

'Sepia, Camouflage, Modernity'

Natasha Eaton

*We define: 'sepia' means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed.
Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Sepia, as the ontological ground of the image, is maybe the most poetic of colours. Sensuous, warmed, welcoming the grain of wood; how it can make stone, skin yield, blush, fade in its light. Is sepia the most obfuscate of colours? Sludge, shade, fade; relational sepia even fascinated that great theorist of chromatic rigour, Joseph Albers.¹ Sepia has many faces. To judge this, Albers resorted to brown, which he tested by the colours that tested the exact same shade of brown depending on the colours that surround it. Brown is a palette that Albers saw as intimate with white, with silence. For Rimbaud, brown becomes silence. As he would abandon poetry, he did not assign it a corresponding vowel in his poem of synaesthesia, 'Voyelles'.² Maybe, then, brown the 'colour' is most like camouflage. Possibly sepia is the most 'alchemical' of colours, although for modern and contemporary writers it resonates with anachronism.³

For Luc Sante, sepia is as 'an apt shade for a society that has gone from rustic improvisation to merchant-banker stolidity without an intervening succession of classical and romantic stages'.⁴ Sepia is an anagram of *paise* (Indian currency), which in a colonial context is pertinent here as much of this essay discusses nineteenth-century British colonialism. Sepia's etymology derives from the ancient Greek σῆπια (sēpia, 'cuttlefish'), σήψ (séps, a kind of lizard or a serpent whose bite was alleged to cause putrefaction). Is/was sepia akin to the *pharmakon* – a poison and a cure, as blind spot? Think, for instance, of Walter Benjamin's discussion of David Octavius Hill; or, if we step back further, Fox Talbot's desire for shadow as light (figure 1).⁵ The trace of albumen, egg, sugar, silver, salt: empire as *la vie en brun*. Attentive to the sensitivity of photography, for Sante '[s]epia in its original state can sometimes be misty, but it can also be steely. It can blur the edges of things in a way that mimics the selective softening of

¹ Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Colour*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1975

² These are points raised by Luc Sante in his brief, provocative essay 'Sepia: Picturing Nostalgia', *Cabinet*, Summer 2004, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/14/sante.php>

³ See Georges Didi Huberman, 'Before the Image, Before Time; The sovereignty of anachronism', trans. Peter Mason, in *Compelling Visuality: The work of art in and out of history*, Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg, eds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003

⁴ Sante, 'Sepia', op cit

⁵ See Walter Benjamin, *A Little History of Photography*, Penguin, London, 1970 [1930], p 45

memories... but it can also register and enumerate details with fidelity and penetration, to a degree that beside its black-and-white can appear bloodlessly actuarial and polychrome looks gaudy'.⁶



Figure 1: William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Ladder*, c 1839, calotype, published in *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

La vie en brun harks back to the Picturesque and to Company School Painting. As is well known, the politics of the Picturesque incites the varnish, the tarnish of Claude Lorraine et al. Colour as brittle veneer viewed through the shards of the Claude glass, or as the veil over a painting. Worked up on imported watercolour paper, these washed out drawings use local and imported pigments sparingly. Forced from regional courts, *khanazadi* (household) painters migrated to bazaars where they spread their pigments thin.⁷ Such delicate brown invoked the seventeenth-century brush sketches known as *nim qalam* (figure 2).⁸ Admired and derided for his 'deliquescent' tones, Reynolds' notoriously unstable material practice favoured much varnish, perhaps taken by some to be tarnish – its vanishing. It remains unclear if he desired decay, the

⁶ Sante, 'Sepia', op cit

⁷ A strong case study in relation to *Kampani kalam* remains Mildred Archer, *Patna Painting*, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1947

⁸ *Nim qalam* is a Persian term for half pen, where ink is overlaid over delicate outlines. See also Yael Rice, 'The Brush and the Burin: Mogul Encounters with European Engravings', in 'In Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art', Jaynie Anderson, ed, Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Australia, 2009, pp 305–310; 'Between the Brush and the Pen: On the Intertwined Histories of Mughal Painting and Calligraphy', in *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, David Roxburgh, ed, Brill, Leiden, 2014, pp 148–174; Yves Poter, 'From the "Theory of the Two Qalams" to the "Seven Principles of Painting": Theory, Terminology, and Practice in Persian Classical Painting', *Muqarnas* 17, 2000, pp 109–118; Gülru Necipoglu, 'The Scrutinizing Gaze in the Aesthetics of Islamic Visual Cultures: Sight, Insight, and Desire', *Muqarnas* 32, 2015, pp 23–62. See the classic study John Seyller, 'A Mughal Code of Connoisseurship', *Muqarnas* 17, 2000, pp 177–202.

grand opening moment, or whether his practice was either hopelessly inept or experimental.⁹ More explicit in his desire for browns meant as decay, Albert Pinkham Ryder seemingly desired that his pictures fade to brown with age. Known for his seascapes and turn to allegory, his mists pushed the Barbizon School's tones to a new instability of mood. He toiled with oils for ten years more, layering resin, paint and varnish, candle wax, bitumen; aegis of a 'lost Golden Age'. His paintings were often too brittle to be exhibited. So perhaps sepia became the private 'medium' *par excellence* – the space for introspection, for nostalgia.

Luc Sante's view is bleak. Sepia as allegory of modernity: 'Maybe the carcass still stinks and the bones have not yet been bleached'. Even photographs cannot be reprieved as they 'could evoke those subjects while literally or figuratively camouflaging their pollution'. Sepia is (like) soot, dirt. With recourse to etymology, sepia is the serpent that bites to cause putrefaction: 'sepein' is to be rotten.



Figure 2: Anonymous Mughal artist, *Emperor Akbar*, painted at Lucknow, c 1600, 17.3 x 13.2 cm ink and paint on paper, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

⁹ See Rosie Dias, 'Venetian Secrets: Benjamin West and the contexts of colour at the Royal Academy', in John Barrell, Sarah Monks and Mark Hallett, eds, *Living with the Royal Academy: Artistic Ideals and Experiences in England, 1768–1848*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2013, pp 44–67; Matthew C Hunter, *Painting with Fire: Sir Joshua Reynolds, Photography, and the Temporally Evolving Chemical Object*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2020; Matthew C Hunter, 'Joshua Reynolds's "Nice Chymistry": Action and accident in the 1770s', *The Art Bulletin*, vol 97, no 1, March 2015, pp 58–76

'Narrow Space of Evening'

Ruskin, Goethe, *Nim Qalam*, Dusk

Fade

*To droop, wither, lose freshness and vigour, irregularity of intensity, to grow pale, to dim,
to come in and out of view cinematically on in relation to other forms of 'screen'.*

Probably the Latin origin is fatuus (silly) and vapidus (vapid).

