

## **“Mindfulness of the Drift”: Nomadic Formations in Peter Reading’s *Evagatory*\***

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### **Abstract**

The formal qualities and innovative aspects of Peter Reading’s poetry have been largely ignored or evaluated from a limited perspective due to the pessimistic subject matter, the gloomy images of “Junk Britain” and the deteriorating earth. This paper attempts to revitalize his legacy within the late twentieth century by bridging a dialogue between his work and Pierre Joris’s vision of nomad poetics. Joris’s engagement with nomadicity in *A Nomad Poetics* (2003) might provide a certain critical consciousness in associating Reading’s trope of evagation in *Evagatory* (1992) with the state of linguistic homelessness, the wandering of a mind through numerous textual, cultural, spatial borders, and lastly the poem as an unfinalized construct. This paper suggests that nomadic trajectory in *Evagatory* is foregrounded by constantly shifting registers, crossing of poetic boundaries, and trans-corporeal relations. Then, it aims to analyze the non-discursive visual patterns and collage practices in *Evagatory* to explore the text’s “rhizomatic” relations. The trope of evagation in Reading’s mid-career work foregrounds how Reading actually works at the edge of the margins of literary traditions, of linguistic comprehensibility, of the visual and the verbal, and the poetic and unpoetic materials.

### **Keywords**

nomad poetics, nomadicity, Peter Reading, *Evagatory*, Pierre Joris, the practice of the outside, rhizomatic, verbal and visual collage

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\* This article is a revised version of the fourth chapter of the author’s unpublished PhD dissertation.

Perilous trek, unarmed, unaccompanied:

.....  
Guideless, directionless, lightless, silence.

—Peter Reading

*Evagatory*

A nomadic poetics: mindfulness in & of the drift (la dérive)  
there is no at homeness here but only an ever more dis-  
placed drifting.

—Pierre Joris

*A Nomad Poetics*

## Introduction

In the face of a wide range of poetry produced in the latter half of the twentieth century, poetry as a genre, unlike fiction, has had a declining popularity in the literary world. Unsurprisingly perhaps, along with the decline of poetry as an art form, public taste for reading has changed from poetry to works “telling stories, anecdotes in a light easy style that can safely be consumed at first sight without fear of later indigestion” (Frazer 125). Sarah Broom similarly asserts that “the whole of the poetry world appears to the majority to be an esoteric and marginal enterprise” (222). The marginalization of poetry as a literary genre is largely caused by financial issues and its changing role within the capitalist modes of publishing. At the beginning of the 1990s, Oxford University Press “closed down the entire list” as poetry was not cost-effective, and poetry lists were only seen as “loss-leaders for mainstream publishers”; and publishing houses such as Penguin and Faber could generate revenue so long as they republished selections or well-established poets especially for colleges, libraries, and other educational institutions (Middleton 771). Despite the disappointing sales figures, diverse poetic forms and poetic activities flourished before the new millennium, which changed the way poetry is understood, read, published, and valued in general.

It is challenging to incorporate Peter Reading’s poetry within the diversity of poetic movements in the late twentieth century. He has been mostly considered a solitary figure publishing at least one poetry volume every year—very prolific, but hardly appreciated by critics due to the infamously pessimistic mode of his poetry (Kennedy 120). Born in Liverpool in 1946 and trained in painting at the Liverpool College of Art, Reading had a vacillating career in arts and literature. He was temporarily involved in visual arts after graduation and taught for a short period of time while struggling to write poetry. After a short-lived attempt to be a full-time

poet, he felt compelled to find a permanent job, and worked as a weighbridge operator in a Shropshire feed mill company. He chose to stay away from the “ivory tower” poetry industry; working-class employment was a more-than-twenty-year survival strategy, and an act of self-exile from academic and literary circles, though poetry remained a life-long interest for Reading.<sup>1</sup> In his later career, he reached a wider audience and began to feel more secure financially with the support of the Lannan Foundation. Despite his wavering self-confidence, he was committed to writing extensively and publishing a poetry collection almost every year, with a total of twenty-six books of poetry in all.

Tom Paulin declared Reading “the unofficial laureate of a decaying nation” for reflecting on the condition of “Junk Britain” in his early career (204), and Duncan Bush proclaimed his unnatural poetic wisdom by calling him one of the “preternaturally-grizzled master-poets” (64). Reading’s name has been at the center of controversial debates over taste in contemporary poetry. Martin Booth, for instance, accused Reading of repeating the same type of poetry in his first five books, writing cleverly without producing poetry of good taste (160). We also have conflicting views about the quality and subject matter of his poetry. “Provocative” (Wheatley 64), “outrageous” (Marowski and Matuz 352), “teasing” (Jenkins 475), “pessimistic” (Paulin 207), “ludic and deadly serious” (Kennedy 136), “shocking” (Bush 64; Murgatroyd 142) and “nasty” (Ewart 2; Marowski and Matuz 352; Boyle 74) are among the adjectives employed by Reading’s critics. These keywords expose a series of heated debates on the nature of his poetry; in other words, while his work has been praised by critics such Isabel Martin, Anthony Thwaite, and Sean O’Brian, it is also reviled by another camp of readers and critics.

Francesco Dragosei further avows that “no other contemporary British poet has caused so much scandal and indignation as Peter Reading has with his poems” (104). In his interview with Reading, Alan Jenkins reports that the editors of the *Times Literary Supplement* received “gifts of excreta” when one of Reading’s poems was published in the *TLS* (7). As a riposte to such scandalous reactions, there are many instances in Reading’s poems of the poet-figure self-reflexively mocking the denigrating comments on his work. Despite such criticism, Reading is totally comfortable with incorporating troubling materials and dealing with unpleasant subjects in his poetry, as his oft-quoted response from Jenkins’s interview shows: “If you want art to be like Ovaltine then clearly some artists are not for you; but art has

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<sup>1</sup> See Barr on the “persona of the poet” as “a fundamental opposition to the bourgeois certitudes of poetry and culture” (255); and also note Reading’s interview with Stephen Edgar, in which he openly rejects London literary circles, finding them bogus and “unreal” (“Whistling” 59).

always struck me most when it was to do with coping with things, often hard things, things that are difficult to take” (7). Poetry should not numb the senses of its readers, he seems to suggest; it should rather cause vibrations, oscillations, to force them leave their comfort zones. Reading is a “pessimist” and “misanthropist;”<sup>2</sup> he openly acknowledges that he is a committed “nihilist” (Martin, *Reading* 227),<sup>3</sup> spawning social problems in “ugly manifestations” (Roberts 167).

