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Kenneth White, Dwelling and Nomadism: a geopoetic education for the twenty-first century

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In his *The Wanderer and his Charts* (2004) Kenneth White offers two crucial texts that serve at once to 'educate and to initiate' (Bissell 2005: 37) his readers into a project a lifetime in the making: in one of these texts he introduces us to 'The Nomadic Intellect' while the in the other he provides 'An Outline of Geopoetics'. The term 'geopoetics' – which is not to be confused with 'geopolitics' – started to enter into White's 'texts and talks at the end of the 1970s', after a long period of what he describes as 'intellectual nomadism'. He adopted this term in order to articulate not only a field that was opening up in his own intellectual trajectory but also to outline a 'potential general space' that would be 'concerned with the cultivation of a live and life-enhancing world by self-developing individuals' (White 2003: vii, 6). Nomadic; geopoetic: as an educator White has been a creator of groups which, while recognising that education has never been 'so ubiquitous', it is nevertheless somehow 'lacking' (Bartlett and Clemens 2017: 1), and have therefore attempted to create 'new organisations, with new thematics and new perspectives' (Bissell 2005: 37) outside the university, groups that are truly 'universal' in aspiration. The International Institute of Geopoetics, the most recent of these groups, was founded 19 years ago (1989), and has sites located as far apart as New Caledonia, Chile, Scotland and Sweden.[1]

Opening its doors to established academics and artists and also to those with no formal qualifications or artistic status, but who nevertheless share in its concerns, the Institute of Geopoetics operates in terms that might be expressed well with reference to Jacques Rancière's exploration of the axiom of Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* namely, that 'the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind' (Rancière 1991: 18; Deranty 2010: 7). The equality of intelligence that would ground White's 'active culture' is qualitative, not numerical, in Rancière's sense: it is an

[1] http://institut-geopoetique.org/en/, accessed 8 May 2018.

intelligence of the human mind capable of speaking with one another, that is capable of understanding one another, and that is capable of 'reasoning with one another' (May 2008: 57). It is an equality of intelligence committed to the view that we are, each one of us, eminently capable of creating meaningful lives together, in our interactions with one another, and in our intellectual and existential endeavours. White has faith that we are capable of rising 'to the tasks that life puts before us' (May 2008: 57) but it is a faith tempered with an acknowledgement of the difficulties associated with the necessity of creating a real, live field and of integrating that field into 'existence and culture' (White 2004: 16). Each one of us has the capacity to create a life together that is meaningful and we can do so in such a way that we open ourselves up towards a life that has its being in movement, a life that gestures towards the possibility of becoming a nomadic subject (White 2003: 13; White 2004: 16). And all of this will take in a variety of forms of "resistance, research and re-grounding"; it will take in varieties of "strategic thinking, policy shifting, and openly moving": 'A tall order', as White says, but, 'perhaps it can be done' (White 2004: 16).

1

The axiom that I invoked above, of Joseph Jacotot, a nineteenth-century exiled French Lecturer, caused something of a scandal in Holland and France. Jacotot, who had an aspect of 'the Scot abroad' about him, that is, something 'heretical' (White 1998: 106), suggested that 'uneducated people could learn on their own, without a teacher explaining things to them, and that teachers … could teach what they themselves were ignorant of' (Rancière 2010: 1). That is, so-called uneducated people could be self-developing individuals. Without any Flemish, Jacotot found himself in Holland teaching students his native language, who did not speak French, by means of a recently published bilingual edition of Fénelon's *Télémaque*. Through an interpreter Jacotot told his students 'to read half of the book with the aid of the translation, to constantly repeat what they had learned, to read the other half quickly, and to write in French what they had thought of it' (Rancière 2010: 1–2). In the end, the surprised Jacotot was confronted by a fact: his students had learned enough French, without the help of explication, to express themselves in this new language. Jacotot had 'educated them without teaching them anything' (Rancière 2010: 2).