Sepia is an elusive presence in Goethe's *Theory of Colour* (1810).¹⁰ Colours are acts of light, which, in the style of Bacon's *Natural History*, should be arranged numerically. Now 'as an unsparkingly and vanishing light, as undulation in the air, as commotion in matter, as oxidation and de-oxydation; but always uniting and separating'.¹¹ As far as Goethe is concerned, it is only Boyle and Theophrastus who have approached the phenomena of colour with rigour. Goethe's main concern with the effect of light and darkness on the eye is to search for the dusky: 'In passing from bright daylight to a dusky place we distinguish nothing at first: by degrees the eye recovers its susceptibility'.¹² His predilection for grey is meant to temper intense vibrations and contrary light. 'It has been stated that certain flowers, towards evening in summer, coruscate, become phosphorescent, or emit a momentary light'. The flower must be seen sideways; its spectrum is 'compensatory blue-green'. The double image of the flower for a moment in the summer twilight. 'If we look long through a blue pane of glass, everything will afterwards appear in sunshine to the naked eye even if the sky is grey and the scene is colourless'. To be tinged with a purple hue.¹³ The vivacity of shadow. By candlelight, a full moon casts itself double.¹⁴ Ultimately, Goethe's is a search for the luminous image: the 'volume of light [which] poured from the sun-image'.¹⁵ His play with glasses, mirrors, water, seek the vanishing – how moisture 'evaporates with its own colours'.¹⁶ White glass becomes 'blind' soonest.¹⁷ Of all colours, yellow is nearest to the light: 'The eye is gladdened, the heart expanded and cheered, a glow seems at once to breathe towards us'.¹⁸

If we search for sepia with Goethe, it is to be found with worms, insects, fishes, 'the juice of the ink-fish' which is so often red.¹⁹ How he is fascinated by its exposure to light; from

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, Charles Eastlake, trans, London, 1840 (publisher not known)

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 5

¹² *Ibid*, p 20

¹³ *Ibid*, pp 29–30

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 78

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 97

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 109

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 113

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 168

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 141

yellowish to greenish, to blue and if transferred to cambric pure red.²⁰ Such juice he sees as connected with the phenomena of reproduction.²¹ In ‘Grounds’, whether linen or panel, Goethe seeks light and the way certain artists (da Vinci, Fra Bartolomeo, Guido) washed their materials brownish. He saw that for Titian the ‘whitish ground was left as a middle tint, the shadows painted in, and the high lights touched on’.²² Washing brown underneath allows for glow. There might even be a ‘mystical application of colour’ but also there ‘are degrees of brightness which destroy colour’.²³

Of Caspar David Friedrich’s four large and three small landscapes exhibited in 1808 at the Weimar exhibition, Goethe has ‘never seen such freshness, the perfumed cool of the morning in the wooded valleys between the hills better expressed in monochrome’.²⁴ Friedrich’s talent is to be admired regarding the third of the large drawings as:

The truth, which dominates all the finished parts of this drawing and the piquant contrasts, must please and satisfy every lover of art; but whoever knows the peculiar difficulties of working with sepia wash will admire above all the mastery and freedom with which Herr Friedrich has been able to represent the froth of breaking waves simply by leaving the paper white.²⁵

John Ruskin’s engagement with Goethe (seemingly mediated by Turner) turns away from the aqueous, mirrored reflection in favour of the brush.²⁶ Of camel hair, the point of the brush is, or desires to be, like that of the Persian or Mughal miniaturist.²⁷

For colourman *par excellence* George Field (a kind of muse for Ruskin given their shared fascination with Turner), sepia is associated with the fine sketches of Leonardo da Vinci. It possesses a ‘powerful, dusky brown colour, of a fine texture’.²⁸ Field included a detailed section on how to paint in sepia. Sepia, he believed, deserved its own unique treatment, separating it even from watercolour. It belongs to his category of Brown as a Semi-Neutral Colour, which should be warm, broken, determined by yellow; ‘brown is in some measure to shade what yellow is to light... Browns contribute to coolness and clearness by contrast when opposed to pure colours. Hence their vast importance in painting and the necessity of keeping them from

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, p 142

²² Ibid, p 189

²³ Ibid, p 191

²⁴ *Goethe On Art*, selected, edited and translated by John Gage, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980, p 229

²⁵ Ibid, 230

²⁶ See Gerard Finley, ‘Pigment into Light: Turner and Goethe’s theory of colours’, *European Romantic Review*, vol 2, no 1, 1991, pp 39–60; John Gage’s classic study, *Colour in Turner: Poetry and truth*, Frederick A Praeger, New York, 1969; Anon, ‘Thackeray and Ruskin on Turner’, *The Crayon*, vol 1, no 1, January 3, 1855, pp 12–13

²⁷ There is not space here to conjecture on the relationship between Goethe and Ruskin regarding what might be termed Orientalism, but this would be a rich area for study

²⁸ George Field, *Chromatography: Or, a treatise on colours and pigments and their power* (Albion, London, 1835), section XIV, ‘Seppia or animal aethiops’, pp 285–286. Field claimed that the majority of sepia used in Britain derived from the Adriatic. He also believed that the Chinese mixed sepia with Indian ink. It cannot be used in oil painting for it dries ‘very reluctantly’ (pp 285–286).

other colours, to which they give foulness in mixture.²⁹ Sepia is an elusive presence in Field's accompanying tables. Sometimes it hides in the midst of Cappagh brown, burnt umber, cassel earth, cologne earth, Rubens Brown, bone brown, ivory brown, Antwerp brown, Prussian brown, madder brown, mummy brown. It is considered to be one of the best and most stable of pigments, that will be resilient to light, oxygen and pure air, shade, hydrogen and deep and impure air.³⁰ Unsuitable for enamel painting or fresco, sepia is perhaps too transparent.³¹

In *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), John Ruskin muses on sepia and its relationship with light and what he terms 'the refinement of perception'.³² Writing 'The Elements' as a series of letters, Ruskin attended to the tender and the smooth apropos a syllabus that could be used by many, including the Working Men's College.³³ His drawing exercises press you, the pupil, to search for trees nearly bare of leaves, trees that can be seen against a light ground. They should never be in harsh sun. Such colour patches dazzle to puzzle 'by the lights on the boughs'.³⁴ As for the boughs, 'consider them as so many dark rivers to be laid down in a map', for their 'roundness of stems... map them in flat shade'.³⁵ Such depth of colour requires tones of brown. Brown which can be found in the mixing of a shilling cake with Prussian blue.³⁶ Colour should be laid in so pale that you can hardly see it on the paper, 'gradually in a branchy kind of way'.³⁷ So 'Go until the colour has become so pale that you cannot see it'.³⁸ Then with lake, gamboge, cobalt, vermilion and sepia make a colour scale. Sepia 'alone will make a forcible brown one'.³⁹ Then the ground is laid for one of the most difficult exercises, the drawing of a stone; its circular matching; sympathy with its holding in of itself.

