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# L'Océanite

## The Storm Petrel

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## **Editorial**

### **In Memoriam**

Between issue 2 and this issue of *L'Océanite*, the world of geopoetics has changed.

The death of Kenneth White, to whom this issue is dedicated, is the reason for this.

Whatever happens, he will remain the creator of the geopoetic theory-practice through his life and his work. His very high intellectual standards must remain our inspiration to preserve and spread the energy of the geopoetic movement.

The Institute has chosen a paradoxical strategy: to touch broadly without giving an inch to integrity, the only value capable of profoundly changing the course of things. This collective demand is at the same time an individual requirement that concerns all those who have rediscovered, through Kenneth White's work, the existence, or at least the possibility, of a human world in harmony with the Earth — and the paths that lead to it.

All the contributors of this issue, using various approaches, have taken one of these paths and share this path with us, with the implicit and simple recognition of fellow travellers or friends.

As *L'Océanite* travels beyond the International Institute of Geopoetics, we invite those who will read it and who are not yet with us to join our association to help us (1).

Enjoy this issue and I wish you all fair winds.

**Régis POULET**

International Institute of Geopoetics, President

Editor of *L'Océanite*

On the shores of the Rhône, October 2024

(1) Write to [secretariat@institut-geopoetique.org](mailto:secretariat@institut-geopoetique.org)



Marie-Claude and Kenneth White - Alaska, 2007

Kenneth White  
World Poet  
of Scottish origins  
died in Gwened  
catastrophically happy  
11th August 2023

(epitaph written  
by Kenneth White)

# Beings and Places

Arnaud Villani

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This essay had been sent to Kenneth White, and he intended to make it the starting point for a common text. His many activities made this book for two, which he had expressed several times the desire for, impossible.

The place is the successful encounter between nature and culture. Place is *topos*, and it appears “qualified” in Aristotle. And even if Newton’s de-qualification of places, and his “absolute space” have gone through this, common thought continues to speak of “charged places”, novelists of “places where the mind breathes”, inventive philosophers of “strong places” (1). It is necessary to have the physical support of a place for the sacred to manifest itself. In this conception, the place represents a rich intersection of flows and movements, exuding a higher energy. It is a relationship and not a relation. Indeed, the relationship is embodied while the relation remains intangible (2), being a “meaning” that only intelligence can “hear”. Relationships are never external, but for relations, it is the opposite. The de-qualification of places is therefore homothetic to an irresistible tendency to conceptualisation. And certainly, the concept demonstrates the intellectual superiority of man. But always wanting to pass for intelligent and “conceptual” carries risks. We lose the intelligence of the situation, the intelligence of the artist, the intelligence of the heart. The concept vitrifies other types of intelligence, like a neutron bomb leaves only a shadow on a wall of flesh and blood beings.

(1) Simondon in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Paris, Aubier, « Analyses et raisons », chapter 3.

(2) See the work of Bréhier dans *La théorie des incorporels dans l'Ancien Stoïcisme*, Paris, ed. Vrin.

To relocate the carnal existent is to forget the unbreakable link between existing and being in a place. This is the problem of our contemporary “civilisations”, *the forgetting of place*. The Earth works like the stone of Pirithoos: once you have “sat on it”, you do not detach yourself from it, unless Herakles is in the area. Research may show that by its seeds, equipped with helical systems to slow down the fall and take advantage of the wind, the tree can plant itself far from its stump, the distance is not such that we can say that the tree “moves”. It remains attached to its initial clod of earth. And this is where anchoring comes into play. It allows this communication by hyphae, extending under the forest soil by an intense network of communications. It is enough to reread Uexküll to understand that the geographical environment (*Umgebung*) of the animal is worked on from the inside by its sensory/active device, the “functional circle”. Although it is moving, an animal is also attached to its place, so that its *Umwelt* extends its body, and extends it as far as its signifying stimuli go. It is therefore perfectly inconsistent to consider space as abstract, even if it makes calculations “roughly” more convenient. What would animals be like in a space without qualities?

In the same way, man is *attached* to a place. The problem is ontological, not affective or empirical. Let us ask ourselves whether a people, a language, a culture, can be analysed outside the country, the climate, the forests and the quality of the land that supports them. In the vocabulary of these peoples, we see sand predominating, or water, or snow and ice. From the moment we were born, we have been enveloped in smells, a quality of air, a tone of light, humidity or dryness, accents, sequences of sounds. When Derzou Ouzala and Agaguk (3) perceive the urgency announced by the colour of the sky and the white spot in the distance (a typhoon, a polar bear), when Kenneth Roberts (4) makes us experience the atmosphere of the immense swamp that separates the trapper/scout from a “Northwest Passage”, they manifest the flesh of the place: a tangible reality, forming over time a system that requires a “trick”.

(3) In Kurosawa’s movie : *Derzou Ouzala* and Yves Thériault’s novel : *Agaguk*.

(4) *Le Grand passage*.

The qualified, carnal, *topos* place has a role equivalent, on the spatial side, to that played by the *kairos*, on the temporal side (5). And what Lorenz describes with the goose Martina happened. We have taken as our father/mother, as our imprint, that incomparable set of sensible qualities, which designate a definite time and place, and not floating in the air. The place is the *actual* becoming of a cloud of virtual or ideal outcomes. It is a double movement that shows that we are detaching ourselves from the territory at the very moment we are sinking into it (Deleuze). A notion in motion that must nevertheless be considered as a “block”. It is to this block of places that we are existentially “attached” (6). This is why it is really worrying that de-location has marked most places. The disappearance of the “spirit of the place” from tourist sites means that our living together has been overlaid by concepts. This mixture of successive layers rubs off on individuals, whose specificity becomes blurred, “indifferent” (7). Man becomes a citizen of a “globalism” devoid of a vertebral place (8), of a structure that allows him to “stand on his own”. Man obeys this “pseudo-forward movement” of progress, which is moving away from Mother Earth in a calculated way, and bringing to Western thought a continuous war with nature (9). This is what it means to create “non-being”. But Parmenides’ fierce criticism (fragments VI and VII, end of fragment VIII of his *Poem*) did not prevent this error from spreading throughout the world.

What then becomes of man ? A total imbalance between *what he is*, a natural being, animal by his body and a part of his unconscious, and what we want him to be: a supremely “intelligent” being, master of the world and possessing the Earth, but *atopos*, “without place, strange, unlocatable”.

(5) Sun Zu, *L'art de la guerre* ; Hegel, *La première philosophie de l'Esprit* ; Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant in *L'intelligence de la ruse. La mêtis des Grecs ; L'invention du quotidien*, de Michel de Certeau, tome 1.

(6) All of Proust's work on time is an illustration of this (madeleine, Martinville bell towers, hawthorns, cobblestones).

(7) The imprint could be considered the "good form" of the Gestaltists.

(8) Let us call this vertebral place, coming from Von Hofmannsthal: *Lettre du voyageur à son retour*, a "lieu d'empreinte ».

(9) My book on this secret war was published in 2020 (ed. Kimé): *La terre engloutie. Philosophie de l'écologie*.



Let us analyse this strangeness (10). Man like everything that exists (11) on this Earth and in the cosmos, is a being of relationship. These relationships run through and constitute every being until death. The existent, extended to the confines of the cosmos, is defined only by the micro-infinite network of its relationships and “relatives”, justifying a holistic look at the real. The Pre-Socratics were careful to deal only with concrete relationships, qualitative/intensive multiplicities (12), and distanced themselves from abstract relationships as much as after them, the Epicureans would distrust any subtle demonstration. Question: how is it that man has surrounded himself to such an extent with abstractions, which weaken his concrete existentiality, like Delvaux’s women, seized up to the middle of their bodies by bark? Is it not since the representation of sacred space as a *templum* that space and time have been linked to the disconnection? It was indeed the *pontifex* who, with the help of the *lituus* (curved staff), drew an area in the sky, the projection of which on the ground defined the space of the *sacer*, separated from the profane (*pro-fanum*, “in front of the temple”). If we compare the etymon of *templum*, space and then the temple, with that of *tempus*, time (13), we further reinforce the impression of an origin of the spatiotemporal in the disconnection. This disconnection materialised in the early period (Uruk, – 2004) in the Elamites’ assault on the temple of the last Mother Goddess. This marks the end of their multi-millennial reign and under various names (Astarte, Demeter, Aphrodite...), with a benevolent gaze over all terrestrial and celestial entities.

(10) Parmenides had already criticized human atopy, showing it as being “struck by lightning [...], double-headed”. And Sophocles symbolized it with the oxymoron of the “marvelous” and “terrifying” in the same word: *deinon*. See his *Antigone*.

(11) I am far from thinking, as Sartre does, that existence only derives from conscience.

(12) Intensive multiplicity' is a network of relationships, which cannot be cut without changing in nature, that circulate heterogeneous intensities. 'Quantitative multiplicity' piles up homogeneous relationships, but without any continuity or energy.

(13) The greek root +*tem-*, *temnô*, “cut” with suffix +*lo-* (*tem-lo*, *templum*) and +*po-* (+*tempo-*, *tempus*),

Gilgamesh cuts off the head of the goddess who has become, for the needs of the cause, a dragon, as later, Marduk will *cut open* the belly of this “dragoness”, thus giving birth to the world. The aggressive aspect of this cut/disconnection is sobering.

However, it is not by nature that the place can be shared or separated. It was imposed. It is essentially undivided, as an existential synthesis of flows. The same thing happened over time, and it is the merit of Bergson and Proust to have powerfully emphasized this. We return to the cosmic value of the sacred, always manifesting itself in a place, even if that place is the *dêmos*, on which (*epi*) god appears: “epidemic” (14). Obviously, this place can include concrete separations. Appropriation and accumulation, demarcation, borders, electrification of barriers, transform the “wasteland”, wilderness “defends” it, into a cattle yard, a battlefield, a military “camp” (*castra*) or a “concentration” (15) camp. But what is remarkable here is the *reversal* of the straight line direction, linked to control and partition, when it signifies a cosmic order (16). We understand that this astronomical knowledge, transposed to the earth, is the effect of high-flying speculation, making terrestrial space and its “places” depend on the immutable order of the stars, constellations and of the zodiac. There is no trace here of an individual or of a *desire* for possession, no trace of a “cutting” thirst for space, but the serene link to the sky (*cosmos* = order) and an earth to be ordered.

(14) See Rousseau, and his famous phrase: “The first who, having enclosed a piece of land, took it into his head to say: this is mine...” The same formula was used by the Romans, with the hand on the shoulder of a slave (*mancipatio*): *eum meum aïo*, “I declare him mine”.

