

For the Tempus-fugitives:
Christopher Norris on the philosophy (and poetry) of colour

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Born in 1947, Christopher Norris is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Cardiff University. He worked first on literary criticism, then on the question of realism and antirealism in philosophy (as a strong adversary of antirealism), on Derrida and deconstructionism and, more recently, on the philosophy of science. In the past few years he has also authored several philosophical poems.

In this issue we present two poems he wrote that are dedicated to color. Color is a recurrent theme in Norris' poetry. Why? And why does Norris choose, for nearly ten years past, to mainly use poems for his philosophical investigations? Is there a link between his interest on color and this choice he has made?

Moreover: Norris was always a strong adversary of antirealism and the extreme consequences of the "linguistic turn". Isn't there a contradiction between this philosophical position and the importance he gives to poetry? Perhaps color can give us a key.

Keywords: colour, antirealism, linguistic turn, poetry.

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“Let parrot-charts make room for cockatoos...”
(Christopher Norris, *Missing Hues*)

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In this issue we present two poems he wrote that are dedicated to color. Colour is a

¹ C. Norris, *Quantum Theory and the Flight from Realism: Philosophical Responses to Quantum Mechanics*, Routledge, London 2000; Id., *Minding the Gap: epistemology and philosophy of science in the two traditions*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 2000. For an account of Norris' philosophical itinerary, see his auto-biographical reconstruction in C. Norris., *Introduction*, in Id., *Deconstruction after all. Reflections and conversations*, Sussex Academic Press, 2015. On literary criticism see C. Norris, *Fiction, Philosophy and Literary Theory: Will the Real Saul Kripke Please Stand Up?*, Continuum, 2007. On realism and antirealism see C. Norris, *Truth Matters, Realism, Anti-Realism, and Response-Dependence*, Edinburgh University Press 2002; Id., *Resources of Realism: prospects for "post-analytic" philosophy*, Macmillan-St. Martin's Press, London-New York 1997; *New Idols of the Cave: on the limits of anti-realism*, Manchester University-St. Martin's Press, Manchester-New York 1997; Id., *Language, Logic and Epistemology: a modal-realist approach*, Palgrave, London 2004; Id., *Epistemology: key concepts in philosophy*, Continuum, London-New York 2005; Id., *On Truth and Meaning: language, logic and the grounds of belief*, Continuum, London-New York 2006 On Deconstruction see among others: Id., *Deconstruction and the unfinished project of Modernity*, Routledge-Athlone, London-New York 2000.

² See C. Norris, *The Cardinal's Dog and Other Poems*, De La Salle University Publishing House, Manila 2013, co-published De La Salle with Seventh Quarry Press, Swansea 2015; Id., *The Winnowing Fan: verse-essays in creative criticism*, Bloomsbury, London 2017; Id., *For the Tempus-Fugitives: poems and verse-essays*, De La Salle University Publishing House-Sussex Academic Press, Manila- Eastbourne 2017; Id., *The Matter of Rhyme: verse-music and the ring of ideas*, De La Salle University Press- Sussex Academic Press, Manila- Eastbourne 2018; Id., *The Trouble with Monsters: poems for dark times*, Culture Matters, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2019; Id., *A Partial Truth: poems 2015-19*, Seventh Quarry Press, Swansea 2019; Id., *The Folded Lie*, Culture Matters, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2019; Id., *Socrates at Verse and Other Philosophical Poems*, Parlor Press, South Carolina 2020.

recurrent theme in Norris' poetry. To understand why, perhaps it is best to begin with the poems themselves.

The first one, *Missing Hues*, starts not by chance with an experiment made by two visual scientists, Thomas Crane and Hewitt Piantanida, on impossible colors. To allow viewers to see colors that were at the same time red and green, or blue and yellow, the two scientists «had created images in which red and green stripes (and, in separate images, blue and yellow stripes) ran adjacent to each other»:

They showed the images to dozens of volunteers, using an eye tracker to hold the images fixed relative to the viewers' eyes. This ensured that light from each color stripe always entered the same retinal cells; for example, some cells always received yellow light, while other cells simultaneously received only blue light.

