



CONFERENCE REPORT
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Nomadic and Processual Poetics: A Symposium Bangor University 18th May 2013

Nomadic poetics has been proposed by Pierre Joris in his various versions of 'Towards a Nomadic Poetics'. The term 'processual' has been considered in particular through the work of Allen Fisher, often in connection to the term 'procedural', though the idea of 'process-showing', a kind of writing that allows its procedures to be visible, was first developed by Fisher and Joris together in the 1970s. This symposium, organized by ContemPo, a regular video link seminar series between Bangor, Aberystwyth, Northumbria and Brighton, brought together both poets along with a number of papers on their and related work, to open up the complexities of notions of place and the nomadic, with an awareness of the dangers of their oversimplification.

A simplistic view of nomadic and processual poetry might be that they celebrate interconnectivity and mobility. They might seem to be calling for a back-to-basics return to a way of being in the world with a closer sense of the connection between us and our environment. On the other hand, they might seem to be complicit with the interconnectivity of a transglobal capitalist system that increasingly depends on such connections and mobilities. But Fisher and Joris seem to want to do neither of these things and this symposium would show that nomadic and processual poetics are much more complicated than this.

Peter Barry (Aberystwyth University) began the day by proposing ten tesserae on nomadic and processual poetics. He described the word tesserae as focal points for meditation, but to avoid the implications of fixity that such ideas might suggest, emphasized that these were blurred focal points.

1. 'Always be a beginner and just starting out even at the end' – Rilke
2. It has the dust on its hooves of 'between here and elsewhere' – Ed Dorn, Gunslinger

3. Radio crackle is the echo of the Big Bang: the beginning hasn't ended.
4. It navigates without any visible means of navigation.
5. It continues across gaps, like Joseph Conrad's 'shadow-line' (a transition point that you do not know you're crossing).
6. & 7. Sections of the poem have blurred edges: in a series, it's not always clear where one poem ends and another begins.
8. It is a copy of something which does not have an original, replaying a moment of perception that never happened.
9. You *forge* a link between things.
10. You make a track through the poem, finding points of anchorage.

Barry was careful to try to define these shifting poetics without fixing them, to describe their features without being prescriptive, but his points did seem to set out ideas that the rest of the day might have been felt to think through.

Panel 1: Pierre Joris and Allen Fisher in dialogue: Locating movement & moving location

The presence of Charles Olson looms over contemporary discussions of place in poetry, Joris pointed out. He went on to make a useful distinction between Olson's *Maximus Poems* and Fisher's *Place*. In Fisher's work, he said, there is no place to get back to, no ideal to be restored; he keeps his feet on the ground. This seems very much at the heart of Fisher's own take on open field poetics, which he described as having plans but allowing for the unanticipated. He stated that, for him, place is process: it involves engagement with the situation he is in. This fits into the themes of Barry's tesseræ, particularly number eight: the poem does not record any originating moment of perception; the writing itself is the moment of perception, and so is the reading of the poem then also the moment of perception.

Fisher went on to connect the nomadic to the concept of chreods, which he has used in his own poetics (for example, in 'The Mathematics of Rimbaud'). Chreod is a term from biology used to describe a habitual pathway. The comparison is that nomads also use paths previously used, by themselves or others. This would seem to complicate the implications of continual flux that might be taken from nomadic poetics and Joris picked up on that, pointing out that pastoral nomads rely on repetition. They are ecology-bound and enslaved by basic needs such as water. Fisher related this to his own (ab)use of the work of Alfred Watkins in the 1970s, following focal points such as hill summits, making alignments. It was useful that Fisher and Joris pointed out these matters of limits and tradition. Process-showing works by setting up patterns of repetition to produce surprises, and the unexpected only works if something is expected.

Joris emphasized that he is not suggesting that he is literally a nomad in life, but that he is a nomad in language. For Joris, all languages are foreign: he swaps the mother tongue for the other tongue or many other tongues. Does he, like a nomad, have habitual paths in language? Is he linguistically ecology-bound in some way? Does a linguistic nomad have equivalent basic needs? These were ideas that could be seen to be developed on in Mandy Bloomfield's discussion of poetics and ecology.