(15) From *oregô*, “to desire strongly, to strive eagerly towards” comes a family built around the idea of a straight line (*rex, regio* (the country ruled by the king), *e regione* (in a straight line), *Recht, Right (directum)*, to *rectify*, to *regularize*).

(16) Since the work of archaeoastronomy (Alfred Watkins, Norman Lockyer, John Michell, Alexander Thom, Xavier Guichard, Jean and Lucien Richer, Joseph Heinsch), we have been able to decode the rectilinear alignments of “sacred” places. Thus Watkins’ “ley” lines (“open space, clearing”), confirmed by Michell around Saint-Michel, as well as the right triangle between the three sites: Glastonbury, Avebury and Stonehenge, as well as the Saint-Michel/Apollo axis, the evidence, in Xavier Guichard’s work, of a starry shape radiating from Alaise, the set of these lines linking 400 toponyms, which can be linked to Eleusis (Alesia), going back to Demeter and the cult of the Black Virgins and Mother Goddesses.

Let's go back to linearity. If we link the hegemonic tendency, witnessed in the history of warlike peoples, to the invention of perspective in the Renaissance, we see how we can introduce quantitative and homogenising linearity into an entity that, a priori, does not support it.

Thus the place, through the multiplication of straight lines, norms and abstractions, is seized by this type of politics where the link of individuals to a city or a state is a relationship of hierarchy and domination. Like everything else in the world, place passes from the status of an active subject to that of an available object. Antaeus rejuvenated himself by touching the earth/mother, which was itself linked to the celestial balancing zone. After the Archaic period, men chose to refocus everything on man and his narrow expression: power and accumulation. Capitalism is only the consequence of this. It implies the disappearance of individual differences, of differential singularities. The project of the man who claims to be 'master' is simply to make it a '*non-place*'. All this to physically locate a place.

But the necessity of finding one's "*situs*", one's "*sitio*" (as Castaneda says), cannot avoid cases in which the place has nothing corporeal, nothing which can be situated. Two examples. When Michel de Certeau analyses the habitability of places, he defines it neither as a physical place nor as a natural place. He sees it in off-the-cuff discussions, in a bar, a street, in a bowls court, on a bench at the entrance to a village. Inhabiting is not based on any urban planning decision. The place of residence is a "being together" of social flows, of contradictory self-affirming tendencies, of urban legends, rumours, manipulations, life stories, unfulfilled desires, bar rhetoric, "hit and miss" politics, sociality. An immaterial place, neither natural nor urban, allowing us to inhabit the uninhabitable. The second example recalls the discussion between the leaders of the Athenian expedition to Asia Minor, whose retreat into a hostile country Xenophon recounts in his *Anabasis*, in the direction of "the sea, the sea" (*thalassa, thalassa!*).

This discussion between a few generals, outside of any materialised city, and even of what they call “civilisation,” around the common good of the Andres Athenaioi, of the Athenian citizens, is sufficient in itself to constitute a City.

The “strong points” that Simondon evokes, and which explain the experience of the sacred, may therefore have nothing in common with material features of the landscape. Everything would happen outside of space and time. However, it is difficult to speak of an Idea, because the strong point, the sacred place, the common good are devilishly concrete. Can the place, should it even be made up of immateriality? What takes place is not the bar, the campfire, the church. It is the link between a concept and a body, between a narrative and embodied beings, between a virtual Idea and actualised entities, with the designation of a link by the “feeling of being together” (17) as spiritual bread. A place as a strong point is located only because it contains an immaterial naturing impulse, physical as a conglomeration of concurrent forces, non-physical as a sense of belonging (18). There would be in the landscape something like a miscellaneous syncline, slope and hill, of season, of perfumes, of humidity or dryness, of bird calls, of the movements of the wind, of the colour of the leaves, of traces of culture and history, forming a harmonic structure (19). The place finds its own definition: a particular conjunction of flows, a connective (centripetal) and then disjunctive or conjunctive (centrifugal) synthesis. A non-spatial conjunction, a place of dialogue, of the work of art, of the City, of faith.

To tell the truth, it is not entirely right to speak of immateriality. For the place makes the link between the corporeal and the spiritual, and takes into account, actually, the traces of virtuality that remain clinging to it.

(17) In Greek, *synéchès*, *synousia*, *omilia*, *homonoia*, *harmonia*, *kreittos logos* ; in Latin, *consensus*.

(18) Electro-sensitivity to magnetic fields (relays) reinforces the credibility of dowzers, or "magnetizers".

(19) This term should not be taken as an equivalent of "harmonious, pacified, idyllic", but as the tension obtained by the carpenter when he assembles two pieces of wood via an "overhang".

Having dematerialised the soul is a harmful misinterpretation. The spirit, the soul, are breaths. The rapture that results from a female soprano voice, and a clarinet (*Duke Ellington's Transblucency*) requires no transcendence with one's eyes raised to the sky.

Transcendence is a conjunction of flows, the whole of which is a profoundly united and protective immanence, as in a framework. This relation, as a tense meeting of quite concrete processes, this material/harmonic whole, is of the type of *relationship*. Whether we call it harmony or togetherness, it is both sensitive (audible, tangible) and insensitive (the impalpable atmosphere emanating from it). Flows, combining instead of colliding, produce a “well-being” that is the basis of “feeling at home”, the power to “inhabit”. Just as Detienne was able to insist on the “foundation” of the temple (20), so too must be posited, in the constitution of the place, a consciousness, a sentience. We see how the marriage of body and spirituality is not only desirable, but real.

Now, this activity of the subject, human or non-human, man or glowworm, which allows the constructing adaptation of the stimuli available in nature, and thanks to its organic capacity to reactivate them, to make it one's “world”, we can call it *Sinngebung*, donation of senses. A perfectly directed opera, with magnificent voices and intelligent décor, does not make of La *Scala* in Milan, or the *Festspielhaus* in Salzburg, a “place”, but gives rise to the appearance of a “live-well-in-place”. This happens: every flow is material. But the junction of a multiplicity of flows in a conscious or unconscious sensibility registers for each flow a leap over itself, like the gray dot in Klee's *Theory of Modern Art*. And it can only jump through its encounter with a multiplicity of other flows, which it travels at the greatest speed. The point of junction, which so strongly erethises the sensibility, is both within and without, and back to it.

(20) Under the direction of Marcel Detienne, *Tracés de fondation*, Paris/Louvain, Peeters, 1990.

At the crossroads (21) are invention and life, Sophocles knew it. Everything that we call spiritual takes a step aside (22), as a combination of *a matter and a deviation from that matter*.

Hence the relevance of the Ehrensweigian concept of “unconscious scanning” to describe the artist’s exploring work (23), his path being elbowed by his “side steps” (24). Jacobi spoke of an “elastic point that pushes him forward”. We have a word to express the intelligence of *kairos*, but none to express the intelligence of the place. I would suggest: “intelligence of the heart”, with its background of “being with” (25). The intelligence of the heart, leaning towards the place, would consist in holding fast to what, in the mix of flows going in all directions, makes it possible to conceive the point where the movement acquires stability without losing its serpentine inflection (26). The intelligence of the place would draw lines of exchange and connivance between the forms, transfiguring an organic body into a counter of spiritual exchange.

(21) This is clear in *Œdipe-Roi* (the murder crossroad) and in *Œdipe à Colone* (the abduction crossroad).

(22) What Kierkegaard expressed with non exclusive “either or” and Deleuze with “and... and”

(23) Art studies progressed with Anton Ehrenzweig thanks to *The hidden order of art*.

(24) The pas de côté (side step) is an image to express what Deleuze calls encounter and synthesis of flow.

(25) Heart intelligence could be related to situation intelligence, even a sly calculation.

(26) Allusion to a problem originating from Vinci, ending with its theoretical élaboration with Ravaisson.

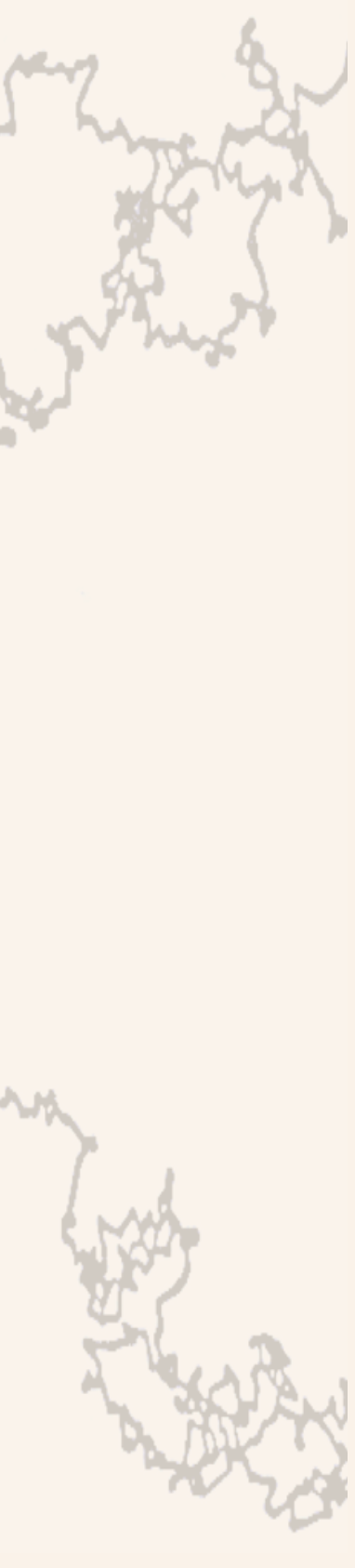
# Opening up other paths

Olivier Penot-Lacassagne

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« Under my feet the dark earth »

(En toute candeur, 1964)



In *La Figure du dehors*, which was published in 1982, Kenneth White evoked the need for a “new poeticity” requiring a different relationship to the world. An expression crystallizing twenty years of explorations and research in libraries and on the Eastern and Western roads (1), this poeticity greatly exceeds academic poetic cartographies. The pantheon of arts and letters of the “European Man” (Valéry), in no way neglected, is revisited, decompartmentalized, profoundly renewed. “The inventory of our disinterests” (R. Bertrand) brought to light, it is the very extent of our certainties and prejudices that are striking when reading this book. A new geography of knowledge nourishes a sprightly summary, both traced out of a path and crossed by forgotten, undermined or neglected territories of thought, listening to the prose of the world. Far from the “great narratives” (whose destitution the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard analysed in *La Condition postmoderne*, 1979), far from the “small narratives” that flourish on the ruins of a collapsed greatness, a “telling” unfolds by untying the present, bringing it “elsewhere than where its only headlong rush leads it”(2). Page after page, seeking without reservation but by no means lightly this elsewhere within the very Western culture and, its limits and its enclosure duly evaluated, outside of it, it is a change of meaning, orientation, direction that is written.