David Kennedy’s analysis of the generational divides in post-war British poetry situates Reading within the third group of the loosely-molded label, New Generation (*NewGen*), along with other poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Selima Hill, Jo Shapcott and David Dabydeen (8). We might agree with Kennedy’s grouping only if we consider the basic concerns of these poets and read their work content-wise—voicing the tremendous cultural changes in contemporary Britain accompanied by its decline as a nation and dissolving national identities. However, the formal and linguistic experimentation in Reading’s work, disjunctive narrative patterns, collages of found materials, and experimentation with traditional meters draw Reading closer to post-war modernisms or late-modernist trends. These belated modernisms, as Peter Middleton argues in “Poetry after 1970,” reveal that “language is already in play as the scene of desire and the field of the ‘other,’ that it can be found, fragmented, neologistic, philosophical, and can show subjectivity in the process of emergence and deconstruction” (771). Regarding the deviations in his work around the 1990s, Broom draws Reading’s poetry closer to the experimental trends in the UK: “[i]f any poet truly deserves the epithet ‘experimental,’ with its implications of newness and originality, Reading is surely a candidate, because of his strikingly original combination of strategies derived from visual art, traditional verse, and postmodern poetics” (249).

The peculiarity of Reading’s poetry lies not in its tone and nasty subject matter, yet in a distinct “*aversion of conformity* in pursuit of new forms” (Bernstein 1; emphasis in original). Although much has been written on Reading’s thematic

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<sup>2</sup> See Reading’s short commentary “Going, Going” on the current state of life and poetry in Britain to understand major motivations in his poetry: “a congenital English pessimism . . . an English tendency to self-denigrate; the actual English experience of loss of Empire; . . . Add to this a measure of misanthropy and the sort of depressive moroseness already outlined” (33-34).

<sup>3</sup> Again, see his interviews with Alan Jenkins and Isabel Martin: Reading comments on the attacks on his poetry, particularly those comments which devalue his poetry for its nihilism and pessimism: “And there’s nothing wrong with nihilism. Again, with Beckett—the terms applied to him, nihilism, pessimism: these are terms like sentimentality or morbidity, contrived by the people who want Ovaltine instead of art” (Reading, “Making” 8); “What am I saying apart from the fact that things are shitty and that nothing can be done about it? That’s a very nihilistic attitude and I’m a nihilist . . . What can I say beyond that?” (Martin, *Reading* 227).

concerns, the formal procedures in his poetry received little critical attention from his critics. This paper aims to focus on the verbal and visual experiments in Reading's *Evagatory* (1992) in reference to Pierre Joris's nomad poetics. Joris's engagement with nomadicity in *A Nomad Poetics* (2003) may provide a certain critical consciousness in associating Reading's trope of evagation in *Evagatory* with the state of linguistic homelessness, the wandering of mind through numerous textual, cultural, spatial borders, and lastly the poem as an unfinalized construct. I suggest that a nomadic trajectory<sup>4</sup> that can be discerned within the network of poems is foregrounded by constantly shifting registers, crossing of poetic boundaries, and trans-corporeal<sup>5</sup> relations. Secondly, by analyzing non-discursive visual patterns and collage practices in *Evagatory*, the text can be investigated as a "rhizomatic space" in which "spatial hierarchy" is eliminated and the speaking subject is dislocated (Joris 5). Joris's interpretation of nomadicity, in other words, might enable our understanding of how formal dynamism might evoke a sense of perpetual wandering, as also a sign of constant deferral or drifting, in Reading's *Evagatory*.

### A Digression: Nomad Poetics

Pierre Joris's *A Nomad Poetics*,<sup>6</sup> a collection of critical writings on nomadic formations of poetry, defines nomad poetics as always being restless, "an absence of rest, always a becoming" (*Nomad* 29). Joris's emphasis on the lack of "stasis" in nomad poetics and viewing it as a vast and "open system of assemblages" (*Nomad* 46) might inform my close reading of the poems in *Evagatory*. Nomad poetics in Joris's formula points to the mutability of language and of writing in diverse languages and discourses available to the poet:

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of "trajectory" is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's nomad thought. The nomads are conscious of their territory and the points that they temporarily occupy; their life takes place "in the intermezzo." As opposed to the "sedentary road" that "parcel out a closed space to people," nomadic trajectory "distributes people (or animals) in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating" (380).

<sup>5</sup> The term "trans-corporeality" has been taken from Stacy Alaimo's recent work, in which she adopts Gail Weiss's concept of "intercorporeality" and proposes "trans-corporeality" as a term that describes the human as material and "emphasizes the imbrication of human bodies not only with each other, but with non-human creatures and physical landscapes" (18). The decentered human subject exists as part of "a wider material world," and the human body is "radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed, and decomposed by other bodies" (24).

<sup>6</sup> Joris is not consistent in his use of the terms "nomad" and "nomadic." The earlier version of his work *A Nomad Poetics* was entitled *Towards a Nomadic Poetics*, published by Spanner in 1999. His earlier essays were revised and republished in 2003 with the new title *A Nomad Poetics*.

A nomad poetics will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them. If Pound, HD, Joyce, Stein, Olson, & others have shown the way, it is essential now to push this matter further, again, not as “collage” (though we will keep those gains) but as a *material flux of language matter* . . . And then to follow this flux of ruptures and articulations, of rhythm, moving in & out of semantic & non-semantic spaces, moving around & through the features accreting as poem, a lingo-cubism, no, a lingo-barocco . . . a poetry that takes into account not only the manifold of languages & locations but also of selves each one of us is constantly becoming. The nomadic poem as *ongoing & open-ended chart of turbulent fluxes* the dispersive nature of our realities make inevitable. (*Nomad* 5, 6, 44; emphases added)

What I find most compelling in Joris’s definition about nomad poetics above is his emphasis on movement and a type of poetics which is “rhizomatic,” more precisely a view of poetics as an “*ongoing & open-ended chart of fluxes*” in which poetic and non-poetic relations and connections are played out. A rhizome, as opposed to arborescence, discards the notions of origin and telos, and also hierarchies produced by the tree model. According to Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>7</sup> the first two principles of a rhizome, “connection and heterogeneity,” are related with the rejection of an orderly structure and establishing connections between different systems of thinking:

the rhizome connects any point to any other point . . . It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. . . . The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (21)

Another feature of the rhizome is “multiplicity”: “there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s terms spread virally through Joris’s work, and he simply refers to them as “D&G.”

lines” (8). Multiplicities affect the way language and its semantic reservoir functions; in other words, the rhizome brings into play different linguistic registers or signifying structures, and disrupts the hierarchical system of representation that is based on the safe connection between the signifier and the signified.

