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'This is today/Raised out of history': Kenneth White, Existentialism and the Other Side of History

Cairns Craig

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Kenneth White was by no means the only intellectual nomad who had left Scotland in the decades after the Second World War to 'stravaig' in other parts of the world. Helen Adam had already left for the United States in 1939 and was working with Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan in San Francisco; in the 1960s Muriel Spark was in New York – *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* first appeared as a single issue of the *New Yorker* magazine in 1961 – and then in Tuscany; Alan Sharp, after the success of *A Green Tree in Gedde* (1965) and *The Wind Shifts* (1967), had abandoned his trilogy to become a script-writer in Hollywood and, later, after a life of wandering, to take up residence in New Zealand; Alexander Trocchi was in New York and Paris and London, where (in the disguise of Joe Torelli), he is the first of White's encounters in *Travels in the Drifting Dawn/Dérives* (1978); Alastair Reid, who, like Muriel Spark was a contributor to the *New Yorker*, lived not only in New York but in Spain, Majorca (from where he eloped with one of Robert Graves's female acolytes), the Basque Country and various parts of South America; Allan Massie was in Italy and was setting his novels both there and in France and in Argentina; Tom Nairn was in the Netherlands and in Hungary, and a large number of Scottish theologians and philosophers – such Thomas F. Torrance – were in various parts of Germany and Switzerland. This is not to mention all those Scots who had decided to make their careers in London, from novelists like James Kennaway to artists like Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, or the psychoanalyst – later described as an anti-psychoanalyst – R. D. Laing,who made his career at the Tavistock clinic in London. These were not only geographical peregrinations but travels across different intellectual territories: Muriel Spark's trajectory took her from a Church of Scotland and Jewish background to Anglicanism and then to Roman Catholicism; theologian Tom Torrance sought a means of co-ordinating Christianity with science; Alan Spence's Buddhism shaped a career in which his poetry (*Glasgow Zen,* 1981) and some of his novels draw on Japanese traditions.

That Scottish intellectuals and artists were migrants was hardly surprising given the country's history of outward migration. White has himself charted for us many of the impulses to migration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in his essay 'The Scot Abroad',[1] and from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries Scotland regularly topped the league table of nations with substantial outflows of population: only Ireland and Norway had comparable levels of outward migration but they were both primarily agricultural economies. The paradox of Scotland (as T. M. Devine has described it) was that it was an an industrialised economy but nonetheless continued to export people at a rate which, if it had not been compensated by inward migration from Ireland and from eastern Europe, would rapidly have undermined its industrial progress. After the First World War, however, the country's main industries collapsed and the outflow of population intensified: 'at its peak, in the 1920s', Devine notes, 'over 363,000 Scots left for the USA and Canada in a single decade'.[2] The establishment of the welfare state in the aftermath of the Second World War did not encourage Scots to stay in Scotland: according to Devine, 'between 1951 and 1981, 753,000 Scots left the country, around 45 per cent of them for England and the rest for new lives overseas' and 'between 1952 and 2006 net migration loss, defined as the difference in the number of people moving to and leaving a country, was about 825,000, described by one authority as "a staggering amount" from a nation of little more than 5 million'.[3] Scotland, whether for its skilled workers or its intellectuals, was a country of potential or actual migrants, and Kenneth White was one of those statistics.

There was, however, a particular context for the migration of Scotland's artists and intellectuals, one which I have denominated, in my book on *The Wealth of the Nation* (2018), as 'nostophobia' – hatred of or contempt for one's homeland. In Scotland, from the 1920s, even among those involved in the 'Scottish Renaissance' movement, nostophobia was rampant. The major figures who had represented the epitome of Scottish culture to a nineteenth century public – John Knox, Robert Burns, Walter Scott – were subjected to withering criticism as the progenitors or the products of a culture which repressed creativity, corrupted the powers of the imagination and deformed

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[1] *Collected Works of Kenneth White, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 'The Scot Abroad', 85–101.

[2] T. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora 1750–2010* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 83.

[3] Ibid., 270, 271.

art. Hugh MacDiarmid's battle cry in the 1920s – 'Back to Dunbar' – effectively laid waste all Scottish culture between the late medieval or Renaissance period and modernity. In responding to criticism of MacDiamird's project, Neil Gunn wrote,

> Artistically in the modern world Scotland doesn't exist. No music, no drama, no letters, of any international significance. Why is this all-round sterility so complete, so without parallel in the life of any modern nation? Should not an honest attempt be made to answer that question before attacking the very movement that is trying to do so?[4]

Scotland is an artistic desert, and its supposedly major writers are all crippled from the very fact of having been Scottish. MacDiarmid, writing in praise of Edwin Muir (at the stage when he and Muir were still allies in the Renaissance movement), declared that the 'majority of Scottish writers during the past hundred years have been entirely destitute of intellectual equipment adequate to work at international calibre, or even national calibre comparatively considered'; the historical extent of this failure, however, is then expanded to include every writer back to the Makars of the fifteenth century:

> Scotland has consequently become insular and has "fidged fu' fain" on the strength of work that reflected only its national degeneracy and its intellectual inferiority to every other European country. The majority of the Scottish writers held most in esteem by contemporary Scots were (or are) too "unconscious" even to experience the sense of frustration. They were too completely destitute of artistic integrity. It is in this that Muir is so significantly differentiated from the great majority, if not all, of his predecessors back to the time of the Auld Makars both as a critic and creative artist.[5]

The whole Scottish tradition is blighted with the same disease, a disease which goes back to the Reformation, because 'if the religious and political courses to which we have been committed have not come between us and the realisation of our finest potentialities, it is impossible to account for our comparative

[4] Neil Gunn, 'Defensio Scotorum', *Scots Magazine*, 1928; quoted from Alistair McCleery (ed.), *Landscape and Light: Essays by Neil Gunn* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), 150.