For Ruskin, colour, sepia as seeing in, is to be found in Dürer's engravings and certainly in Turner's 'Liber Studiorum'. These are not easily found, so with your camel's hair brush in hand seek out a photograph. The photograph can be of any 'general landscape subject, with high hills and a village or picturesque town, in the middle distance, and some calm water of varied character (a stream with stones in it, if possible), and copy any part of it you like, in the same brown colour, working as I have just directed you to do from the Liber, a great deal with

²⁹ George Field, *Rudiments of the Painters' Art, or a Grammar of Colouring*, John Weal, London, 1858, Chapter XVII, pp 90–99, p 91

³⁰ Ibid, pp 116–117

³¹ Ibid, Table VII, pp 119–120; 'The great importance of transparent pigments is to unite and to give tone and atmosphere generally, with beauty and life, to solid or opaque colours of their own hues and to convert primary into secondary and secondary into tertiary colours with brilliancy; to deepen and enrich dark colours and shadows and to give force and tone to black itself' (pp 120–121)

³² John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, London, 1857; Dover Publications, New York, 1971, p 12

³³ There is not space here to explore the detailed notes of *The Elements of Drawing*, which are held in the Ruskin Teaching Collection, Oxford University; also of relevance are the transcripts of letters and papers by E T Cook and A Weddeburn, Mss Eng.lett. c 32–52

³⁴ Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, p 40

³⁵ Ibid, p 40

³⁶ Ibid, p 42

³⁷ Ibid, p 45

³⁸ Ibid, p 46

³⁹ Ibid, p 48

the point of the brush'.⁴⁰ But 'You are under a twofold disadvantage here, however; first, there are portions in every photograph too delicately done for you at present to be able to copy; and secondly, there are portions always more obscure or dark than there would be in the real scene, and involved in a mystery which you will not be able, as yet, to decipher... still you must fight through the difficulty, and get the power of producing delicate gradations with brown or grey, like those of the photograph... Now observe; the perfection of the work would be tinted shadow, like photography, without any obscurity or exaggerated darkness.'⁴¹ As a follow-on exercise, you should take a small and simple photograph; 'allow yourself half an hour to express its subjects with the pen only'. Add ink at its most liquid to make shadows deeper, which was deemed by Ruskin to be akin to etching. Once this has dried 'take your sepia or grey, and tint it over, getting now the finer gradations of the photograph' before doing violence to the image by taking out the higher lights with penknife or blotting paper.⁴²

His own sketching palette, its eye for how materials yield their being, the warmth, the breath of stone, has an air of the photographic. There is a warmth to the ground of his images which can be said to be analogous to the early experiments of Fox Talbot. Fox Talbot's photogenic drawing, his use of salted paper for the calotype, also play with sepia as ground. In *The Elements of Drawing*, it is unclear to which photographic technique Ruskin might be referring.

Given Ruskin's close attention to detail, it is curious that he allows such freedom. Freedom in painterly practice is something with which Ruskin struggles. Perhaps this is due in part to his relationship with abstraction: 'A perfectly great painter, throughout his distances, continually reduces his objects to these shadow abstracts; and the singular, and to many persons unaccountable, effect of the confused touches in Turner's distances, is owing chiefly to this thorough accuracy and intense meaning of the shadow abstracts.'⁴³

This freedom is tinged with nostalgia. Nostalgia is commonly associated with black bile. Not necessarily black, bile/gall – its components – are dank green, yellowish. Bile veers between anger, melancholia, derangement. Acute pain, nostalgia can kill. It lived on in the form of souvenirs, and maybe also through, as sepia. Its tones might invoke sentimentality and forgetting.⁴⁴ For the Victorians, nostalgia as disease filtered into somewhat melancholic or maudlin *ekphrasis* whose tones echo those of early photography whose *eidos*, as Benjamin and Barthes remind us, is (impending) death.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid, in a footnote: 'You had better get such a photograph, even though you have a Liber print as well'; see also G Wharton Simpson, 'Mr Ruskin and Photography', *The Photographic News*, 9.353, June 9 1865, pp 266–267; and Frank M Sutcliffe, 'When Ruskin Trembled', *The Photographic Journal*, November, 1937, pp 604–605

⁴¹ Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, p 101

⁴² Ibid, pp 102–103

⁴³ Ibid, p 106

⁴⁴ See Linda M Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780–1917*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2007

⁴⁵ See Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; see also Jennifer Green-Lewis, 'Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia', *Victorian Studies*, vol 46, no 4, Summer 2004, pp 714–715; and Helen Groth, 'Literary Nostalgia and Early Victorian Photographic Discourse', *Nineteenth-century Contexts*, vol 25, no 3, 2003, pp 199–217

Although advocating sepia, Ruskin is clear on what you should never draw. Nostalgia – avoid. Never draw anything you love or which carries within itself intimate associations. Never make presents of your drawings.⁴⁶ Avoid the neat, the shiny. Instead ‘make intimate friends with all the brooks in your neighbourhood, and study them ripple by ripple’ to see how the light shines through.⁴⁷ Sepia pertains to the law of radiation. The law of radiation can be studied best with reference to trees. A recurrent source of inspiration in Ruskin’s writings is J D Harding’s ‘Lessons on Trees’ (1850).⁴⁸ In Ruskin’s reading of Harding nothing is ever seen perfectly, only as fragments of obscurity: ‘softness of the surface of trees, downy, globular, bloomy, partly passing into a misty vagueness’.⁴⁹ Harding writes movingly of the impossibility of trees which ‘are among the most difficult. They are not imitable in like degree, or in like manner, as other objects.’⁵⁰ As students, we must practice drawing leaves from cylindrical objects; ‘we are bewildered in the maze of branches, in their semi or total obscurity, we sometimes descry a stem’.⁵¹ Plates 38 and 39 make leaves seem like wings.

Although Ruskin refers to ‘Lessons on Trees’, which for his readers would be more on the scale of grey, Harding’s watercolours’ play with wet is not the practice of Ruskin. They do not necessarily translate as print. For Ruskin, colours should be prepared each morning. Colour must be vibrant, fresh for the artist’s brush and eye. In his ideal colour box of twenty-four shades, sepia is listed last. Sepia accompanies brown madder, burnt umber, Vandyke brown. It is necessary for you, the student, to be in search of ‘field colour’.⁵² Here we are advised to consult George Field’s *Chromatography*. Occasionally, in the spirit of the Venetians, try to fashion an azure ground to dry for sepia as gold as a middle tone. Let sepia shine back, fore, for itself; to be of the everyday: ‘Give me some mud off a city crossing, some ochre out of a gravel pit, a little whitening, and some coal-dust, and I will paint you a luminous picture, if you give me time to gradate my mud, and subdue my dust’.⁵³

Ruskin turns to the pathetic, to the furrow, to ‘Lancaster Sands’.⁵⁴ Ceased labour. Sepia as the road of ruts, ‘golden as the moss’ before the shepherds rise.⁵⁵ Throughout *The Elements of Drawing*, the play of light eludes line. Ruskin’s detailed endnotes are tinged with imagistic delicacy in places: ‘The enclosure of the light by future shadow... a local colour will show its own darkness most on the light side, by projecting into and against masses of light in that

⁴⁶ Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, pp 107–108

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 110

⁴⁸ J D Harding, *Lessons on Trees*, David Bogue, London, 1850

⁴⁹ Ibid, not paginated

⁵⁰ Ibid, not paginated

⁵¹ Ibid, not paginated

⁵² Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, p 143

⁵³ Ibid p 149

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 206

⁵⁵ Ibid, p 20

direction; and then the painter will indicate this future force of the mass by his dark touch'.⁵⁶ You must care for 'the tender evanescence of the edges of the reflections... you ought not to see where reality ceases and reflection begins', where 'the image loses itself'.⁵⁷