Joris defines nomadic writing as the “practice of the outside” (*Nomad* 29), a process of establishing relations or making connections between poetic and non-poetic materials. The “rhizomatic” method, according to Joris, is not simply “an aesthetics of the fragment” (*Nomad* 5), but is “a *war machine*, always on the move, always changing, morphing, moving through languages, cultures, terrains” (*Nomad* 26; emphasis added). A nomad text is never settled; it is viewed as an unfinished project, as a constant “becoming.” Joris also takes up a similar discussion of the concept of *dérive*, following the Surrealist and Situationist arguments and finally appropriating it in his text through a post-structuralist perspective. Guy Debord defines the “*dérive*” or “drifting,” among the most important practices of the Situationists, as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”; and “from a *dérive* point of view of cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (65). Drifting, in Joris’s formulation, may be further associated with linguistic homelessness: “for language to be accurate to the condition of nomadicity, it too has to be drifting” (*Nomad* 26). Marie-Anne Hansen-Pauly further draws attention to the concept of drifting as “a much theorized metaphor in art” while it stands for “following the path of an unplanned journey,” it also refers to the untraceability of origin or a “non-original work” (136).

In “The Millennium Will Be Nomadic or It Will Not: Notes Toward a Nomadic Poetics [version 4.00],”<sup>8</sup> a dialogic exchange between Joris and Brian Massumi, Massumi also draws attention to the dynamism of nomadic formations which “value motion over fixation, variation over order” and “involve ‘arraying oneself in an open space’ rather than arranging a closed space around oneself” (*Nomad* 40). Both agents of this article contend that “the nomadic” posits a state of thought or a process of writing foregrounding its formal procedures and undermining any resolution. Joris’s own writing composed of textual fragments, repetitive citations, and multilingual practices supports his claims over poems as “multilayered construct[s]” (“Transitzone” n. pag.). In an interview by Peter Cockelbergh, he comments on the major difference between his work and that of high modernists such as Eliot and Pound, pointing out the latter poets’ ambition to establish their work as a sort of “masterpiece” or “a single great work” (“Transitzone” n. pag.). Joris seems to

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<sup>8</sup> This collaborative and conversational essay was published in *A Nomad Poetics* (25-56).

acknowledge the legacy of modernist practices and employs them when required (as earlier stated above: “though we will keep those gains” [*Nomad* 5]); nonetheless, he writes with a mindfulness of the impossibility of producing an “organic whole” (“Transitzone” n. pag.).

Such writing is then “non-hierarchical, free-moving” and composed of “randomly articulated language units,” offering the readers “a vast proliferation, open on all sides for ever further egalitarian *dérives*” (Joris, “Transitzone” n. pag.). The viewer/reader’s “view-point” is recurrently disrupted: “this continuous eye-&body-act of de- & re-territorializing the spaces of the drawing keep the viewer from ever being able to find that fictional single static point” (Joris, *Nomad* 42). Similar to Barthesian writerly texts, the reader is expected to forge new reading habits; such nomadic texts demand them to question the capacity of language and critique the ways in which poetry is habitually read and produced.

### A Nomadic Venture: “The Practice of the Outside”

At the time Reading was writing *Evagatory*,<sup>9</sup> Robert Potts conducted an interview with him at his Shropshire country house. As Potts reported, Reading did not have enough creative energy to finish a new collection, and *Evagatory* might have been his last one. The collection was published in February 1992, soon after Reading was fired from his job at the mill for refusing to wear the uniform. Despite Reading’s creative drought at the time, *Evagatory* marks a transitional period in his poetry, from an obsession with social issues to a more vigorous and experimental use of the page space.

Reading seems to have derived the term “evagatory” from the archaic and Latinate word “evagation.” If we look at its two major denotations— “[t]he action of wandering away, or departing from a specified locality” and “[w]andering of the mind, thoughts, spirit, etc.” (*OED*)—the derived word fits in his nomadic venture in this mid-career book: a “guideless, directionless, lightless” wandering through various landscapes (Poem 19),<sup>10</sup> and an “unarmed, unaccompanied” movement of thought (Poem 22),<sup>11</sup> eventually winding up in the “drifting” and “hurtling” of the Voyager probes into extra-terrestrial space. The act of evagation is foregrounded by

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<sup>9</sup> As Reading prefers to keep *Evagatory* unpaginated, available for reading from whatever plateau his readers choose, I enumerate each work on a single page as a poem rather than citing them through the tyranny of pagination, to which Reading would certainly object.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Reading’s poetry designated “Poem” are from *Evagatory*.

<sup>11</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, “To think is to voyage” (482).

voiced references to “a series of virtual spaces that combine only to break away from each other” (Haines 109). The “directionless” and “vicious” journey starts from Sydney<sup>12</sup> in the first poem and moves through Tasmania and Australia,<sup>13</sup> places in former Yugoslavia,<sup>14</sup> England,<sup>15</sup> Malaysia,<sup>16</sup> “Edge of black Baltic,”<sup>17</sup> “Niagara,”<sup>18</sup> and the “Franco-Italian border.”<sup>19</sup> The texts usually start in the middle of things and without proper information about what precedes them or what will follow next.

Before continuing with further analysis, it would be useful to remember Joris’s proposition that nomad writing is “the practice of the outside”:

- 1) that language has always to do with the *other*, in fact, for the writer is the *other*.
- 2) that there is no single *other*, there are only a multitude of them—plurality; even multitudes of different multitudes—**hetero-pluralities**.
- 3) language others itself always again → nomadic writing is always “the practice of outside”; writing as nomadic practice—on the move from one other to another other. (*Nomad* 29; emphases and underline in original)

The concepts Joris mentions, “hetero-pluralities” and “practice of the outside,” are connected with the rhizomatic nature of nomad poetics. Following a non-linear and non-hierarchical trajectory, the nomadic text “proceeds via series of images, moving from realm to realm, human—animal—vegetable—mineral, & back up, away & around & through, horizontal & vertical, taproots, transfers” (*Nomad* 50).

The first poem opens in a harbor in Sydney with the description of the landscape as space of various intensities. What the nomadic subject discovers in almost all these settings is “faunal extinction” and environmental decline:

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<sup>12</sup> “Doyle’s on the harbour . . . Sydney, *The Age* screwed up in a trash-bucket” (Poem 1).

<sup>13</sup> “Nubeena, Wedge Bay, / Oakwood, Port Arthur, Highcroft, Stormlea,” (Poem 2); “Pipe Clay Lagoon, wet silver ellipse of sand” (Poem 4); “Cape Grim recording ozone-depleting air” (Poem 28).

<sup>14</sup> “Down from the sleet-clad mountains into / Mostar, fecundity (pulsing UV)” (Poem 6); “Midnight, an open window in Trebinje” (Poem 6); “Café Dalmacija, Adriatic” (Poem 7).

<sup>15</sup> “Came to an island farcitate with feculence: / chip-papers, Diet-Pepsi cans clattering” (Poem 9); “dapper sartorial English elder” (Poem 11); “England, *The Time* screwed up in a trash-bucket” (Poem 14).