[5] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (Edinburgh: Scottish Educational Journal, n.d.), 31.

sterility'.[6] The blight means that even when MacDiarmid praises Burns as 'the most powerful lyrical poet the world has ever seen', it is only in order to emphasise how Scotland itself distorted and repressed that genius:

> It is in keeping with the cultural history of Scotland that such a Pegasus should have had to work in double harness with the clumsiest of carthorses, that Burns's wonderful power of song should have been so prosaically shackled, that his unique gift should have had to manifest itself behind such an irrelevant array of trite platitudinisation. And it is in keeping too with the cultural history of Scotland that even yet he should be most esteemed for the orthodox externalities of his work, for all that is irrelevant to, most opaque to, and most disfiguring of his genius rather than for the essence of that genius in itself.[7]

Rather than being the expressive voice of Scottish culture, Burns is its tragic victim – a promethean talent tied down by the inadequacies of the culture that he happens to inhabit:

> The tragedy of Burns is that he was a great poet who lived in an age and under circumstances hopelessly uncongenial to the exercise of his art and that, as a consequence, he was prevented from penetrating to an intellectual plane in keeping with his lyrical genius. There is an unspanned gulf between his matter and his manner, between his calibre as a poet and the kind of poetry to which he was for the most part restricted by his want of cultivation, between his powers and the work he actually produced and the influence that work has had.[8]

This, from 1926, was to be reinforced by Edwin Muir's influential analysis of Walter Scott in *Scott and Scotland* in 1936:

> [. . .] men of Scott's enormous genius have rarely Scott's faults; they may have others but not these particular ones; and so I was forced to account for the hiatus in Scott's endowment by considering the environment in which he lived, by invoking the fact – if the reader will agree it is one — that he spent most of his days in a hiatus, in a country, that is to

[6] Ibid., p. 32.
[7] Ibid., 114.
[8] Ibid.

> say which was neither a nation nor a province, and had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it. But this Nothing in which Scott wrote was not merely a spatial one; it was a temporal Nothing as well, dotted with a few disconnected figures arranged at abrupt intervals: Henryson, Dunbar, Allan Ramsay and Burns, with a rude buttress of ballads and folk songs to shore them up and keep them from falling.[9]

In other words, the writers of the Scottish Renaissance movement demoted within or excluded from their pantheon of Scottish culture the very Scottish writers who not only attempted to utilise the folk tradition that was 'undeniably one of the finest in the world' but who, despite the accusations of their 'intellectual inferiority to every other European country', had, in fact, had the greatest influence on European literature.

'Nostophobia' was the prevailing ethos of Scottish intellectual life in the 1950s and 1960s: if you were a creative person with ambition the only thing to do was to get out, either to get out physically, like all those mentioned earlier, or to get out by aligning oneself with another culture, as Edwin Morgan did through his translations of Mayakovsky (*Wi the Haill Voice*, 1972) and other Eastern European writers. Scotland was a place from which it was essential to escape because its history was that of failure – a failed religious revolution which had sought to remake the world through its missionary endeavours but which had ended up in the Disruption of 1843 and the contraction of the worldwide mission of the Church in the early decades of the twentieth century; a failed cultural transformation in which Burns and Scott had declined from being major innovators in literature to being insignificant figures in a minor literature, and a failed philosophical project, the 'Common Sense' tradition in Scotland having been declared redundant not only by the twentieth-century's reaffirmation of the importance of Hume, whom the Common Sense philosophers had sought to refute, but by the apparent irrelevance of Scottish philosophy to developments in Anglophone philosophy in the 1950s. Despite its reputation as an affirmation of Scottish values, George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect* of 1961 is symptomatic of the culture of nostophobia, since it both recuperates the importance of philosophy in Scotland in the nineteenth century and, at the same time, blames modern Scotland for the nation's failure to maintain that philosophical tradition. White gives voice to this kind of nostophobia

[9] Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (London: Routledge, 1936), 11–12.

when, in his essay on 'A Shaman Dancing on the Glacier', he mocks common notions of 'Scottish culture and identity':

> We all know what Scottish culture is, don't we? That mixture of the common sense and sentimentality, of social realism and airy-fairy, of Gaelic piety and Lowland pawkiness, etc. etc. We all know about Scottish identity: porridge and the People's Friend and all the rest of it. And if you write ten neat lines in Lallans about the whooping cough of your baby boy when you were on holiday in the Mearns, that is Scottish literature, is it not?[10]

And he aligns himself with MacDiarmid when, in the same essay, he writes:

> One who felt for the dearth of so-called Scottish culture, and the narrowness of so-called Scottish literature, at the beginning of this century, and who was out to change things, summed up the programme as 'back to Dunbar'! That was the Scottish Renaissance, but I don't think it is enough. What I'd say, for a start at least, is: 'Back to Finn', and that what we need is a wide-ranging *reconnaissance* as well as a new grounding. Back to Finn, and, via that figure, into that Hyperborean 'white world' from which, as Lévi-Strauss has shown, the Celts derived so much of their myth [. . .] (*SG*, 42)

White takes the agenda of the Scottish Renaissance and makes it even more destructive of the Scotland that had actually existed since the middle ages, going even further back to find its vital culture. The real issue, though, is to get down to a Scotland that is there but unacknowledged, the Scotland not of the romantic landscape which offers itself to its viewer as a place of escape but of its geological foundations which resist incorporation into the human world:

> A country is that which offers resistance [. . .] But in the course of time, the resistance wears down, the country gets covered with cliché and becomes couthy, or even cruddy. Alba is Scotland un-couthied, un-cruddied, re-discovered [. . .] original landscape-mindscape, and, connecting them, wordscape. (*SG* 3)

[10] Kenneth White, *Collected Works Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), *Scottish Ground*, 40. Hereafter cited in the text as *SG*.