Panel 2: Mandy Bloomfield, Ian Davidson, Lyndon Davies, Robert Sheppard

Bloomfield (University of Bedfordshire) proposed a post-equilibrium poetics as a response to the normalizing discourse of sustainability. That discourse's insistence on change is contradicted by its reliance on ideals of continuity, stability and stasis. The two kinds of writing that most often use ecological tropes, the pastoral and apocalyptic genres, both rely on images of underlying balance in nature. As a contrast to this, Bloomfield presented a close reading of Fisher's 'Proposal 24'. The poem creates a nomadic pastoral landscape by swerving a loose syntax through different collaged locales to produce a sense of nature as instability and discontinuity. She suggested that the poem is a non-equilibrium system in that it never reaches a stable equilibrium state, but remains indeterminate – though that indeterminacy could itself become a kind of precarious stability, hence the introduction of the terms 'dis-equilibrium' and 'post-equilibrium'. The talk concluded that this indeterminacy becomes an ethical issue to do with language. The poetry offers ways of reshaping the languages we use to imagine nature beyond the logics of sustainability. It is not simply about celebrating interconnectivity; it confronts us with the ethical implications of our ecological interconnectedness.

Ian Davidson (Northumbria University) discussed writing and motion, connecting textual mobility to social mobility. Nomadic poetics seems to privilege notions of movement, whether between places or languages. Davidson drew out the differences between kinds of mobilities: those of tourists, outlaws, migrants and refugees. He pointed out that while capitalism requires this movement to function, any critique of it must keep moving as well. For Davidson, this is important to the textual situation, the space of the poem, because it is determined by what happens within it, in the reader's search for meaning. He too looked at Fisher's *Proposals*, exploring the elusive subject position in the poems, which he suggested is not an ontology, not an origin, in that it does not precede the situation of the poem. The poems enact and explore that construction of subjectivity in mobility, that is, they keep moving.

Lyndon Davies (independent scholar) carried out a nomadic reading of that not immediately nomadic-seeming figure, William Wordsworth. He made a connection between the use of the term 'station' in Joris' 'Nomad Poetics' and in Wordsworth's 'Home at Grasmere'. Joris uses it to refer to a kind of resting-place, though not an entirely static one, more a moment of movement in rest, where the nomadic poem is written. Any Wordsworthian parallels are already headed off in 'Nomad Poetics': '& remember that the romantic is the anti-nomadic par excellence, i.e. Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity."' Davies pointed out that in Wordsworth's time the word 'station' was used to describe a viewing point and gave as an example the opening of 'Home at Grasmere' where the poet looks down from an elevated vantage point on the landscape. But Wordsworth's station is not as fixing and enclosing as it might seem. Davies unravelled the strange doubling of the older poet and his younger self in the passage's pronouns. There are tensions throughout the poem between the attempt to gain a philosophical overview of human essence and the digressionary engagements with human reality. Davies suggested that while these nomadic lines of flight disrupt the philosophical aims of the poem, they provide the sense of estrangement and surprise that give the work its poetry. He related this to Joris' pronouncement that philosophy is a desire to feel everywhere at home, whereas poetry is the desire to feel everywhere estranged. In the nomadic view, poetry would seem to be about immediacy and immanence, refusing an overview. As Barry said, it navigates without any visible means of navigation. Davies' reading showed that such nomadic features can be uncovered even in a work with a seemingly fixing and enclosing poetics.

Robert Sheppard (Edge Hill University) introduced a note of dissent by bringing Joris' poetics into conflict with Adrian Clarke's response to it in 'Introduction in the form of an open letter to Robert Sheppard'. Sheppard drew a distinction between poetics and manifestos: manifestos are oppositional, whereas poetics is non-dogmatic. Joris refers to his 'Towards a Nomadic Poetics' as a 'manifessay', and Sheppard suggested that the suffix softens it, reflecting the way that its rhetorical stridency is countered by the provisionality of its collaged note-form. He disagreed with most of Clarke's criticism of nomadic poetics as a homogenizing ethnopoetic sound poetry and an easy utopianism of interconnectivity, yet remained uneasy about Joris' text because, despite its fragmentary form, he felt it might approach the authority of the manifesto, that its proposals are in danger of becoming totalizing, globalizing, universalizing. He made an interesting comment about how nomadic poetics seems to absorb everything it comes into contact with. Poetics is nomadic, he suggested, in that it is not about arguing for any compulsory set of approaches, but about speaking differently and registering difference.