<sup>16</sup> “Forest, Sarawak, limestone outcrop / caverns of roosting Bornean horseshoe bats” (Poem 19).

<sup>17</sup> “Edge of black Baltic, night, North-easter” (Poem 20).

<sup>18</sup> “Blizzard, Niagara, roaring white-out” (Poem 29).

<sup>19</sup> “Mountainous Franco-Italian border / Tende, medieval, steep labyrinthine wynds,” (Poem 29).

Doyle's on the harbour, dusk, pulse of warning light,  
octopus, crayfish, chill gold dry semillon's  
    bouquet of ripe grapes/pollen; plum-mauve  
.....  
    a.m., a carcinogenic sunrise  
    **(15% of population . . .),**  
shrieking, an iridescence of lorikeets  
raucous from palms and blossoming eucalypts;  
Sydney, *The Age* screwed up in a trash-bucket. (Poem 1)

The opening poem evokes a post-pastoral setting with a Rothko painting in “plum-mauve” colors providing an “afterglow on which silent / slow-flapping fruit-bats’ transient silhouettes.” Several trans-corporeal forces are at work in this specific territory—both animals and plants cross-breed with one another, yet exposed to threats of “a carcinogenic sunrise.”

The “bird songs,” a characteristic melody repeated by a non-human body to “mark [a] territory,” comprise one of the best territorial assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 312). Lorikeets’ territory, marked by their “shrieking,” “raucous” song, creates a specific “melodic landscape” (Deleuze and Guattari 318), which overlaps with the territories of “slow-flapping fruit-bats,” “ripe grapes/pollen” and “palms and blossoming eucalypts.” Similarly, *wylahs*, in the second poem, “*Calyptrorhynchus funereus*,” wail “their weird *wee-yu wy-la*” (Poem 2). The gulls with a harsh screaming voice (Poem 3), “herring gull” and “kittiwake colony” (Poem 10) and “Bornean horseshoe bats” mark their territory by the “faeces” they leave behind, “sifted by cockroaches” (Poem 14). The territorial marks of the birds are later replaced by the “mutated arthropods”; what is left from the non-human species is “the stench of their excrement” (Poem 35). Toward the closing of the book, the only survivors of the faunal extinction are the transformed insects (“mutated arthropods”), spiders and cockroaches, and “algae,” replacing the biodiversity emphasized in the first half of the book. Within this complex network of human and non-human relations, the wandering subject “crosses” through several identified and unidentified places “by intensity,”<sup>20</sup>—with ranging speeds—and is simultaneously located and dislocated by the “thresholds” of unique flora, fauna, social systems, “vectors” of landscape and weather systems.

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<sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue that “[e]very voyage is intensive, and occurs in relation to thresholds of intensity between which it evolves or that it crosses” (5).

The littoral references such as “harbour,” “Lagoon,” “Edge of black Baltic,” “Came to an island” make clear that the evagation takes place over the ocean. The silences and ellipses existing between the coastal markers point to an imagined voyage over the ocean space. Ocean space, as Philip Steinberg argues, represents the “portion of the earth’s surface least amenable to time-space compression” (168). In *Evagatory*, the seascape that nonverbally exists between the points of capture (coastline, cities, islands, “edges” of seascape) makes absolute speed and passage possible and holds a middle position between the markers of the earth’s surface. The volatility of water implied in between the lines suggests a heightened sense of linguistic displacement, homelessness, or drifting.<sup>21</sup>

Reading’s nomadic style is further augmented by a fabrication of generic variations, register and discursive shifts, and inter/intra-textual references. First of all, in *Evagatory* Reading deals with diverse generic variations alongside the poetic medium: a forged epistolary poem about the forced voyage of ex-convicts (Poem 3), fragmented journalistic prose pieces about “a dreadful, bloody, civil insurrection among the / poor mad islanders” (Poems 15, 24),<sup>22</sup> a patois verse and its distorted translation (Poem 17),<sup>23</sup> a text parodying proverbial wisdom in a mock-didactic language (Poem 25), and an old seafaring text (Poem 30).<sup>24</sup> Joris puts emphasis on the multilingual practices in the production of nomad poetics. A polyglot from birth, he alternately employs other languages while dominantly writing in English, and, at times, “establishe[s] intertextual links through the sound of words in English reminding him of words in another language” (Hansen-Pauly 129). In the same way, the English language in *Evagatory* is often dislocated by a multilingual awareness as the scenes alter through different time-spaces: Croatian (“visokokvalitetno,” “vinjak,” “crno vino,” “bijelo”), German (“keller,” “gewüürzy glühwein,” “wildschwein”),

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<sup>21</sup> A similar idea can be explored later in Reading’s [untitled] “this ocean’s endlessness / so very, very, very far from home” (13).

<sup>22</sup> This prose document, most probably an invented one, starting in the middle of the story and having no clear conclusion, tells about “a dreadful, bloody, civil insurrection among the poor mad islanders” which takes place due to an “absurdity of mayhem”—the government decides to hold the automobiles of these poor islanders “which they had revered above all else, and which had helped boost their weak, inferior egos” (Poem 15).

<sup>23</sup> The poem is introduced with a parenthetical reference on the same page as “(patois and translationese alternately).”

<sup>24</sup> Our craft approaching y<sup>e</sup> fhore,  
many fcores of diuers fowls,  
all clagged in fome fticky tar,  
did flacker away from y<sup>e</sup> land; (Poem 30)

Latin (“etiolated,” “vitriolated,” “farctate with feculence,” “Logaoedic,” “Quondam Parnassian”).

Moreover, lexical elements pertaining to different registers are foregrounded by italics or brackets and catalogued by using fewer conjunctions in an “asyndetic” form (Martin, *Reading* 216). These highly disorienting terms range from botanics (“eucalypts,” “cypress”), geology (“[cf. the Permian],” “[cf. the Camrian],” “[Holocene],” “stalactitic”), zoology and ornithology (“*Calyptorhynchus funereus*,” “*Larus novaehollandiae*,” “Laridae,” “arthropod aberration,” “crustacean,” “*Anas platyrhynchos*,” “*Aynhya farina*,” “*Mergus albellus*,” “*Melanitta fusca*”), meteorology (“ferruginous fog,” “carcinogenic sunrise,” “climacteric,” “labyrinthine wynds”), to medical language (“thyrotoxicosis,” “insomnia,” “Cranium,” “lesion”). Reiterated scientific terminology pushes the poetic discourse to the limits of imperceptibility and invalidate the claims of a lyrical voice.