Alba is Scotland *before* or *beyond* history; it is the aim of a poet-thinker who believes that the answers to human existence do not lie in history but in the escape from history.

Now here, White is actually following in a long tradition of Scottish writing and thinking that is deeply suspicious of the ideology of history. Hume's history of England was premised on his essay on miracles, which demonstrated that early histories of human societies were full of supernatural interventions but that the closer we come to modernity the fewer of such interventions there are in the accounts of events. Modern history as developed by Hume is history shorn of the supernatural. But in the case of Scotland, the supernatural refused to go away: banished from history it went into poetry – as, for instance, in White's analysis of 'Tam O' Shanter' as a poem about the folk-recollection of the powers of shamanism (*SG*, 46–53) – or it went into the Gothic novel – as in Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) – or it went into the mysticisms of the kind of Celticism promoted by Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp) in the 1890s. And, of course, it went into the missionary energy of the Scottish church which saw its world-wide endeavours to bring Christianity to the heathens as possible only because the fundamental truth of Christianity lay in Christ's proof of the miraculous and of the intersection of the eternal with time. These were symptoms, however, of Scotland's problematic relationship to history. After 1707 Scotland's historical narrative had been made redundant because the narrative of Great Britain was presented as fundamentally a continuation of English history – thus the general propensity to use 'England' as equivalent to 'Great Britain' or the 'United Kingdom'. The 'Whig' interpretation of history – as described by Herbert Butterfield in 1931[11] – assumed the past of Great Britain to be England's, and the nature of modern Britain to be a continuation of specifically English institutions. Scotland's past thus becomes redundant; it becomes a place on the other side of history. When White writes,

> The plot thickens, history gets heavier, the contradictions increase in frequency. If the logic of development corresponded with the course of history, general perspectives would be more inspiring than they generally are – but that is very rarely the case: few are the human communities that know a steady state of evolution. The question is always how, against the mechanics of history, to maintain some dynamic that transcends history, keeping open an alternative space that counteracts history. (*SG*, 107)

[11] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell & Sons, 1931).

– he is giving expression not just to his own personal view of history but to one that had been deep-seated in the culture of Scotland since the mid-eighteenth century. 'History', as the account of human progress towards modernity, emerges from and builds on an English past to which Scotland is irrelevant.

2

Such Scottish concern with being on the 'other side of history' is mirrored in the Danish writings of Søren Kierkegaard that became the foundational works of existentialism. Kierkegaard set out to overthrow what he believed to be the tyranny of history as presented in Hegel's philosophy, a tyranny of abstraction in which the particular experiences of individual human beings are, in effect, erased in favour of the totalitarian structure of history as an abstract system. Kierkegaard attributed his works to pseudonymous authors, each of whom is given a character and an implied biography. This fictionalising of his philosophy is intended to reveal how unreal is any philosophy which seeks to present itself as not embedded in and the product of a particular life story. There is no perspective that can escape the conditions and the limitations of an individual existence. Even religion cannot provide a template for understanding our relationship to God: that relationship can only be grasped through an individual and personal struggle with what it means to strive towards the eternal. Knowledge of God is achievable only through our existential individuality, not by making our individuality redundant. The individual is not merely part of a larger pattern of historical development or a local version of a larger narrative of spiritual fulfilment: each individual existence is the very basis through which we have to come to terms with the world.

It is a path which has many parallels in White's writings, even if White would have little sympathy with Kierkegaard's notions of the 'eternal' as specifically Christian. Thus White asks, 'Where are we, a hundred years or so after Rimbaud?' and the answer is to undo the question:

> We? Since I know no one better than myself, as Thoreau says in the first chapter of Walden, I'll formulate that question differently: where am I? Talking about oneself isn't always such a hateful enterprise, so long

> as you go about it radically enough. It's the only way to get anywhere beyond flat sociology.[12]

The focus on the individual and on the interaction of life experience and the understanding of the world connects White to fundamental elements in existentialism. Thus White's essays are often structured by how apparently accidental events in his own life prefigure – perhaps even predestine – his later thoughts and actions. So a boyood spent on the west coast of Scotland contains already an encounter with the Celtic, an exploration of geological structures, and the juncture of land and sea that will become key elements in White's geopoetics. What appears to be accident – the discovery of a book on his father's bookshelf or the unanticipated presentation of a school prize or the appearance of a book in a Parisian bouquaniste – 'I'm telling it the way it was, chance after chance', White insists[13] – turns out to be the necessary preparation for White's later intellectual development: what appears to be chance becomes, retrospectively, predestination. The transformation of his surname – an apparent accident of inheritance – into an epistemic category – the 'White world' – underlines that knowledge is always individual, even when it is able to find justification in literary and cultural traditions. It is a point White makes in relation to his early French publication, *En Toute Candeur* (1964):

> What transpired principally from this book, adumbrated in its title, 'In All Candor' (this latter word going back to the Latin for 'whiteness'), was the notion of 'white world'. This was what might be called a personal myth, with a surface reference to my name, but it went far away beyond my person. It had a background: in the old name of Scotland, Alba (the high white country); in the fact that in ancient Celtic culture, the word for the most concentrated place of living was gwenved (the white land); in the additional fact that in zen buddhism, the finest identity is described as 'like a white heron in the moonlight'. And it had a foreground: uncoded space, like a white area on the map.[14]

The 'personal' and the apparently 'accidental' are revealed as having

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[12] Kenneth White, *Collected Works Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), *The Wanderer and his Charts,* 490.