Jacotot, like White's International Institute of Geopoetics, in its educational egalitarianism, had established only the minimal condition with those who had

attended his lessons, namely, of finding something in common with them which, in his case, was the novel *Télémaque*, but it could have been any book, and which in White's and the Institute's case is the awareness of a problem and the desire to see the 'opening of a general new field' (Bissell 2005: 38) of thought and enquiry, of life. In the case of Jacotot a relationship between the intelligences of Fénelon, his translator and the students had been established. A relationship without an essential reference to the master educator, to Jacotot himself. The immanent relationship between author, translator and reader bypasses the 'mediating intelligence of the master', who might, after all, really be in minority to the doorkeeper, and who delivers what White calls 'mere instruction' (see White in Bissell 2005: 31, and Bissell 2005: 25). The principle of explication, of pedagogical stultification, has been bypassed in the case of Jacotot and Kenneth White. The intelligences at work, whether in translation or reading, whether in a group or when thinking or wandering alone, are of the 'same nature' (Rancière 1991: 9): for White and Rancière there is no transcendent master or understanding beyond or behind the page, above or beyond the group, beyond or behind this world: 'no false bottom that necessitates the work of an *other* intelligence' (Rancière 1991: 10). An *other* ground (White 1989: 7), yes, but not an other intelligence. Education, intellectual emancipation, is an immanent affair and the nomadic subject, duly emancipated, is 'an intention and a trajectory…a field of energy' (White 2003: 13).

The demands of radical equality, captured in the proposition that 'everyone is of equal intelligence' (Rancière 1991: 102), is that the thoughts and manners of expression, the voices, actions and words of the dominated, who are produced by hierarchical social orders structured on a 'divisive logic' that separates thinker from worker, man from woman, adult from child (and so on), be heard in the work of equality as radical communication. Such structures, while real, have no existence outside of their affirmation, and radical communication, affords the dominated and excluded their just status as people who 'make sense', as people who are valid partners 'in dialogue' (Deranty 2010: 11). It is the 'Motorway of Western Civilization' (White 2004: 9–10) that has produced these hierarchical social orders, of which school and university are but two examples, and the promise of White's educational vision is that his self-developing individuals be able to participate in something new. The demand of radical equality is made on behalf of the child or student, of any dominated group or individual, and is enshrined in the conviction that such groups do not require instruction in thinking and speaking. In White, who left his post as Lecturer at the University of Glasgow for France in the mid-1960s,

and who lost his position as *lecteur* there because of his participation in the events of fifty years ago, the events of May 68, following which he would be unemployed for two years, we have a figure that might reformulate Rancière's conviction as a new Pelagianism – a new 'being of the sea' – committed to the view that human nature is a "good enough basis for thinking and speaking" (see Bissell 2005: 28), so long as you 'work at it' (White 2006: 36), so long as you cultivate yourself. The International Institute of Geopoetics will offer assistance in this regard.

Importantly, White's educational move is not to wholly abandon the modern university, but it is to profoundly challenge it. He says: the ethos of a truly 'creative university' will be one '*of self-realisation, based on the notion of* auxesis, *the increase of life*' (White quoted in Bissell 2005: 33). Education should be rethought as an immanent process of 'leading out' and of opening up paths of 'growth and discovery' that have no predetermined outcomes and/or end-points (Ingold 2018). Learners should "attend to things", they should do 'field work', in White's terms, they should go out into the world, into the countryside and onto the shores, they should become exposed to such places without attempting to build static bodies of knowledge about them: keep moving. Dwell in the midst of things. 'Study with' others and reconceive education as the discipline with the power to 'transform the world' (Ingold 2018: ix). As White says: 'Every territory … is open, if one knows how to read it' (White 2006: 76). Learn to read.