As a final point, the traces of other texts and poems from Reading’s earlier works and in future ones that follow *Evagatory* foreground the textuality and reiterative practices in Reading’s text. This also shows how Reading views his earlier texts as unfinished projects to be recuperated, reused, introduced into new contexts. These practices have been varyingly labelled by several scholars as follows: “circular and twisted” (Martin, “Rich” 358); “cannibalizing” and “reiterative” (Barr 261, 276); “viral referencing” (Kennedy 147); “recycling” (Potts), or an artful “auto-cento” (Martin, *Reading* 219). Recycling, reiteration, and reproduction of earlier texts coincide with Joris’s principle that “nomad art and poetry are never complete or final: whatever is created is always a becoming, to be modified and added to later” (Hansen-Pauly 111). Joris, in his interview with Cockelbergh, comments on the major difference between his work and those of high modernists such as Eliot and Pound, pointing out the latter’s ambition to establish their work as a sort of “masterpiece” or “a single great work.” However, nomad poetics, for him, does not aspire to have an “organic whole”; it is, on the contrary, “non-hierarchical, free-moving” and composed of “randomly articulated language units,” which are able to create “a vast proliferation, open on all sides for ever further egalitarian *dérives*” (Joris, “Transitzone” n. pag.).

Glyn Maxwell uses the term “viral referencing” to characterize the symbolic contamination of the page space “by random others” (54). Poem 8 (“ye haue heard this yarn afore”), Poem 17 (“Gobschichte damapetty,”) and Poem 25 (“Prouerbes xiiij. iij”) were formerly used in a 1989 collection by Reading, *Shitheads*:

how we was one Monday anchored



Down from the sleet-clad mountains into  
*Mostar, fecundity* (pulsing UV  
irradiating, *vines, figs, peaches*). (Poem 6; emphasis added)

*Carp baked* in herbs and *bijelo vino*, (Poem 5; emphasis added)

*They* came to *Mostar* out of mountain *sleet*,  
into *fecundity, peaches, vines, figs*,  
lamb carcasses spiked on slow-turning spits,  
*carp poached* in spiced *bijelo vino* sauce. ([*untitled*] 13; emphasis added)

Although in the first poem above Reading avoids using a pronoun through the whole poem, the reiterated version in [*untitled*] refers to a series of mythological characters roving through those places referred to as “They.” Both poems celebrate the fertility of the geography by repetitively cataloguing food and drinking items; “vines, figs, peaches” in Poem 5 are given in a renewed order “peaches, vines, figs.”

Midnight, an open window in *Trebinje*,  
thrashing of warm May rain on fig leaves,  
*nightingale*, one hour richly mellifluous  
under this *vitriolated downpour*. (Poem 6; emphasis added)

In *Trebinje*, all night, a *Nightingale*  
solaced the Wily-Witted where he lay  
drenched to the chine in *vitriolic rain*. ([*untitled*] 13; emphasis added)

Café Dalmacija, *Adriatic*  
violet (dark as *crno vino*), (Poem 7; emphasis added)

the *Adriatic*, violet in its depths,  
wine-dark as *crno vino* which they sloshed ([*untitled*] 13; emphasis added)

The sound and tactile imagery evoked by the nightingale song (even taken to be an allusion to Keats) and the sensation of the wetness in the [*untitled*] variation (the second poem above) is derivative of Poem 6 in *Evagatory*. The visual imagery and aura generated through references to the color “violet” and darkness of “*crno*

*vino*” are caught up in a chain of reiterations in [untitled]. These places and images are revisited once more in -273,15 (2005), published thirteen years later than *Evagatory*:

Trebinje; six a.m.;  
 autumn; bank of the river,  
 a burgeoning *Ficus*; pausing  
 to pick one, I flushed from wet roots  
 a Little Bittern (tiny,  
 fast-flying, wing coverts cream  
 against black—and I’d heard it barking  
 and barking through the night  
 every two or three seconds).

Outside the Café Dalmacia, (-273,15, Poem 5)

The scene is wet again; the song of the nightingale is replaced by the “barking” of the “Little Bittern.” Sound, wetness, geographic coordinates are fabricated, this time, with a fake lyrical “I.” In these inter- and intratextual references, we sense an affirmation of materiality, prompting a “flux” between texts, poetic voices, tones, and contexts. Perhaps, from Joris’s perspective, these intertextual gestures and palimpsestic rudiments might be taken as the first step of nomadicity, since the poet “steal[s] directly whatever is of use, without needing to theoretically kowtow via analysis, *explicatio*” (“Transitzone” n. pag.).

## Typographical Experiments: The “Cranium” Poems

Rather than making use of found materials, Reading engages in typographical rearrangement of his material in the central poems of *Evagatory*, the “cranium poems.”<sup>26</sup> The visual and verbal aspects of non-/poetic assemblages are enhanced by hand-drawn cranial images, with fragments of texts scattered throughout the text and reinvigorated by *dérives* without an intended order. Therefore, as Uwe Klawitter

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<sup>26</sup> I have decided to call these poems “cranium poems” since the poet verbally recaps the term “cranium” over and over in several poems along with his cranial drawings: e.g., “set out from Cranium, through uncharted / swamp” (Poem 12); “Cranial voice loquacious” (Poem 14); “Province of hyperborean bleakness, / Cranium” (Poem 22); “cranial voice gratuitous” (Poem 32); and so on.



The pictorial representation of the city in the cranium has many entries, exits, and overlapping points divided by indistinct grids. The map is actually in fragments, and the networks between several streets, avenues, urban spaces are inadequately represented. Could poetic utterance or form be an adequate medium to represent life? Will “Logaoedic Dependency” (spilling through the graphic’s mouth) make this voyage—writing process—less “perilous?” (Poem 12).

The next poem seems to provide an answer: “Cranial voice” is highly active, yet “inadequate”; and life can be translated only through an unintelligible and incompetent language (“lingo”) (Poem 14). In an interview with S. J. Fowler, Joris reminds us of the *Cantos*, in which Ezra Pound “create[s] a vertiginous literary mille-feuille” via “a palimpsest of translations, both in terms of content & form,” from Homer’s *Odyssey* and other adaptations of “old Anglo-Saxon formal elements” through “modernist moves” (Joris, “Maintenant” n. pag.). With the same fervor, Reading experiments with the classical or almost obsolete prosodic forms which he self-reflexively calls “this Logaoedic Dependency” (Poem 12). The word “translationese” (Poem 14), in addition, refers to the conscious erring or distortions of reality in the text. Peter Newmark defines “translationese” as “the area of interference where a literal translation of a stretch of the source language text (a) plainly falsifies (or ambiguates) its meaning, or (b) violates usage for no apparent reason.” “Translationese is an error due to ignorance or carelessness . . .” (78). In other words, the text is no more than a faulty and inadequate translation of life to a foreign language the speaking subject unsatisfactorily produces or is produced by (Poem 14).

