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COLOUR ENCHANTED: THE USE OF COLOUR IN HILDA DOOLITTLE'S *SEA GARDEN*

By Lancy Kurakar, *The English and Foreign Languages University*

The precise category to which colour belongs is an elusive field of study, that which has worried philosophers, writers and scientists across the ages. Is it an intrinsic quality of objects, like size and shape? Or is it an illusion, purely subjective, and borne of visual experiences?

Numerous theories have been formulated over the years to conceptualize and understand the nature of colour, though none of them are strictly conclusive.¹ Till the 1800s, Isaac Newton's experiments and deductions on the nature of colour were upheld as unquestionable truths. Newton's theory of colour expounds that light is composed of seven separable colours and that these colours, when united, give white light. To him, colour was purely a physical phenomenon, involving light, object, and eyes. "Colors are affirm'd to be not Qualifications of Light, deriv'd from refractions of natural Bodies, (as 'tis generally believed;) but Original and Connate properties, which in divers rays are divers."² That is, colour is an intrinsic quality of objects, including light (which is proved to be an object).

In the year 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published his ground-breaking treatise on the nature, function and psychology of colours, *Zür Farbenlehre (Theory of Colors)*. Goethe discovered that the Newtonian teachings were only applicable to colour as light, not as pigment and that they were not always applicable in ordinary physical experiences. He believed that colour was more of an experience of the eye rather than a reality as such.³ Colour, according to Goethe, is "light⁴ that is modified by darkness"⁵ or in other words, a product of the opposition between light and darkness: "shade is a part of light [...] colours, which are shadow and the result of shade, are light itself, or [...] are the beams of light, broken now in one way, now in another."⁶ Going deeper into the psychological and aesthetic aspects of colours, he classifies colours thus: purple/magenta symbolize beauty, red and orange nobility, yellow goodness, green usefulness, blue the common or the mean, and violet the unnecessary.⁷

Since colours are perceived because objects reflect those colours to the eye, later science is of the view that colours are not contained within objects; they are purely extrinsic, doubly because without a perceiver, the colours are not simply 'out there'. Colours are defined variably as "sensations, psychological properties of visual experiences, mental properties, representations, constructions of the brain, and properties of the brain."⁸ The

¹ Barry Maund, "Color," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012). One of the oldest, the Primitivist theory says that colour is a quality that objects 'possess'—it is intrinsic and thus is a 'property' of the object. Projectivism, on the other hand, describes colour as a product of sensations which 'project' that colour on the object, an argument closely connected with the Subjectivist theory that maintains that colours are borne of experience. Eliminativism goes a step further to argue that physical objects do not have colours at all.

² Isaac Newton, "A Letter of Mr. Isaac Newton, Professor of the Mathematicks in the University of Cambridge [...] to the R. Society," in *Philosophical Transactions* (1665-1678) (1671), 3075.

³ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (London: Everyman's Library, 1970), 168-9. Goethe is recorded to have said: "there is nothing without us that is not also within us; and [...] the eye, like the external world, has its colours[...] [the eye] produces colours itself if it does not actually find them."

⁴ Albert Bielschowsky, Theobald Ziegler, Salomon Kalischer, and Max Friedlaender, *The Life of Goethe*. (New York: Haskell House, 1908), 123. The fundamental difference between Newton's and Goethe's theories of colour pertains to the definition of light. To Newton, light is composed of seven distinct colours; whereas for Goethe, light is "the most simple, most indivisible, most homogeneous thing we know."

⁷ Interestingly, the word 'violet' that Goethe terms 'unnecessary' figures the most number of times (precisely twenty) in *Sea Garden*.

⁸ Maund, *Stanford Encyclopedia*.

counter claim that colour is indeed an intrinsic quality of objects is also valid, as the argument of Colin McGinn exemplifies:

When we see an object as red ... [the] color is perceived as intrinsic to the object, in much the same way that shape and size are perceived as intrinsic. No relation to perceivers enters into how the color appears; the color is perceived as wholly on the object, not as somehow straddling the gap between it and the perceiver.⁹

However, the metaphysics of colour is such that no universally acceptable answer is possible for the nature of colour.