(1) The books *Dérives* (1978), *Les Limbes incandescents* (1976), *Terre de diamant* (1977), *Segalen, Théorie et Pratique du voyage* (1979), *Le Visage du vent d'Est* (1980) give an account of this journey.

(2) Jean-Christophe Bailly, « L'isthme », in Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La Comparution* (1991), Paris, Christian Bourgois éditeur, coll. « Titres », 2007, p. 33.

“The European corpus of literature looks like a congenital cripple or a voluntary mutilated,” wrote Raymond Schwab in 1955, who invited his contemporaries to browse the “Library of the Universe”. “Europe is no longer the only writer”, he noted. Kenneth White has been criticized for his eclecticism, summarily confusing intellectual nomadism with youthful dispersion. The diversity of references, which is often disconcerting, in no way diminishes the rigour of the “fundamental poetic project” presented. So many breaking points, references and quotations move the boundaries of knowledge. Bypassing the cultural chessboard squares, they blur the traditional landmarks of legitimation and space out the mind, exhuming or exploring thoughts, near and far, that renew the relationship of human beings to the world of the Earth. Whether inside or outside European culture (and what is called the West, now carried on a planetary scale), Kenneth White treads on various paths, in an enlarged space-time. His syncretic approach will no doubt displease specialists of such or such author, those used to circumscribed objects or to specific and restricted fields. But White never discredits academic specializations, which he feeds on advantageously. His approach is different, and this difference determines the scope of his own work, which is transdisciplinary and nomadic. A work open to other cultures, to other knowledge, to other fields of experience, animated and magnetized by the same requirement, first described as “cosmopoetic” in the first texts: to find and express an “immediate” relationship with the Earth.

The words “white world” have long translated this advance out of our acosmic, ecocidal, “de-terrestrialed” modernity (M. Deguy). They indicated a potential space of thought that embraces, on the margins of modern indifference to the Earth and to all its existents, other ways of staying on it and inhabiting it.



Questioning our cultural and conceptual heritage, White rejects the profound orientation followed for a few centuries. He does so by crossing certain fences, by venturing *outside*, here or elsewhere, “to discover cultural contexts and ways of thinking” distorted or devalued by the Moderns (now globalized). Both a rupture and a crossing, his reading of the “Library of the Universe” invites us to “go out”. To go out both inside and outside, towards inner and outer spaces open to each other, providing possibilities for exchange and reciprocity, inviting another circulation of meaning, in search of “a life less confined to the socio-personal, a broader epistemological field, a more vigorous ethics, an aesthetic vision of the world, a poetry of the cosmos“ (3).

*Une Apocalypse tranquille* in 1985 and *L'Esprit nomade* in 1987 continued this momentum. The chapters of these abundant books mark out a long journey leading to the essay *Le Plateau de l'Albatros*, published in 1994. A major moment (but by no means the final point) of this original journey seeking in all parts of the *world* the ferments of a sensitive thought, the book explains and reformulates the advances of previous publications. Subtitled “Introduction to Geopoetics”, it imposes a new lexicon of which the notion of geopoetics is the cornerstone. Many texts were published afterwards that deepened and deployed this notion. *Le Plateau de l'Albatros* is too often the only book referred to or cited when this notion is mentioned. Wrongly, since this is only an introduction, the premises of which are laid down in *L'Esprit nomade*, in a section entitled “Elements of Geopoetics”. *The geopoetic project is not one more contribution to the cultural variety show, nor it is a literary school, nor it is concerned with poetry considered as an art of intimacy*, White writes in this introduction. It is a *movement* that concerns the very way in which man bases his existence on earth.

(3) Kenneth White, *La Figure du dehors*, Paris, Grasset, 1982. In *The White World. Itineraries and texts* (Lausanne, Éditions Pierre-Alain Pingoud, 1989), White writes: “[...] A dense world, a well-founded culture, a world intimately and intensely lived. Grounding a culture based on the experience of such a world has been my goal since the beginning of my intellectual and poetic activity. (p. 9-10)

It is not a question of building a system, but of accomplishing, step by step, an exploration, an investigation, situating oneself, as far as the starting point is concerned, somewhere between poetry, philosophy, science (4). About fifteen books, published after *Le Plateau de l'Albatros*, clarify and complete it (5). Often ignored, they are nevertheless indispensable for anyone who hears about geopoetics without reducing this movement to a few superficial remarks.

Contemporary with Michel Serres's "natural contract", Gilles Deleuze's "geophilosophy", Félix Guattari's "ecosophy", the term shares the same horizon without losing its singularity. Geopoetics, geophilosophy, ecosophy or natural contract are part of a "post-modern" shift or fork on the road (post-modern designating here what comes "after" the Modern, less in the mode of succession or suture than of rupture) (6). "On the frontier of the human" (Saint-John Perse) as modernity defines it, on a devastated land where the "wounds of civilization", now exceeding "the capacities of mastery, both technical and political" (7), expose us to a "catastrophe of meaning" (8), these notions, the radicality of which we learn, confront us with the experience of the closure of an era which is also the end of an age of the world; they grasp what is happening to us, and, not giving up thinking about it, they work to re-situate thought, re-found speech, re-make the world poetically, philosophically and politically.

Questioning our "cultural and conceptual heritage", White declares that he is building the notion of geopoetics "from the scientific, philosophical, and literary points of view". Wanting to "*open a world*, following the lines of the Earth", "establish a relationship, and find the language of this relationship", the Whitian project presents itself as the possibility of a "new cultural foundation" in a de-terrestrialed *world*.

(4) K. White, *Le Plateau de l'Albatros*, Paris, Grasset, 1994, p. 12.

(5) Here are a few titles: *Déambulations dans l'espace nomade* (Crestet Centre d'Art/Actes Sud, 1995), *Les Affinités extrêmes* (Albin Michel, 2009), *Panorama géopoétique*, Éditions de la revue des Ressources, 2014), *Au large de l'histoire. Éléments d'un espace-temps à venir* (Le Mot et le reste, 2015), *Les Leçons du vent* (Isolato, 2019).

(6) See Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Équivalence des catastrophes. (Après Fukushima)*, Paris, Galilée, 2012, p. 31.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 43.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

It should therefore not be confused with ecopoetics, which has enjoyed undeniable academic favour in recent years. “A study of the literary forms that shape the use of places” (M. Collot), ecopoetics is a form of academic resilience and the expression of a neo-modernist recycling that is in no way up to the era shift that has been underway for more than half a century, a shift that it confuses with the recent emergence, precipitated by the awareness of the so-called climate “crisis”, of a “new feeling for nature” that brings more or less relevant developments (9).

A champion of this late conversion, Michel Collot denounces the thousand and one ramblings of geopoetics: of his project, his library, his expectations, his ambition, his formulations, to oppose it with the song of his wise prose. Good for him... But this chronic, stubbornly recurrent bitterness of which Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and a few others are now paying the price, is the symptom of a very usual disciplinary stiffening that is justified by a gloss in the spirit of the times: a little ego, a little eco, a little geo for a patched up humanism and a feeling for nature which is the flavour of the day.

This is of little consequence. If it sometimes reflects a concern for the world (which we salute of course), it remains far below what requires a poetics aimed at the right measure of the event. Huddled up in its thematic, stylistic and formal turf, barely agitated by timid proposals, which nevertheless consider themselves audacious, in favour of an “interdisciplinary opening”, the current bucolic and sentimental ecopoetics suffers from its own inadequacies. Aware of the narrowness of its disciplinary space, it certainly indicates that it can “associate with its approach” “literary history and geography”, and even, in order to avoid “anachronisms” and “quick judgments”, “be attentive to the teachings of the history of ideas and of literary history (10). Let us welcome this intellectual audacity as it should be.

(9) See *A new feeling of nature*, Paris, Corti, 2022.

(10) M. Collot, op. cit., pp. 174-175, and for the following quotation. I take up here and in the following developments a few sentences from a text, *Ecocriticism: front line*, published in issue no. 11 (December 2022) of the online journal *ELFe XX-XXI*, entitled *Ruptures écocritiques, à l'avant-garde*, <https://doi.org/10.4000/elfe.2854>

But it is difficult to see how ecopoetics, sheltered from the gusts of time and of the weather, can “embrace the diversity and complexity of the writings of nature” (since that is what it claims to do) by confining itself, struck by anachronism, to a worn-out definition of nature and by rejecting counter-modern writings in the margins of the Belles-Lettres deconstructing the Cartesian language of modernist control. No one can deny that “literature plays an essential role in the way we inhabit the world“ (11); but the literary re-grounding of this “inhabiting” requires a little more than the thematic survey and formal analysis of naturalist occurrences in fiction and non-fiction, poems, a-poems and post-poems of recent decades. These exercises are not lacking in interest, they can even be useful; but their relevance is less if it is a question of proposing a “completely different” reading (12) of the human presence on earth. The devastation of the biosphere is such today that it condemns us to no longer mistake smoke for fire. Because we are reaching a tipping point that has long been foretold, because “we are on the limits of the previous civilization (which is still ours), which has become very toxic“ (13), we must (re)learn to “relate to the world”, to think and speak about it without repeating, revised and corrected, the modern presuppositions, entangled as we are in the consequences of their consequences.

There is therefore no point in discrediting geopoetics in favour of a sour and quavering ecopoetics. Let us rather work to strengthen their respective advances, to make their meetings and exchanges fruitful. The question that runs through the geopoetic project comes from elsewhere and goes further. Attentive to the thoughts and works that denounce a catastrophic planetary future, and even more attentive to those, wherever they come from, that experience another – *terrestrialed* – relationship to the world and dispense a terrified *gai savoir*, Kenneth White has gone to the crossroads of what has been called East and West.

(11) Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu. Essais d'écopoétique*, Marseille, Wildproject, 2015, p. 273.

(12) Here we are “*devant le rien-ou-le-tout-autre*”, writes Jean-Luc Nancy in *La Peau fragile du monde* (Paris, Galilée, 2020, p. 14).

