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Author: Gavin Bowd

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Rimbaud in a sporran?
The French Scotland of Kenneth White

Gavin Bowd

In this essay, I aim to make a brief study of one case of literary migration and interperception, that of the Franco-Scottish poet, essayist and travel-writer, Kenneth White. I want to look at the ways in which he represents France and Scotland in his writing, and the evolution of the reception of his oeuvre in these two countries. The case of White, I argue, sheds sobering light on the limits of the 'stravaiging Scot'.

I. *Wild Coal*

Kenneth White was born in 1936 in Glasgow, the son of a Communist railwayman, and brought up in Fairlie on the Ayrshire coast. A distinguished student of French and German, he followed a familiar migratory pattern of young, upwardly-mobile and/or middle-class West Europeans in the mid-twentieth century: spending years abroad as language assistant and/or scholar – in White's case in Munich and Paris. He also followed a now very familiar mating pattern of our times: marrying a French language assistant, in this case Marie-Claude Charlut.

It was in 1963 that, while *lecteur de langue anglaise* at the *Institut du Monde Anglophone* in Paris, the *Club des Etudiants d'Anglais* published his first poetry collection, *Wild Coal*. We might wonder what would have happened if Kenneth White had been language assistant at the University of Clermont-Ferrand, but, at the Sorbonne, he tapped into a powerful literary nexus.

Wild Coal is prefaced by the translator, academic and poet, Francis Scarfe. Scarfe writes:

> Since I first met Kenneth White when he was a brittle sharpeyed student, I have been increasingly impressed by his ferocious honesty. He has that wilfulness, sense of purpose and of destiny which is an essential element in the character of a poet or in poetry itself. He compels, irritates and excites the mind in much the same way as D.H. Lawrence, and his

> poems have all that living freshness (or what D.H.L. called starkness), of Lawrence's … It is important to point out, especially to readers in France, that poetry is passing through a very bad phase in Britain. So far as Scottish poets are concerned – and I have read them all – I do not see one who approaches White's honesty, clarity and seriousness. As for English poetry, in the past ten years or so it has become much too cerebral and artificial.[1]

Here we see qualities which will seduce many a French reader: clarity, and a sort of savage, virile authenticity. In the second preface to this slim collection, which has the dimensions of a literary launch, Jean-Jacques Mayoux, translator of Lewis Carroll, Beckett, Joyce and Shakespeare, declares:

> It is generally up there in the warm filth of Glasgow or the tender smokes of Edinburgh that you have the occasion to evoke the Auld Alliance. Let us do this, for once, in Paris, to welcome this young Scottish poet who is now half one of us in his personal life, and his poetry which remains as solidly anchored 'up there' as James Joyce's prose was in Dublin … A reader like me, who has always strongly felt our Celtic affinities, rediscovers them here in all their vigour. Ignoring the linguistic and other separations of the Briton and the Gael, you occasionally seem to find a younger brother of Dylan Thomas with mischievous lyricism, occasionally a last descendent of the tradition of gnomic and aphoristic poetry of the ancient Gaels … But what affinity with an Orient distant and dear to the Celtic soul appears in this solitary, simple meditation of a moment when the poet faces the world, so familiar to readers of Tu Fu and Basho?

We have here elements of the Whitean persona which the author will project and which his French supporters will celebrate: the primitive and poetic Celt, from a far west that echoes the far east. Mayoux concludes that White is 'a man faced with the real and the human drama, who perhaps will write novels, and a lyric poet who eliminates heaviness and begins to sing'.[2]

Wild Coal's poems evoke a harsh, elemental winter world. Winter whiteness clears away and kills the old clutter, preparing the way for a spring. After the pantheistic 'Precentor seagull', we have 'Morning walk', 'When the frost came

[1] Kenneth White, *Wild Coal* (Paris, 1963), 5–6.

[2] Ibid., 7–9. Author's translation from the French.

to the brambles', 'Poem of the white hare' and 'Let winter now come'. Already the whiteness that irks many, but which the author would defend as positive narcissism, is evident to the point of manifesto. Hence the poem 'White World':

> That world of white trees
> Look: it is here before me
> Birch wood in frost, naked
> Present, alive and definite
> Only fire can write on such
> Ultimate fact, I ask for fire
>
> FIRE to destroy and create
> FIRE to burn the inessential
> FIRE to write in this whiteness[3]

The Scotland he prefers is an asocial one. Thus, 'Fishing off Jura', he finds 'Scotland an echo all around me'. Or in 'Snowdust':

> there is only the presence
> of me
> falling
> sawdust
> snow[4]

Urban Scotland, in this case Glasgow, is a dystopian nightmare of hard work, bad diet and early death, hence 'Song of the Coffin Close' and 'Song about the uselessness of life'. So too it appears as such in the poem 'City':

> City the anonymous slavery that
> rots the mind and makes offal
> of dreams and the frenzied rootless
> urge to escape from this swamp
> of carrion life.[5]

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[3] Ibid., 21.
[4] Ibid., 26.
[5] Ibid., 35.

Certainly, the radical roots of White are expressed humorously in the Scots poems 'Ballad of the C and W (Carriages and Waggons) staff' and 'Revolt'. But there is no futuristic celebration of technology, no glorification of the workers' transformation of matter. There is instead an appeal to cultural revolution, as in the title poem:

> Is it possible to get poems fierce enough
> for the hot blast furnace of the Scottish mind
> poems cut from language uncouth and rough
> like that wild coal in the depths of the ground
> hiding in its savageness the richest ore
> or is poetry to be the scholar's whore[6]

And it is clear that this quest for a new, white poetics must be pursued away from Scotland. The last poem, 'A personal winter', concludes:

> From Strathclyde to Whiteness lies the way
> through all the wild weathers of the world
> and through all the dog-days: si con Escos
> qui porte sa çavate, de palestiaus sa chape ramendée
> deschaus, nus piés, affublez d'une nate[7]

Thus the scruffy elemental Scot migrates barefoot through space and language.

II. A French Scotland – a Scottish France

The establishment of Kenneth White continued the following year, with the publication of *En toute candeur*. In his preface, the highly distinguished translator Pierre Leyris wrote of his discovery of White: 'For many years, no contemporary poet, perhaps, had sung so clearly to my ear, rendered so well the poignant grace of primordial things. That poet was a rooted poet. The sap of a land, of a race generously irrigated his own genius'. He evokes his first meeting with White in the well-to-do Parisian suburb of Meudon: 'Passionately in love with this world and utterly refusing any other. Wilfully intransigent. Completely in revolt against the pseudo-fatality of history.

[6] Ibid., 37.
[7] Ibid., 48.

Conceding to cities only the most contingent of his being, between two visits to his mother the earth'.[8]

White does not disappoint in his long autobiographical introduction. First there are the 'matricial hills' that he grew up in, then a Rimbaldian season in hell in the 'furnaces of Glasgow', producing the incandescence of 'Le monde blanc', the white world. White asserts: 'The Scot is a nomad, like the Scythian, his ancestor … Perhaps, originally, the area he wandered over was the great Eurasian steppe stretching from China to the Danube; but a moor in the west of Scotland suffices. Space for movement and tranquillity for vision. This is the original ground for poetry'.[9]

White's Scotia must necessarily be 'deserta', as illustrated by the last line of 'Report to Erigena': 'Rock province, roots – and lights'.[10] Olivier Delbard points out that 'it is the geological past which marks above all else for White the identity of Scotland'.[11] Scotland has an apocalyptic, tortured, fractal landscape formed by the Great Ice Age. It is archaic, pre-human territory, unfit for cultivation. Such savagery and singularity are transmitted to the eventual human settlers. It is a pre-Christian world, bearing the imprint of invasion by Vikings and Celts. Scotland is Caledonia, land of the forests, or preferably Alba, land of the white hills. The Scot is a barbarian, akin to the American Indian. He inhabits a denuded, elementary landscape: mountains, rocks, moors, coastlines, gulls, the ocean. In the archaic landscape around Fairlie, the young White engages in shamanic rites, including arboreal masturbation.

His first way-book, *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, devotes chapters to Scotland, but we are dealing mainly with the west coast, the archipelago of the isles.[12] Scotland has, he claims, a 'complex cartography' – 'All those kyles, lochs and sounds' – which corresponds to a complex cartography of mind.[13] This image of Scotland is echoed in the France White inhabits. We are very far from the twee and comforting stereotypes of *A Year in Provence* or *Amélie* (or are we?). Instead we have the *Letters from Gourgounel*, recounting his transformation of an isolated farm house in the Ardèche.[14] There is then the blue light on the Pyrenees, the transcendence achieved in the Col de Marie-Blanque, and finally

[8] White, *En toute candeur* (Paris, 1964), 7–8.
[9] Ibid., 63.
[10] White, *Open World. The Collected Poems 1960–2000* (Edinburgh, 2003), 79.
[11] Olivier Delbard, *Les Lieux de Kenneth White. Paysage, pensée, poétique* (Paris, 1999), 122.
[12] White, *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (Edinburgh, 1989), 47–55.
[13] White, *Open World*, 598.
[14] White, *Letters from Gourgounel* (London, 1966).

the Armorican coast. It could be said that White was in fact a pioneer for British migration in recent decades to precisely those parts of France. Let us note that the land is not a place for labour, unless it is solitary.

White's rare references to the Scottish Borders illustrate his geopoetic vision and its limits. In his poem 'On the Border', the motif is 'rough wind, a rock, and a rowan tree': the Borders landscape in all its bareness. White seeks to dig beneath cliché, doing 'a little clean phenomenology' that will bracket out the toxic waste of modern mass culture. White is interested in the geological foundations of the Borders, and in people only in their primitive, tribal state. The effects of human habitation lead only to the 'bitter quarreling of nations'. White is not interested in 'the border between nation and nation'; he seeks the silence at the back of the 'noisy areas:/muzack, politics, TV shows/kilts and saddles, buttons and bows'. What matters is 'the border/between human and non-human/between one filled of knowledge and another/between spirit and matter'. The poem assembles the keywords of geopoetics: 'cartographies/topologies', 'clear mind, words and reality/complex ecology' – 'these Borders border on more than England'.[15]

His Borders is a region evacuated of politics; there are no social practices worthy of respect; popular culture is reduced to caricature. Absent are the common ridings and seven-a-sides that Hugh MacDiarmid mentions in his own poem on the Borders. All that remains is a vast, inhuman space, nature red in tooth and claw, which the solitary subject confronts. The only human beings worth mentioning are the great 'eccentric intellectuals' of the borders: Thomas Carlyle, