
The indecision of the Universe:

on Gérard Granel's *On the colour of impressionism*

In *On the colour of impressionism*, Gérard Granel treats the philosophical question of colour as a philosophical question within the conception of colour itself and by itself. The question of colour has a long history in philosophy. In modernity, colour is treated as an epistemological dilemma whether it is to be understood as a sensible and secondary quality of the objects, or as the perception of the mind projected on objects, or finally, if colour should be seen as saying something about things and their essence or about the subject that perceives them. But what is at stake for phenomenology is no longer the objectivism where colour is the property of things, nor the subjectivism where colour is perceived by the subject, but it is the experience of the object *having* the colour as well as the experience of *seeing* the object as something that has colour. In this sense, the phenomenological perspective is that colour itself shows “*that there is colour*”.

As Merleau-Ponty well explained, the phenomenological subversion of a substantialist ontology that is strictly solidary to the grammatical logic of sentences such as “s is p”, where “p” is the accidental of “s”, makes colour essential to the manifestation of being in the horizon of the world. Moreover, what comes from the sensible enjoys an emblematic privilege in the donation of being and does not appear as constituting the inferior degree of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, *L’Oeil et l’Esprit*, Gallimard, 1964, p. 43). Colours and what Merleau-Ponty calls their “indecisive murmur” can present us things, forests, storms, the world, and perhaps integrate the perspective as a particular case of a greater ontological

power (ibid). Within this phenomenological standpoint, the essay by Granel on colour can be read as a way to deepen and expand this perspective.

Departing from a synoptic table by the painter Paul Signac that defines the objective of impressionist painting as to give the most *éclat* possible in paintings, Granel wishes to investigate this essential objective in impressionism and neo-impressionism in terms of colours. His question is simply “what *are* colours and what do they *mean* in impressionism?” One of the things that is interesting in this text is that the author brings the painter’s perspective, and not the philosopher’s perspective to the fore. The modern painter draws lines and fills them in with colour – a posture towards painting that is problematic, because it follows a philosophical model inherent in modernity. The impressionist painting, on the contrary, is not only an *éclat* which takes place pictorially, but it is something that makes a turn (*un re-tour*), a revolution, in terms of the relation between the sensible and the thing. For Granel, the sensible sensibilizes itself in impressionism. Meaning, the sensible is in action and breathes in represented things, because the sensible needs pauses so that it can regain its force.

Differently from art in modernity, impressionism is not a movement that colours forms. It does not follow the philosophical idea of the colour as something that is sensible and thus belongs to things as a secondary quality or to the subject’s perception. This modern attitude corresponds to an idea of the real being in given things distributed as pieces of reality. Colour is here something that belongs to the sensible which does not have a life of its own but is something that is and can be possessed. The impressionist revolution lies in making a turn (*un re-tour*) of the relation between the sensible and the thing in that the sensible is a movement that takes place within the sensible – it looks towards, it regards the sensible and mixes itself

within the sensible, that is, within itself. According to Granel, the pure appearance is a free movement, or as he says a “free stirring” of pure appearance. Meaning, the sensible is a movement of and in the sensible where pure appearance appears as pure appearance.

The movement of the sensible is characterized as a mobility of the universal. The universal is a term that Granel uses in quite a challenging way because he does not use it in the logic sense, but rather understands it as belonging to the Universe. The logical outcome would be to think of the sensible as particular – *I* feel it, it is *mine* – which results in the sensible becoming illusory. But Granel’s use of the universal as belonging to the Universe shows that the Universe is the sensible in its very movement. The Universe is a great sensibility in movement; it is a mobility of the sensible. Within this movement, the (represented) things function as breaks, pauses, as resting places. That is, the things give this sensible movement that is the Universe a place of rest, a place of taking a breath and regain its force. We could understand the Universe as the World, but I believe it is of importance to see Granel’s insistence of using the word *Univers*, Universe, precisely because it seems to be more in a cosmological sense. The things are thus a place of rest and works thus also as a lapse of the sensible. Just as the time-lapse depend on its intervals to continue, the lapse of the sensible depends on the things to rest and continue. Granel calls the place of rest that are the things “the peace in a combat between the Colour-Univers (*Couleur-Univers*) and the thing”.

We could make the distinction here between represented things and the thing in itself but what Granel is aiming for is to show that the thing is a *something* that *comes* to itself. It comes to itself and is not in itself, showing thus its indecision: the thing is here and there, and being indecisive, it comes to itself because it is a breath of this sensible movement. In its indecision it further shows that the Universe is a pure *Ailleurs*, a pure *Other-place*. The way

the impressionist shows this is in how he works with the palette and the facture of his work. The impressionist sets the canvas not in front of Nature as something that is a group of things, but in front of a totality of opening – light, space, vivacity of the sensible – which is what he paints. The method of seeing is not seeing the things. His seeing is not to see things, but to see the vague, the luminous etc. by seeing without seeing things. What he sees is the pure sensible – the colour of colour. And he does not depart from the idea that the sensible painting is a sensation or an impression, but it is a *knowing-of* the sensible; a knowing that witnesses the universality of the sensible, a universality which is a diverse-universe (*divers-univers*).

As said, the impressionist thus shows this in his use of the palette and the facture. Regarding the palette, the impressionists do not mix the tints on the palette, because they are dedicated to the pure colour. Those who mix the tints, are mixing to come closer to the colour on a particular thing, something which goes against impressionism. The impressionist uses pure pigments, because things do not *have* colour, but colour rather possesses the thing. The pure colours are pure because they are of the Universe, they belong to the sensible movement, and not to the things. They are colours of colours that feel the movement, the Universe. To quote Granel, “the things themselves thus appear as the round and trampled airs of a wheatgrass that witnesses a retiring hurricane: they *feel* the universal” (*Les choses elles-mêmes apparaissent alors comme les aires rondes et foulées d’un blé qui témoignent d’un orage retire: elles sentent l’universel*).

The second use of impressionism to show the diverse-universe is through the facture, that is, through an artist’s characteristic handling of the paint – the manner in which he executes the painting. The facture manifests the *cela, det där, that thing*, which is gathering of the

sensible. For Granel, the things, as resting-places, gather the sensible precisely because they are resting-places. The things have come to themselves, letting the sensible movement rest in them and thus returning to being things in themselves so that they can gather the sensible. And this can only be seen in a good, convenable distance. Standing too close to an impressionist painting, it looks chaotic, standing too far away it makes no sense, you can't see what it is, but standing at precisely that right distance, everything comes together as the sensible movement that rests in the things which gather the sensible. The distance, the *good* distance, the *just-right* distance, allows for the things to return. This is, however, something that puts the place of measurement into question, a question that deserves further investigation. Finally, the facture moreover makes a pure Difference emerge in the very facture, in the way or manner of painting. The facture itself, the way the painter paints, is the gulf where a pure Difference emerges and with it the *éclat* of the colour happens. The colour *explodes to brilliance* within the trenchant of Difference that is the facture.

By bringing another experience of being *something*, the thing as *coming* to itself, Granel throws new light to the question of thinking the subject, the self or identity as something that is a resting place of the sensible movement that is the Universe, the World, where one takes a breath rather than something that should justify its being in the world. Furthermore, the facture that makes a pure Difference emerge is also a way for us to understand that our being in the sensible movement is where we can find a pure *Ailleurs*, a pure Other-place, that makes colour, the sensible explode into brilliance.

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