(13) See Bernard Stiegler, “*A limit beyond which is the unknown*”, *ELFe XX-XXI* (O. Penot-Lacassagne dir.), n° 11, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4000/elfe.2854>

For the question is always / how / out of all the chances and changes / to select / the features of real significance / so as to make / of the welter / a world that will last, he wrote in 1967 in *Le Grand Rivage*.

From *La Figure du dehors* to *Affinités extrêmes* (2009), from the *Plateau de l'Albatros* to *Mémorial de la terre océane* (2019), White has mapped multiple territories of thought that break with or are foreign to the “unearthing” of modern practices and knowledge. At the limits of literature, he deployed a message whose topicality cannot be disputed. His work is part of the ongoing bifurcation, which imposes a radical reorganization of our societies and a no less profound overhaul of our knowledge and teaching. The radicality of the current situation requires a new conceptuality. Kenneth White’s work contributes to the emergence of this other conceptuality, which experiences the present and listens to what is to come. We must read it without reducing it, we must situate it, contextualize it, question its surroundings, recognize its proximity, follow its progress. We must express its singularity, its lucidity, its clear-sightedness, its necessity.

# Kenneth White: Fairlie's beachcomber

Stéphane Bigeard

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This text is an excerpt from a work in progress on the different facets of Kenneth White's life and work.

In the early 1940s, the White family moved from Glasgow to Fairlie on the northwest coast of Scotland in an effort to find a more peaceful and healthy environment for the whole family. Young Kenneth was four years old at the time. During his childhood and teenage years, in this small coastal community, he made two major discoveries for his personal development and the work to come: the seashore and the back country, the "matrix hills" as he would call them. Kenneth White, on several occasions in his work, and also in his intellectual autobiography, mentioned the importance for him of these two primary spaces. The exploration of the hinterland and the appropriation of the Fairlie shoreline must be considered as the archetypes of all his future peregrinations around the world.

In an anthology devoted to the maternal figure (1), White opened up about his mother as rarely before. He relates the following anecdote: "Then came the inevitable conflicts of adolescence. I was never directly coerced, but I felt hampered by a kind of expectation, by an attachment that I appreciated and at the same time rejected. My mother would have liked me to become a doctor, or a lawyer, someone socially recognized, but she realized very early on that I wasn't interested. When I was asked the question, I answered: "I want to be a beachcomber!" Which made my father laugh who said that I was going to become an intellectual tramp."

(1) BISIAUX M., JAJOLET C., *A ma mère, 50 écrivains parlent de leur mère*, Horay, 2006, p. 306.

The teenager's rebuff illustrates two traits of his character: his independence of mind very early on, but also, already, his attraction to nomadism. It should be noted that the story says nothing about the mother's reaction. It is very likely that Mrs. White did not welcome such a vocation. Indeed, the *beachcomber* is "socially recognised" but not for the best reasons in the Anglo-Saxon imagination and culture. This name refers to the South Sea globetrotters who, from the seventeenth century, took advantage of the commercial and colonial expansion of the European powers in the Pacific to deal in and trade with the indigenous populations. Here is their description in *Histoire de l'Océanie* (2) : "From the entry to the Pacific Ocean to the European ecumene to the formalisation of the Western powers' interests from the 1840's onwards, Oceania was a pioneering front. The islands and lagoons contained riches to be seized and their populations are both souls to be saved and a labour force. This period was marked by personal initiatives: it was the time of *beachcombers*, traffickers and the predation trade that also inaugurated new forms of mobility for Oceanians. These informal relations had a profound impact on the islands and their populations".

The American Melville and the Scotsman Stevenson made literary types of them in their South Sea novels, a fact that White, already a great reader, could not ignore: "From the end of the seventeenth century to the first decades of the nineteenth century, Oceania was marked by the figure of the *beachcomber*. Herman Melville, inspired by the months he spent in the Marquesas Islands during the year 1842, used the term in his first two novels, *Taipei* (1846) and *Omou* (1847), the success of which contributed to the dissemination of the literary image of the *beachcomber*". (ibid.)

(2) MOHAMED-GAILLARD Sarah, « Chapitre 3 - Beachcombers et trafiquants dans les îles », in : *Histoire de l'Océanie. De la fin du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours*, under the direction of MOHAMED-GAILLARD Sarah. Paris, Armand Colin, « Collection U », 2015, p. 38-52.

Stevenson in his novel *The Ebb-Tide* (a novel written in collaboration with Lloyd Osbourne and published in 1894) makes him a central character of colonisation: “Runaways, castaways and renegades, beachcombers lived in the Pacific Islands, and were the vagrants of the South Seas. Historically, they were most prominent in the early nineteenth century, and belonged to the medial phase between the Pacific Islanders’ first contact with Europeans, and the formal colonization that followed. Roaming from one island to another, trading skills and goods with their inhabitants, the beachcombers were driven further and further afield as Western powers began to annex the Pacific Islands”(3).

The *beachcomber* therefore leads a wandering life, a marginal and free life in a space that has not yet been westernized and has a strong and ancestral culture. Enough to captivate the young White. It is interesting to note that the author would borrow much later, but also from Melville, another similar literary type and another marginal figure: that of the *isolato* (4).

We must summon another figure, prehistoric this time, to fully understand what the young White wanted to say to his parents at the time: that of the *strandlooper* or *strandloper* (literally: beach walker). This term refers to tribes of mollusc fishermen who led a nomadic existence in small bands in coastal regions. White evoked their memory in a poem from the collection, *Le passage extérieur* (p.80):

### THE STRANDLOOPER

Nomad of the coast

paleolithic pathfinder  
in the old boreal days

(3) ROBINSON Alistair, *Beachcombers: Vagrancy, Empire, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Ebb-Tide*, *The Review of English Studies*, Volume 70, Issue 297, November 2019, Pages 930–949.

(4) [See "Isolato" in the Dictionary of geopoetics](#)



went from rock to rock  
looking for whelks and limpets  
dug for razorfish and cockles

but also spent many an hour  
just wandering along the sands  
at nights, there in the high lands  
looking up at the Great Bear.

And young Kenneth, while fishing for molluscs himself along the shores of Fairlie, may have had a thought for these coastal nomads: “In addition to his work as a switchman, my father had taken up collecting whelks. We sent these whelks to Billingsgate Market, London, and were given between thirty and thirty-five shillings per bag, depending on the market. Morning and evening, depending on the fluctuations of the ocean (every month my father cut out the tide timetable in the local newspaper and pinned it to the kitchen wall), my father was “on the shore” and I sometimes accompanied him. It was hard work, especially for the back, because we were constantly bent in half, but also for the hands, especially the fingers (my mother had made mittens for us, because we had to have free fingers). And it was not enough to collect whelks in bulk, we had to choose the right ones, otherwise the buyer would refuse them. So we picked up in the silence of the foreshore, only a seagull sometimes screamed in the greyness and then there was also the *tip-tip-tip* of the whelks in the bucket”(5).

White, in memory and also in homage to his father, wrote *The Little Whelk-Gathering Song* (6) :

*For Bill White, at Fairlie*

“My skin is weatherbeaten, my destiny unknown.”  
(Japanese folksong)

We used to gather them  
down the dark mornings

dragging back the seaweed fronds  
salt water, bands frozen

(5) WHITE Kenneth, *Entre deux Mondes*, Le Mot et le Reste, p. 57.

(6) WHITE Kenneth, *Terre de diamant*, Grasset, p.37.

*tip, tip, tip, tip*

*tip, tip, tip, tip*

it takes a hell of a lot of whelks  
to fill a bucket

and eight long buckets  
to fill a sack

While he was on the shore with his son, was William White Sr., a railroad switchman by trade, thinking about his prediction hidden behind his joke? Would his son continue to collect periwinkles like him to improve the ordinary or would he really become an intellectual tramp? By the way, how does an intellectual tramp earn his bread? And how can he reassure his mother about the future of their child?

The young poet's thoughts are elsewhere. While carrying out this laborious work, the young White experiences above all the "silence of the foreshore", a silence that is quite relative, and, through this silence, that of the intense presence of a world that it will be up to him to invest poetically.

Many years later, having become a consecrated author, he would specify in an interview: "When I was a child and was asked what I wanted to become 'in life', I always answered: *beachcomber*. Even today, this word continues to exert a certain fascination on my mind, and perhaps I even find it difficult to make a clear distinction between this word and that of writer"(7).

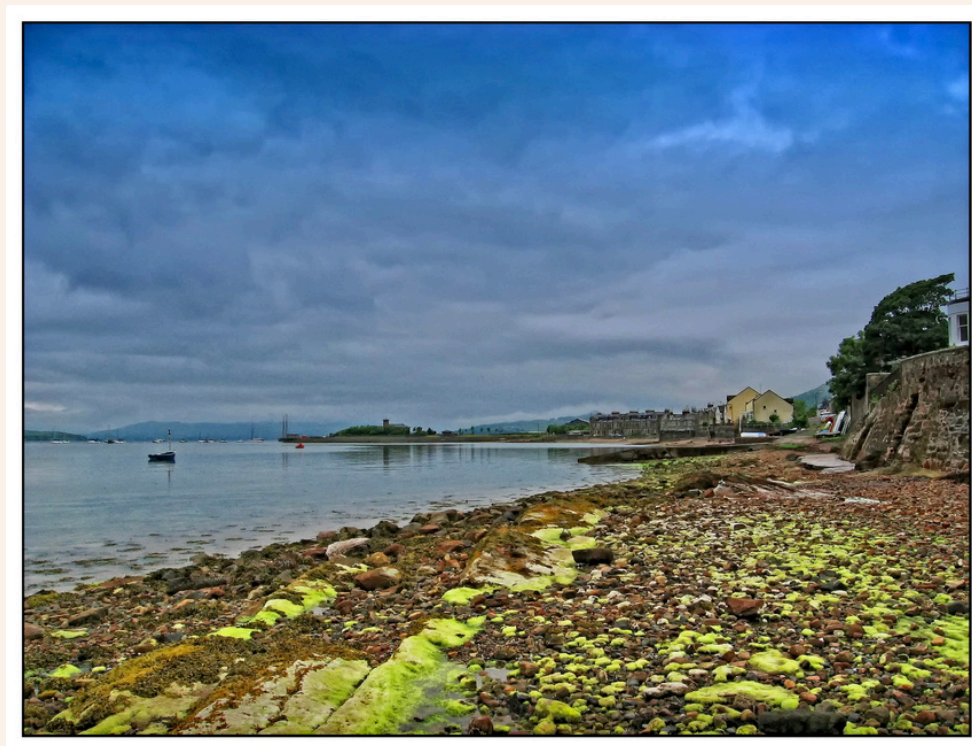
In another interview, with Gilles Plazy, he will return to this leitmotif of his work:

"Gilles Plazy: *When you were a child and you were asked: "What will you do when you grow up?"*, you answered (*in English it's prettier*): '*beachcomber*'.