[13] Kenneth White, *Collected Works, Volume 2, Scottish Ground,* 21.

[14] Ibid., 313.

connections – latencies – which make them much more than 'merely' personal. Retrospectively, recapitulations of the past become prophesies of the future, turning a mere series of events into a predestination whose fulfilment will reveal the coherence that connects the first to the last terms in the series – and thereby contributes to the making both of the individual and his 'world'. Such insistence on the existential 'I' reveals how similar is White's conception of the individual to Kierkegaard's.

Kierkegaard's influence on later philosophy was delayed, of course, because he wrote in Danish, praising it as superior to German, and it was not until the translation of his works into German and then French that they began to shape the existentialism of the twentieth century, as a philosophy of freedom and of choice. But Kierkegaard was a philosopher aiming to make sense of what had happened to Christianity in the 1800 years since its founding and to give better justifications for committing to it than he could find in the theological and philosophical works of his contemporaries. Humanity's freedom of choice ultimately came down to the issue of whether or not one chose Christianity. It was, therefore, theologians who were first challenged and inspired by Kierkegaard. It was by the route of such specifically *Christian* existentialism that existentialism entered into Scottish culture. In particular, Scottish theologians were among the first to respond to Karl Barth's attempt to overthrow the historical theologies of the nineteenth century and to reassert the foundational role of faith, a theology that was inspired by Barth's reading of Kierkegaard. Interest in Christian existentialism on the part of Scottish theologians such as Ian Henderson and Thomas Torrance led to Barth being invited to give the Gifford Tectures in Aberdeen in 1937–8. Barth's pre-Second World War presentation of Kierkegaard's ideas in his Gifford lectures was followed, after the war, by the lectures of Gabriel Marcel, another Christian existentialist who had, in *The Philosophy of Existence* (1948), undertaken a radical challenge to the then only recently published (1943) atheistic existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Marcel notes,

> I have recently surprised and even scandalised some of Sartre's followers by classifying his philosophy among the 'techniques of vilification', by which I mean techniques which result, whether deliberately or not, in the systematic vilification of man. I admit that, superficially, this would seem to be a paradox, for does not Sartre ceaselessly exalt man and his freedom in the face of the radical absurdity of the universe? […] Etymologically, to vilify a thing is to take away its value, its price. This

> can be done in the case of merchandise by flooding the market, and this is just what Sartre does to freedom: he debases it by putting it on every stall.[15]

The Scottish connection of the Gifford lectures is underlined by the fact that the first volume of Marcel's lectures, *The Mystery of Being*, was translated by the Scottish poet G. S. Fraser.

The most significant point of interconnection between Scotland and existentialism is, however, to be found in the work of John Macquarrie, whose translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is now the standard version for Anglophone readers, and whose *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* was published in 1972. By that time, Macquarrie was based in the United States but during the period when he was studying and lecturing in Glasgow, he had been among the earliest to respond to the work of Martin Heidegger in his study entitled *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultman* (1955), which insists on Heidegger's challenge to the whole western metaphysical condition:

> Kant thought that it was a scandal to philosophy and human intelligence that there was lacking a cogent proof for the reality of a world outside ourselves. Heidegger's reply is that the true scandal of philosophy is not that such a proof is lacking, but that it was ever looked for. Man, as existing, is always already in a world.[16]

The denial of the duality of subject and object, thinker and thought, this *placing* of *Dasein* (Heidegger's term for the individual human being) in the world as the beginning point of the journey of thought, is founded not just on man's being *in* the world but 'in his intimate concern with world': 'To be in the world does not mean for man merely to be located in it, as a rock is, but to be concerned with it in his existence'.[17] This develops Kierkegaard's fundamental insight into the existential nature of Christian belief: it is not a *knowledge* and can never take the form of an intellectual proposition because to turn it into such a proposition would be to incorporate it into a system of thought when, in fact, its whole intent is to escape from such systematic thought and get back

[15] Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence* (London: Harvill Press, 1948) trans. Manya Harari, 62–3.

[16] John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultman* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 38

[17] Ibid. 39.

into the experience – the 'passion' – of existence:

> My main thought was that, because of the copiousness of knowledge, people in our day have forgotten what it means to *exist*, and what *inwardness* is, and that the misunderstanding between speculative thought and Christianity could be explained by that […] If people had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, they had probably also forgotten what it means to exist humanly; therefore this would have to be brought out. But this must not on any account be done didactically, because then the misunderstanding would in a new misunderstanding instantly make capital of the explanatory attempt, as if existing consisted in coming to know something about a particular point. If this is communicated as knowledge, the recipient is mistakenly induced to understand that he is gaining something to know, and then we are back in knowledge again.[18]

It seems to me that many of the problems that have arisen around the notion of '*geopoetics*' is the result of White's similarity to Kierkegaard in this respect: geopoetics is not a system; it is not an addition to our knowledge of the world; it is a resistance to system and an insistence on experience, and therefore cannot be approached through the belief that one 'is gaining something to know' – it is an existentialism of Kierkegaard's type which can only be experienced by the existing human being who has escaped from the systemisations of abstract thought and knows what it means 'to exist humanly'.

Heidegger also believed that the whole of Western philosophy had taken a wrong turn after the pre-Socratics, a thought that develops on Kierkegaard's assertion in the *Unscientific Postscript*, that

> Viewed Socratically, the eternal essential truth is not at all paradoxical in itself, but only by being related to an existing person. This is expressed in another Socratic thesis: that all knowing is a recollecting. This thesis is the intimation of the beginning of speculative thought, but for that very reason Socrates did not pursue it; essentially it became Platonic. This is where the road swings off, and Socrates essentially emphasizes existing, whereas Plato, forgetting this, loses himself in speculative

[18] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; originally written 1846), 249.