Nevertheless, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, there is unanimous agreement on the view that colour is a relative quality. For example, red appears more brilliant against a black background and duller against white. And in contrast with orange (warm colour), red (the warmest colour) appears lifeless; with blue-green (cool colours), it exhibits brilliance. Colours are not stable, definite entities – they vary according to the surrounding colours, light, distance from the perceiver, and so on. Just as white is a group of colours of different shades of whiteness, there is no precise term by which we can name colours. Like pain, colour is ‘found’ only in experience, and so is subjective.

Colour is a problematic element in much of Modernist poetry. It has been used in interesting ways by many modernist poets (Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, W.C. Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens), delving into the metaphysical and ideological problems behind colours and colour terms. This paper examines the representation of colour in H.D.’s earliest collection of poems, *Sea Garden*, published in the year 1916. Imagism, feminism and violence in Hilda Doolittle’s poetry have been much discussed. The implication of colour in her poetry is a topic hitherto unexplored and a premise of vast possibilities. Her colours repeat themselves with such a degree of contrast and prominence, they are not merely descriptive, but evoke emotional and ideological concerns.

H.D.’s colours stand out in their brightness and vividness, even overpowering the words themselves with their raw vitality. They serve as conveyors of emotions and psychological processes, precise and definite, often just ‘purple,’ ‘white,’ or ‘yellow’ without a noun (as in Moore’s “peacock blue”¹⁰) to establish a common reading ground. For her, colour is not ‘in’ or ‘of’ the object, but is without a definite ‘carrier’ or ‘vehicle’ as such. And so in “Pursuit,” the buds of the hyacinth “*show deep purple*” and the “green stems *show yellow-green*.”¹¹ Again in “The Shrine,” waves “*shot with blue/ cut under deeper blue*.”¹² Rather than the ‘object,’ it is the perceived colour that has more significance and colours have no ‘tags’ attached to them as in Moore’s poetry.

The function of colours, in H.D., is similar to that of Expressionist or Fauvist colour. The former in the sense that it is not a realistic portrayal of colours (as in the poems of W.C. Williams or Marianne Moore) but an ‘expression’ of a feeling or thought. Thus in “Oread,” the colour of the forest is juxtaposed with the sea when it says “Whirl up, sea -/...hurl your green over us.”¹³ And in “Mid-day,” the black seeds scattered in the wind are compared to the poet’s own scattered, abortive thoughts; in contrast with the poplar “bright on the hill,” black here is more than a colour, it describes the trauma and defeatism experienced by the poet when faced with the might and

⁹ Maund, *Stanford Encyclopedia*.

¹⁰ Marianne Moore, “The Steeple-Jack,” in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 5.

¹¹ Hilda Doolittle, *Sea Garden* (London: Constable and Company, 1916), 8 (emphasis added).

¹² *Ibid.*, 5 (emphasis added).

¹³ Hilda Doolittle, “Oread,” in *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz, (New York: New Directions, 1986), 55.

glory of an unreachable poetic ideal.¹⁴ This unattainability of a beauty that H.D. aims to achieve is expressed in “Pear Tree” where she juxtaposes white pear blossoms with silver dust: “Silver dust/ lifted from the earth,/ higher than my arms reach,/ you have mounted, O silver,/ higher than my arms reach.”¹⁵

The Fauves, similar but more radical in outlook, made art “so simplified in design, so shockingly brilliant in colour,” rejecting traditional, Renaissance harmonies in favour of clashing, discordant primary colours just as H.D. rejected Victorian and patriarchal conventions of poetry for a more individual, harsh and strikingly ‘simple’ poetry.¹⁶ Fauvist art painted directly from nature, but invested a strong expressive reaction to the subjects portrayed. They “freed colour from its traditional role as the description of the local tone of an object and helped prepare both artists and public for the use of colour as an expressive end in itself. In a sense colour becomes the ‘subject’ of the picture.”¹⁷ This is verily the case with H.D.’s poetry too.