Some of Ruskin's finest writing concerns tone: 'Tone first, the exact relief and relation of objects against and to each other in substance and darkness, as they are nearer or more distant, and the perfect relation of the shades of all of them to the chief light of the picture... secondly, the exact relation of the colours of the shadows to the colours of the lights' and how this creates 'one kind of atmosphere'.⁵⁸ The Old Masters are much to be admired as a lens through which to view Nature. Ruskin is struck by how on a cloudy day if you look through a *camera obscura* foliage is darkened against the sky, 'nothing been seen in its mass but here and there the isolated light of a silvery stem'.⁵⁹ The pitches of shade are carefully graded. Turner, Ruskin believes, entirely rejected this method by turning boldly to pure white, 'justly, for it is the sign of the most intense sunbeams'.⁶⁰ Painting between pure white and lamp black, Turner's dramatic palette might be compared with the last vignette of Roger's *Poems* – 'Datur Hora Quiet' – whose careful gradation, even the darkest parts of the trees, is kept pale; full of repose. Whilst Ruskin finds fault with Turner's painting, he sees the tones of his drawings as flawless – 'from the coolest greys of wintry dawn to the intense fire of summer noon'.⁶¹ By contrast, Callcott's desultory browns, Landseer's and Stanfield's 'earthiness and opacity', characterise modern painting.⁶² The truth of chiaroscuro for the amateur is best to be found in the delicate boughs of a tree in winter. You should stand four to five yards from the bark with your back to the sun to espy the shadows, to see if they are flat.⁶³ You should seek out the imperceptible gradations – the elusive qualities of the middle tints. So for Ruskin, nature is that of the carefully graded tones of Wordsworth, occasionally Claude, Harding, Prout and Turner. Despite all his fascination, his elision of Nature and Turner, Turner's trees are 'uncopiable'.⁶⁴

For Ruskin, the dazzle of gilded (Venetian) architecture is best approached through the silver coated copper plates of the daguerreotype. Recently reattributed to Ruskin, 325 of Ruskin's photographs show his dedication to detail.⁶⁵ Because of his intense fervour for the daguerreotype, Ruskin chose not to exhibit his photographic collection. Photography could

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp 215–216

⁵⁷ Ibid, p 216

⁵⁸ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 1, p 149

⁵⁹ Ibid, p 150

⁶⁰ Ibid, p 152

⁶¹ Ibid, p 155

⁶² Ibid, 156

⁶³ Ibid, pp 184–185

⁶⁴ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 7, p 56

⁶⁵ Ruskin's belongings were put on sale in 1936, being laid out by his relatives for a distress sale on the lawn of his home at Brantwood for local perusal. Ken and Jenny Jacobson, who bought the collection, realised at a most recent local sale in 2006 that it had been miscatalogued. They put together a fully illustrated catalogue with Ruskin's other known daguerrotypes, published as *Carrying off the Palaces: John Ruskin's lost daguerrotypes* (Bernard Quaritch, London, 2015).

approximate the drawing of the modern artist he most admired: ‘a delicately taken photograph of a truly Turnerian subject, is far more like Turner in the drawing than it is in the work of any other artist’.⁶⁶ Certainly when engaging with Turner, Ruskin turned to sepia. Sepia offers sentient mid tone; it might be like cloth. Sepia is tender. ‘Take any narrow space of evening sky... between the bowers of a tree or between two chimneys or through the corner of a pane in the window you best like to sit at, and try to gradate a little space of white paper as evenly as that is gradated – as *tenderly* you cannot gradate it without colour, no, nor with colour either’.⁶⁷ Gleams of light blend with shadow to create the tender: ‘In the darkness of ground there is the light of the little pebbles or dust; in the darkness of foliage, the glitter of the leaves; in the darkness of flesh, transparency’.⁶⁸

As Jeremy Melius intimates, in *The Elements of Drawing* and *Modern Painters* Ruskin might be training us to see the world

... through the eyes of a great master like Turner, isolating and thinking through particular moments of depiction, a copy might allow us to participate in that artist’s more expansive view of the world. But in the same move it also performs an act of submission that curtails the self who draws... Reproduction’s painstaking labour thus turns on self-negation, producing mere remnants of his intense engagement – redundant objects that point away from themselves and towards the cherished thing itself.⁶⁹

By the 1860s Ruskin had become confounded by photography: inimitable. Inimitable is also a word he uses regarding ‘oriental’ art. Possibly it is analogous with Hegel’s curious use of the sublime when discussing Indian art.⁷⁰ Inimitable can mean many things. ‘Photographs have an inimitable mechanical refinement... They are popularly supposed to be “true”, and at the worst they are so, in the sense in which an echo is true to a conversation of which it omits the most important syllables and reduplicates the rest’.⁷¹ Rather, it is the drawing, because of its failure, that works as an expression of inferiority: ‘It is because a photograph cannot condemn itself that it is worthless. The glory of a great picture is in its shame’.⁷²

⁶⁶ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 4, p 196; Ruskin certainly experimented with sepia in his ‘copies’ of Turner’s *Liber Studiorum* – see, for instance, his pen and sepia sketch R300, Ruskin Teaching Collection, Ashmolean, Oxford

⁶⁷ Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, p 45

⁶⁸ Ibid, p 65, ‘Use your fingers and an Indian rubber’

⁶⁹ Jeremy Melius, ‘Ruskin’s Copies’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 42, no 1, Autumn, 2015, pp 61–96

⁷⁰ Brief mention is made of Hegel’s views on Indian art in Partha Mitter’s *Much Maligned Monsters*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1977; see also Aakash Singh Rathore and Rimina Mohapatra, *Hegel’s India: A reinterpretation with texts*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2017

⁷¹ Ruskin, quoted in Melius, ‘Ruskin’s copies’, note 26

⁷² Melius, ‘Ruskin’s copies’, note 28

To Topographise: Edward Lear and the Colour of Empire

O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate that let thy folly in
King Lear, William Shakespeare

The ‘poetic’ case of Lear to whom I refer is not that of Shakespeare but rather of Tennyson. Edward Lear, as is well known, would become obsessed with nonsense, or what we can term the non-sensical (which are almost but not quite the same things).⁷³ His world of folly pertains to what in postcolonial terms might be termed fabulation and the creole, as can be seen in his books *Nonsense Alphabet*, *Book of Nonsense* (1846) and *More Nonsense* (1872).⁷⁴ As is well known, Lear wrote extensively on nonsensical animals, alphabet and botany. Less well known is his *Nonsense to Colour*.⁷⁵

Lear published twelve musical settings of Tennyson’s poetry, delicately inscribed in sepia ink on cream paper. Sometimes a homage, they could also pertain to parody. Tennyson’s ‘illyrian woodlands, echoing falls of water, sheets of summer glass... A glimmering shadow under gloom of cavern pillars’ become for Lear a source of play.⁷⁶ Such imagery in Lear’s hands is to be torn into nonsense:

Delirious bulldogs – echoing calls...
Green as summer grass:
The long supine Plebeian ass,
The nasty crockery boring falls...
O! ain’t you glad you were not there.⁷⁷

It can be surmised that the colour of the British empire was brown. Fey, drab watercolours, Company School painting, forced through the poverty of the bazaar, were made to circumscribe to a mild notion of the Picturesque. In this way sepia could be redeemed.⁷⁸ Not only were watercolour and ink set off by Chinese white and graphite, it could become the ground of

⁷³ Edward Lear’s *Diaries, 1858–1888*, which amount to 30 volumes, are kept in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Ms Eng. 797.3 (42M-206 Gift of William B Osgood Field, 1942). The Houghton also contains his Miscellaneous Drawings, 1849 New Delhi: 1866 (Ms Typ 5514). His travels overseas vol 16 India, 1873 file 68-3496E, vol 17 India and Ceylon, 1874 68-3496E, vol 18 India 68-3496E. Listed in Ms Typ 5514, no 6 is ‘Burnt Sienna and Indian Red’. No 15 Sketches made in India. See also his papers held at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, MS-2415. His self caricatures also make for fascinating viewing; National Portrait Gallery, London, (NPG 4351). See *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, James Williams and Matthew Bevis, eds, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

⁷⁴ For Lear, see Vivien Noakes’s classic study *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer*, Collins, London, 1968

⁷⁵ Edward Lear, *Nonsense to Colour*, Harper and Row, New York, 1963

⁷⁶ Royal Collection Trust, *Poems of Lord Tennyson*, illustrated by Edward Lear, 1859 RCIN 1005099; Tennyson was Poet Laureate from 1850 to 1892

⁷⁷ See the *Later Letters of Edward Lear*, Constance Stracey, ed, T Fisher Unwin, London, 1911, letter dated February 28, 1872. The Art Fund holds six illustrations to Tennyson’s poems by Lear, as well as scenes of India, Palestine, Egypt and Albania, all in grey wash. See James Williams and Matthew Bevis, *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016; and Angus Davidson, *Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet, 1812–1888*, Penguin, London, 1950.

⁷⁸ The word ‘khaki’ derives from the Persian *khak*, which means dust. It has existed as a colour name since 1848 when the British in India began to use it in military uniforms whose colour was also known as ‘drab’. Its first large scale official use was the Abyssinian campaign, 1867–1868. If khaki fabrics were not available, the British used dye from the mazari palm, which they believed was used by Aghanistani tribals as camouflage. At other times, a by-product of the extensive Bengali silk monopoly – mulberry juices – was employed.

the poetics of the landscape image. Not the aesthetic of the absurd, the nonsensical, but Lear's desire to make the world pay homage to his love of Tennyson. Sometimes deploying cream, or grey, Lear desired sepia seep into the weave.

Although perhaps not the most elegant of 'verbs', to topographise was for Lear one of his ways of approaching sepia. Lear was a prolific sketcher, his brush agile on each of his many overseas trips – sepia spilling, tempered by white. To work with sepia, Ruskin suggests, is no easy task. It requires a certain precision; it would be intriguing to compare his measured diaries with this spare way of working. Far from Malinowski's concern with the menstrual, old socks, tent despair, 'to topographise' is 'all the journeying of my life'. In his extensive correspondence with Chichester Fontescue, Lear referred to himself as 'a painter of poetical topography', believing that if he topographised his life he would have been of 'some use to my fellow critters beside leaving the drawings and pictures which they may sell when I am dead'.⁷⁹

His style of drawing involved annotations, colour made on the spot with watercolour washes that he then went over with pen and ink – a unique technique that he called 'penning out'. Soft granite, black chalk, gouache on grounds of varying colours. Possibly sepia becomes the trace of the patron.



Figure 3: Edward Lear, *Amalfi*, 1838, pencil, pen, ink and chalks on grey-green paper, 34.9 x 25.4 cm
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

⁷⁹ Edward Lear, letter to Lady Waldegreave, January 9, 1868, quoted in Constance Stracey, ed, *Later Letters of Edward Lear*, op cit, p 91

Lear had a specific way of talking about how ‘to topographise’. He worked with coloured papers, which he found to be ‘hard study’. For Lear, this hard study also meant writing. Although barely mentioned by his contemporaries – for instance, Ruskin makes only mild passing to his own private pleasure of the nonsensical – Lear wrote extensively about his travails as an eye-witness artist. Regarding Lear’s approach to landscape there is still, nonetheless, an engagement with Turner. In Volume Four of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin stipulated what he believed to be ‘Of Turnerian Topography’. Turnerian Topography was penned on the cusp of the Indian Mutiny. Its recourse to wide skies, to the apocalyptic. In Volume Four, Ruskin divides art between art as simple (historical) and art as imperative (poetical). For Ruskin, the lowly artist tends to conflate landscape and portraiture. What is required is to quote ‘mental chemistry’ by which memories and associations are supposedly transposed osmotically, or at least in free fall. This must be a ‘vast, unindexed and immeasurable mass of treasure... dream-gifted, so as to summon at any moment exactly such group of ideas as shall justly fit each other, this I conceive to be the real nature of the imaginative mind’.⁸⁰ By contrast, all scientific truth is ‘hard and shallow; and only the imaginative truth is precious’.⁸¹

Lear’s journals – many of which, including his visits to India and Ceylon, are now housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard – speak of his interest in ‘Burnt Sienna and Indian Red’. This is partly to do with his slight editorial sense of the savvy and partly because of his varied palette. As opposed to Darwin’s careful colour notes, fragile hints of washes, Lear used the language of the brush quite broadly and often in chiaroscuro. As eye-witness artist, his travels give the impression or at least convey the desire that he wished to travel alone. His ‘ill nerves’ would increasingly preclude him from making the intrepid, ‘heroic’ undertakings he desired. Frequently he is captivated by ‘the ever varying beauties of light and shade in mountain and valley, the contrast of snow heights and dark forests, the thick covering of herbs and flower, shrub and tree, from the cyclamen to the ilex, oak, pine, these are always around him’. In the town of Ajaccio in Corsica ‘still more striking is the absence of colour... Almost all is black to very dark brown (landscape, streets, dress, people) and to a new comer who has not travelled to the East or the South everything has a dull and melancholy air’. Like Darwin, like Goethe, Lear searches out a flash of colour, to be freed from the oppression of sepia – red trousers as ‘the only gleam of colour in a world of black and brown’.

For Michael Taussig, such flashes of vibrancy are the colours of the sacred.⁸² For Lear, outside of brown towns, ‘the colour of this landscape is very beautiful deep sepia (dusty) foliage in the middle distance and the grey olives, the purple near the hills and the dazzling white snow line more remote... and the exquisite variety of the foliage in the foreground... by no means easy to convey just such an idea on a piece of paper’. As Lear warms to Corsica, colour begins

⁸⁰ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 4, p 63

⁸¹ Ibid, p 67

⁸² Michael Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, p 13

to enter his writing and his oils (his preferred ambitious means of artistic practice): ‘wall of opal’, ‘brown armed trees, dusky’. Browns become a joy; they might be said to possess their own faciality. This palette carries over to Egypt, the Holy Land, India and Ceylon. In such warmer climes, Lear shifted his palette of more metallic graphite and white gouache to his technique of ‘pencilling out’.