> thought. Socrates' infinite merit is precisely that of being an *existing* thinker, not a speculative thinker who forgets what it means to exist.[19]

This Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian insight is one that White explores in his essay 'On the Fronting Shore', where he points to the ways in which Heidegger moves from seeing philosophy and poetry as two parallel paths into viewing them as 'a wayfaring into primal space',[20] but Heidegger, White argues, later comes to realise that 'only poetry exists on lasting ground':[21] 'If, for a start, he welcomed this encounter as the occasion of a fertile dialogue, seeing poetry and philosophy as two neighbouring but separate peaks, he gradually came to see a closer connection, if not an identification'.[22] The end of that 'wayfaring into primal space' White wants to designate, in German, as 'Westland, a land where "*es west*", where "there is being", a being deeper than anything envisaged or experienced in ontology'.[23] The search for that deeper being is what connects 'wayfaring', travelling the land, to poetry, the search for the poetics of being, and connects both to the need to 'to exist humanly', to exist beyond what is conceptualisable or communicable as an abstract thought.

When White was at the University of Glasgow in the 1950s, Macquarrie was lecturing on Heidegger. To what extent philosophy at Glasgow was informed by developments in theology is something still to be researched, but there is a striking similarity between Macquarrie's account of the relationship of existentialism to both Greek philosophy and to Buddhism that prefigures the intellectual travels in which White has been engaged. Macquarrie cites, for instance, an essay by Yohenori Takeuchi on 'Buddhism and Existentialism' which suggests that,

> 'our several ways of philosophical thinking appear to be converging more than they have for many centuries.' Some of the themes of existentialism are, it is said, those with which Eastern philosophy, especially Buddhism, has been concerned for two and a half millennia. Takeuchi mentions as particularly significant the notions of 'being' and

[19] Ibid., 205.

[20] *Collected Works of Kenneth White, Volume 2*, 211.

[21] Ibid..

[22] Ibid., 212,

[23] Ibid., 211.

> 'nothingness', and the phenomenon of anxiety to which the encounter with nothingness gives rise.[24]

Even if Macquarrie's book was not published until the 1970s, it is clear that existentialism was an important part of the intellectual environment in Glasgow in the 1950s,[25] and that Macquarrie's account of existentialism builds on the work that he and others were doing on the European development of existentialism.[26]

'*Geopoetics*', in other words, is not a sudden intervention into, or a sudden break from, earlier Scottish culture and Scotland's philosophical and theological relations with France and with Germany. White's work – however much he personally was aware of it – arose out of an intellectual environment to which the effort to experience and find value in what was 'beyond history' was central. There are, however, two particular Scottish precursors of whom White was very well aware, two precursors that tell us a lot about how 'geopoetics' is rooted not just in the landscape of Scotland but, if we adopt White's terminology, rooted in a Scottish 'mindscape', and these are Patrick Geddes and John Muir.

III

White has acknowledged the influence of Geddes's speculative account of the development of human history as one of the forerunners of geopoetics:

> Paleotechnics [industrial society] meant waste of natural resources, blighted landscapes, pandemoniac cities full of factories, offices, slums and stunted human lives. Neotechnics meant the use of non-polluting energy and the attempt to reunite utility with beauty, city with landscape. Biotechnics would promote new life thinking, leading to more developed human lives, more expanded psyches. As to geotechnics, it was the means for human beings to learn how to really and fully inhabit the earth. ('Looking Out: From Neotechnics to Geopoetics', *SG*, 147).

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[24] John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (London: Penguin, 1973; 1972), 43.

[25] See, for instance, Jack Rillie, "The Abenheimer-Schorstein Group", *Edinburgh Review* 78–9 (1988), 105.

[26] MacQuarrie, for instance, cires Scottish philosopher John Macmurray as a contemporary exponent of an existentialist philosophy; see, *Exitentialism,* 126 and 174.

Geddes, more famous now for his innovations in town-planning, was, first and foremost, a botanist: the Chair that was created for him at the University of Dundee was in botany and, in the tradition of Scottish professors of botany, he would lecture in the botanic garden that he established there. Botany was a crucial element in Scottish education since Scotland was producing so many graduates in medicine – according to one estimate 10,000 between 1750 and 1850[27] – and those medical students were introduced to botany as providing resources for the treatment of diseases. The range of botanic knowledge increased exponentially from the mid-eighteenth-century as a result of the voyages of exploration which brought back thousands of new plant types that could have medicinal properties, as, for instance, in the discovery in 1820 that quinine, derived from the bark of the cinchona tree, could be used as a treatment for malaria. Before and alongside the world of Paleotechnics, as described by Geddes, there was the world that I am going to call 'geo-botanics', the space of world-wide botanical exploration and the creation of botanical gardens in which to exhibit the riches of the world's vegetation. Scots were prominent in the world of 'geo-botanics' for two reasons: first, Scots dominated the world of gardening in the United Kingdom after its formation in 1707 because of the higher levels of basic education in Scotland than in England, and because of the easier access to university courses and, second, because the Scottish universities were producing those medically qualified graduates that the country could not employ, so that many of them ended up us ship's surgeons, who, when they touched land would go 'plant-hunting', gathering seeds that could be sent back to the botanic gardens in Edinburgh, Glasgow or Kew.

