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La Rousse and the Tapestry Artist: Tracy Chevalier's Liberation through Images and Colours

Art has always held a very ambiguous position in human society: on the one hand it has been exploited for promotional use and revered as a stand in for the entity it represents; on the other hand however, its ability to question dogmatic authorities by appealing to an individual's innermost instincts and thoughts has made it a threatening and seditious force to be reckoned with. As a result, numerous studies on the impact of art and visions on society, authority, and our perception of reality, have emerged and taken many forms of interdisciplinary inquiry (it is sufficient to think of movements such as "literature and the visual arts", "culture studies", "cross-cultural image studies" or "law and imagery", to mention a few). As a confirmation of this, the subversive power of art, in the form of suppressed colours and controversial portraits, is at the heart of two of Tracy Chevalier's works, The Virgin Blue (1997) and The Lady and the Unicorn (2003). In both novels the protagonists' lives are dominated by a strong patriarchal society that suppresses the voices of those who do not pertain to politically privileged categories. Art therefore is the force that leads the characters to leave the paths that had been assigned to them by custom and seek out their own future.

In The Virgin Blue, art reappears in its minimal and purest form, i.e., colours, and more precisely, a blue known as the "Virgin Blue" and red, recalling the hair of the Virgin and the two protagonists Isabelle and Elle, and blood in its various connotations. Because of her resemblance to the Virgin, Isabelle is oppressed by the Calvinist society and compelled to hide her religious devotion and her desire for a better life. Such wishes are embodied by the colours that return centuries later in the dreams (and therefore unconscious) of Elle, who finds her own fulfilment through her research into Isabelle's life and images. Colours oppose both the word of power and masculine domination, as

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will be illustrated by an iconological study into the significance of the colours and paintings mentioned in the novel.

In The Lady and the Unicorn art openly subverts social conventions: tapestry artist Nicolas des Innocents decides to create a series of six tapestries depicting ladies and unicorns, each one depicting a lady that he meets throughout the novel, against the wishes of his patrons. He therefore decides to celebrate women from various social classes and origins and does so also through his use of colours and themes, which did not conform to the very strict pictorial cannon of the time. Art here tells an alternative story than that dictated by historical accounts.

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The plot of The Virgin Blue is divided into two alternating parallel storylines set in the 16th century and contemporary France. In the former storyline, Isabelle Du Moulin is continuously denigrated by the Calvinist society she lives in because of her resemblance to the Virgin and compelled to hide her religious devotion and her desire for a better life. In the novel's modern chapters, Ella Turner (later Tournier) experiences the difficulties of adjusting to her new life and searching for work as a midwife in a small town in France, so she decides to do some research on her family's origins. Such wishes are represented and enforced by the peculiar hue of blue that comforts Isabelle and returns centuries later in Ella's dreams (and therefore her unconscious). The latter then finds her own sense of fulfilment through her increasingly passionate research into Isabelle's life and images. In such a context, as Chevalier points out, colour becomes a uniting source of strength in the face of external circumstances:

> *Colour is very important to me. It used to be unconscious, although since so many people have pointed it out to me, it is starting to become conscious! I think in part, it is because since most of my characters are set in the past, I have to find some common ground between us and them, and for me, colour and the senses are one way. We may have different views on religion, or society now, but the sun still shines on someone now as it did then; bread still smells the same. (Baker 34)*

Here art reappears in its minimal and purest form, i.e., colours, and in particular a hue known as the "Virgin Blue" and red in its various connotations. Colour, whether present or absent, represents

the minimal unit of a work of art. Where there is no form, there is always a colour, even if it is considered 'uncoloured'. Colour is an abstract essence that goes beyond all rational comprehension and acts on one's most profound instincts as Daniel Bergez observes:

> *la couleur bénéficie de la valeur significative que peut lui accorder un artist. Si le dessin est volontiers perçu comme la partie la plus intellectuelle de l'art picturial, qui s'adresse a l'esprit, la couleur est souvent associée a l'âme et aux passions, c'est-a-dire a la part la plus irrationelle et profonde de la psyché humaine (67).*