Where the Image Loses Itself: Sepia and photography as screen

India

In a very fine essay on India and photography, Christopher Pinney spoke of ‘sepia’s elimination of the obvious signs of photography’s contingency’.⁸³ Having written elsewhere about the contingency of the image – photography as *pharmakon* – Pinney warns of the dangerous ‘aesthetics of the same’.⁸⁴ Provocative is his turn to André Bazin and how the camera, cinematic or photographic, screens rather than frames. With colour as screen in mind, Pinney thinks about how colour might still or at least quieten an image: ‘painting the surface of the image is another strategy which restored that slowness, centeredness, and hierarchy’ that had otherwise been abolished. To what is sepia sensitive? And what does it send to oblivion?

Technically, in photography, sepia is deemed to be print toning. It is a tone added to a black and white photograph in the darkroom to ‘warm up’ the tones. Whether sepia is sensitive to skin tones has become a subject of debate. By the later nineteenth century metal toners had replaced metallic silver. Metals like gold can, in fact, protect the image. Iron used as a blue toner, or copper as red, have the effect of shortening its life.⁸⁵

In his manual of artistic colouring as applied to photographs, Alfred H Wall praises the use of sepia in watercolour, although in oils it dries very tardily as either cool or warm.⁸⁶ His manual is exemplary in its attention to reflected light of the flesh, how to marry this to a dark green background and how with flesh, to dust off colour.⁸⁷ For the face, a ‘horizon tint’ of pale orange should be mixed with white, which should be used to strengthen the highlights – the brow, cheekbones, nose, chin can be softened with half tones. Sepia can be used as watercolour, but as Field had suggested it is slow to dry when mixed with oil. It can nonetheless be seen to be amenable as cold or warm: ‘the latter being compounded with perhaps a little

⁸³ Christopher Pinney, ‘Sepia Mutiny: Colonial Photography and Its Others in India’, in *Feeling Photography*, Elspeth H Brown and Thy Phu, eds, Durham, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 2014, pp 71–91, p 71

⁸⁴ Ibid, p 84

⁸⁵ The archival Gold Protective Solution (GP-1) formula uses a 1% gold chloride stock solution with sodium or potassium thiocyanate; it is sometimes used to split tone photographs previously toned in selenium for artistic purposes

⁸⁶ Alfred H Wall, *A Manual of Artistic Colouring, as Applied to Photographs: A practical guide to artists and photographers*, Thomas Piper, London, 1861, pp 52–53

⁸⁷ Ibid, p 75: ‘to dust on a little pink or flesh colour here and dust it carefully off there, blow it gently to remove the very loose particles’; this form of dust ‘of a certain colour could not be retouched’

lake or another warm colour'.⁸⁸ Wall stipulates 'Maxims for Colouring Flesh, etc',⁸⁹ with recourse to Mary Merrifield and how her intimacy with painting might transfer to photography: 'the reflected light of flesh becomes warmer than the surrounding parts... All the retiring parts of flesh partake more or less of grey'.⁹⁰

Regarding flesh, Wall's favour of pale orange is that of the 'horizon tint'.⁹¹ The horizon tint should be mixed with a little white which should be used to strengthen the highlights of the brow, cheekbones, nose, chin, all of which should be softened with the local tint of the flesh 'which can be enhanced by warm brown, orange or carmine to be mixed according to the complexion'.⁹² 'Darken the local tint as you approach the half tones, carefully avoiding the darkest shadows, which the powder colours always destroy.'⁹³ Wall advocates that to colour a 'very dark face' orange and white must be blended with warm brown and carmine.⁹⁴ He revisits this later in his text when he considers the combinations of white, yellow, green, red, burnt sienna, madder pink and cadmium yellow, which merge into his discussion of half tones of white, *terre verte*, black and yellow ochre, Indian red and raw umber. Half tones with shade tints, which should be Indian red, raw umber, black, madder brown, lake, vermilion and Van Dyke brown.⁹⁵ The whole should be retouched, if too brilliant, with carmine and green. Sepia as varnish softens the glare.⁹⁶ With tender strokes you can strengthen the shadows beneath the brow as with the hollow at the corner of the mouth, which may indicate a smile, so as to receive a faint, soft light. The photograph and the face are made up of reflections.

When choosing your photograph, its 'ground' must be pale grey. But this is grey as a kind of mirror to life as the sitter should be present. It is the sitter's flesh, their luminous tints that must engage your eye. For Goethe, pale grey was the colour of the board you should hold in front of your eyes after contemplating paintings. Perhaps then the photograph can be seen as the ground for after images. It is also the space of the eye: 'Put in the pupil with indigo or indigo mixed with a little lake and sepia'; 'touch in the lash with warm sepia' before madder pink is stippled delicately across the whole face.⁹⁷ Sepia should be used for skies and those backgrounds that are warm.

For painting on ivory, before photographic transference, select a slice of which has to be 'warm, mellow and transparent'.⁹⁸ Scrape the surface with an erasure and apply a mixture of

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp 52–53

⁸⁹ Ibid, p 65

⁹⁰ Merrifield quoted in Wall, *A Manual of Artistic Colouring as Applied to Photographs: A practical guide to artists and photograph*, p 65

⁹¹ Ibid, pp 78–79

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid: 'When the skin is thin the blue veins will tinge the flesh with their own colour... If the eye be blue or brown, put a touch of either colour; with extreme care, into the iris diagonally opposite the "spark" or gleam of strong light in the eye'

⁹⁴ Ibid, p 82

⁹⁵ Ibid, p 180

⁹⁶ Sepia here should be prepared with gum arabic and distilled water to which should be added sugar loaf

⁹⁷ Ibid, p 133

⁹⁸ Ibid, p 155

Tripoli and water and when the painting is done, finish with ‘very fine cuttlefish powder’.⁹⁹ You should not photograph on ivory per se, but rather place a paper picture underneath it so as to trace the outline; the light and the shade must come before colouring.¹⁰⁰ Curiously perhaps, sepia is not listed in the selection of pigment combinations. Although it might be for roads and for banks, or if mixed with garbage for ‘greens for green in light and shadow’.¹⁰¹

Ruskin’s remarks are tentative; the surfaces of his photographs suffused with sepia only on occasion. Sepia works very differently in relation to the portrait and the landscape. Richard Perlake’s painstaking study ‘How to colour photographs and lantern slides’ includes several black and white (or rather greyish) reproductions for the reader/student.¹⁰² It is unclear whether these should be coloured as they are not technically photographs and their shiny surface would seem to confound his extensive instructions. The ideal, ‘the tabula rasa’, is the author’s rather ethereal image of a white woman, whose décolletage and fey faraway gaze invite obvious associations with (Burkean) notions of the beautiful. It is to her you must return, either to project tints in your mind or if ripped out, to apply them to her body – possibly violent and anachronistic. This might be achieved by the aerograph – an airbrush that claimed to improve the negative and vignetting.¹⁰³ Perlake is clear from the outset that this is a manual that only attempts to present the surface of the image rather than approaching what might be embedded in its texture. It is only anilines, oils and watercolours that should be employed, although they often fail. The skin of the image (especially carbon) fails to flow, although opal will yield as it can gently erase ‘any objectionable shadow or unwelcome form’.¹⁰⁴ When printing your photograph, avoid too much reddish brown – aim for purple or a cold brown.¹⁰⁵ It is clear that for Perlake (as for many other writers on colour) sepia is not brown.