A prime example of these interactions is the Vineyard Nursery of Lee and Kennedy, established by two Scottish gardeners – James Lee (1715–95) from Selkirk and Lewis Kennedy from Dumfries (1721–82) – around 1745. Lee and Kennedy's nursery was famous for its collection of exotic plants – *Hortus Kewensis* names one hundred and thirty-five plants introduced into England, or first known as cultivated by, the Vineyard Nursery during the lifetime of James Lee[28] – most of them sent by Lee's correspondents in North America and Australia, but some of them coming from dedicated 'plant hunters' such

[27] R.H. Girdwood, 'The Influence of Scotland on North American Medicine', in Derek A. Dow (ed.), *The Influence of Scottish Medicine: an historical assessment of its international impact* (Carnforth: Parthenon, 1988), 39.

[28] E. J. Wilson, *James Lee and the Vineyard Nursery Hammersmith* (London: Hammersmith Local History Group, 1961), 25.

as Francis Masson. Lee became famous as a result of publishing, in 1760, *An Introduction to Botany* (effectively, a translation of the work of Linnaeus) but became wealthy as a result of his ability to naturalise exotic plants and to sell them at a significant profit: when the first fuchsia came into his hands, for instance, he was able to sell the plants grown from his cuttings at a guinea a time. Lee's daughter, Ann, was an illustrator of the plants by which Lee and Kennedy made their fortune, encouraging the taste for the exotic which would create a market for the nursery's products. Such enrichments of the British garden would not have been possible, however, without the development of the 'hot house' to provide an artificial environment suitable to plants from very different climates.

The British centre for the collection and growing of exotic plants was Kew, now regarded as an iconic English institution but for its first one hundred and fifty years effectively a Scottish institution. Its creator and promoter was James Stuart, the third Earl of Bute and the first Scottish Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Bute was a devoted botanist – he published in 1785 his *Botanical Tables Containing the Families of British Plants* – and he set out to develop Kew in the 1760s in competition with the achievements of Philip Miller, who had been gardener and *de facto* director of the Chelsea Physic Garden since 1722. Miller too was of Scottish background, his father having been trained as a gardener in Scotland before setting up a garden business in Deptford, where Philip learned his trade. Like many other Scottish gardeners, Miller was both expert in gardening and equally expert in communicating what he knew: not only did he turn the Chelsea Physic garden into one of the leading botanic gardens in Europe[29] but in his *The Gardener's and Florist's Dictionary* of 1724 and *Gardener's Dictionary* of 1731, he produced two of the most admired works on the science of cultivating plants, which led not only to many subsequent and expanded editions but to a European reputation as *hortulanorum princeps*.[30]

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[29] See Henry Field and R. H. Semple, *Memoirs of the Botanic Garden at Chelsea* (London, 1878), for an account of the commitment to producing not just a 'physic garden' but a 'botanic garden' (22–3), and also for an estimate of its European importance, indicated by a visit from Linnaeus, who was a correspondent of Miller's, in 1736. Peter Collinson, a fellow botanist, wrote of him, 'He has raised the reputation of the Chelsea Garden so much that it excels all the gardens of Europe for its amazing variety of plants of all orders and classes and from all climates as I survey with wonder and delight this 19th July 1764', quoted in Gill Saunders, *Victoria and Albert Natural History Illustrators: Ehret's Flowering Plants* (London, 1987), 11.

[30] John Claudius Loudon, *The Gardener's Encyclopaedia*, Book 1, 1103; Loudon renders the Latin as 'The Prince of Gardeners', but it might more properly be 'the leader or

According to A. A. Tait, Miller had a preference for apprentices from his own country (or his father's), and was responsible for so many Scots becoming head gardeners in the estates of England.[31] He was certainly responsible for recommending William Aiton, one his deputies at Chelsea, to oversee the development of the gardens at Kew, a position which Aiton and, subsequently, his son, William Townsend Aiton, between them maintained till 1841. In that year William Jackson Hooker was appointed as Director after having spent twenty-one years as professor of botany at Glasgow University, where he was involved in the laying out of the new site for the botanic garden, and he was in turn succeeded at Kew in 1865 by his son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, who was educated in Glasgow and graduated in medicine from Glasgow University in 1839.[32]

The Scottish genealogy of Kew is matched in the genealogy of many of the botanic gardens in the Empire. The Calcutta Botanic Garden, for instance, was developed by William Roxburgh, a student of John Hope, Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University and Keeper of the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens. Roxburgh first arrived in India as a ship's surgeon in 1772, became Assistant Surgeon at the General Hospital at Fort St George in 1776 and had his first scientific paper published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in 1778. In 1770 he combined his surgeon's role with that of the East India Company Botanist, subsequently becoming Superintendent of the Calcutta garden from 1793 to 1813; his *Flora Indica or Descriptions of Indian Plants* was posthumously published in 1820 after his death in Scotland in 1815.[33] Equally tangled was the career of James Hector, founder of the botanic garden in Wellington, New Zealand: Hector studied medicine at Edinburgh University, taking courses in botany and geology, and was appointed in 1857 as both surgeon and geologist to John Palliser's expedition to Western Canada, as a result of which he was not only elected to the Royal Society of Edinburgh but appointed as Director to the Geological Survey of Otago in New Zealand, a role which was then turned into a national one as Director of the Geological

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the first of gardeners'.

[31] A. A. Tait, *The Landscape Garden in Scotland 1735–1835* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980), 203.

[32] Mea Allan, *The Hookers of Kew, 1785–1911* (London: Michael Joseph, 1967) might equally have been titled *The Hookers of Glasgow*.

[33] The details of Roxburgh's life and scientific endeavours are contained in Tim Robinson's *William Roxburgh: The Founding Father of Indian Botany*, especially Chapters 2 and 3, 23–62.