(7) PICHON Michèle, *L'écumeur de rivages*, ARTUS, ECOSSE Blanches terres, n°21-22, janvier 1986.

Kenneth White: Beachcomber. Yes, it came out of my mouth like that and I stayed true to that image. Most of my travels end up on a shoreline. And this is a recurring image in my essays. At the end of my essay on Segalen, we are on a bare shore, where all the old philosophy is shattered, it is a beach strewn with wrecks of thought, with things that are difficult to define that are beginning to manifest their presence. For me, this is the very image of the landscapes of thought today. The human being, at the limit of himself, facing an open landscape” (8).

It remains for us to describe the path that leads to this geopoetics of the shoreline.



Fairlie Beach, Ayrshire, Scotland

(8) WHITE Kenneth, *Le lieu et la parole, Entretiens 1987-1997*, Éditions du Scorf, 1996, p. 17.

# A bivouac for heritage / Open letter to Kenneth White

Yannick Barazer

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*Kilo, Echo, November, November,  
Echo, Tango, Hotel  
Whisky, Hotel, India,  
Tango, Echo.*

....

*Golf, Whisky, Echo, November,  
Victor, Echo, Delta*

.....

*Kilo, Echo, November, November, Echo, Tango, Hotel  
Whisky, Hotel, India, Tango, Echo.*

*Golf, Whisky, Echo, November, Victor, Echo, Delta*

.....

*Contact /  
(Not a ghost)*

Listening to the muffled creaking of a footstep approaching on a snowy moor. A break in the mist and there you are.

Hi Kenneth.

I found an anecdote on the Facebook page of one of your friends, Paul Mirat, telling the story of your meeting in a bar in Pau in the 70's, and the name you gave to your Montblanc pen: *Old Crow*. I smiled.

Since it was founded in Montpellier, in 2020, the Atelier Géopoétique des Marges situates and orients its approach from the *Rêve du Moustier des fous* of your *Borderland* (Éd. Vagamundo, 2018).

I'll let you speak:

*"And the other night, in the twilight of the gods and idols, in the darkness of my oceanic studio, I had one of the wildest dreams of my life.*

*I dreamed that I had founded a monastery.*

*Rest assured, nothing religious, nothing ecclesiastical.*

*Imagine in a remote place in the Côtes-d'Armor, an old abandoned lighthouse.*

*(...) it was there that I founded my monastery, (...) with the idea of making it a place of laughing resistance, of original meditation, of transcendental irony and of salty wisdom.*

*When I woke up, I immediately knew that it was not one of those vague psychotropic mixtures that we know, but a projective dream, of a very rare kind, opening up a field of great dimensions.*

*(...) Cultured readers will recall Nietzsche's words (...), concerning the need, in an age of total decay, to create monasteries of a new type, where a fundamental, possibly foundational, experiment would continue. »*

The rest of the text humorously presents a therapeutic praxis the essence of which can be summed up in one word: *'Okeanisation'*.

In fact, it is in the double momentum of the Oceanification movement of the International Institute of Geopoetics and of the *'movement of the margins'* in your book *Borderland* that, starting from the *Dream of the Moustier des Fous*, Cécile Vibarel and I formulated the first intention of our work program and gave it a direction.

Joining gesture to thought, we quickly decided, on the occasion of a timely opening, to experience the spatialisation of the *body-mind* on a tropical island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, for four years of geopoetic research and wanderings. It will be Bora Bora in the Leeward Islands, a string of islands in the Society Islands (Polynesia).

— A geopoetics grounded in your texts, in the concepts and values that your work transmits to us.

— A dream unlocked from imagination, psychology and idealism to become the very gesture that directs the flow of vital energy in the opening between the body and the world.

We are moving towards a '*Geopoetic Dreaming*'.

First, as an anchor, a laboratory and a residence originating from the Dream, we elaborate the concept of the *Insular Body*, as an open place everywhere, a centre and a totality of space. From it, we can consider the *body-mind*, integrate and activate the *psychocosmogram*, articulate the *landscape/mindscape* equation and wandering extravagantly, following *the lines of the Earth*. The Insular Body is the foundation of a singular and plural World, a gateway into the open space.

In June 2024, we publicly presented for the first time, on the occasion of an installation in the *Muriavai* Room of the *Te Fare Tauhiti Nui* Cultural Centre in Papeete, an '*Insular Body Cartography*', in the form of a contemporary art installation accompanied by a Notice where we exhibited the germ of the atopic concept that we will develop and branch out along the way. It is a free and gratuitous gesture, an offering to Earth, an essential poetic act that inseminates the very body of the world with a dream.

From the geopoetics point of view, the installation ‘*Mape / Insular Body Cartography*’ is conceived as the projection of an architectural structure for the *Moustier des Fous*, that is to say that it is, in ‘Dream Time’, ‘off the coast of History’, a ‘*Dreaming*’ of the institutional edifice of geopoetics. A nomadic architecture, essentially a place of passage, it is a bivouac, a base camp for openness: it installs energy mechanisms.



- The aiming trajectories of the 4 astronomical telescopes form the edges of a pyramid. They converge onto a point located at the top of the mat and vertical to the centre of the pigment mat (a circle on the ground 8 meters in diameter).
- As optical instruments, these astronomical telescopes represent the scopic drive, the desire to see (the effort of knowledge, or consciousness). Their aims mark the projective features of a long glance towards the summit point.

- This point, invisible to the naked eye, is the lighthouse, the solar source (an abstraction, the place in – and outside – all places, Atopia that is). From it flows to the ground (the visible part of Earth), a flux of poetic inspiration, a chain and an artery of meaning, which generates and animates the landscape of the visible (the pigment) in lines, shapes and colours. Here it is a very concrete grove of three *mape* (Tahitian chestnut trees) which is ‘open’ (i.e., inhabited), mapped and invested as an anchoring place for our representation of the Insular Body, but the places on Earth and the scales of possible renderings are, in theory, infinite.
- In return, the ground thus animated emanates a radiance (diffuse radiance of colour and drawing). Astronomical telescopes metabolise it, concentrate it and project it in four rays towards the point of abstraction, at the top of the pyramid. The latter, thus fed with the visible, absorbs it in Atopia’s infinite whiteness. It itself, in turn, sends back to the ground a regenerating solar vitality, and so on.
- It is a complete cycle, a sensitive dialogue between the Visible and the Invisible. A tree (in this case, three trees) feeding on air and light as well as on the soil nutrients to develop its wood through a circulating and expansive process.

Starting from the 3D space (the concrete place — the *mape* grove) and the modalities of perception of the physical body, through which it approaches the world: up/down, far/near, hot/cold, lines, textures, colours... (the ‘primary virtues of physical reality’ according to J.-J. Wunenburger), open in resonance, through a few folds, a few possible passages, other dimensions.





It is in this broadening, embracing space in its totality and its multi-dimensionality, the two *enveloping each other*, that geopoetic navigation finds the necessity of an awakened conduct of the Dream, (*North-South-East-West. Lights!*), a navigation ‘by the stars’ like the one practiced by the first Polynesians, for example, launched into the unknown of the oceanic opening. These green reflections of the clouds in the distance announcing the proximity of a lagoon, an island, these constellations of the Southern Hemisphere, these birds of the high seas, these winds and currents that evolve with the seasons: landmarks, coordinates of reality on the Ocean.

The navigator of the Geopoetic Dream is naturally a cosmographer, or better, he has access, in the form of intuitions and presentiments, to an integral cosmographic knowledge of the multiple dimensions of space and of the nature of the relations between them. Anchored in the Island Corps, he did not lose his bearings. He is the North himself.

These are the sketches that we are drawing today from the *Dream of the Moustier des Fous*. It is the discreet pass on the ‘*Narrow Road to the North*’ that the Atelier Géopoétique des Marges is applying to explore and map, keeping the course that you initiated, Kenneth, within the Institute.

Crouching on the threshold of my hut, it is time for me to come out of my reverie and to let you go.

A light rain crackles and sparks on the banana tree leaves.

The echo of a laugh.

Friendly regards.

Yannick Barazer, for the Atelier Géopoétique des Marges,  
Bora Bora, June-September 2024

# Geopoetics: a full presence to the world

Régis Poulet

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This text was the subject of a first presentation at the Labgeopoetics First Transatlantic Forum, on July 18, 2024 in Bahia, Brazil.

It is possible to distinguish three levels of reality: the Cosmos, which is the totality of that which exists in all directions and dimensions of the universe/pluriverse; the Earth, which is the part of the Cosmos where humanity and all living beings live; and the world, which is the representation that humans have of the Earth and of the Cosmos. The change is constant on these three levels: as far as we know, the Cosmos has existed for about fifteen billion years, but it is not excluded that it will experience cycles of creation/destruction. Planet Earth, too, has an existence already ancient – more than four billion years – during which endless changes at all spatial and temporal scales have been and still are the rule. As for the worlds, they follow one another throughout human history. The world of the Neanderthals was probably not that of the Homo sapiens and, since the latter species imposed itself, civilisations have followed one another until our time when widespread collapse is threatening because of the technical-metaphysical hold on Nature. The world in which we live is deadly and moribund. So we have to change it, but for which world?

## 1 – FIRST APPROACH

For decades, Kenneth White travelled as an intellectual nomad through past and present cultures, with the idea that each culture offers a partial point of view and that by nomadically wandering from one to the other in search of the best of each of them in relation to the natural world, one could draw the contours of a complete culture in an open world. As he writes in *Magna Carta : It is difficult to exit Modernity without regressing back to old symbols, without headlong rush*. Indeed, to have a culture, in the strong meaning of the term, humans, at all levels of society, must share a strong common reference.

During prehistoric times, he added, it was the relationship with the animal; during the Christian Middle Ages, the reference to the Virgin. In our era of globalisation of exchanges, of technical-capitalistic ruin that is dragging everything towards nothingness, the only possible common point is the relationship to Earth. Put men in touch with Earth, he says, and they will have a stronger bond with each other than if they were only put in touch with each other. The logical continuation of intellectual nomadism is geopoetics. Perhaps it is not useless to quickly recall what it is and what it is not.