2

The two texts that I invoked at the beginning of this paper are profoundly connected, and connected in multiple ways. One of these connections is their shared engagement with the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a 'lookout' of the 'inhuman' and who, 'outside all norms, conventions and categories'; was "six thousand feet above humanity and the age" (White 2004: 112). To Nietzsche's council, 'Brothers, remain true to the earth', White will add Rimbaud's declaration, 'If I have taste left for anything at all, it is for earth and stones' (White quotes both of these in White 2003: 15). It was Nietzsche that created the concept of the 'philosopher-artist', the figure that becomes the 'poet-thinker' in White's writings, and who is a figure immersed in the field of immediate experience, engaged in the task of articulating the sound of the 'universal symphony' (White 2004: 238). The philosopher-artist can be a solitary traveller, an intellectual nomad, a wayfarer, who is opened out on to something non-human by virtue of that very nomadism, and who moves out

beyond the history of Western metaphysics into a 'new intellectual-existential geography' (White 2004: 238). The 'white poetics' that Kenneth White entered into, as Craig has identified, brings him into the nomadic tradition of thinkers in Europe who sought to reconceptualise 'the relationship of modern thought to the past of Western culture'. Thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida in France who stand within a field of concerns that can be 'traced to the influence of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and through Heidegger to the Nietzsche by whom White was obsessed in his early years as a student in Glasgow' (Craig 2018: 236).

Wayfarers are 'continually on the move' because they are their movement (Ingold 2016: 78). Travelling is a way of being. What Bergson suggests of philosophy, that it should be a 'schooling in the art of living' (Ansell-Pearson 2017: 115), that goes 'out of the school' in order to connect more to 'life' (Bergson 1946: 126), White will explore nomadically, in terms of geopoetics. Geopoetics becomes an education, a schooling in the movement of life that takes place outside in the world. Intellectual nomads expound a 'moving poetics' (White 2004: 16) that articulates, in Bergson's words, 'the mobility of which the stability of life is made' (Bergson 1946: 127). Such a poetics has "weight, force and movement": it resonates. It is what White has called an 'Atlantic poetics' (White 2004: 125).

The consequence of such an educational transformation, which is equally the case for both White and Bergson, is that philosophical speculation and perception will become enriched and enlarged and as a result everyday life will be nourished and illuminated (see Ansell-Pearson 2017: 116). If the task of education is 'to become a master in the art of living' (Ansell-Pearson 2017: 116), as Bergson would have it, then the complimentary task of geopoetics is to move into 'presence-in-the-world', it is to 'experience a field and a territory', it is to learn to read and to express with an 'openness of style', a 'relationship of configurational complicity with the cosmological 'poetics' of the universe' (White 2004: 241).

Geopoetics is, as White says, Novalis's speaking of 'a 'writing of the earth' that can be found of birds' wings, on shells, in clouds, in snow, on mountain sides, in plants, in animals, in the lights of the sky, and which can be integrated into the language of human being' (White 2004: 241). It is MacDiarmid's, and I quote, 'descrying, out on this stony limits, from the heights of a raised beach, a field few in the English-language context had any notion of and into which he often, cogently and beautifully, enters' (White 2004: 242): 'All is lithogenesis … All the other stones are in this haecceity' (MacDiarmid 1992: 146). As White's

intellectual friend and former student Norman Bissell has suggested, one way to approach White is as a 'poet-teacher' (Bissell 2005: 26), who endeavoured to retain the 'freedom to come and go'; White's whole educational approach inspired in Bissell a 'tremendous feeling of well-being' (Bissell 2005: 30) and there could be no better time for us to read him for the sake of our education.

As a poet-teacher White is placed somewhere in the long cultural line of Scoto-Celtic monks, and later medieval and Renaissance wandering Scottish scholars, the *Scotus vagans*, who left Scotland for Europe, but who nevertheless took 'a great deal of Scotland with' them (White 1998: 87), and who can be considered examples of the 'nomadic intellect', an intellect that, as Cairns Craig has reconstructed it in *The Wealth of the Nation* (2018), refuses to be incorporated into the 'fixed structures of an existing society' and that, to quote White, always seeks to 'maintain some dynamic that transcends history'. Indeed, the nomadic intellect keeps open 'an alternative space that counteracts history' (White 1998: 107). White's nomadic intellectuals are, we might say, 'untimely' in the Nietzscheo-Deleuzian sense of being able to create new 'lines of flight' 'along which things happen and changes take place' (Patton 2000: 10): their untimely – or 'heretical' – power is their power to disrupt not only their own time but also ours. Such intellectuals are, of course, located within a context but their untimely power is to gesture toward 'a new time and a new epoch' (Colebrook 2002: 63). Untimely heretics, nomadic subjects, provoke cultural learning: they are its catalyst.