The violence of her words and sounds strike you at the very first reading. Within the contextual setting of her poems, which are chiefly gardens, the sea, dense thickets and rocky coasts, the violence is of the natural world. The acceleration of life and the inherent violence of the scientific and technological advancements of the post-Victorian age correspond to the harsh and disturbingly discordant world in Doolittle’s poems. And in many of her poems, war imagery is also prominent: for instance, in “Sea Violet” where she describes the flower “fronting all the wind/ among the torn shells/ on the sand-bank.”¹⁸ Colours are active participants in this world of violence. They are depicted in brutal terms such as in the lines, “we parted green from green,”¹⁹ “cut from white-ash,”²⁰ “honey and amber flecked each leaf,”²¹ and “black creeps from root to root.”²² The violence underlying all beauty (be it natural, human or artistic) is a recurring motif in *Sea Garden*.

As an indicator of experience, colour is not ‘passive,’ merely ‘seen,’ but is active, functional and very much an ‘agency,’ while the (natural or artistic) object is an inert presence—the lines: “violets streaked black ridges/ through the grass,”²³ “sun-light stamped/ hyacinth-shadows/ black on the pavement”²⁴ and the last two examples in the above paragraph show the power imparted to colour in Doolittle’s poetry.

The subsequent sections deal with this performative aspect of colour, the violence that agency essentially involves and the metaphysics of colour in H.D.’s *Sea Garden*. Firstly, this paper examines how the domestic world in the poems reveal a stagnancy of thought and movement, while the ‘sea garden’ of her imagination teems with vitality and a terrifying beauty, the colours engaging in battles between light and darkness, life and death. In the second section, I discuss Doolittle’s colours as inhabiting a free zone, involved in performance, which is the exertion of one’s will over the will of others and therefore is essentially violent. The final section deals with the question posed initially in this paper: whether colours are extrinsic or intrinsic properties of objects in *Sea Garden*.

¹⁴ Doolittle, “Oread”, in *H.D.: Collected Poems*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶ Helen Gardner, *Art through the Ages*, Fifth ed., ed. Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansley, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 693.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Doolittle, “Sea Violet,” in *Sea Garden*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, “The Helmsman,” 2 (emphasis added).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, “The Contest,” 11 (emphasis added).

²¹ *Ibid.*, “The Gift,” 15 (emphasis added).

²² *Ibid.*, “Evening,” 17 (emphasis added).

²³ *Ibid.*, “The Gift,” 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, “Cities,” 44.

1. THE AGENTIAL POWER OF COLOUR

Modernism is the re-enchantment of the world; nothing remains passive here; life brims out of inanimate objects, sometimes even more than it does in the animate. Trees, flowers, fruits, shadows, light, and colours are all alive in H.D.'s world; they feel and breathe the air in this extraordinary 'sea garden'; they are neither symbols nor metaphors, they simply exist; and they are both vulnerable and capable of imparting violence. This power of life—the ability to feel, to battle, to experience pain and violence and to exert violence is yearned by the poet, as epitomized by these lines from the ironically titled "Sheltered Garden":

I want wind to break,
scatter these pink-stalks,
snap off their spiced heads,
fling them about with dead leaves—
spread the paths with twigs,
limbs broken off,
trail great pine branches,
hurled from some far wood
right across the melon-patch,
break pear and quince—
leave half-trees, torn, twisted
but showing the fight was valiant.²⁵

The garden in the poem "Sheltered Garden" is saturated with flowers of different shades of pink/red, fragrant, arranged in patterns. This becomes a suffocating, oppressive, and detestable sight for the speaker when she says:

I have had enough—
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
herbs, sweet-cress.
[...]
only border on border of scented pinks.²⁶

She wishes instead for a "sharp swish of a branch," "scent of resin," "taste of bark, of coarse weeds,/ aromatic, astringent—"and favours brown and yellow over the pink and green hues of the garden:

let them cling, ripen of themselves,
test their own worth,
nipped, shriveled by the frost,
to fall at last but fair
with a russet coat.
[...]
For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life.²⁷

²⁵ Doolittle, "Sheltered Garden," in *Sea Garden*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The very idea of an unanimated world itself is oppressive to Doolittle. In “The Garden,” the heat creates stagnancy in the life around, an immobility, a repression of motion, against which she retaliates:

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.
[...]
Cut the heat—
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path.²⁸