In art, as well as in The Virgin Blue, colours represent the formless and uncontrollable part of reality and a challenge because they can give form to many different "variations that entail … suppressions of definitive details – the deformative process – in order to preserve a 'dream quality'" (Rogers 38). Such a characteristic makes them threatening in the eyes of those who seek to control society, for it pertains to the reign of the visual and "is 'modulation' that avoids superimposing shapes a priori" (Carpi 9, original emphasis). In fact, in the novel all initial references to the Virgin blue colour in Ella's dreams are vague and undefined, underlining this dream quality. Consequentially those who are associated with colour like her are considered unreliable because "It has been generally believed that people who responded to colour rather than to line were not wholly trustworthy. Love of colour was somehow instinctive and primitive, indicating a Dionysian cast to one's psyche rather than the restrained and Apollonian one appropriate for a proper man" (Shlain in Riley 6). This may also be clearly seen W. J. T. Mitchell's illustration of Lessing's binary discourse:

Painting – Poetry

Space – Time

Natural signs – Arbitrary (man-made) signs

Narrow sphere – Infinite range

Imitation – Expression

Body – Mind

External – Internal

Silent – Eloquent

Beauty – Sublimity

Eye – Ear

Feminine – Masculine (Mitchell, 110)

In accordance with this classification, Isabelle embodies the emotional and visual world of painting and colour, whereas her husband Etienne, along with the rest of society, opposes her with their domineering rational and practical view on reality. As colours are speechless, and their silence precludes any possibility of expression to those who embrace them, Isabelle is completely illiterate and condemned to silence and secrecy but resists her community's pressure to conform thanks to the providential guidance granted to her by her devotion for the Virgin, to whom she is bound through the coppery colour of her hair and her love for the colour that gives the novel its name.

Ella also experiences the colour on an emotional level, for as Riley affirms "Colour is identified with the emotional, rhapsodic, emancipated, formless, and even deceitful aspect of art" (6). The first time she claims: "It [The blue] moved like it was being buffeted by the wind, undulating toward me and away. It began to press into me, the pressure of water rather than stone" (Virgin Blue 32). The only indications she can give consist in the sensations she feels in perceiving rather than seeing this colour. When discussing it with the librarian Jean-Paul she says: "It's the atmosphere more than what actually happens that frightens me. And the fact that I keep having it, that it won't go away, like it's with me for life. That's the worst of it all" (Virgin Blue 52). Ella later has a vision of a concrete solidification of this blue colour in the form of a dress, though it is described in kinetic words rather than visual ones in order to maintain a certain degree of unattainability and indescribability:

When it [the dream] came it was less impressionistic, more tangible than ever. The blue hung over me like a bright sheet, billowing in and out, taking on texture and shape. I woke with tears running down my face and my voice in my ears. I lay still.

'A dress', I whispered. 'It was a dress' (Virgin Blue 56).

The colour is further consolidated and artistically defined after seeing the 'dream blue' in real life, and more precisely in Nicolas Tournier's painting Le Christ descendu de la Croix in the Musée des

Augustins, which mirrors the contrasting sentiments in Ella's dreams and convinces her that the painter was her ancestor:

It was a painting of Christ taken off the cross, lying on a sheet on the ground, his head resting in an old man's lap. He was watched over by a younger man, a young woman in a yellow dress, and in the centre the Virgin Mary, wearing a robe the very blue I'd been dreaming of, draped around an astonishing face … she gazed down at her dead son, framed by a colour that reflected her agony (Virgin Blue 62-63).

The emotions that colours bring are twofold. In his many works on colour and symbolism Michel Pastoureau insists that each colour is double-faced and can therefore take on both positive and negative implications. The 'Virgin blue' is a perfect example of this constant shift in connotation and importance, as Tracy Chevalier points out by quoting from Goethe's Theory of Colours: "blue still brings a principle of darkness with it. This colour has a peculiar and almost indescribable effect on the eye. As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose" (Goethe, in preface). In fact, Ella often remarks that her 'dream blue' "is bright. Very vivid. But it's bright and yet dark too … It's like there are two sides to the colour…" (Virgin Blue 52) and that "'It has two parts: there's a clear blue, the top layer, full of light … But there's also a darkness beneath the light, very sombre. The two shades fight against each other. That's what makes the colour so alive and memorable" (Virgin Blue 227).