The observers of this unusual visual stimulus reported seeing the borders between the stripes gradually disappear, and the colors seem to flood into each other. Amazingly, the image seemed to override their eyes' opponency mechanism, and they said they perceived colors they'd never seen before.

Wherever in the image of red and green stripes the observers looked, the color they saw was «simultaneously red and green», Crane and Piantanida wrote in their paper. Furthermore, «some observers indicated that although they were aware that what they were viewing was a color (that is, the field was not achromatic), they were unable to name or describe the color. One of these observers was an artist with a large color vocabulary³.

There have been a lot of discussions on the possibility or impossibility of «impossible colors». That of red-green has been a very disquieting question, as it is well known, for Ludwig Wittgenstein, who didn't simply exclude its existence – as it is quite often thought – but on the contrary wondered very often why we can actually see red-green, for example, in autumn leaves⁴. Recently, Fiona Macpherson came back to the question of the impossible colours inside the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*⁵.

According to Norris, impossible colors are something to which all known colours «hint». It is enough to «spin the disc», and all rigid borders between hues disappear.

³ N. Wolchover, *Red-Green & Blue-Yellow: The Stunning Colors You Can't See*, in «Live Science», 17th January 2012 (<https://www.livescience.com/17948-red-green-blue-yellow-stunning-colors.html>; last view July 2020). The last part of this text is quoted by Norris in his poem. See H. Crane, T.P. Piantanida, *On seeing reddish green and yellowish blue*, in «Science», 221, 1983, pp. 1078-1080.

⁴ I tried to examine this question in A. Barale, *Il giallo del colore. Un'indagine filosofica*, Jaca Book, Milano 2020, pp. 117 ff.

⁵ F. Macpherson, *Novel Colour Experiences and their Implications*, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, Routledge, London 2020, part III.

This image of the spinning disc is present also inside the analytical debate on color. Mark Johnston uses it to show the difference between temporary colours (like the ones you see on the surface of the disc) and real colors⁶. In Norris' poem, however, the nuanced colors of the disc are perfectly real, while the rigid divisions among colors instead are something that we must be able to overcome and transform. There is one very evocative verse that says: «Let parrot-charts make room for cockatoos». «Parrot-charts» here is a transformation for “pareto-charts”, a kind of diagram that represents the fixed divisions between ideal colors, while the white of cockatoos (another kind of parrot) stands for the possibility of infinite new colors: «As bands dissolve so we should quit fixed views/ Let nuance reign, let differences be slight!/ All shades conspire to hint at missing hues».

This praise of nuance is far from being a mere aestheticism. In fact, according to Norris, nuances are what allow for a change, also from an ethical and political point of view. As Norris explains in the introduction of poem called, not by chance, *Ectopiques*, real changes are obtained not so much through «utopian or omni-transformative solutions», but rather «by opting instead for carefully calibrated “ectopic” departures from the sociopolitical or intellectual norm»⁷:

They got it wrong who placed it out of sight,
Too far off, long ago, or far ahead,
Or just too other-world to shed much light
On *hic et nunc*. That's why they lost the thread,
Those old utopians, and went astray
So grievously when what we want instead
Is just a slight deflection from the way
Things currently go on, or how they look
When viewed close up and in the light of day⁸.

The possibility of seeing new colors is at the same time that of seeing things differently, beyond their usual borders: to look at the new colors that arise when we spin the disc.

⁶ M. Johnston, *How to Speak of the Colours*, in A. Byrne, D.R. Hilbert, *Readings on Color*, vol. 1, MIT Press, Cambridge Ma. 1997, pp. 226-7.

⁷ C. Norris, *Ectopiques*, in Id., *The Winnowing Fan*, cit., p. 29.

⁸ Ibidem.