Paradoxically, the speaker hardly ever engages in active action; she is almost always just a keen observer of the ‘life’ around her, or a late-comer at a scene of violence deducing the action from the minutely laid out clues. While describing the garden in “The Gift” where flowers ‘invade’ and ‘streak across’ the landscape, the speaker remains a passive observer:

I cannot walk—
who would walk?
Life is a scavenger’s pit—I escape—
I only, rejecting it,
lying here on this couch.²⁹

In “Pursuit,” the speaker is on the trail of a victim of violence, who in turn has victimized the weaker forms of life on his/her track with the violence of his/her very movements. However, the speaker stops the lively and dramatic pursuit mid-track once the clues run out:

For some wood-daemon
has lightened your steps.
I can find no trace of you
in the larch-cones and the underbrush.³⁰

For all the inactiveness of the observer in the poems, the objects show an animation and a thirst for life that is aggressive and threatening to behold. In “Evening,” which depicts the movement of evening into night,³¹ the verbs used to describe light and colour—“passes,” “grow,” “reach,” “bend,” “dart,” “creeps,” “cuts,” “seeks”—are all verbs of action.³² Light panning across the garden, followed closely by darkness, reminds you of the primal polarities of light and darkness, from which the colours in the garden cower to escape the engulfing approach of ‘black’. Colours disappear to give way to a chiaroscuro encounter between shades of black and white, finally giving in to the utter blackness of night. Black possess so much energy within that it cancels all other colours. The shadows grow, dart, and cut each other and finally the entire garden is swallowed up by a drape of blackness in

²⁸ Ibid., “The Garden,” in *Sea Garden*, 24.

²⁹ Ibid., “The Gift,” 15.

³⁰ Ibid., “Pursuit,” 9.

³¹ The transition into night is in terms of the clearly observable changes in light, perception and colour: “The light passes/ from ridge to ridge,/ from flower to flower;—/ the hypaticas, wide-spread/ under the light/ grow faint—/ [...]/ and the flowers are lost.” (17)

³² Doolittle, “Evening,” in *Sea Garden*, 17.

which colours and objects lose identity.³³ The whole poem is suggestive of a battle, a surreptitious one—between light and darkness in which the garden is ravaged, “lost”—the “light pass[ing]/ from ridge to ridge,” darkness descending upon “flower to flower,” the hypanthia slowly getting eclipsed one by one, ‘darting shadows,’ black “creep[ing],” “each leaf cut[ting] another leaf,” “shadow seek[ing] shadow,” until

| [...] both leaf
| and leaf-shadow are lost.³⁴

to darkness. This imagery of combat creates a world of great energy, where colours are alive and active, in perpetual flux in the world’s garden.

In these lines from “Pursuit”:

| the purple buds—half ripe—
| show deep purple
| where your heel pressed.
| [...]
| the green stems show yellow-green
| where you lifted—turned the earth-side
| to the light:

colours are not ‘just there,’ but are “shown” – the buds of the hyacinth *show* deep purple and the green stems *show* yellow-green.³⁵ ‘Showing’ is an act of the will; it is performance, deliberate action and therefore, essentially entails power. The colours, here, show themselves to the perceiver (and their aggressor) as signs of the violence inflicted upon the object.

Part of the power attributed to colour comes from the *indestructibility* of colour; though they can be bleached, crushed, scraped, and obscured by darkness, they regenerate. This resourcefulness and vitality of colours is apparent in H.D.; colours never seem to drain themselves. They change, pale, mix, or separate, but their sources remain, just as in “The Shrine”:

| [...] the sea
| where rollers shot with blue
| cut under deeper blue,³⁶

³³ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 8. Black or the absence of colour is shown to have enormous powers, becoming a phenomenon, a controlling presence that checks the violence on the senses, and bringing respite to the madness of crowding impressions one upon the other (as expressed in “Sheltered Garden”). This supremacy of black is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s “Domination of Black,” in which colours ‘turn,’ free of objects, free of identity, in the imagination/ memory once the darkness of night settles in.

³⁴ Doolittle, “Evening,” in *Sea Garden*, 17

³⁵ Ibid., “Pursuit,” 8.