This is because, as Pastoureau sustains "il colore non e solo un fenomeno naturale, ma una costruzione culturale complessa che rifugge le generalizzazioni, se non addirittura le analisi e presenta problemi di difficile soluzione." (Storia di un Colore 7) Since society changes in time, the same happens to colour's prestige – or lack thereof - in a specific context: "E la societa che «fa» il colore, che gli attribuisce una definizione e un significato, che costruisce i suoi codici e i suoi valori, che stabilisce i suoi utilizzi e l'ambito delle sue applicazioni" (Storia di un Colore 10). Blue for instance has been considered the colour of both the Virgin and the Devil and both associations are evoked in the novel. During the Roman Empire it was deemed a barbarous colour often found in depictions of devils, demons and hell (Storia di un Colore 37) as recalled by Isabelle's eldest son Petit Jean when he says that his sister Marie, who was wearing an undercloth of the Virgin blue

colour “wanted to show her new dress to the devil in the woods” (Virgin Blue 259). In the XII century however blue was reappraised thanks to images depicting the Virgin in robes of a specific blue instead of black or grey:

> *Prima, nelle immagini, Maria puo essere vestita di qualsiasi colore ma si tratta quasi sempre di un colore scuro: nero, grigio, bruno, viola, blu, o verde cupo. L’idea che domina e quella di un colore di afflizione, un colore di lutto: la Vergine porta il lutto del figlio morto sulla Croce … Tuttavia nella prima meta del XII secolo questa tavolozza va riducendosi, e il blu tende ad assolvere da solo questo ruolo di attributo mariano del lutto. Inoltre si schiarisce, si fa piu seducente: da smorto e cupo che era da parecchi secoli, diventa piu deciso e piu luminoso (Storia di un Colore 50-51).*

Jean-Paul confirms this when saying: “Ah, the blue of the Renaissance. You know there is lapis lazuli in this blue. It was so expensive they could only use it for important things like the Virgin’s robe” (Virgin Blue 94). The ‘Virgin blue’ hue comes from lapis lazuli, which was considered very valuable because of its gold coloured veining and its distant place of origin. Moreover, its colour is more precious and stable than its inferior counterpart azurite and furnishes a pigment that can be used by painters as opposed to sapphire. It represented the Virgin’s profound maternal love and her sorrowful grieving arising after her son’s death as is the case of Nicolas Tournier’s painting: “It’s a beautiful colour, you see, but sad too, maybe to remind us that the Virgin is always mourning the death of her son, even when he’s born. Like she already knows what will happen. But then when he’s dead the blue is still beautiful, still hopeful” (Virgin Blue 227).

Moreover, by inheriting the ancient superstition that “il blu e un colore benefico che allontana le forze del male” (Storia di un colore 23), the bond between the Virgin and her colour was further strengthened by its apparent ability to protect those who believe in it as if she were watching over them. This power comes to Isabelle’s aid when her family is threatened by Christians who seek to kill them: “she thought of the blue of the Virgin … She took a deep breath and her heartbeat slowed. She opened her eyes. The empty spaces at the table were shimmering with blue light”, and afterwards: “Inside there was a strange, frozen silence. Then Isabelle stood up calmly, feeling the blue light surround and protect her. She picked up Marie” (Virgin Blue 74-76). This divine power is later revealed to be the reason why the blue cloak Isabelle buys from a pedlar is eventually made into the dress that Ella dreams about. He narrates the legend of the weaver’s

daughter who was saved by the very cloth he is showing her, endowed with the same colour of the Virgin's robe in the painting Madonna in Trono con il Bambino e i Santi (Sacra Conversazione) by Giovanni Bellini in the church of San Zaccaria in Venice (Virgin Blue 141-142). Such garments are often regarded as investitures granted from saints to their worthy ambassadors and therefore "legata a un rito di passaggio, all'ingresso in una nuova condizione" (Stoffa del Diavolo 17). The blue dress therefore was not worn to meet the devil as Petite Jean insinuated but to protect oneself from peril. When Isabelle's daughter Marie is killed while wearing the dress, one is lead to suspect that the dress brought misfortune; in truth however the Virgin's divine protection could extend itself beyond death in Michel Pastoureau's words: "E [il blu] associato ai rituali funebri e alla morte per proteggere il defunto nell'aldila" (Storia di un colore 22-23). Therefore the 'Virgin blue' was simply fulfilling its other task, that of protecting her in the afterlife.

