianism, likewise imagined colors coming to replace words in his 1897 play *Buddha: A Drama in Twelve Scenes*. The final scene, dedicated "To Students of Color Psychology" and singled out for praise by Mallarmé, figures the Buddha's enlightenment as "a concert of self-radiant colors." The scene, meant to be performed on a stage "of at least 800 yards length" using yet-to-be-invented technology, consists of a five-part color ekphrasis building to a final sequence in which "a flower star, emitting rocket like fire lines," runs through "the colors of the solar spectrum" before "at last improvising an outburst of new colors, like ultra red and violet, for which optical instruments have first to be invented before the human eye can perceive and enjoy them."²⁵ Spiritual enlightenment and technological progress go hand-in-hand, as colors outstrip not just language but the current realm of visibility.

Yone Noguchi too used his verses to conjure the invisible and ineffable through written color. A Japanese poet who moved to San Francisco as a teenager in the 1890s, Noguchi's ethereal poems soon attracted the attention of Gelett Burgess, editor of *The Lark* and fixture of the West Coast bohemian scene. Burgess called Noguchi "a mystic by temperament, race, and religion" and presented his often inscrutable verses as "nocturnes set to words of a half-learned, foreign tongue; in a form vague as his vague dreams."²⁶ Burgess, it should be noted, was known for deliberately courting unintelligibility as an aesthetic strategy; he's most famous for a nonsense verse about, of all things, a purple cow.²⁷ The proximity of such strategies to the Symbolist aim at an invisible Ideal is evident in the two-part title of Noguchi's first volume of poetry, published by Burgess in

1896: *Seen and Unseen; or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail*. The poems themselves model a series of whimsical moods that make aesthetic virtue of suggestion and vagueness. Dreams and reveries predominate, as do vapors and shadows, with the implication that these slippery entities constitute a domain of reality unacknowledged in common perceptions.

Chromatic descriptions do not appear as frequently in *Seen and Unseen* as in Irwin's *Pagan Trilogy*, but Noguchi frames his poetry through the metaphor of color (as Le Gallienne did a decade later). His Prologue imagines thoughts and expressions as autumnal leaves falling onto the white page. It begins with "fate-colored leaves float[ing] dumbly down," "matting the earth with yellow flakes." The speaker sits "[a]lone in the dark green shadows of the canyon-forest," where he watches "the colored thought-leaves of my soul-trees falling down, falling down, falling down upon the stainless, snowy cheeks of this paper." Poetry here appears as ephemeral color: the fleeting "death-hurrying" leaves that fall to earth but that, nonetheless, become "the stuff of Eternity itself" when they land on the white surface of the paper.²⁸ Color prepares readers for literary experiments that take flight from the major Realist mode.

Noguchi's verses, especially when read through Burgess's characterization of the poet's mystical "race," signal both the general way that color sensitivity was pegged to racial type in this period and the more specific way that literary chromatics often reached the immaterial by way of the East, especially Japan. Wilde, Whistler, and the wider *fin-de-siècle* scene hailed Japanese design, as evidenced in woodblocks, screens, and porcelain, as a paragon of taste and chromatic sensibility and an instructive counter-example to the industrial arts of the West. In fact, the development of aestheticism in Britain, like its reception in America, was inseparable from an idealization of the Japanese "color sense" as delicate, sophisticated, and exotic (just as the supposedly crude color sensitivity of darker-skinned people was held up as evidence of their inferiority).²⁹

No one gave a more loving and involved description of the precise colors of Japan than Lafcadio Hearn, about whom Noguchi wrote a whole book. Hearn came of age as a writer in the USA, though he was born in Greece and later permanently decamped to Japan. In *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), he mixes the literary chromatics of aestheticism with the cultural interest stirred by *Japonisme* to convey an impression of this faraway land to Western readers. His task is a tricky one: as he notes at the outset, his first impressions of Japan were "intangible and volatile as perfume."³⁰ What's more, the impressing object was itself a vague atmosphere or feeling rather than specific buildings or people. To tackle all this

amorphousness, Hearn focused on the country's hues and so exploited the ambiguity of color's location – somewhere between the mind and the world – to pull off the Paterian task of presenting the object through the subject's experience of it. One reader flagged this as Hearn's principal achievement, praising him as “the most brilliant . . . of modern colorists” whose “command of pure color, with all its shades and tints, as set before the mental vision in words,” outstripped Pater himself.³¹ Here's a taste:

Oriental landscapes possess charms of color extraordinary – phantom-color, delicate, elfish, indescribable – created by the wonderful atmosphere. Vapors enchant the distances, bathing peaks in bewitchments of blue and gray of a hundred tones, transforming naked cliffs to amethyst, stretching spectral gauzes across the topazine morning, magnifying the splendor of noon by effacing the horizon, filling the evening with smoke of gold, bronzing the waters, banding the sundown with ghostly purple and green of nacre. (473–74)

Color sets everything in motion in this scene, alchemizing the landscape into a set of aesthetic riches, and Hearn matches this process through his own sinuous style. The effect is that of a glimpse of an impression of a misty atmosphere – an indirection sought by so many writers of the 1890s and here aided by the time-worn Western tradition of figuring otherness through color.