The second cranium poem (Fig. 2) is thus a derivative of the first one (Fig. 1), introducing us to the “ur-poem” (Martin, *Reading* 223) of the collection. Each version of “cranium poems” is a “printed version of photomechanically reproduced printed version, a copy of a copy of a copy;” this process both “obscures” the path between its precedents and successors (Klawitter 200). This single poem nomadically wanders between different intertextual elements and competing registers which are exhaustingly reproduced throughout the text, such as Old English alliterative tradition (“farctate with feculence”) and motifs (“flight of a sparrow brief through the feasting hall”), Latinate vocabulary (etiolated, crustacea, hyperborean), mythological reference to the hyperborean people who are thought to live at the North Pole, geological terminology (“[Permian, Holocene . . .]”), and waste matter (“all that remains, their last year’s shit’s stench”).

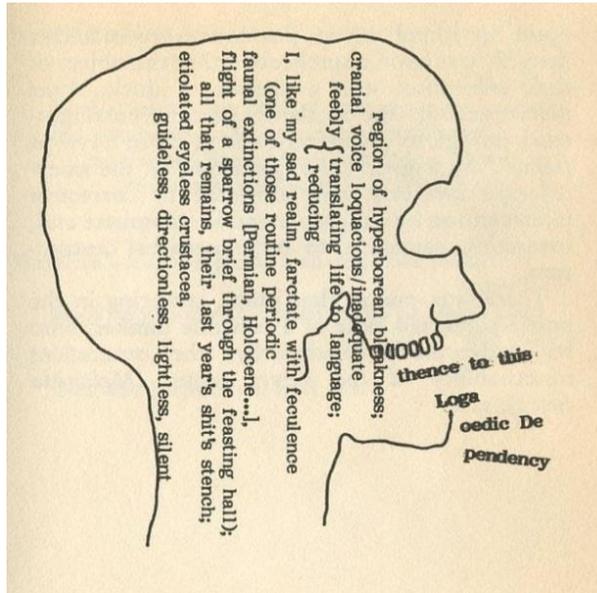


Fig. 2. Poem 23. Peter Reading, *Evagatory* (Chatto and Windus, 1992), n. pag. Copyright © Peter Reading.

The term “hyperborean” in the first line introduces a new atmosphere into the poem—possibly dark, cold, arctic, deserted—rendering a paradoxical outcome for the “cranial voice”—“loquacious / inadequate,” pointlessly talkative yet pointing to a failure, the futility of poetic utterance. The failure of “translating life to language” (Poems 23, 31, 33) is admitted several times in exasperation along with this poem; the fragmented translations of Old English texts (“translationese” [Poem 14]) are nothing but “reductions” (“feebly / reducing”):

feebly { translating life from language;  
 { reducing (Poem 23)

The repeated keywords above, in other words, reiterate “a sign of enfeebled articulation, a compulsive repetition confirming deficiency” (Barr 261). The “[c]ranium” as an “uncharted swamp” tries to find an expression equivalent to it, yet the text becomes even more “swampy” at every attempt,<sup>27</sup> as the final line of Poem 23 illustrates: “guideless, directionless, lightless, silent.”

<sup>27</sup> See Poem 12, “set out from Cranium, through uncharted / swamp.”



The third cranium poem substantiates Joris's claim of poetic creation as an "always ongoing process" laying bare the procedures at hand as "the poem composes, recomposes, decomposes before your eyes, de- & re-territorializing at will and chance" (*Nomad* 31). Consecutively, Poems 31, 32, and 33 give place to the same verbal content through various forms—superimpositions, illegible words, fragments, duplications, and traces of ink—in "free-moving and at times randomly articulated language units" which open the text to "a vast proliferation" (Joris, "Transitzone" n. pag.). Through constant repetition and "viral referencing" (Kennedy 147; Maxwell 54), the concepts of origin and linearity within *Evagatory* are problematized;<sup>28</sup> Reading very consciously undermines the premises of an original work in *Evagatory*.

### Reading, The Visual Artist

In his essay "Collage & Post-Collage: In Honour of Eric Mottram,"<sup>29</sup> Joris accepts the fact that collage practice is regarded as old-fashioned by many and all "discussions of art and literature [now] avoid the notion of collage" (*Nomad* 83). I already quoted in the "Digression" section that Joris's nomad poetics is envisaged as "a *material flux of language matter*"; yet, in the same quotation, he makes a note about modernist collage in parenthesis, "(though we will keep those gains)" (*Nomad* 5). How could collage still be considered valid in poetic discourse? Joris thinks over the concept of "post-collage" by employing a Deleuze-Guattarian vocabulary such as the fold, rhizomes, and machinic assemblages, yet in arts and literature their adaptation still owes a debt to earlier collage practices. He contends that these concepts allow us "to rethink the limits of modernist collage" (*Nomad* 90). For instance, by referring to Steve McCaffery's argument about fragmented quotations and citations, he reconsiders the fragments as "tactical folds of a poetic interior," and dreams of a "grand cyber-collage" or a "democratic vision of a 'poetry made by all,'" through cyberspace perhaps (90-91). I suggest that Joris's imagination of the multi-layered collage practices as "tactical folds of a poetic interior" might inform my close reading of Reading's poems and add another dimension to our readings of his collage work.

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<sup>28</sup> Joris declares the demise of linearity in *A Nomad Poetics*: "the linear-soon-to-be" (3) and defines "dérive" as "lines of flight through language that empty any desire for origin, for an original" (118).

<sup>29</sup> This essay was published in *A Nomad Poetics* (83-93).

The collage pieces and visual poems<sup>30</sup> toward the end of *Evagatory* create a space of exhibition to the reader, “a gallery of overlapping, smeared, untitled gouaches, with Reading as the Curator always vanishing round a wall when you need to ask something” (Maxwell 53). The lack of page numbers and absence of titles enable the reader to explore the text through its open and heterogeneous structure. Klawitter maintains that collage in Reading’s work serves different purposes. One of these purposes is to underline the inherent textuality of writing. Collage not only decontextualizes the collaged material but also creates new possibilities for interpretation in *Evagatory*. The decontextualization process puts the assumptions of originality at stake. Rather than having an ultimate meaning out of recontextualizations, what we are left with is the “procedural traces” from earlier contexts “vitiating by new contextual relations” (Klawitter 194). Analyzing Charles Bernstein’s *Rough Trades*, Joris similarly refers to such a “rapid decontextualization and recontextualization” process which grants a certain autonomy to the reader to “start looking (reading) anywhere” (*Nomad* 96).

Moreover, the discerned “procedural traces” put the reader in an active engagement with a multi-layered textuality, which Joris has been accentuating in *A Nomad Poetics*, or with “tactical folds of a poetic interior” (*Nomad* 90). The following collage piece in Fig. 4, which appears toward the end of the book, in this regard, takes a “directionless” evagation between several materials, both poetic and non-poetic.

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<sup>30</sup> The “structure” of most of his books was informed by his earlier training in painting, particularly with the shocking “combines” and “ready-mades” of “aggressive and provocative modernists” such as “Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Jim Dine” (Martin, *Reading* 12).