³⁶ Ibid., “The Shrine,” 5.

or in “Evening”:

the blue tips bend
toward the bluer heart.³⁷

This possibility of an inner source to go back to, of solace, of a healing ‘deeper,’ ‘bluer’ spring of rejuvenation, something which has increasingly become absent in the modern world, imparts to colours a power and vitality absent in the modern individual.

The performative aspect of colour is essentially a performance of violence. This agential power of colour reveals in two different ways: in the manner of Expressionist and Fauvist colours respectively. As mentioned earlier, colour acts as a kind of symptom of the state of the object, or by extension, the state of the mind of the poet.³⁸ It enacts the emotional reactions caused by violence *on* the object. H.D.’s poetics being one that is committed to the portrayal of violent passion and harsh life experiences, colours are naturally aggressive; they have the power and force that you see in paintings, especially in Fauvist art. The violence that her colours are a part of is dealt with in the following section.

2. VIOLENCE AND COLOUR

Paralleling the large-scale violence of war, technology and modern life, the colours, flowers and all the erstwhile harmless, passive and symbolized objects engage in a violence of sensory impressions, in chaos, in mutually-destructive ‘mixing,’ and suffuse the landscape. It is a world of menace that H.D. creates; life is not a smooth, peaceful process, but one in which violence is inherent even in the act of perception. And in this world, colours are centres of power; in *Sea Garden*, they are unpredictable, aggressive forces. Colours are no longer passive sufferers or inanimate qualities; they transcend limits, they seep in everywhere, they cannot be restrained, and this pervasion of colour, inevitably, as a result, encroaches on space and identity.

The speaker’s extreme frustration at the world of colours that do things on a volition of their own and violate the space of others around them is communicated through “The Gift.”

Violets streaked black ridges
through the grass.³⁹

These lines suggest an image of brutality on the part of the violets, seen both as the colour and as the flower. The word ‘streak’ imparts a cold detachment and ruthlessness to the action. The image invokes the metaphor of painting; a Fauvist brush streaking black across the green canvas. The pigmental colours violet and green, when they combine, give black. Based on this fact, what happens in these lines is the mixing of the colours of two different objects; the colour of the flower streaking itself on the green of the grass to create black. Seen alongside the theme of sensory glut and violence, the colours too, here, partake in this forceful intrusion against one’s will, this infringement of one’s space. The lines also denote “black violets” (of which the poet speaks towards the end of the poem), here split into two: flower and colour; with the colour black flowing out of the petals, streaking on

³⁷ Ibid., “Evening,” 17.

³⁸ Ibid., “Mid-day,” 7. The poet compares her thoughts to “shrivelled”, black seeds: “my thoughts are spent/ as the black seeds./ My thoughts tear me,/ I dread their fever./ I am scattered in its whirl./ I am scattered like/ the hot shrivelled seeds.”

³⁹ Ibid., “The Gift,” 16.

grass.⁴⁰ The over flowing black shows another attribute of colour: *non-containment*—it pervades the garden, the poet’s senses, and “crowd[s]/ madness upon madness.”⁴¹

In “Evening,” as in “The Gift,” colours are extremely violent and the speaker’s refuge is an ideal world in which all colour has been muted. In “Evening,” once the blue flowers are “lost,” what remains are the “still white” cornels and the “dart[ing]” shadows. This reduction of the world into a monochrome and the final impasse when the utter black veil is thrown over the garden, obscuring all activity, all life, are a kind of healing breather after the onslaught of the colours of the day on the senses. The word “bleach” in “Sheltered Garden” similarly, signifies an act of violent depletion of colour:

Or the melon—
let it bleach yellow
in the winter light.⁴²

Though the enchantment of colour and objects is necessary to the poet, paradoxically, she desires the complete subjugation of colour and sensations. One of the reasons for her wish for an ‘unmoving,’ ‘still’ world is the violence inherent in objects, the constant threat that they pose to the poet whose sensibilities are stung by overwhelming sensations. The Romantic conception of nature coming to the aid of the wounded soul of the beholder is subverted in *Sea Garden*. The seen world is too alive to be looked at. Colours haunt H.D. because they are present everywhere. They move, change colours and shades, infringe on other colours; they are, in short, never limited (unless darkness takes over).