While in *Missing Hues* the flight of colours appears as generative of new possibilities, in *Giverny* it shows its character of loss and pain. *Giverny* is, as it is well known, the town where the painter Monet lived for many years. In this poem, an old Monet talks about the difficulty of catching colors before they get lost: «Four minutes at the most, and then they die». There is a contrast between the solid, vertical character of glory and culture (of which Monet is considered an important part), and the «sigh» that should be spared, according to the painter, for the disappearing colors:

My dear friend Clemenceau says I'll raise high
The nation's cultural stock, but I take fright:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

I'd rather he just spare a passing sigh
For all the hues now lost to vision's blight.
No painted lily graces the mind's eye.

The whole poem focuses on the gap between the original impressions of colors, and the attempts of memory and language to do justice to them (to «requite» them):

Giverny's my dream-world, yet a far cry
From what that vision once strove to requite:
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

Memory, technique, and the «new trick» of «photography», are all means through which the painter tries to «conjure up» the fugitive hues. There is no full presence that can be regained, however, and the cataract that afflicts the artist makes this feeling of loss even more acute. There is a «chaos» that can not be held at bay, because it results from the attempt of memory and language to do justice to a reality that escapes and exceeds them. Hence the impossibility of clear borders, which was already stated in *Missing Hues*:

How splendid our precursors who defy
The chaos by their colours clear and bright.
Four minutes at the most, and then they die.

If we try to refer these poems to the more “classical” philosophical debate of colour, some questions arise, which are worth considering.

1. Does this praise of the nuance mean that colour is something merely subjective? The

answer is definitely not. In his prose-work, Norris dedicated an entire book, *Truth Matters* (2002), to show how color dispositionalism cannot be accepted, precisely because it ends up being a form of subjectivism. Dispositionalism is a philosophical position that was adopted frequently during the Nineties (which were the ten years that precede Norris' book), not only in relation to colors but also ethics, mathematics or epistemology⁹. Its origin, however, must be sought in the philosophical debate on colour, and in particular in Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities, like shape, extension and number, «exist independently of human response», while secondary qualities, like taste, smells and colours, «involve some normative reference to the nature and modality of human sensory perception»¹⁰:

Thus the truth value of a statement such as “this is a triangle” or “this triangle encloses an area of 22,5 square inches” must be taken as objectively fixed quite aside from our geometrical perceptions or extent of mathematical knowledge, whereas the statement “this triangle is red” can not be assessed for its truth-value without taking stock of what qualifies as a normal human response under normal ambient conditions¹¹.

There has been a long discussion, within the philosophy of color, on the advantages and the problematic aspects of this position¹². Yet what is most important here is the reason why dispositionalism cannot be accepted according to Norris. In fact, *Truth Matters* is not a book on colour, it focuses instead on science and ethics. What becomes lost, in the dispositional attempt to find a middle point between subjectivism and objectivism, is the objective character of truth, as something that doesn't depend on our knowledge of it. This has a strong ethical implication. Truth and justice are things to which we should try to approximate, and not things we can decide about.

There is a close link, from this point of view, between Norris' interest in color and his study of the philosophical questions of modern physics. In his book *Quantum Theory and the Flight from Realism*, he looked at how different «philosophers (Michael Dummett, Ian Hacking, Quine, Popper, Putnam, and Rorty, among others) had reacted to certain anomalous features of quantum physics – non-locality, wave-particle dualism, the measurement problem or observer-induced “collapse of the wave-packet” – by proposing a range of putative solutions, mostly involving some drastic change to our

⁹ C. Norris, *Truth matters*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² I tried to examine these aspects of the discussion in A. Barale, *Il giallo del colore*, cit., pp. 11-78.

basic conceptions of physical reality and/or some equally drastic revision to the ground rules of classical logic»¹³. Norris takes a strong position against those who take «quantum mechanics (along with chaos theory, Gödel's incompleteness theorem, and other vaguely kindred developments)... as evidence that present-day science» has «nothing to do with such old-fashioned notions as reality and truth»¹⁴. Throughout his entire work, he doesn't fail to recognize the «harm done» by the extreme anti-realistic consequences of the “linguistic turn”, or at least of its extreme anti-realistic consequences. He constantly criticizes «that facile notion (common to post-structuralists, postmodernists, some Wittgensteinians, sociologists of knowledge, and others) that “reality” is a linguistic, discursive, textual, or social construct and hence that all truths claims must be viewed as relative to this or that language game, discourse, paradigm, conceptual scheme, or cultural mode of representation»¹⁵.