In fact, the nomadic voice enters in and out of our hearing in line with the crises of civilization. White says:

> The figure I call the intellectual nomad … is the bearer of at least the beginnings of new language and new space. He has broken his way out of the labyrinth and moves in what may at first seem a void, but which is perhaps the high-energy field in which could emerge a (new) world. (White 2004: 15)

Pelagius, Erigena, Michael Scot, Duns Scotus, indeed, the entire 'Pelagian line' (White 1996: 57), figures whose thought bordered, in one way or another, on the disruptive untimely power of the heretical, might speak again in service of a 'post-colonial Scotland' that would emerge from Alba or a "Scotland un-cruddied"; an original landscape-mindscape requiring connection in a wordscape. Alba is an archaic ground, a 'past in the present' (Bishop 2012: 38), a support for a renewed creativity that draws inspiration from the landscape

and that would engender a new geography, a new "earth-writing" that is at once a cultural archaeology, unearthing the 'forces of creativity' (Craig 2018: 232) that link seemingly discrete environments – the Siberian shamanic and Japanese Zen, for example (Craig 2018: 232) – and, an 'exploration of actual territories' that have, as White has put it, resisted the 'autobahn of Western Civilization' (White 1998: 91). Transcendence is, for White, best conducted, as Craig has put it, 'at the margins of the defined territory of the nation' (Craig 2018: 233). From such an 'originary ground', or plateau, as Alba, can take place the 'ultimate union of matter and space' where local and universal are, as Alfred North Whitehead might say, related as part to whole; poetry should transcend individual consciousness and reach out into a "growing cosmos, a literal Universe" (White 1998: 142); 'a beautiful whole in movement' (White 1998: 58).

3

When it comes to the Scottish mind, White suggests, it is the trace of the Bible (in its 1611 version) that has perhaps marked it most over the course of the last four centuries. In fact, the Bible can, when approached from the perspective of a certain 'joyful science' ('*gai savoir*'; see White 1989: 7), provide a 'good introduction to nomadism' (White 2004: 7), especially in its Old Testament, which is, after all, a book of 'beginnings' based 'largely on a dialectic of nomadism and sedentarization' (White 2004: 7). Sedentary and nomadic, Cain and Abel: wayfarers have to sustain themselves as they proceed. Abel, the nomad, whose name, White reminds us, means something like 'the useless wind', moved out through the wilderness from well to well (White 2004: 7): the well-being of the pastoral nomad depends upon this network of wells, a network that composes their territory. Cain, the sedentary, builds the first town and names it after his son, 'Tubal-Cain' (White 2004: 7). It is with Cain that the human being becomes the 'townsman, a citizen, a maker of history, a constructor of enclosed culture' (White 2004: 7); but, it is Abel that Jahweh prefers: nomadism is the more radical of these two tendencies precisely because it opens the human onto the non-human.

It is not hard to hear in these two tendencies an echo of the forces identified by Nietzsche in his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian and the Apollonian that, when combined in Ancient Greece, produced tragedy. In this early work, which was ready shortly after his brief service as a medic in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, but was not published until 1872, the Dionysian force is associated with intoxication and ecstasy, literally, 'being-outside-of-oneself' (Burnham 2015: 102): it is associated with lyric poetry