Panel 3: Nikolai Duffy, Jean Portante and Zoë Skoulding, Rhys Trimble

Nikolai Duffy (Manchester Metropolitan University) drew on discussion of Moses' breaking of the tablets and the cabbalist breaking of the vessels in order to describe the fragmentary poetics of Rosmarie Waldrop. In speaking of a poetics where reading involves being out of place, on the move, and the space of commentary is an open field, bouncing off the limits of what is not quite possible to say, the style was appropriately oblique and allusive. He quoted Waldrop paraphrasing Olson, 'What matters is not things but what happens between them'. Applied to language, it might suggest that it is not phonemes but the connections that make language. Duffy envisioned an interrelational space, a zone of movement, crossings and crossings-out. As in Davies' discussion of Wordsworth, poetry exposed the strangeness and otherness of language. Duffy proposed that we move in these spaces, which language opens, in order to arrive at a truly plural speech.

Zoë Skoulding (Bangor University) and Jean Portante (independent scholar) took part in a dialogue. Discussing her translations of Portante's sonnets, Skoulding highlighted something Joris had said earlier: it is not the translation that is nomadic but the poem, in its movement from one translation to another. Portante writes in French but with Italian hidden inside; resemblances of words between the languages allow him to write Italian while writing in French. It is like the ruins of a city under the surface. He spoke of his earthquaked hometown, L'Aquila, where the inhabitants can no longer live in their homes.

It reminded me of Joris and Fisher's discussion of how nomads use their knowledge of one place to help them learn about another. Similarly, perhaps, linguistic nomads use a language they are familiar with to explore another language. The patterns of a language are also chreods, to use Fisher's term. Italian was Portante's first language but he was never taught to write it at school in Luxembourg. Joris' poetry also works with wordplay, finding patterns between languages. This pattern-making could be described as chreodic; in defamiliarizing and othering a dominant language, known structures are used onto which to graft. The patterns of the language provide the expectations that are necessary for surprise to occur when they are broken. Portante commented, for example, that to a French reader it might at first appear that he is writing in French, as the linguistic chreods are left more or less intact; only under the surface are they earthquaked.

Rhys Trimble (Northumbria University) pointed out how some English language writers have used Welsh to defamiliarize these linguistic chreods: David Jones dropped Welsh words into an English syntax, while

Harry Gilonis has subjected English words procedurally to a Welsh syntax. Trimble's poetry, meanwhile, shifts seamlessly between English and Welsh (and often other languages as well). It reminds me of Charles Bernstein's comment on Maggie O'Sullivan's poetry: 'It's not that O'Sullivan writes directly "in" any one of the languages "of these isles", but that they form a foundational "force-field" out of which her own distinctive language emerges...' ('Colliderings: Maggie O'Sullivan's Medleyed Verse', *Ecopoetics*, nos. 4/5, 2004-5, p. 159). It is as if Trimble is writing in some Welsh bardic form even when a poem is in predominantly English. It is what he refers to as *cynghanedd-rap*. *Cynghanedd* was a deliberately intricate form so that only those schooled in its arts would be able to write it. Trimble's writing, however, seems to explode any such strictures. Yet traces of the Welsh consonance remain under the surface, a sound patterning in the paratactic rhythms of pulverised word-combos.

Panel 4: Steven Hitchins, Sam Rogers, David Miller

The final panel focused on issues of place and the city and reprised themes that had ghosted the day. My paper drew on Foucault's concept of heterotopias to discuss the local and the global in Fisher's *Place*. Collaging recordings of an email dialogue with Fisher into the paper, I questioned whether Fisher was entirely complicit with the 'dissolved', 'amoebic' city of 1970s London. His placing and locating work seemed to be trying to find some way that home could be made within it, yet the defamiliarizing collage methods might be seen to undermine that attempt. Sam Rogers (Bangor University) did a close reading of poems by Elizabeth Jennings and Lee Harwood to compare the use of lyric voice in the travel poetry of the Movement and the British Poetry Revival. Harwood's poetry seemed the more nomadic, with its lyric voice destabilized through geographical transitions and cinematic references. David Richard Miller (independent scholar) used Rem Koolhaas' notion of 'bigness' to consider the post-heroic city in Fisher's *Brixton Fractals*. There remained a sense here that in writing about place these writers are aware of the dangers of doing so. Miller emphasized that writing about the city is perilous. Though they might hint towards ways of getting outside of the city, nomadic and processual writings engage with it, as Rogers reminded us, from within its realities. This brought us back to Joris' phrase about Fisher's work keeping its feet on the ground without any Olsonian sense of an ideal place to get back to. Yet neither are these poetics about simply celebrating the increased interconnectivity and mobility of the place we are in now. So at the end we were still beginners: interconnectivity and mobility were both good things and bad things; stations were not as static as

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they seemed. Many thanks must be given to Zoë Skoulding and Peter Barry for bringing together this stimulating and thoughtful programme.

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