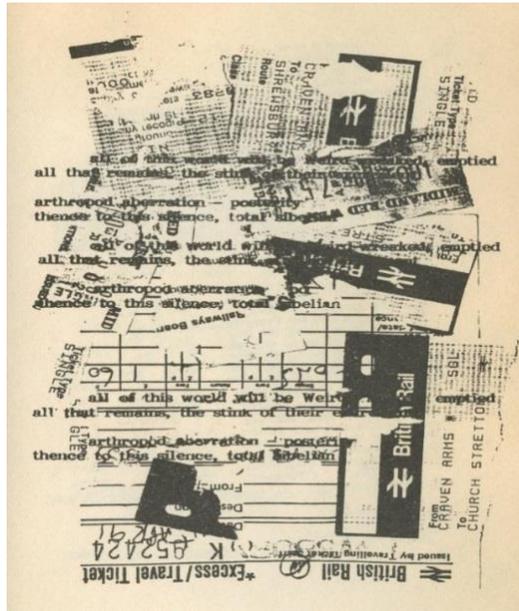


Fig. 4. Poem 37. Peter Reading, *Evagatory* (Chatto and Windus, 1992), n. pag. Copyright © Peter Reading.

Fig. 4 marks an essential point in the development of Reading's collage practices in terms of his desire to blend the visual with the verbal and foreground the page space as a "smooth space," on which the procedures of "traversing, circumventing, circumscribing, separating, piercing, splicing, connecting" are sustained in all their heterogeneity (*Nomad* 41).

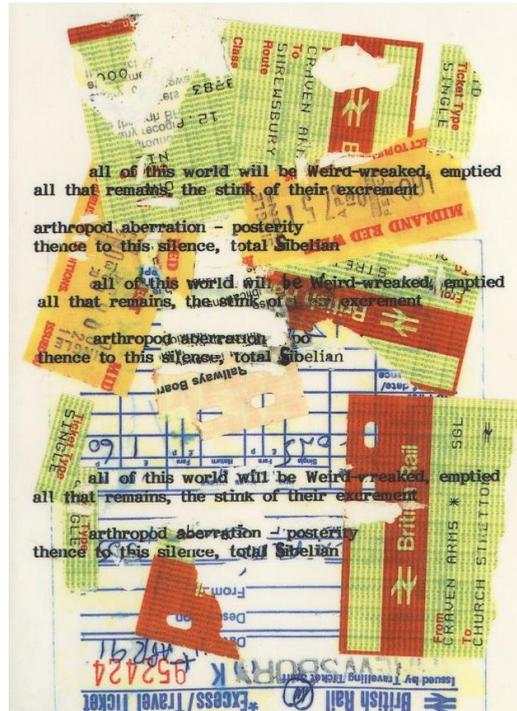


Fig. 5. The front cover of *Evagatory*. Peter Reading, *Evagatory* (Chatto and Windus, 1992). Copyright © Peter Reading.

The trimmed train tickets from British Rail are repeated with differing degrees of absence and presence; traces of the photocopying foreground the materiality of the process of assemblage. The layers of the British Rail tickets—hardly traceable destination information—have been multiplied. All indicators about the intended trajectory or route information (“Des,” “To,” “From”) are largely blotted or rendered dysfunctional by superimposed material. At the bottom of the page the word “Excess/Travel Ticket” is marked by an asterisk and blue edges, pointing at another document aside from poem fragments and torn train tickets—perhaps a bill of excess fare. What is publicized by the “Excess/Travel Ticket” is the “directionless” wandering of the itinerant subject who rides out of her zone and is charged with an excess fare, or does not have a destined route at all.

The multi-layered collage pieces above (Figs. 4 and 5) create a heterogeneous surface of competing materials. It is possible to discover an intricate interplay of the notions of presence and absence in this collage work since the “shadow of their

absence” is still “there” on the surface of the page and “ragged edge[s] of their contours [give] a vague indication of who or what was here”” (Joris, *Nomad* 4). Barely seen and read lines from previously quoted poems in *Evagatory* are written on this collage page. Torn British Rail tickets are pasted over each other; accurate information about the departure and arrival points is omitted on some of the tickets. This poem lays bare the processes of organizing, of arranging the poetic and the unpoetic material that is available to the poet. The reader is expected to find the rhizomic relations between these arrangements to understand how and to what ends such poetry functions.

A further disfiguring of the text’s legibility and the photocopied texture of the page defy claims of authenticity and any concealed textual dimension. Foregrounding of the “combinatory process” gains a lot more importance in Reading’s text as it “subvert[s] normative relations between elements through the concerted and spontaneous displacement of words and images” (Adamowicz 31). In the following image, formal drifting of the page space is conveyed through verbal and pictorial representation of the theme of evagation, “hurtling,” “drifting” into an extraterrestrial time space.

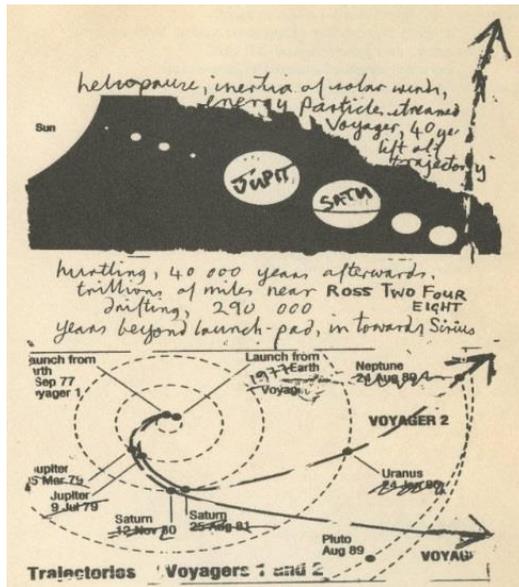


Fig. 6. Poem 39. Peter Reading, *Evagatory* (Chatto and Windus, 1992), n. pag. Copyright © Peter Reading.

The solar system, the darker part of the image, is incomplete, as the names of the planets are carelessly marked. The unpoetic material—the drawing of movement by Voyagers 1 and 2 in outer space with a timetable and cut-up elements of the solar system—is interrupted by crossings-out, scribbles of poems and jotting of dates (1977), the name a star (ROSS TWO FOUR EIGHT), and incomplete words (VOYAG, JUPIT, SATU). The trajectory of evagation is further visually evoked by the graphic of Voyager’s outer-space mission. The end of the voyage is obscure as all three arrows drawn point to diverging directions, and the dates of stellar arrivals are under erasure; all that is left is a sense of “drifting” and “silence” (Poem 40). As Joris contends, these new “seem- & seam-scapes,” related with his discussion of the fold, do not promise “any ontologically secure ‘ground,’” and finally the speaking subject is “dislocate[d] & dismember[ed]” to avoid locating an authoritative lyrical agency “to speak from an assured or implied position of uni-vocal, unequi-vocal truth” (*Nomad* 96). The subject’s withdrawal from the terrestrial space thus might be an acting-out of its “dismemberment” and eventual “dislocation” from a drowning and decaying world.