and music and embodies the Schopenhauerean metaphysics of a dynamic Will underlying appearances and the cultural products, such as epic poetry, architecture and sculpture, associated with the force of the Apollonian. In the Apollonian the beautiful arts are accompanied by a cheerfulness and embody the Schopenhauerean metaphysics of individuation. But the Apollonian is not deluded: it is aware of the illusory nature of these individuated forms and is later conceptualised by Nietzsche as a calm moment of stillness within the dynamics of the Dionysian (Burnham 2015: 24). The Schopenhauerean Dionysian drives to leave Apollonian individuated appearances behind and 'ecstatically sink back into the original oneness of the will' (Burnham (2015: 340). With this in mind we can get a glimpse of what White means when describing 'real poetry', poetry that will reach out into an 'experience of the earth' as an experience of its 'incandescence', its 'whiteness' (White 1998: 64): 'Poetry signifies the transcendence of the individual conscience and the introduction to a world (a cosmos, a beautiful whole in movement)' (White 1998: 58). In a world in absence of poetic transcendence and penetration the observations of larval subjects, observations and impressions of this or that, provide a 'hideous caricature of the real world of poetry' and 'The House of Being', language, in Heidegger's words, is turned into a 'villa' or an 'asylum' 'at the side of the technological Highway' (White 1998: 58–60). 'Beyond the goddess, there is the world' (White 1998: 63): the rational animal must re-become the '*animal poeticum*, in harmony with the *logos*; not a victim of his (degraded) environment, but an inhabitant of his world' (White 1998: 65).

Cain's wandering was wandering as punishment: White's was a wandering of necessity born of habit. In 'A Shaman Dancing on the Glacier' White tells us of his experience in the very late 1950s of finding Mircea Eliade's book *Shamanism – The Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Payot 1951) when he was 'wandering around the streets and backstreets of Paris' (White 1998: 35). His explorations of his inner reality at this time induced in him many 'flashbacks' to his 'childhood on the West Coast of Scotland' where when he was 'about eleven or twelve years old', he became much concerned with a territory he called "up the back" (White 1998: 36). In his reading of Eliade, White realised that what he had been up to 'up the back' amounted to 'a kind of home-made shamanism' (White 1998: 37). An 'immemorial tradition going back to … prelithic times', the entry into which by the child shouldn't be so surprising, since, as White says, 'given enough scope, enough freedom, a child will go through all the past phases of humanity, from fishes to philosophers' (White 1998: 37). The shaman is a 'dawn-man', as the Ojibwa of North America call him, who seeks an ecstasy, a 'getting outside'

of one's self and of history; a 'de-conditioning' (White 1998: 38). Through this ecstatic experience, this transcendence within immanence, the shaman attains the capacity to experience and express 'total life' (White 1998: 38). Through this, the shaman comes to know an identity larger than his socially coded one and by virtue of this he is enabled 'to do the greatest good to the community, by giving it breathing space' (White 1998: 38). The 'total experience of the earth' is a luminous experience: uranian and telluric, which may be expressed by deities but can also be 'de-theologised' and 'reduced to 'white light'' (White 1998: 38). 'Beyond the goddess there is the world' and it is not so surprising at all that flashbacks of a shamanic childhood occurred in the Twenty-something Kenneth White; as Parmenides said, 'It is all one to me where I begin; for I shall come back again there' (Parmenides Fragment 5 quoted in Ferarro 2017: 17): Heraclitus agreed: 'In the circumference of a circle the beginning and the end are common' (Heraclitus Fragment 103 quoted in Ferarro 2017: 30). The child, as Giuseppe Ferarro has said, is 'closer to the beginning of life … They are where the world begins' (Ferarro 2017: 17) and through these experiences White was able to find a poetic language for a certain kind of presencing, for giving voice to the unfamiliar, for going back before Socrates in order to 'begin again' (White, 'Chant', quoted in Craig 2018: 236).

4

Returning to the two works by White that I invoked at the start of this paper, and to begin to draw things to a close: both works are also connected by an engagement with the medieval Scottish philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus and with the Twentieth Century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Scotus, whose epitaph reads, 'Scotland bore me, England received me, France taught me, Cologne in Germany holds me'', appears as an intellectual nomad in his metaphysics when he takes a line contrary to the doctrine of the analogy of being that was particularly associated with St Thomas Aquinas in his day. Scotus argues for the univocity of the concept of being, a concept of being predicable of everything that is, whether that thing be finite or infinite, just as it is, in so far as it opposes nothingness. Hugh MacDiarmid, when speaking from a 'raised beach' will, as intimated above, invoke Scotus's concept of haecceitas, of 'thisness', of singularity; a radical singular that appears in anything and everything, in a stone on a beach, in the singular intense 'whiteness' of some white thing, in the individuation that is 'you'. To quote White: Scotus 'is a wanderer at the limits who opens up an unedited space of thought' (White 2004: 13).