Geopoetics is not a literary geography, vaguely lyrical. It is a field of convergence of the arts, sciences and philosophy opening up a re-grounding of the relationship between humans and Earth. Kenneth White and I discussed at length in interviews the question of the differences between geopoetics and other geo-: geopolitics, geocriticism, geophilosophy, etc. in the book *Panorama géopoétique* (2014).

However, I would like to insist a little more on the relationship between ecology and geopoetics, and to quote Kenneth White:

“Being an ecologist means being interested in the way human and non-human beings live in a space and it is also respecting and wanting to preserve living spaces.

Geopoetics is about establishing the relationship to this space. Not only to preserve it, to protect it, but to establish a sensitive and intelligent relationship.

Which requires a change in the person, a change in the being, and goes further.

Then, we must try to express it, that is to say that we must change our language. There are two more steps.” (*Le lieu et la parole*)

Ecology is one of the strata of geopoetics, without any doubt, but geopoetics proposes and demands more: a change in the person that implies getting rid of identity obsessions, on the way to the concept of a being open to the flows of the world; a change in the way we express our relationship to the world, which we know is wrapped up in grammar. This starts, in particular, with a language that puts forward “neither the self, nor the word, but the world”. In other words, attention to the poetics of the Earth.

## **2 – THE SOURCES OF GEOPROETICS**

Invented by Franco-Scottish poet-thinker Kenneth White in the late 1970’s (but the premises go back a long way in his experience) during a journey to Labrador (*La Route bleue*, 1983), geopoetics did not appear out of nowhere. Among the precursors of a renewed and richer vision of the world put forward by White in his essays are Victor Segalen, Henry Thoreau and Alexander von Humboldt.

Kenneth White considers Humboldt's *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (30 vols., 1807-1834) to be 'a geopoetic peregrination par excellence', as is *Cosmos. Essai d'une description physique du Monde* (4 vols., 1847-1859) is one of those masterly syntheses such as the minds of the nineteenth century could produce.

What particularly attracts attention in Humboldt is not only his wide-ranging contributions to universal science. If he was a scholar of great precision and scope, he should not be seen as an austere scholar but rather as a 'fervent lover' of the world (Baudelaire). If he travelled for five years, and often in more than difficult material conditions, through New Granada and Peru, through New Spain, from Cumaná to San Carlos, from Cartagena to Quito, from Lima to Veracruz, it was because he was profoundly happy there. Here is what he wrote on his arrival in Cumaná: 'We are here, at last, in the most divine and wonderful country. Extraordinary plants, electric eels, tigers, armadillos, monkeys, parrots and many, many pure, semi-wild Indians, a very beautiful and interesting race of man. Since our arrival, we have been running like crazy... I feel like I'll be happy here'. In Humboldt's work, knowledge is linked to being, being is linked to the environment and, thanks to an aesthetic preoccupation, we feel that the mind can project itself far away – where a vision of the world, rich and habitable, a cosmos, is elaborated: 'a set of relationships', he writes, 'which is easier to grasp, when one is on the spot, than to define with precision'. One could say that Humboldt uses a *gaya scienza* to approach geopoetics.

But it is Kenneth White who founded this theory-practice.

It was in 1994 that he devoted his first essay exclusively to geopoetics. *Le Plateau de l'Albatros – Introduction à la géopoétique*, whose name is borrowed from this plateau that barely emerges from the water a thousand nautical miles from the Galapagos – ‘what better symbol for an emerging thought (that of geopoetics)?’ *Le Plateau de l'Albatros* is not a manual of geopoetics: ‘The emphasis here is not on definition, but on desire, a desire for life and the world, and on momentum’. It is not a matter of founding a literary movement, not least because ‘poetics’ is to be taken in the sense of ‘fundamental formation and dynamics’ capable of manifesting themselves in the sciences, in the arts or in language – and not in the sense of ‘in relation to poetry’. Nor is it a question of founding a system, on the contrary: we remain open and in the rejection of dogmatism because geopoetic theory is inseparable from its practice, it is ‘a basic idea that cannot be defined in abstracto but that takes shape in vivo, from several contexts’.

The geopoetic project must constitute, in the history of the mind, a new tool or instrument for understanding and expressing our relationship to the world. It will thus succeed Aristotle’s *Organon* (that of the entire classical period), Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (that of modernity) and will be an organum for today and tomorrow: *Organum Geopoeticum*. In *Panorama géopoétique*, White specifies:

“Aristotle’s space was the Mediterranean. Bacon’s was already a more turbulent sea, which extended beyond the Pillars of Hercules: the Atlantic (“the least enclosed site,” says St. John Perse), and, beyond, the World Ocean. Total openness, with a lot of risks, a lot of disasters on the horizon. As Melville says, in *Moby Dick*: “all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea”. (PG 99-100)

To work on geopoetics is to open oneself, intellectually and sensitively, to the poetics at work in nature, to the spontaneous natural poetics. The method of intellectual nomadism (“north, south, east, west – ancient and modern worlds”) and the objective of geopoetics are to study the complex relationships between the self, the word and the world, the search for a new expressiveness, a *poetics of the Earth*.

To do this, “the geopoetic approach explores the archaic path and the anarchic voice, before embarking on other nameless paths”.

### **3 - THE ARCHAIC NEW WORLD**

The practice of drifting, nomadism and wandering is the foundation of geopoetics, but it is obviously not reduced to it. The great American wandering began long before the Pilgrim Fathers of the Mayflower. Because “worlds in gestation and development tend to freeze into empires”, White follows in the footsteps of wandering peoples in the history of the New World. The question of the ‘New World’ is freed from its Vespuccian limits to be returned to its indefinite quest. And it must be said that knowledge about how the American continent was populated is constantly evolving.

For a long time, the original settlement of the Americas was considered in the form of a great migration of Asians who passed through the Bering Strait during the Palaeolithic, thanks to an ice-free corridor 13,000 years ago. This was the immovable position of American prehistorians. But discoveries have been accumulating in recent decades in the United States, Chile and Brazil tending to prove that human presence in the Americas is not only much older than the Bering Strait theory, but that settlement took place at several times and along various routes.



To say a few words, the oldest settlement, according to the audacious theory of the Franco-Brazilian prehistorian and anthropologist Niède Guidon, would have taken place from West Africa to the north-east coast of Brazil around 100,000 years BCE. Discoveries in Brazil, such as at Pedra Furada or Pedra Pintura (notably studied by one of my former professors in palaeontology, Claude Guérin) have shown that the population there is found to be between 11,000 BCE and 38,000 BCE. Additional hypotheses support a migration from northern Asia along the western coasts of the Americas, the theory of the Kelp forest route (coastal algae), 16,000 years ago, when the ice shield was still preventing transit through Alaska and Canada. There is also a theory that South America was populated from Sondaland (the province of the Sunda Islands in Southeast Asia) through the South Pacific 50,000 years ago. The different clans would have spread throughout the American continent.

Why valuing this drifting so much? Because “travel and vision go together, one is not possible without the other”. Just as the founders of cities, states and empires, by becoming sedentary, are able to impose their human vision of existence on humans, the nomads in their desire for the world are aware of the illusion of most human goals. They remain in contact with the world and do not base their culture, as the Greeks did for their cities, on an excess that is only a black hole. Let’s move from these anthropological and archaic considerations to contemporary and individual considerations — this is what intellectual nomadism allows us to do.

#### **4 – MAPS AND CHARTERS**

In 2020, Kenneth and I had toyed with the idea of going together to South America, Brazil and Chile in particular, where geopoetics is generating a strong interest. This could not be done. Kenneth visited the Caribbean many times and I have visited a country neighbouring Brazil: Venezuela.

From my travels on both sides of the Atlantic, I have drawn a very long poem (of more than 100 pages) entitled *Gondawana*. Although Kenneth did not set foot on South American soil, he read many accounts of explorers (Humboldt, mentioned earlier, Jean de Léry, Claude D'Abbeville, in particular) and consulted old maps. He drew from it the book *Magna Carta*, illustrated by Dominique Rousseau.

Although I do not place these two books on the same level, let me briefly talk about mine, which Kenneth said was “right in the middle of geopoetics,” considering it “enormous.” Here is how the poem is presented:

“At a time when the collective destiny of living beings is threatened, this long poem evokes the epic account of the human species from its origins to the present day in its still close relationship with marine and terrestrial places, with the living beings that have populated them and still populate them.

The contemporary physical and mental exploration of several regions of the ancient geological province of Gondwana – with this –a of the origin and of new beginnings that appears at the heart of *Gondawana* – gives these verses the strength of an intensely lived experience in contact with the elements, the natural world and peoples, in search of the richest anarcho-archaic order to open and ground a world.”  
(*Gondawana*)

The writing follows the double path of intellectual nomadism and geopoetics. Namely, it is based on the integration (as effective and discreet as possible) of elements of naturalist (geology, paleogeography, botany, zoology, astronomy) and human (ethnography, history, philosophy, linguistics) knowledge that must be brought into resonance in order to draw a full voice from them on the places.

The case of *Magna Carta* is quite different but illustrates the double exploration at work in the ‘intellectual-geopoetic nomadism’ binomial. Unlike *Gondawana*, the sensory-physical exploration and the mental-abstract exploration are not accomplished by the same person but by two: Kenneth White for the geopoetic text and Dominique Rousseau for the geopoetic visual matter, the whole being organized by the poet. Dominique Rousseau’s long stays in Brazil allowed him to take on the role of collector of the world’s lines, his discussions with Kenneth White and the papers he created for him allowing the latter to enter into an aesthetic dialogue with the lands of Brazil. In *Magna Carta*, White thus specifies the difference between perception and sensation: the first grasping the forms of matter-world, the second, its forces, both combined to create a version of the world that constitutes a world in itself.

With this book written on Brazil for Brazil with an unprecedented distribution of roles, Kenneth White shows in an original way how the question of place can be considered in geopoetics.

## **5 – THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PLACE**

In his treatise entitled *Physics*, Aristotle already pointed out that place is something complex, that there is a place of the place and that place has a power. To stick to the fundamentals of geopoetics, let us first say that no place is isolated. With some knowledge of geology, it is possible to connect the present to the most distant past and here and there, a reading of the landscape that allows us to understand the forces that have shaped it. Similarly, with knowledge of animals, we can follow the migrations of birds and insects that introduce us to the flow and balance in the living world.