Such a reappraisal is at the base of Isabelle's and Ella's strength, which enables them to overcome the scrutinizing and unforgiving conventions by demonstrating the importance of emotions and instincts. The colour's providential power is finally reiterated in the Epilogue, which shows Isabelle's and Jacob's life following Marie's death. The blue light here is a divine sign that enables them to choose their own path:

Isabelle kneels at the crossroads. She has three choices: she can go forward, she

can go back, or she can remain where she is.

- Help me, Holy Mother, she prays. Help me to choose.

A blue light surrounds her, giving her solace for the briefest moment …

Jacob reaches the crossroads and finds his mother on her knees, bathed in blue. She does not see him and he watches her for a moment, the blue reflected in his eyes. Then he looks around and takes the road leading west (Virgin Blue 301-302, original emphasis).

The other important and ambiguous colour in the novel is red whose presence is vital as a counterpart to the 'Virgin blue'. In the beginning, it appears to assume decisively negative connotations though this is more often noticed by the reader than by the characters. The people who destroy the statue of the Virgin and Child for instance are described as a "mass of bright red faces, unfamiliar now, hard and cold" (Virgin Blue 9) and the pastor Monsieur Marcel is

distinguishable by the colour of his hands "stained with tannin" (Virgin Blue 1). He is the Virgin and saints' arch enemy and rallies the village people against them, taking on the true role of the Diablo, i.e. he who divides. Notwithstanding his imposing sermons however "his red-stained hands undermined his commanding presence, a reminder to them that he was simply a cobbler" (Virgin Blue 6). When he is found naked and hanged to a tree by the Tournier family, Isabelle recognizes him only by the red of his hands. Isabelle's first born son, Petit Jean, "was born in blood and was a fearless child" (Virgin Blue 22) and epitomises red's worst traits by assisting his cruel father Etienne and arrogant Uncle Jacque as opposed to his younger brother Jacob, who "was born in blue" (Virgin Blue 22) and whose personality closely resembles his mother's.

More importantly, Isabelle, Marie, and Ella's hair is red, a distinction that causes them to be set apart from other people, both it in the 16th and 20th century, starting with Isabelle in the very beginning of the novel: When its [the sun's] rays reached her, they touched her hair with a halo of copper that remained even when the sun had gone down. From that day she was called La Rousse after the Virgin Mary" (Virgin Blue 1). Her chestnut red hair is considered a sort of divine gift while Christianity dominated; Monsieur Marcel's arrival and the Calvinist teachings he brought with him subverted the religious and the social standings of the time and the village's opinion on Isabelle: "The nickname lost its affection when Monsieur Marcel arrived in the village a few years later … In his first sermon, in woods out of sight of the village priest, he told them that the Virgin was barring their way to the Truth" (Virgin Blue 1), thus recalling Wandel's theory on the matter:

> *the idolater is the object of a wrathful judgement that is in principle without limits. The unlimited severity of the judgement follows logically from the peculiar character of idolatry, which is not just a moral failure among others but a renunciation of one's own humanity, a projection of that humanity into objects. The idolater is, by definition, subhuman and until it is shown that he can be educated into full humanity, he is a fit object for religious persecution, exile from the community of believers, enslavement, or liquidation (198).*

People like Monsieur Marcel pertained to the chromophobic faction of the time, which asserted that colour "représentent le côté dangereux, ambigu, trop séduisant de la beauté… Comme tout ce qui capte trop le regard, les couleurs sont un obstacle a la piété" (Figures et Coleurs 35). In a woman's case the matter was even more serious: just as Eve is remembered in history and in the Duke's

stained glass window as the reason for mankind's fall, Isabelle is presented by Monsieur Marcel as a personified idol, and an example of what would happen to the others should they persist in following the "old ways": "La Rousse has been defiled by the statues, the candles, the trinkets. She is contaminated! She stands between you and God!" (Virgin Blue 1). Not only is Isabelle different from the other villagers, but she is already "lost" due to her "contamination" by the idols. Isabelle's "shameful hair" (Virgin Blue 17) is thus considered an idolatrous contaminating mark that she feels the need to cover with a headcloth. At the time, famous traitors such as Cain, Delilah, and Judas were depicted with red hair and displayed to those who couldn't read as a moral lesson:

la rosseur comme couleur de la félonie et de la trahison. Certes, tout au longe du Moyen Age, etre roux c'est encore, comme dans l'Antiquité, etre cruel, sanglant, laid, inférieur ou ridicule; mais au fils du temps cela deviant surtout etre faux, rusé, menteur, trompeur, déloyal, perfide ou renégat (Coleurs, Images, Symboles 74).