Scotus was a key influence on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who said of him that he was 'Of realty the rarest-veinèd unraveler; a not Rivalled insight, be rival Italy or Greece; Who fired France for Mary without spot' ('Duns Scotus's Oxford', Manley Hopkins 1986: 142). Hopkins, by coincidence, died in the year 1889, the year in which that other crucial reader of Scotus, Martin Heidegger, was born. Heidegger wrote his post-doctoral teaching qualification on Scotus and it is there that he says of him that his:

> striking individuality as a thinker characterizes him in general as having unmistakably modern traits. He has a more extensive and accurate nearness (Haecceitas) to real life, to its manifoldness and possible tensions than the scholastics before him … he knows how to turn … from the fullness of life to the abstract world of mathematics (Heidegger 1978: 15)

Scotus is a key figure in the advent of a new way of thinking and being. A way of thinking and being that White will call 'geopoetics'. Geopoetics, for White, as we have been suggesting, stands for nothing less than the attempt to open new cultural spaces all over the world. Spaces of education, spaces of self-cultivation. The intellectual nomad, the geopoetician, passes through the many cultures of the world and integrates aspects of them into a 'new coherence' replete with local colourations (White 2004: 247). The unity of geopoetics is not continental: it is the unity of the archipelago. Geopoetics aims at nothing less than the experience, expression and thinking out of the connection between world and earth, between the human being and the 'Earth-cosmic context' (White 2004: 247). Geopoetics' concern is with the condition of the human being in the universe, with the human being and planet Earth, with what White calls a 'presence-in-the-world' that experiences a field and a territory and that, with an openness of style, tunes in to the very 'poetics' of the universe' (White 2004: 241).

Heidegger is an 'affluent to geopoetics' (White 2004: 239) who 'steps out of philosophy' into 'beginning thinking' (White 2003: 29). For both White and Heidegger poetry shouldn't be thought of as words on a page. The poetic takes place in language, for Heidegger, because 'language preserves the original nature of poetry' which is 'the setting-into-work of truth' (Heidegger 1971: 74). For White, the depth dimension of poetry is revealed in that it is the very responsiveness to the world wherein the 'mind cries out for unity, for a unitive experience … an ecstatic existence, expanding to a sense of cosmic unity'

(White 1998: 60-64; see also Craig 2018: 235). Poetry, in this sense, is extra-linguistic: the poetic is revealed in 'a sheer experience of the nakedness and loveliness of everything' (White 1998: 64). The poetic is ecstatic in the senses given to that term by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Deleuze – of being outside of oneself; outside of the categorical thinking of traditional metaphysics – precisely because we are opened up beyond the humdrum categories of thought in such an experience. Traditional metaphysical categories sought to bring individual things under a generality. The trajectory of Scotus, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, MacDiarmid and Kenneth White will instead open us up toward the extra-categorial radical singularity of things; towards their 'thisness', their haecceitas. Such an experience of the 'white world', as Craig points out, circumvents the abstracting 'function of language itself' (Craig 2018: 235) and points to an original approach of the world as meaningful (see Tonner 2010: 167–8). As Hölderlin said and as Heidegger agrees: *poetically, man dwells on this earth*. The 'white world' is where 'poetry and metaphysics meet' (White 1998: 179) and a geopoetic education for the twenty-first Century will call for, as Thoreau had it, a 'larger sense than common sense permits' (Thoreau quoted in White 2004: 16). It will explore a new 'epistemological landscape', a 'real field', it will 'research', 'resist' and 're-ground'; it will 'move': it is 'A tall order. But it can, perhaps, be done' (White 2004: 16). [2]

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