Finally, if we may say so, the observation of rains and rivers, of mists and sea currents, or the attention to winds, make not only intelligible but also perceptible the relationships in time and space between the elements, the mineral, the vegetal and the animal worlds, whose boundaries are sometimes so blurred.

The problem that we, humans, experience in our reading of reality is that “our representations do not correspond to the complex totality of reality, that our mental structures (erected as religions, ideologies, philosophies) block a full presence in the world” (*Magna Carta*). Thus, a place is much more than a set of physical, historical, and climatic details. A place is not only that, but also the situation that forces and forms that constantly run through it make it adopt, even briefly, even on a very small scale. The place is made up of a set of what could be called ‘dimensions of existence’ open to each other. To re-recognize these multiple dimensions of existence, one must first know them, that is, feel their reality in a body and in a mind.

I would like to end, without concluding, by quoting these lines from Kenneth White’s latest collection, *Mémorial de la terre océane*, which say in all simplicity what geopoetics opens up to:

Coming to a place  
where there is  
neither complication  
nor explanation

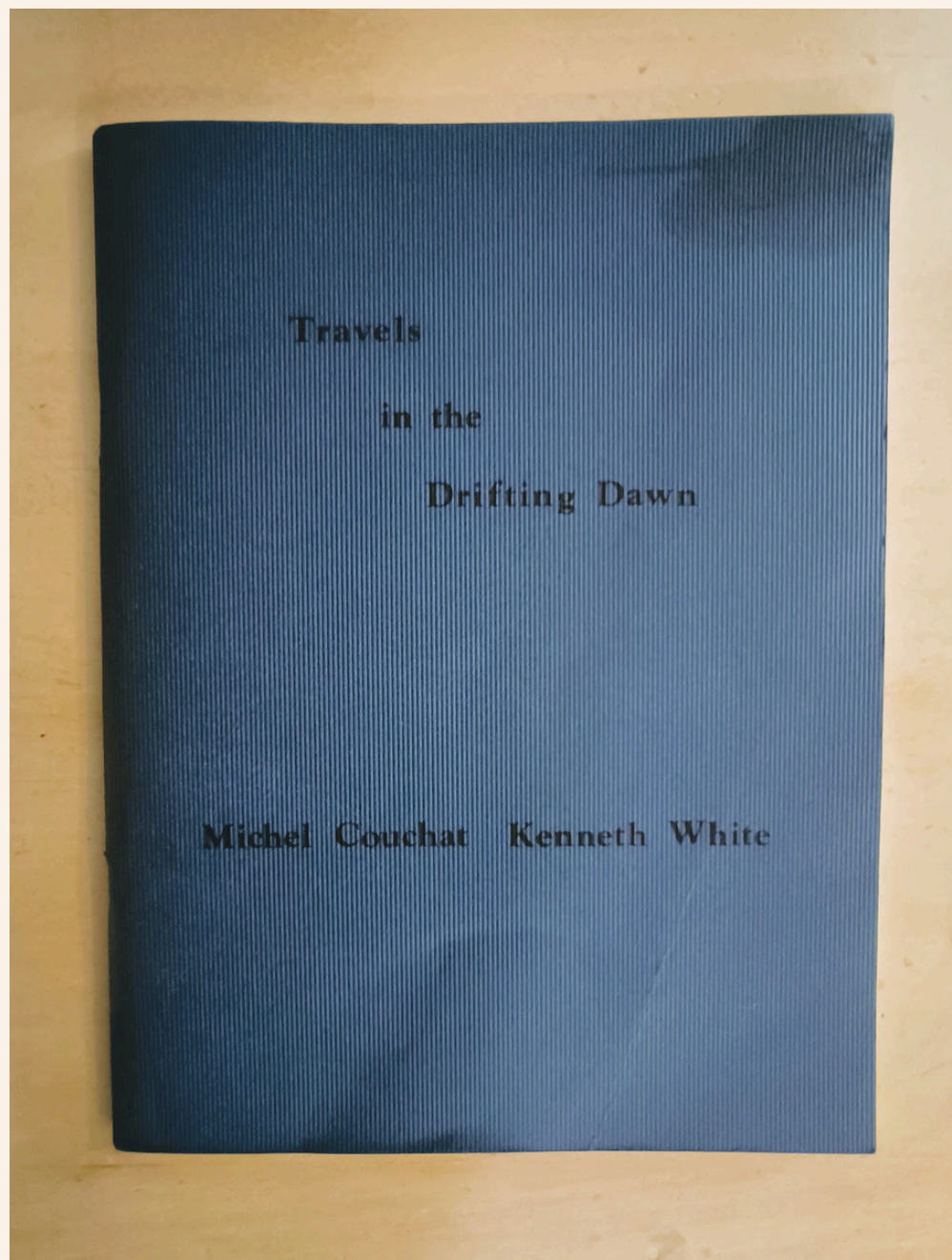
going forward step by step  
absolutely attentive  
to what is there.

# Notes on Kenneth White's bibliography.

## Travels in the Drifting Dawn

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Exhaustive bibliography of artist's books 1963 – 2023  
(revised, expanded and updated by Stéphane Bigeard)



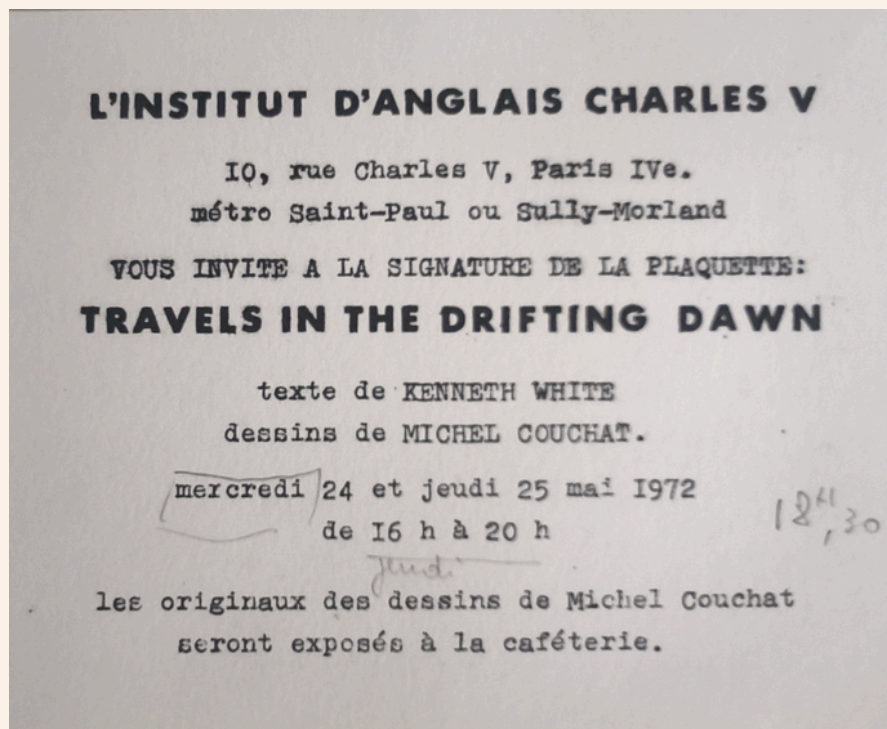
*Travels in the Drifting Dawn* was published by Kenneth White nine years after his first book, *Wild Coal*. This time it is a prose text and not poetry but still an original text in English. For this publication, White teamed up with a French artist, Michel Couchat.

**1. Description of the work:** Kenneth White, Michel Couchat, *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, IPI, Paris, 1972, paperbound (navy blue cover in corrugated cardboard, title and authors in black on the front cover), 20 pages. (26.5 x 20 cm). Decorated with Indian ink wash by Michel Couchat. The text is a facsimile reproduction of the original manuscript in English. Limited edition of 311 copies on GC2-140 gr offset paper, including 11 not-for-sale copies numbered from A to K. Sertaic printing house in Neuilly-sur-Seine.

**2. The artist:** Michel Couchat (1935-1998) devoted himself to opera singing in his youth. After teaching at the Beaux-Arts, he turned to painting with immediate success: at the age of 20, his first solo exhibition was held in Paris. In 1971, he exhibited at the Chapelle de Seillans in the Var, and then in Paris at the Galerie Remarque (Hélène Bondil), large washes in Indian ink evoking landscapes. These semi-abstractions are inspired by the work of landscape calligraphers from the Far East. Did Kenneth White and Michel Couchat meet during his exhibitions, deciding to collaborate? The fact remains that the artist used this wash technique to restore the Scottish landscapes evoked in the text.

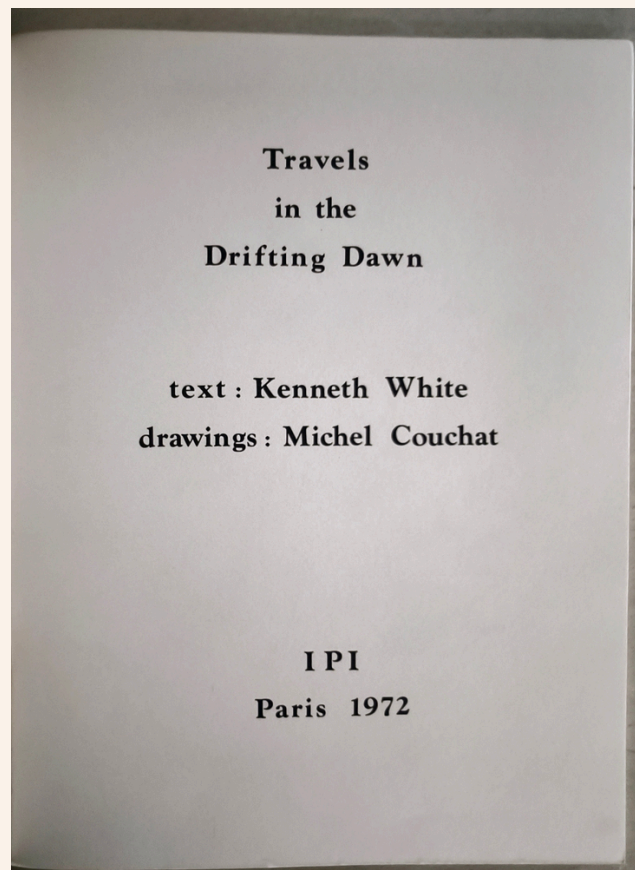
The publication of the book had a signing session organised on May 24-25, 1972 in the Cafeteria of the Charles V Institute of English in Paris (Kenneth White was then a reader) with an exhibition of the originals of Michel Couchat's drawings. This event is announced in a national education magazine (1). In 1984, Kenneth White wrote a text entitled "*Retrouvailles*" in presentation of an exhibition by Michel Couchat (*Retrouvailles*, catalogue of Michel Couchat's exhibition, paintings, Mairie du 14e, Paris, 28 Nov-16 Dec 1984).