To make a surface adhere, lick it. Your saliva ‘appears to give to the picture an exceptionally good working surface’.¹⁰⁶ But if the film has hardened, it is more difficult to get the colour into the gelatine. The ideal palette should consist of olive green, dark green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, orange and pink, which should be mixed on the print itself in very weak mixtures.¹⁰⁷ Curiously, skies should be painted as though they are oceans; a thin blue wash fill

⁹⁹ Ibid, p 155

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p 155

¹⁰¹ Ibid, pp 243, 247

¹⁰² Richard Perlake, *How to Colour Photographs*, London, 1861, p 123

¹⁰³ Perlake includes an advertisement for the Aerograph which it is claimed can help colour up any photograph in any medium: ‘There is not the slightest difficulty in producing either the finest of pencil lines or the broadest of shades with it’; ‘Skies when they are there, maybe strengthened in paint or when required softened down. When skies are lacking, then they are created’. The Aerograph was sold at 43, Holborn Viaduct; Perlake, *How to Colour Photographs*, p 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p 8

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p 9

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p 14

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p 16; over 200 colours maybe used purchased by photographic tinting which could be purchased as penny packets from an oil shop. These should be mixed with 2 drams (120 drops) of acetic acid or vinegar and 2 ounces of water; p 14. See also C Winthrop Somerville, *Toning Bromides and Lantern Slides*, published for the Photogram by Dawbarn & Ward, London, 1904. Japanese artists, Perlake believes, are the best at toning lantern slides. This technique was emulated by G Hauberrisser of Munich.

flow downwards.¹⁰⁸ In the selection of watercolour, sepia is classed as both semi-transparent and as an albumen colour.¹⁰⁹ When colouring the flesh of small portraits, stipple, hatching or small dots must be featherine (done with a camel's hair brush – the type used in Mughal/Persian miniature painting, so that the colour must at first be imperceptible).¹¹⁰ For skin tones, which are not specified, you should employ a mixture of 'suitable proportions' of scarlet alizarine and raw sienna, rose madder and yellow ochre or vermilion for skin tone base, before the deeper tints of the cheeks done as the faintest stipple or cross hatching of vermilion and rose madder.¹¹¹ Dark complexions should be painted with Van Dyke brown.¹¹² Perlake believed the flesh of the face as textured by the photographic surface to be lined, which thus required a certain mimesis. Foreheads should be drawn in horizontal lines and the nose vertically, and should be approached with a brush nearly dry 'the lines no thicker at the ends than the centre'.¹¹³

At the spiritual centre of the face, the image should be painted in sepia. Hair should also be sepia. Sepia can also be used on the hands, which should be a shade darker than the face.¹¹⁴ However when painting transparencies, sepia should not be used. Yet sepia plays a fundamental role in the lustre required of ivory. Popular since the late eighteenth century in Britain and India, Perlake still believed ivory to be the finest support for portraiture. In the age of mechanical reproduction, photography still has to negotiate with ivory. Although we, as Perlake's students, have by now supposedly learned the intricate art of colouring an albumen print almost as if it were an Indian miniature, ivory offers another challenge. Here, sepia carbon facilitates the transfer of a photograph onto ivory. If the ivory is rubbed down with fine pumic powder, 'the picture if carefully coloured in watercolours, can be made to have the appearance of a proper miniature; ie without a photographic base'.¹¹⁵ Aside from the precision, the sentence of ivory 'painting' sepia 'in the raw' might be made to simulate crayon or pastel work: 'A suitable rough surface maybe given to the print by shaking a little pumic or cuttlefish powder over it, knocking off the surplus and rubbing that which remains with the palm of the hand over the whole surface'.¹¹⁶ Sepia within the assistance of illusionism appears also in the Victorian simulation of the late seventeenth-century fashion for crystoleum painting.¹¹⁷ The

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p 17

¹⁰⁹ When fixing colour with gum arabic, it is to be tied in a small muslin bag and suspended in ten ounces of water and left for a few days for it to dissolve. Very little is required. The print should be rubbed with cotton wool slightly moistened with ox gail. Ibid, p 25

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p 26

¹¹¹ Ibid, p 26

¹¹² Ibid, p 58; Van Dyke brown was initially made from peat or soil and used in watercolours and oil paint; it is currently made from an asphalt-like black pigment combined with iron oxide

¹¹³ Ibid, p 26

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p 26

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p 77

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p 76; cuttlefish were long used by goldsmiths for polishing metals as well as being used as moulds for the preparation of jewellery.

¹¹⁷ Perlake believes crystoleum to be first associated with amateur ladies' practice; he cites the work of John Stalker, whose handbook of 1688 notes how the engraving should be soaked in water and the glass prepared with oil of turpentine; Perlake, *How to Colour Photographs*, op cit, p 41. The technique of crystoleum painting (from crystal, oil) was usually used with mezzotint as a way of transferring a print onto glass.

photograph is laid upon convex glass and rendered transparent ready for painting, from where colours are applied,¹¹⁸ the desire being that no trace of photography remain. Sepia as concave.¹¹⁹ Sepia as erasure.

Crypsis as Mimesis: Printing your body surface

They darted tail first, with the rapidity of an arrow, from one side of the pool to the other, at the same time discolouring the water with a dark chestnut brown ink.

Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) (1870, p 7)

As the Beagle reaches Cape Verde, Darwin is dazzled, confounded:

These animals escape detection by a very extraordinary, chameleon-like power of changing their colour. They appear to vary their tints according to the nature of the ground over which they pass: when in deep water, their general shade was brownish purple, but when placed on the land, or in shallow water, this dark tint changed into one of a yellowish green. The colour examined more carefully was a French grey with numerous minute spots of bright yellow – the former of these varied in intensity; the latter entirely disappeared and appeared again by turns. These changes are effected in such a manner that clouds, varying in tint between a hyacinth red and a chestnut brown... were continually passing over the body... These clouds, or blushes as they may be called, are said to be produced by the alternate expansion and contraction of minute residues containing variously coloured fluids.

Since the time of Aristotle, cuttlefish fascinated for their release of ink as a marker. Pliny the Elder conjectured that cuttlefish have ink in lieu of blood.¹²⁰ Today, it is known that cuttlefish ink includes melanin, enzymes related to its production, catecholamines, peptidoglycans, free amino acids and metals. Cuttlefish carefully control the amount of ink and mucus they eject from their rectums.¹²¹

Crystoleum was particularly fashionable in albumen photography, c 1880–1910. See Crystoleum including all the improvements and practical instructions for acquiring this popular art perfectly, with full information on the method of mixing and applying the colours, Caspar's Original Crystoleum Company, London, 1883; 'All About Crystoleum Painting', *Observer*, 7.345, July 18, 1885; Albert Alpton, *Alston's Method of Crystoleum*; Guide to Albton Painting, London, 1910, 3rd edition.