This is also very important for Norris' idea of colour. If we go back to *Giverny*, we see that colour, in its external reality, is something that we should try to “requite”: to repay, to give justice to. There is no “adequate response” (to use the words of dispositionalism) which can guarantee that we are «requiting» the perceived reality. Our response (and its formulation into language) has to be formed, and put into question, time and again.

2. Another question, however, arises: why verses? Why does Norris choose, for nearly ten years past, to mainly use poems for his philosophical investigations, and what is the link between the theoretical problems we just referred to and this choice he has made?

I think that an answer can be sought in his *Introduction to Tempus Fugitives*, a collection of poems that Norris published in 2016. Here he writes that it is exactly the inventive character of verses that can guide the philosophical thought to new discoveries: «What is crucial is that the verse should carry the argument along in a natural-sounding way while also pointing up salient details, introducing nuances of tone or implication, and sometimes (especially through inventive or unusual rhyme-words) *sending thought off in a new direction that very likely wouldn't have occurred to a*

¹³ C. Norris, *Introduction*, in Id., *Deconstruction after all*, cit.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

*prose writer*¹⁶. In offering «some metrical resistance to the “natural” flow of words», verses have the «(quite literally) thought-provoking effect of a *jolt* to our normal, linguistically habituated mental processes»¹⁷.

In this attempt, Norris considers himself a scholar of eighteenth century poetry, of the verse-essays and verse epistles of Dryden, Pope, Johnson and Swift. What Norris seeks in the eighteenth century poetic tradition is a unity, which seems lost nowadays, between different dimensions: ethics, philosophy, science and art. The connection between these different spheres already characterized, as we have just seen, Norris' whole philosophical work and inspired his criticism against anti-realism, as something hostile to science and to moral responsibility. Many of his poems are still dedicated to science: to Darwin, Gödel and even quantum physics. One of Norris' starting points is the idea that poetry «is not to be conceived as a realm of meaning set apart from the prose of the world – as the New Critics wished – by its *sui generis* attributes of paradox, irony, ambiguity, “plurisignification”, or whatever. If poetry does have something verbally distinctive about it, then this is on account of its *raising to uncommonly high levels those expressive resources that are always present, or latent, in everyday or nonliterary discourse*»¹⁸.

Isn't there, however, a contradiction between Norris' fight against the “linguistic turn” (or at least against its extreme anti-realistic outcomes) and his idea that language can guide thought to new discoveries? It is precisely color that could give us a key. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of colour is, already for Goethe, the unity that characterizes it between rules and chance. The relations among different colors follow some very precise norms (this inspired a great number of “geometries of colour”). Nevertheless, color is also something that arises, disappears and transforms itself very fast. This unity between «expected» and «unpredictable» is, according to Norris, also what allows for the «turns» that language and thought should try to realize, as he shows in *Ectopiques*, with the help of verses¹⁹. It is to the necessity of these turns, then, that

¹⁶ C. Norris, *Introduction*, in Id., *Tempus fugitives*, cit., p. VIII, my italics.

¹⁷ C. Norris, *Introduction*, in Id., *The Winnowing Fan*, cit., p. XVI. See also the *Introduction* in Id., *The Matter of Rhyme*, cit.: « It seems to me that, so far from being merely artificial constraints, rhyme and meter can both have a *liberating effect* at every level of poetic composition from the technical or formal to the argumentative or topical-thematic» (my italics).

¹⁸ C. Norris, *The Matter of Rhyme*, cit., p. XXIV.

¹⁹ C. Norris, *Ectopiques*, cit., p. 27

color hints. Color recalls the necessity of these moments in which language and thought have to start again, turning to that reality that they can not possess but can only strive to «requite»: the moments in which it is necessary to «spin the disc».