The painter did not seem to have continued in the path of the artist's book and this work remains his only achievement in this field.



(1) *L'éducation*, SEVPEN, n°143, 1972.

**3. The publisher :** Which publisher is behind the acronym IPI? In his autobiography, *Entre deux mondes*, Kenneth White explains: “First and foremost Charles V gave me a salary. But I couldn’t entirely abandon my plans, my projects, and my vision of a truly vibrant university. Very soon after I started teaching at Charles V, I created a group and a magazine. This group was to be known as the IPI (Institut de poésie internationale) » (2). He went on to cite the program of this new para-university group founded by Kenneth White after the *Jargon Group* in Glasgow. The journal cited in this program is entitled *L’Œuf à plumes* (*The Feathered Egg*), two issues of which will be published. No other publication project was announced in this program: *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* seems to be the most ambitious publication project carried out by the IPI.

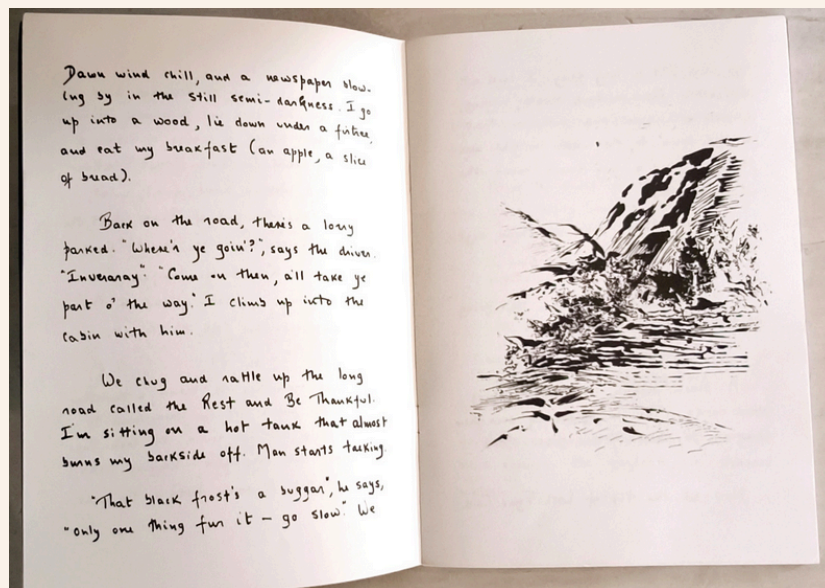
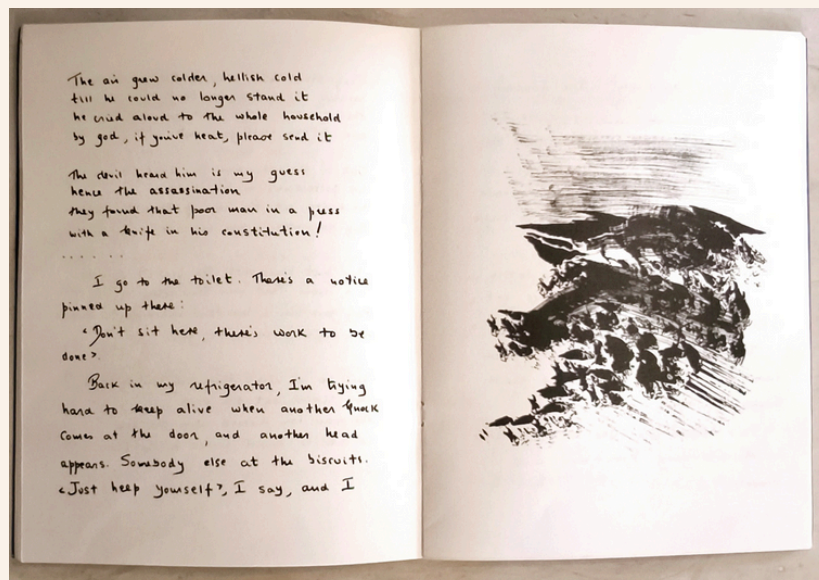


(2) Kenneth White, *Entre deux mondes*, Le Mot et le Reste, p. 303 and following.



In bibliographies devoted to Kenneth White's work, this work is sometimes mentioned as being published "Chez l'auteur" (3) or sometimes "Chez l'artiste". It can be concluded that the book was self-published by the two signatories.

**4. The text:** In April 1970, the journal *Traverse* n. 3 offers a French translation by Pierre Leyris of the text. In 1978, it found its place in the edition of *Dérives* published by Lettres Nouvelles (Maurice Nadeau).



(3) In the bibliography of the original edition of *Terre de diamant* (Alfred Eibel, 1977) the book is indicated as being published by the author.

# The Dictionary of geopoetics

## Géopoétique

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Conceived by Stéphane Bigeard

### Definitions (1)

The very term geopoetics is a neologism. As White puts it: "The idea was latent and the practice was at work from the beginning, and the word had unexpectedly popped up here and there in my mouth and under my pen around the end of the seventies. It seemed to 'crystallize' a large number of diverse and floating elements. It has been pointed out to me recently that this word has already appeared in a fleeting way in other contexts, both literary and scientific. I take note of that. But it's not a paternity that I claim, it's a poeticity. Not a word, but the development of a concept." PA, p. 13.

White gave several definitions of this unifying and multiple notion, including :

#### *First definition:*

“Geopoetics is a transdisciplinary theory-practice applicable to all the domains of life and research. Its aim is to re-establish and enrich the Humanity-Earth relationship long since deteriorated when not totally destroyed, with consequences now well documented on the ecological, psychological and intellectual plane. Geopoetics presents new existential perspectives in an open world.”

(1) The list of works and their abbreviations is [available here](#).

*Second definition:*

“Over the centuries and millenia, culture (a practice permitting an enhancement of life and the expansion of intelligence) has been founded on myth, religion and metaphysics. Nowadays, what is called « culture » is founded on nothing. It simply proliferates, its only law being that of the market. Geopoetics proposes a new grounding.”

*Third definition :*

“Geopoetics is at once the study of the inherent organization of the universe, the formation of a human world and the expression of this formation. The poetization of the geopoetician proceeds from both investigation and intuition. Geopoetics uses language in a way that is both flexible and dense.”

However, we know very precisely, in White’s words, what this notion did not cover:

”Geopoetics has nothing to do with any neo-shamanism. Nor can it be reduced to a geographical lyricism, or to a lyrical geography, or to a vague ‘poetry of nature’. Geopoetics is not confined to ‘poetry’ or ‘art’. By the way, if I say ‘geopoetician’ (like logician, mathematician), and not ‘geopoet’, it’s to ward off reductions of the notion to some kind of lyrical expression of geography.”

Kenneth White further developed his concept:

Geopoetics is an “attempt to renew culture, to create a new cultural space, by returning to the base on which we try to live, the Earth itself. It is a question of establishing with this "ground" the most sensitive, the most intelligent, the most subtle relationship possible. Then, to find the language for this relation.”

“What I mean by ‘poetics’ is a fundamental dynamics of thought. That’s why, in my sense of things, there can be not only a poetics of literature, but a poetics of philosophy, a poetics of the sciences, and, why, not, at least potentially, a poetics of politics. The geopoetician is placed from the start within an enormity. I’m using ‘enormous’, first, in the quantitative, encyclopaedic sense (I’m by no means against the quantitative provided there may be enough energy around to get it moving), then, further, in the sense of ‘exceptional’ (outside the norms). By moving an enormous amount of earth-matter, with an enlarged sense of things and of being, geopoetics opens up a new space of culture, thought and life. In other words, in fact in one singularly charged word : a world.”

“As to the word ‘poetics’, I don’t use it in the academic sense of ‘theory of poetry’. Geopoetics lies outside the traditional sense of the word ‘poetry’ (pure poetry, personal poetry, etc.), and has nothing to do with the current usage of the word, where it is reduced to sing-song lyricism, filmic fantasia, and so on. I suggest we waste no time on all this poverty-stricken sociology, and go straight to Aristotle’s *noûs poietikos*, ‘the poetic intelligence’.”

*See also* **Biocosmopoetics, Cosmoculture, Geognosis Geopoem, Poetics of the world**

### **Main occurrences**

AT, p. 26 ; CS, p. 9 ; DEN, p. 21-23, p. 33 ; EB, p. 89 ; EN, p. 178, p. 279-280 ; FE, p. 89 ; H, p. 116 ; LCGT, p. 32-33 ; LP, p. 60, p. 76 ; PA, p. 11-12-13, p. 27, p. 197, p. 229 ; PC, p. 123, p. 160 ; PE, p. 191 ; SP, p. 161, p. 198, p. 200, p. 201 ; TC, p. 11 ; Carnet de bord, n°3, p. 2 ; n°5, p. 3 ; latitudes n°5, p. 23 ; ALH, p. 334-342

## Comments

It was in February 1979 that White publicly pronounced the term for the first time in the context of a poetic reading-show (*Le Monde blanc — Itinerary and Texts*) given in Paris under the aegis of the *Nouveau Commerce* (cf. EN, p. 278; MB). White reports the genesis of the notion as follows: “It was in 1979, travelling along the North bank of the St-Lawrence river, making for Labrador, that the idea of geopoetics took form in my mind. A theory? Yes. Let’s not be afraid of the word. The result of its rejection in recent times is an intellectual space filled choc-a-bloc with bits of this and that, odds and ends, one little ‘novelty’ after another. Without theory, the mind goes round in circles, piles up commentaries and opinions, holes up in fantasia and the imaginary, gets lost in the spectacular, is drowned in insignificant detail. But for a theory to be valid, it has to be based on fundamental thought, has to be linked to ongoing practice and experience, has to remain open.”

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# CREDITS

## **Photos :**

Cover : Océanite tempête, *Hydrobates pelagicus*, Mor-Braz, Morbihan, july 2016, Fabrice Jallu

Kenneth et Marie-Claude White © MCWhite

Eddie Dowds, *Fairlie Beach, Looking up the river*, Fairlie, Ayrshire, Scotland, 6 june 2008

*Mape/Cartographie du Corps Insulaire* : Yannick Barazer

Artist's book : Stéphane Bigeard, personal collection

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