In H.D.’s poetry, colour is not limited to or ‘possessed’ by objects; unlike Moore, for whom tropes such as “fawn- / brown eyes,”⁴³ “lemon-yellow”⁴⁴ and “dragonfly blue”⁴⁵ are important reference methods, H.D.’s colours come without the trace of the ‘original’ object just as in “silver granite,”⁴⁶ “bronze/ of your sun-burnt neck”⁴⁷ and “amber husk/ fluted with gold.”⁴⁸ H.D. separates colour from the object so easily the ‘violence’ of this forced separation is more telling than that of the suggestion of metaphor in the lines because this separation is an assault on the identity of the object.

In “Pursuit,” violence is committed on colour. Where the “heel pressed,” the colour of the “half-ripe” buds changes from purple to deep purple, the colour of the ‘ripe’ hyacinth flower.⁴⁹ This change of colour ascertains the fact that colours are not distinct to or possessed by objects. The deep colour also stands for blood, wounds, and the life that has oozed out of the flower’s delicate body. The implication that the colour of the flower it is to become is ‘contained’ in the half-ripe bud and is forced out by violence suggests loss of innocence, forced recognition and initiation. Again, the green stem of the hyacinth “show yellow-green,” the colour of dying stem,

⁴⁰ Doolittle, “Evening,” in *Sea Garden*, 17. “Another life holds what this lacks,/ [. . .]/ a hill, not set with black violets/ but stones, stones, bare rocks.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., “Sheltered Garden,” 19.

⁴³ Marianne Moore, “No Swan So Fine,” in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 5-6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., “Marriage,” 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid., “Those Various Scalpels,” 20.

⁴⁶ Doolittle, “The Cliff Temple,” in *Sea Garden*, 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., “Loss,” 47-48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., “Sea poppies,” 1-2.

⁴⁹ Ibid., “Pursuit,” 9.

where “the earth-side” is turned over, exposed to light and forced to die prematurely.⁵⁰ In “the green leaf-moss of the larch branches,” the poem juxtaposes the colour of the leaves on the branches, a final act of violence (on colour) on the part of the speaker.⁵¹

In “Garden,” the focus is a rose which is as “clear” and “hard” as rock.⁵² Extremely violent in her use of ‘sharp’⁵³ expressions, the speaker declares:

I could scrape the colour
from the petals
like spilt dye from a rock.⁵⁴

Undoubtedly, the act of ‘scraping’ colour from the petals is an ontological violence on both. For the flower, whose colour is part of its being, ‘scraping off’ colour implies death to the flower. The analogy to dye is ominous in this context, where for the victim (the rose) disfigurement, torture and loss of identity is the result, as scraping “spilt dye from a rock” disintegrates the rock.⁵⁵ Conversely, if the colour spilled on rock is merely superficial, we may assume that, to Doolittle, the colour of objects is equally superficial or external which may be scraped off without any damage to the object. Here, H.D. seems to be asserting an independent existence of the object devoid of its colour.

The question of whether colour is an extrinsic or intrinsic quality of the object in H.D.’s *Sea Garden* is taken up in the following section.

3. THE METAPHYSICS OF COLOUR

As stated initially, both claims to colour being an extrinsic and an intrinsic property of objects are valid. H.D. uses colour in both ways—as a superficial quality that cannot be possessed, contained or imbibed within objects, instead, can be ‘scraped off,’ and as the essence of the object, the whole itself.

“Garden,” as seen in the previous section, ambiguously articulates both natures of colour, as external to the object and as internal:

I could scrape the colour
from the petals
like spilt dye from a rock.⁵⁶

Is colour analogous to a dye that is spilled over onto objects, able to be scraped off at will? Colour is, then, indubitably, an object outside the object. Conversely, is the dye (a rock pigment) spilt ‘from’ the rock, which, therefore, means that both rock and dye are one and the same? Is colour intrinsic to the flower and does its removal entail the destruction of the flower?

⁵⁰ Doolittle, “Pursuit,” in *Sea Garden*, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, “Garden,” 25.

⁵³ The poem’s violence comes from its use of words related to sharpness and bluntness like: “hard,” “descent,” “hail,” “scrape,” “split,” “rend open,” “cut apart,” “rend it to tatters,” “drop,” “fall,” “presses up,” “blunts,” “points,” “rounds,” and “plough through.”