Survey and Colonial Museum in Wellington, from which position he oversaw the establishment of that city's botanic garden.[34] The botanic garden in Sydney, Australia is also a Scottish creation: initiated by Lachlan Macquarie during his period as Governor of New South Wales (1810–21), it was turned into a major imperial garden by Charles Moore, originally from Dundee, who was Director from 1848 to 1896, and who came from a family of botanic gardening specialists, since his brother David was Director of the Glasnevin Botanic Garden in Dublin, a role which David's son was to fulfil in the early twentieth century. Scotland's involvement with Kew and with Colonial botanic gardens was to continue into the twentieth century when David Prain, who had worked his way through university to achieve a medical degree, and had then risen to be Director of the Calcutta Royal Botanic Garden (1898–1905), was appointed Director of Kew (1905–22), while as late as 1916, John Davidson, who had been a demonstrator in the University of Aberdeen, was establishing the botanic garden of the University of British Columbia.

The idea of the 'wayfarer' as White describes it could be applied to any of these Scottish explorers of the plant world: their activities involve the exploration of unknown territories, encounters with landscapes unseen by western eyes, and then the gathering of their discoveries into collections to be exhibited as a sign or symbol of the earth's creativity. They are nomads of the botanic, both in terms of the potential value of particular plants to the 'palaeotechnic world' – Roxburgh, for instance, discovered the properties of jute that made possible the jute industry in Dundee – and for their addition to the aesthetic potential of the British landscape and British gardens. These botanic explorers were also artists of the aesthetic, since they had to make a record of their finds in case they could not be successfully transported home; they developed a strikingly abstract style for presenting their botanic specimens – one might describe them as botanical haiku. See, for instance, the works of Syney Parkinson who was the botanist on Cook's first voyage,[35] and whose work is accessible from the National History Museum, London (https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/endeavour/search?artist=Parkinson,+Sydney&page=1). Such botanic explorers exemplify White's 'wayfaring', in the

[34] See R. K. Dell, 'Hector, James', first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Vol. 1 (Wellington, NZ, 1990); subsequently available at Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1h15/hector-james (accessed 11 September 2017).

[35] Parkinson died during the voyage: his *A Journal Of A Voyage To The South Seas, In His Majesty's Ship Endeavour* was published in 1784.

combination of 'drifting' and therefore being open to accidental encounters, but also in their intent to discover or uncover an experience which will reveal the aesthetics (or, in White's terms, the 'poetics') of the natural world. Like the botanic explorers, White goes in search of the unknown and returns with his specimens – his notebook accounts of his experiences, his texts – to his 'atelier', where those materials will be reshaped into books that will provide a record his journeyings and that will reflect on the significance of those journeys. And while White's attempts to combine the occidental and the oriental might represent a continuation of Macquarrie's interest in the relationship of existentialism to Buddhism, it is also reflected, for instance, in William Roxburgh's development of a mixed style for the illustration of the plants in his *Flora Indica* that was published in 1820: painted by local Indian artists in Calcutta, whom Roxburgh had trained in western methods of botanic illustration, they nonetheless maintain the more abstract traditions of eastern art in what has come to be seen as a unique hybridity, both scientifically accurate and yet highly decorative.[36]

This long tradition of Scottish travel, plant collection and art, of which Patrick Geddes was the inheritor, opened, I suggest, one of the Scottish pathways to geopoetics. The other figure whom White acknowledges in his *The Winds of Vancouver* (2013) is John Muir, famous now, of course, at least in the United States, as the 'father of environmentalism'. Muir's passion was 'wilderness' but as much as any of the Scottish plant collectors of the previous two hundred and fifty years he was a self-taught botanist who was particularly interested by the plants which survived at the very edge where life gave way to rock or ice. White says this about the notion of travelling with Muir:

> And if, in his company, I had heard him say once too often: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!", I'd either have suggested he pipe down or, more likely, moved off on my own to a less effusively theistic spot. But to stick at this level would be to look at Muir from the wrong end of the telescope, and miss out entirely on the full scope of his intentions, the whole scape of his mind. Muir had vision, a hyper-heraclitean vision of the universe as "an infinite storm of beauty". He's

[36] See Tim Robinson, *William Roxburgh : the founding father of Indian botany* (Chichester: Phillimore in association with Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 2008); examples of the artwork commissioned by Roxburgh can be found at https://images.kew.org/botanical-art/william-roxburgh/.

> well aware of the toughness of the world, well aware of the forces of destruction in it, but he sees beyond them. Of the "flower-gardens" on the lower reaches of what is now called Muir Glacier, he has this: "Out of all the cold darkness and glacial crushing and grinding comes this warm, abounding beauty of life to teach us that what we in faithless ignorance and fear call destruction is creation finer and finer."[37]

For Muir, wilderness speaks 'creation' and is a symbol of immortality:

> We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh and bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun – a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal.[38]

Muir's calvinist-inspired belief was that 'the whole landscape showed design, like man's noblest sculptures [. . .] Beauty beyond thought everywhere, beneath, above, made and being made forever'.[39] The wilderness traveller fulfils his ambition when he is 'beyond thought', when he is 'out of history' and into a kind of eternity – or, at least, into a kind of timelessness.

What links Geddes and Muir is that both are the products of Scottish evangelicalism. Geddes was of the first generation born into the Free Church of Scotland, created by the Disruption of 1843, and Muir was brought up in the Campbellite tradition, a splinter group of evangelical Calvinism in the United States. The Calvinism which was taken by the writers of the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s, to be the force which had repressed and distorted Scotland's creativity since the sixteenth century seems, here, to have taken a different turn, a turn which, as Robert H. Nelson points out in *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion* (2010), was to inform much of the environmentalist movement in the United States in the period after the Second World War. Calvin's account of the consequences of the Fall, allowed that God's original act of creation could still be discerned in the natural world:

> The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of

[37] Kenneth White, *Winds of Vancouver* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2013), 46.