In the short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895), Robert W. Chambers gives this indirection a sinister aspect. Its tales draw on key frameworks for *fin-de-siècle* chromaticism, from aestheticism (Chambers studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts*) to medievalism (of the sort associated with Henry Adams) – but it's best known for the stories that pioneer what we now call “weird” fiction. In this regard, Chambers follows Poe and Spofford in amplifying chromatic descriptions to signal his narrator's pathological sensitivity; one character, a painter, introduces himself by professing that “certain chords of music make me think of the brown and golden glints of autumn foliage.”³² He also has his own version of the language-as-color trope in “The Yellow Sign,” wherein a “curious symbol or letter” that belonged to no “human script” is made imaginable to readers only through its hue.³³

But the weirdest bits of the book all elaborate Chambers's central, chilling conceit of a literary work so intense that it drives its readers mad – a play called *The King in Yellow*. Chambers presents snippets of this text as his epigraph and in the mouths of his characters, each time emphasizing the haunting colors of an imagined world: the “black stars” that “hang in the heavens”; the “twin suns” that “sink into the lake at

Hali”; the “Pallid Mask”; but most of all the King in Yellow himself, “wrapped in the fantastic colours of his tattered mantle” (14, 66). We only get glimpses of the play; like someone else’s color perceptions, they remain just out of reach. Yet it is precisely this ungraspable quality that Chambers exploits to such clever ends. Colors are vague; colors described in words are even vaguer. Where aesthetes like Noguchi traded on this connection to create a literature that elevated fancies and feelings over realities and things, Chambers created narrative situations in which characters’ crazed visions of the King in Yellow’s colorful tatters provide a stand-in for the impossible experience of reading the maddening play. As in H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), in which a color no one has ever seen before arrives on earth and makes people insane, our own readerly efforts to imagine what is not there generate the feelings of ineffability, of the metaphysical ground falling from beneath our feet, that marks the affective atmosphere of weird fiction.

Chambers’s absent yellow king reminds us that literary chromaticism does its work in part through the paradoxical way that written color precludes visual color. As Rey Conquer writes in a study of German modernist German poetry, “The central, and most obvious, problem that colour poses for literature – whether for those writing it or those reading – is that it is not there.”³⁴ Especially in a period in which writers were self-consciously borrowing from the visual arts, color raised questions of reference and medium. This is another reason why the hues of the 1890s served as a prelude to literary modernism, and why they were different from those of the 1850s. Earlier writers had invoked color to cultivate states of perception outside the bounds of commonplace realism, but they had not treated literary colors as occasions for plumbing the possibilities of writing as such. “Why do poets use colour?” Conquer asks; because in addressing the obvious absence of literal color, in “feeling around the edges of what cannot be put on the page,” “they allow us to see most clearly what *can* be” (1–2). The fanciful task of making language colorful that Noguchi, Irwin, Le Gallienne, and Chambers all aimed at was a way of investigating what language could do. What Conquer says for Rilke and George could equally be said of them, and even more for a poet like Wallace Stevens. Why else is his guitar blue?³⁵

realism may still rule when it comes to syllabuses and overview accounts of late nineteenth-century US literature. But when we see the period through a more colorful lens, a different cast of characters and a different set of techniques pop into view. These writers amplified color to make imaginatively present elements of experience excluded by the

metaphysical, cultural, and aesthetic frameworks that came together in the popular conception of Howellsian realism. I have focused on writers largely forgotten, but the pattern fits more familiar figures: Hamlin Garland, L. Frank Baum, Gertrude Stein, and especially Stephen Crane. And the inroads made by these writers proved helpful for those who returned to color in the 1920s – not just the poets, but also the band of latter-day decadents that Alfred Kazin called “The Exquisites” (James Branch Cabell, Elinor Wylie).³⁶ Lest this seem too narrow a lineage, we need only remember that one of Kazin’s exquisites, Carl Van Vechten, brought chromatically tinged aestheticism to the Harlem Renaissance, where it took ever more nimble and meaningful turns in the work of Claude McKay, Richard Bruce Nugent, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. These writers confronted head-on the assumptions about racialized sensitivity that writers like Burgess or Hearn took for granted. All of these diverse figures of US modernism built on a template set by the loose group of aesthetes and mystics who rebelled against realism at the turn of the twentieth century, a template in which literary color figures a wilder and brighter reality, as well as a means to convey it to readers.

Notes

- 1 William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 77. The phrase also serves as the title for Edwin H. Cady’s 1971 study of realism.
- 2 Brad Evans, *The Ephemeral Bibelots: How an International Fad Buried American Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 17. Here and throughout I lean on Evan’s characterization of the 1890s moment in American literature. See also David Weir’s work, especially *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).
- 3 Elaine Auyoung, *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 4 Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Intentions*, collected in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1969), 341–408, 398, and “Pen Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green” in the same volume.
- 5 Richard Le Gallienne, “Miss Irwin’s ‘Color Poems,’” Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, November 26, 1910. This emphasis on color was not new for Le Gallienne, who once cast the entire Decadent movement as “The Boom in Yellow.”