¹¹⁸ You need a pair of concave glasses and gummed binding strips; concave glasses are available from colourmen at 8–9 pence; these should be waxed

¹¹⁹ If we think about the etymology of concave, it is hollow

¹²⁰ See Henry Lee, *The Octopus; or the 'Devil-Fish' of Fiction and of Fact*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1875

¹²¹ For more information, see Ruth Siddall, 'Sepia: The Grant Museum', online resource posted July 29, 2016. This was commissioned as part of UCL's The Pigment Timeline Project. UCL's Grant Museum contains four specimens of cephalopod fossils complete with ink sacks. See also Siddall, N Eastaugh, V Walsh and T Chaplin, *Pigment Compendium: A dictionary and optical microscopy of historic pigments*, Butterworth Heinemann, London, 2008.

Possibly pertaining to both offensive and defensive mimicry, such ‘mimicry of dissimulation’ or mimicry of terrification desires fascination. In his discussion of mimicry, Roger Caillois uses photography for the optical unconscious, the eye for detail, the close up that confounds.¹²² Camouflage might pertain to the evil eye. The question of ‘morphological mimicry could then be after the fashion of chromatic mimicry, an actual photograph, but of the form in relief, a photograph on the level of the object and not on that of the images... sculpture photography or better telepasty if one strips the word of any metaphysical content’.¹²³ Caillois is fascinated by how the butterfly can make itself invisible and with how cuttlefish do not exaggerate precautions in the creation of a ‘reciprocal topography’.¹²⁴

Cephalopods can print their body surfaces. They can fade away or assume the form of plants, algae or seaweed, which might be done with counter shading. The most extraordinary visual language on their skin.¹²⁵ This involves counter shading, whereby the upper body becomes darker. Such disruptive colouring breaks up the wholeness. Skins reflect; they assume the tone and colour of their surroundings; they can drain colour and even mask some of their internal organs. What fascinates scientists is how the background might create crypsis, or what has been viewed as anti-displays. From their visual signals it is not clear whether their signalling systems are closed, finite. It depends on the definition of language whether it should be kept open. Also, how does ink work in ritualistic displays?¹²⁶ Does ink signal potential consciousness? Certainly, in terms of camouflage, cephalopods change colour, shape and size. Some species can even fly. They are also supposedly receptive to mirrors.¹²⁷

In her research for UCL’s Pigment Project, Ruth Siddall observed that sepia as a pigment might be camouflage par excellence.¹²⁸ It eludes the microscope, it polarises light microscopy: ‘because of its complex organic chemistry it is not easy to identify in methods used routinely by painting conservation scientists’. It is very difficult to identify; it is easily confused with bistre and iron gall ink. How it seeps into the paper is also highly variable. Despite this, sepia ink is far more stable than wood-based inks. Leading colourmen made an archive of thousands of ink bags of cuttlefish, kept in the raw state. In many parts of Europe fishermen dried the ink sacs, awaiting Newton’s agents to collect them.¹²⁹

¹²² Roger Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, *October*, Vol 31, Winter 1984, pp 16–32

¹²³ *Ibid*, p 23

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, pp 27, 23

¹²⁵ There is fascinating scientific literature on the cuttlefish and camouflage that is too vast to be included here. I flag up as instances: K C Buresch et al, ‘The use of background matching vs masquerade for camouflage in cuttlefish *Sepia officinalis*’, *Vision Research*, Vol 51, No 23–24, 2011, pp 2362–2368; R Parthasarathy, ‘Lights into Sepia’, *National Journal of Homoeopathy*, Vol 11, No 2, 2009, pp 33–42; C C Chiao et al, ‘The scaling effects of substrate texture on camouflage patterning in cuttlefish’, *Vision Research*, vol 49, no 13, 2009, pp 1647–1656; E J Kelman et al, ‘Perception of visual texture and the expression of disruptive camouflage by the cuttlefish, *Sepia officinalis*’, *Proceedings of The Royal Society B*, Vol 274, No 1616, 2007, pp 1369–1375.

¹²⁶ Charles D Derby, ‘Cephalopod Ink: Production, Chemistry, Functions and Applications’, *Marine Drugs* 12, 2014, pp 2700–2730

¹²⁷ M E Plamer, M R Calvé, S A Adamo, ‘Response of female cuttlefish *Sepia officinalis* (Cephalopoda) to mirrors and conspecifics: evidence for signaling in female cuttlefish’, *Animal Cognition*, Vol 9, No 2, 2006, pp 151–155

¹²⁸ Ruth Siddall, ‘Sepia’, UCL ‘The Pigment Timeline Project’, online resource, 2016

¹²⁹ See George Terry, *Pigments, Paint and Painting: A Practical Book for Practical Men*, E & F N Spon, London, 1893

Kino as Camouflage

The past shrouded in a cloud of squid ink – a deliberate obfuscation!

Tessa Laird, personal communication, June 2018

Can the past be viewed as camouflage? As is much theorised, the Kino Eye attempts to theorise that which cannot be captured by the human eye. Through montage this might pertain to the eye of the camera. What the eye of the camera might be has been discussed, as the idea of being ‘in camera’. There are times when ideas of the techniques of the observer fail. This is when the eye looks back. The eye that can perplex, certainly for Darwin:

The eyes of the cephalopods or cuttlefish and of vertebrate animals appear wonderfully alike... Mr Mirant has advanced this case as one of special difficulty, but I am unable to see the face of his argument. An organ of vision must be formed of transparent tissue and must include some sort of lens for throwing an image at the back of a darkened chamber... The crystalline lens in the higher cuttle-fish consists of 2 parts, placed one behind the other like two lenses, both housing a very different structure and disposition to what occurs in the vertebrata. The retina is wholly different, with an actual inversion of the elemental parts and with a large nervous ganglion included within the membranes of the eye. The relations of the parts are as different as it is possible to conceive.¹³⁰

In his letters with Hyatt, Darwin reviews his own work on cuttlefish with profuse apologies.¹³¹ Not only for Darwin but also for scientists now, the eye of the cuttlefish puzzles.¹³² The eye, perhaps, which we will never know.

Natasha Eaton is Reader in the History of Art at University College London. Her publications include *Mimesis across Empires: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765–1860* (Duke University Press, 2013), *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation* (I B Tauris, 2013) and *Travel, Art and Collecting: Vertiginous Exchange* (Routledge, 2020). She is currently working on art and indentured labour in Mauritius. Natasha is one of the Editors of *Third Text*.

¹³⁰ Charles Darwin, *Complete Works of Charles Darwin*, Vol 16, J W Arwin, London, 1876, pp 151–152

¹³¹ Ibid, p 149

¹³² S Stillman Berry, ‘Light Production in Cephalods I: An introductory survey’, *The Biological Bulletin*, Vol 38, No 3, March 1920, pp 141–169