[38] John Muir, *The Wilderness Journeys* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 8.

[39] Ibid., 7.

> God (cf. John 17:3). Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. . . Wherever you cast your eyes, there is not a spot in the universe where you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory.[40]

As Marjorie Hope Nicolson pointed out as long ago as 1959, the belief that Calvinism frowned on nature, because it had fallen with man, was a complete misreading of Calvin's theology, which found in nature an equivalent to the revelation held forth in the Bible:

> God […] hath manifested himself in the formation of every part of the world […] On all his works he hath inscribed his glory in characters so clear, unequivocal, and striking, that the most illiterate and stupid cannot exculpate themselves by the plea of ignorance. […] But herein appears the vile ingratitude of men; that, while they ought to be proclaiming bounties bestowed upon them, they are only inflated with greater pride. […] Notwithstanding the clear representations given by God in the mirror of his works, both of himself and of his everlasting dominion, such is our stupidity that, always inattentive to these obvious testimonies, we derive no advantages from them.[41]

Nicolson concludes, 'External nature, far from being evil, was a supreme evidence of the goodness of God; evil existed not in external nature but in man.[42] It is at least in part to its Calvinist inheritance that Scotland owes its long engagement with the values of the natural environment.

White may have wanted to silence the theistic enthusiasm of John Muir, but it was an enthusiasm which made both Geddes and Muir precursors of geopoetics in the intensity of their reaction to the natural world:

> I gazed and gazed and longed and admired until the dusty sheep and

[40] Calvin, *Institutes*, I, 5.1; quoted Robert H. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvnia State University Press, 2010), 134.

[41] Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 97.

[42] Ibid., 97.

> packs were far out of sight, made hurried notes and a sketch, though there was no need of either, for the colours and the lines and expression of this divine landscape countenance are so burned into mind and heart they can surely never grow dim.[43]

The relatiionship to Calvinism of such responses to the natural world is one that White acknowledges in his essay on 'The Nomadic Intellect':

> These people saw mountains and all desert places, not only as uncultivable and useless, but as downright damned. Others again, however, (Calvin himself, for example, but not many Calvinists) would say the Fall concerned only man, and that the outside world was still God's creation, still good.[44]

White adds that he 'was very speculative at one time about the Bible' and 'that, if it doesn't drive you completely round the bend, it can be a good introduction to nomadism'.[45]

Such encounters with the 'divine landscape' in the Calvinist tradition has the same intensity as the 'leap to faith' of the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard and his successors, because each represents a recognition of the intersection of the eternal with the temporal. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith is precisely an unresolvable contradiction because it involves what no other religion proposes, that 'The eternal truth has come into existence in time'. This contradiction — how can the eternal *be* in time? — is the 'paradox' and it is repeated with every act of Christian belief: 'When the eternal truth relates itself to an existing person, it becomes the paradox'.[46] It is this paradox which makes a rational account of faith impossible: in the end, it is absurd and one can only reach it by a leap beyond reason, a leap to a faith which can only be known existentially in the experience of the believer. A similar paradox is involved in every act of (geo-)poetic perception. The 'radical question for the naked self', White insists, is how it can make 'full use of its body-mind, make its way through the world, work out some satisfying relationship with

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[43] Ibid., 7.

[44] *Collected Works of Kenneth White, Volume 2*, 480.

[45] Ibid.

[46] The quotations are all from Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* 209.

nature and enjoy the chaos-cosmos'.[47] As an example of such a turning away from social humanity to the 'inhuman',[48] White points to the home that the American poet Robinson Jeffers built at Carmel in California:

> From Carmel, standing at the junction of State Highway 1 and Ocean Avenue, looking south, you can see the Santa Lucia Range rise, green and gold, above the cypresses of Point Lobos. Say the Pacific mist, which has obliterated temporarily the clutter of civilization, has just lifted – what is it you have before you? Is it part of the United States, or the edge of the world? […] If you feel it as part of the United States, you have the soul of a patriotic real estate agent. If you feel it as the edge of the world, you're ready for poetry.[49]

Poetry starts where 'civilisation' and 'history' end. Its purpose is to regain the awareness of the world that lies outside of human history but, in a version of the Kierkegaardian paradox, can only be seen from within the history that is being rejected. After all, the view from Carmel is both 'part of the United States' – it is the United States that, in legal terms, makes the house and its outlook possible – while, at the same time, something is revealed that makes the United States irrelevant. As White says of the work of John Cowper Powys, poetry aims to have 'one foot on the sandy shore of the traditions of humanity, the other in the salt sea of our non-human cosmos'.[50] What is experienced in such (geo-)poetic encounters may not be Kierkegaard's Christian God, but it is a world that retains a Calvinist sense of revelation, of the natural world as the script – if we can read it – of a world 'raised out of history'.

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47 Kenneth White, *The Life Technique of John Cowper Powys* (Swansea: Galloping Dog Press, 1978), 11–12.

48 White, *The Coast Opposite Humanity: An Essay on the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Llanfynydd, Wales: Unicorn Bookshop, 1975), 22.

49 Kenneth White, *The Coast Opposite Humanity: An Essay on the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Llanfynydd, Wales: Unicorn Bookshop, 1975), 17.

50 Kenneth White, *The Life Technique of John Cowper Powys* (Swansea: Galloping Dog Press, 1978), 13; the quote is from *In Defence of Sensuality* (London: Village Press, 1974; New York, 1930)