- 6 John Wellborn Root, "Art of Pure Color" (1883), in *The Meanings of Architecture: Buildings and Writings by John Wellborn Root*, ed. Donald Hoffman (New York: Horizon, 1967), 176–86, 185.
- 7 Nicholas Gaskill, "The Articulate Eye: Color-Music, the Color Sense, and the Language of Abstraction," *Configurations* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 475–505.
- 8 Nicholas Gaskill, *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Many things touched on slightly or not at all in this essay – the importance of aniline dyes for the materiality of late nineteenth-century color, the complex entanglements of color and race, the literary tradition of local color – are given in-depth treatment in this book.
- 9 Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), e.g., 57–59.
- 10 Harriet Elizabeth Prescott [Spofford], *The Amber Gods, and Other Stories* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 3, 4, 62.
- 11 The scholarship on this topic is immense, but two good starting points are David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000) and Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 12 Dana Luciano, "Geological Fantasies, Haunting Anachronies: Eros, Time, and History in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'The Amber Gods,'" *ESQ* 55, no. 3–4 (2009): 269–303, 271. See also Dorri Beam's analysis in *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 3.
- 13 Quoted in Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 123.
- 14 Henry James [unsigned], "Review of Azarian: An Episode by Harriet Elizabeth Prescott," *The North American Review* 100, no. 206 (January 1865): 268–77, 272, 273. For a reading of color descriptions in James's fiction that takes this review as its starting point, see Maurice A. Gérard, "The Color of Things in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*: Complicating the Process of Vision," *Word & Image* 34, no. 2 (2018): 152–66. Tellingly, Gérard argues that James focuses primarily on the colors of things rather than color in the abstract.
- 15 See Gaskill, *Chromographia*, ch. 4 for the critical fascination with Crane's colors.
- 16 Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 148.
- 17 Françoise Meltzer, "Color as Cognition in Symbolist Verse," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 253–73, 256–57.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 260.
- 19 Again, the essential study is Evans's *The Ephemeral Bibelots*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 21 Stuart Merrill, *Pastels in Prose* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 209.

- 22 Hennequin imagines this intensification process as akin to that which produces aniline dyes. I elaborate the links between Symbolist poetics and synthetic color in *Chromographia*.
- 23 The poems recited were later published as *The Pagan Trinity* (New York: John Lane Company, 1912); the quote about correspondences comes from the dust jacket, and the smitten sexless red appears in "Nostalgia." A reviewer of the London show reported that she reclined as she read. "Miss Beatrice Irwin and Crosby Hall," *The Academy and Literature* 82 (June 1, 1912): 689.
- 24 Beatrice Irwin, *The New Science of Color* (self-published, 1915). Subsequent editions published in London by William Rider and Son in 1916, 1918, and 1923.
- 25 Sadakichi Hartmann, *Buddha: A Drama in Twelve Scenes* (New York: Author's Edition, 1897), 43, 44–45. For Hartmann's connection to Mallarmé, whom he met through Merrill, see *Sadakichi Hartmann: Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jane Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.
- 26 "The Night Reveries of an Exile," *The Lark* no. 15 (July 1896), n.p.
- 27 Evans, *The Ephemeral Bibelots*, ch. 1.
- 28 Yone Noguchi, "Prologue," in *Seen and Unseen; or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail* (San Francisco: Gelett Burgess and Porter Garnett, 1897), n.p.
- 29 For an elaboration of the links between color sensitivity and race, including how these bore on the development of aestheticism, see Gaskill, *Chromographia*.
- 30 Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (Tokyo and Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, [1894] 2009), 1.
- 31 Quoted in Stefano Evangelista, "Symphonies in Haze and Blue: Lafcadio Hearn and the Colours of Japan," in *The Colours of the Past in Victorian England*, ed. Charlotte Ribeyrol (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 71–94, 75–76. Evangelista's essay gives a comprehensive and brilliant account of Hearn's colors that fits with the broader argument I'm making here, especially in terms of color's role in departures from literary realism.
- 32 Robert W. Chambers, *The King in Yellow* (Dublin: Roads Classic Editions, 2015), 89.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 34 Rey Conquer, *Reading Colour: George, Rilke, Kandinsky, Lasker-Schüler* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 1.
- 35 Nicholas Gaskill, Sarah Street, and Joshua Yumibe, "Literature and the Performing Arts," in *A Cultural History of Color in the Modern Age*, ed. Sarah Street and Anders Steinvall, vol. 6 of *A Cultural History of Color* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). See also Susan Harrow, "Thinking Colour-Writing: Introduction," *French Studies* LXXI, no. 3 (July 2017): 307–18.
- 36 Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Harvest, [1942] 1995), ch. 9.