Accordingly, toward the end of *Evagatory*, the text leaves the territory of known earthly spaces and times of becoming and discovers new futures. Employing a scientific vocabulary, the texts “open up the territories to new futures” and “extend beyond the existential territories to which they are assigned” (Walkerline 759). Along with the shifting registers discussed earlier, the apparent scientificity of these texts reminds us of Joris’s allusion to Muriel Rukeyser’s assertion that poetry can provide “a meeting place between all kinds of imagination” (*Nomad* 36). Drawing an analogy between the two Voyager missions and their eventual drifting in outer space, the nomad subject’s evagation ends with total disintegration in absolute silence.

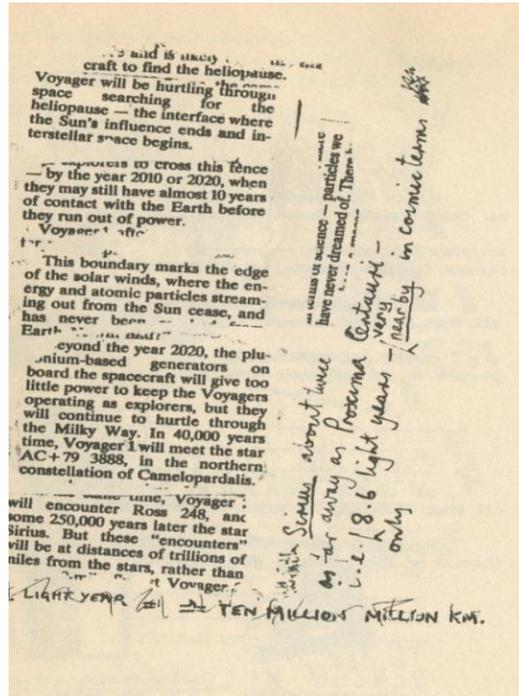


Fig. 7. Poem 38. Peter Reading, *Evagatory* (Chatto and Windus, 1992), n. pag. Copyright © Peter Reading.

As seen in Fig. 7, Reading assures us that the visual outcome of a collage will no more satisfy the readers’ expectation of a neat and elaborated poetic space: the “badly cut-out newspaper article [or document] with annotations scrawled in Reading’s hand testifies to the fact that the concern for beauty in form is finished” (Martin, *Reading* 225). The keywords in this penultimate collage piece and the cut-up scientific document about Voyager’s interstellar mission are recycled once more in Fig. 7. These found documents about Voyager probes can be retrieved from the NASA webpage<sup>31</sup> after a quick Google search with the keywords of the cut-up materials; however, the sources of these documents are not revealed in Reading’s texts and their accuracy might be questioned with the erasure of some words and the scribbles. As I quoted from Joris earlier, the poet can “steal directly whatever is of

<sup>31</sup> Cf. “The Basics of Space Flight: Trajectories.” *NASA Science: Solar System Exploration*. NASA Science Mission Directorate, n.d., [solarsystem.nasa.gov/basics/chapter4-1/](http://solarsystem.nasa.gov/basics/chapter4-1/).

use, without needing to theoretically kowtow via analysis, *explicatio*” (“Transitzone” n. pag.).

The final poem of *Evagatory*, despite its incomplete form, was prematurely announced in Figs. 6 and 7 through found material and indistinct scrawlings, respectively. Reading treats each cut-up part of the document as “particles,” pieces of information about a mission which is not complete, discovering a completely different route in the process of evagation. The closing poem of *Evagatory*, at the end of which “both text and image run out of energy” (Barr 274), becomes a perfect example for textual collage that Reading frequently retains in his collections:

heliopause, inertia of solar winds,  
           energy particles streamed from Sun cease,  
     Voyager, 40 years since lift-off,  
           power from plutonium generator  
 greatly reduced, continues trajectory,

hurtling, 40 000 years afterwards,  
 trillions of miles near Ross 248,

          drifting, 290 000  
 years beyond launch-pad, in towards Sirius (Poem 40)

By shrinking the font size in Poem 40, the text is gradually distanced and silenced and the surface of the text is finally emptied out of performative energy. The textual play takes flight by reprocessing words from two preceding documents and provides a new trajectory by the random wandering of lines such as “heliopause, inertia of solar winds,” “Voyager, 40 years since lift-off,” and “beyond launch-pad, in towards Sirius” several times in different texts. Reading eliminates conjunctions and punctuation marks other than “commas”; the final two verbs are given in progressive form (“hurtling” and “drifting”) and the text ends with a huge emptiness without the use of a period. The poetic discourse altogether fades away within this vortex of images, purely scientific discourse, and found materials.

## Conclusion

As suggested earlier, the formal qualities and innovative aspects of Peter Reading's poetry have been largely ignored or evaluated from a limited perspective due to its pessimistic subject matter, gloomy images of "Junk Britain" and the deteriorating earth. This paper has attempted to revitalize his legacy in late twentieth-century poetry by bridging a dialogue between his work and Pierre Joris's vision of nomad poetics. The paper suggested that a close reading of his formal techniques such as the use and counterfeiting of found materials, montaging of various textual perspectives, assembling verbal and visual fragments in *Evagatory* could be enhanced by Joris's envisioning of nomad poetics as a non-linear, non-hierarchical, and rhizomatic writing which is ever-changing, wandering across different registers and languages available to the poet. Joris's insistence on "the practice of the outside" and "a nomadic language of affects" (*Nomad* 7) also fits in Reading's suspicion of the representative aspect of writing and his nihilist agenda. Moreover, the emphasis on "rhizomatic" method in *A Nomad Poetics* also provides a renewed critical consciousness on Reading's poetic "meanderings"<sup>32</sup> in the midst of different sources, discourses, languages, verbal and visual experiments. The reworking of former ideas, images, and lines of poems does not deliver a unified narrative and opens up *Evagatory* to new possibilities. Despite his claims that poetry cannot produce a meaningful medium to cope with the pain of being alive, Reading's wandering amongst his entire *oeuvre* and archaic literary traditions paradoxically stimulate our experimental inquisitiveness. These wanderings show how Reading actually works at the edge of the margins: of literary traditions, of linguistic comprehensibility, of the visual and the verbal, and of the poetic and unpoetic materials.

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<sup>32</sup> "Meanderings" is an allusion to the Joris's webpage entitled "Nomadics: Meanderings & mawqifs of poetry, poetics, translations y mas. Travelogue too."

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