The irrational power that used to be the colour's strength is now considered a dangerous temptation associated with Eve, women and those incapable of embracing the rational ascetic life Protestantism exhorted, and thus goes against those who embraced it. Hair was also considered a significant expression of sexuality and "etre roux c'est aussi avoir la peau semé de taches de rousseur, c'est etre tacheté, donc impur, et participer d'une certaine animalité" (Figures et Coleurs 78). Moreover, it is not a pure red, but a sort of chestnut colour hair, shot with "coppery highlights" (Virgin Blue 112) and therefore a combination between red and blond, i.e. yellow. This further worsens Isabelle's and Marie's situation, for yellow was another colour that was despised, deemed the "couleur de la maladie et de la folie […] du mensonge et de la trahison" (Coleurs de Notre Temps 111) and attributed to outcasts and non-Christians.

Isabelle's positive attitude in the face of her family's difficulties leads all those who come to care about her to disregard such superstitions and see how Isabelle embodies maternal love and sacrifice by doing whatever is necessary to protect her family, even if it means renouncing to openly express her true faith. Her red hair keeps her from becoming an integrated part of society but also makes her stand out to those who still love the Virgin. It is appreciated by Etienne's sister Susanne and the pedlar who claims: "But that is beautiful, no? The colour of the Virgin's hair, may

we bless her! Why to be ashamed?" (Virgin Blue 196). Isabelle's red hair becomes a lovely trait that she passes on to her daughter Marie more than a curse, a symbol of sacred and pure love that allows them to surpass the constraining people and, either after (as in the case of Isabelle and Marie) or during their life (like in Ella's case). In fact, rather than separating her from the community like during Isabelle's lifetime, Ella's gradual change of hair from being dark to a coppery colouring becomes another tangible tie to her newfound ancestors and country, for she is told that "You look more French" (Virgin Blue 151). From that moment on, she is also called La Rousse: 'It's a Cevenol nickname for a girl with red hair … 'They used to call the Virgin La Rousse because they thought she had red hair'" (Virgin Blue 113).

The circle hereby closes itself, as red hair reassumes it original Marian connotations. The times have changed and Medieval prejudices step aside to allow "La Rousse" to become an affectionate nickname and beloved albeit mysterious colour once again. It also enables the protagonists to leave a strong and lasting impression. Although Marie's life ends tragically and Jacob is compelled to leave his family, the Virgin's blue returns centuries later thanks to the artist Nicolas Tournier, whose relation to the family is only recognized and acknowledged by Ella, who claims "I would have never guessed there had been a painter in the family" (Virgin Blue 63) and finally finds the place where she belongs.

Isabelle's subtle but unwavering and emotional presence and resistance to the undermining of her faith permit her to subtly transmit the maternal love that was instilled in her by the detested red of her hair and blue of the Virgin to those she loved and to Ella, her future self. Ella in her own time also subverts the conventions of the provincial French town she is living in by drastically changing her life and freeing herself from others' opinions after discovering the liberating emotions of her family legacy. Colours oppose and are suppressed by the world of power and masculine domination but gradually resurface and allow both women to find their own paths in life. Tracy Chevalier's novel therefore proves that while images may be physically destroyed and force may usurp their role, in the end the "old ways" always prevail if those heralding their values manage to undermine the present oppressive forces through their actions.

In conclusion, what makes art unique in all of its forms is the fact that this knowledge is not of the traditional universal sort as the word usually indicates. Tracy Chevalier makes this evident by

telling the stories of women who manage to completely change their apparently predetermined destinies and disadvantageous situations through art, by means of colours and their hidden meanings. Such women in fact either invalidate negative social prejudices by proving their worth like in The Virgin Blue or they create a sort of spiritual companionship with other women through their personal experiences and lessons. Artwork thus becomes the occasion for such women to become aware of their limits and surpass them, thus leading to their own personal enrichment and to that of those who support them.

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