⁵⁴ Doolittle, “Garden,” in *Sea Garden*, 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

H.D. sticks to the Extrinsic View when she describes the statue (of a male figure) in “The Contest” in these terms:

You are white—a limb of cypress
bent under a weight of snow.⁵⁷

The metaphor here suggests two things. The colour of the statue, like the snow fallen on a branch, is an extrinsic object, which, in fact, can be separable from the object. Secondly, just as snow weighs down the branch, colour too burdens the object, here, the sculpture. The beauty of the figure, which is the central idea of the poem, is linked with the ‘weighing down’ of colour, like the “great band” that weighs down on his forehead with “its heavy twists of gold.”⁵⁸ The idea of colour as an excess, as burdensome, and simultaneously, as beauty, recurs in the *Sea Garden*.

Again, in “Sea Iris,” the flower is compared to a rainbow⁵⁹ which is “painted” blue but hides treasure within:

Band of iris-flowers
above the waves,
you are *painted* blue,
painted like a fresh prow
stained among the salt weeds.⁶⁰

The colour perceived is equated to paint, a surface coating.

Separating colour from the object figures in numerous poems in *Sea Garden*. “The Helmsman” is about an ominous, ambiguous journey to the sea after a long interval of inland life. The speaker(s), regretful of having ever gone away from the sea and its shore, enchanted with the beauty of life in the land, reminisces on how they “parted green from green,”—the separation of colour from itself, the taming of nature.⁶¹ In “Pear Tree,” she praises the whiteness of the pear blossoms as something that is originally separated:

no flower ever parted silver
from such rare silver.⁶²

This parting of colours is an affirmation of the *separability* of colour from the object, and at the same time, a violence on the ‘wholeness’ of the object.

The lines from “Pursuit,” already discussed in the previous section encompass the Intrinsic View, wherein colour is not merely a quality of objects, but the very identity of objects. In another instance, when the poet says that the green of the branch is crushed,⁶³ the colour is the life of the branch that is crushed. Colour mirrors the state of the object; we can say that colour, in this limited emotive function, is intrinsic to the object.

⁵⁷ Doolittle, “The Contest,” in *Sea Garden*, 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Iris is Greek for rainbow.

⁶⁰ Doolittle, “Sea Iris,” in *Sea Garden*, 40 (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Ibid., “The Helmsman,” 2.

⁶² Ibid., “Pear Tree,” 43. This is in conjunction with the resourcefulness of colours I expressed in the last section on the agential power of colours. Here, the white of the flowers originates from an extraordinary, precious font of whiteness.

⁶³ Ibid., “Storm,” 39.

The separability of colours, though a pervasive aspect in *Sea Garden*, also encompasses an act of violence on the object. Depriving the object of its colour destroys the object. Although Doolittle wishes for colours to mellow, to slow down, and settle, this imagined fusion of the object with its qualities, the containment of colour within boundaries, appears in the scope of the collection to be impossible. Thus, her wish to scrape the colour off a rose in “The Garden” remains an unfulfilled wish; both the object and its colour, exist on a heightened plane of power and mobility, inaccessible to the poet. Colours, with their endless resourcefulness, independence, and intermixing dynamics, emerge in the final analysis, as extrinsic, not *properties*, but objects by themselves. As in the line from “The Gift,” “honey and amber flecked each leaf,” colour is *painted, streaked, or burdened upon* the object, whose changing states of being is *showed* by the ever changing colours.⁶⁴

In conclusion, colour, the most passive of ‘properties,’ in H.D., derives a kind of magical power, enabling it to respond, to retaliate, and to wound. Colours often act ‘for’ objects which remain largely inert; they become agents of emotion and violence. The violence that colours engage in has a panacea only in the curbing of light with the arrival of darkness. Though the poet attempts to rid the object of its ‘threatening,’ excessive colours, she fails because destruction of colour is also destruction of the object. Doolittle in this volume of poetry treats colour as a quality that imparts identity to objects and as a surface property that violates boundaries, weighs down objects, but never ceases to regenerate itself from its undying source of colour.

⁶⁴ Doolittle, “The Gift,” in *Sea Garden*, 15.

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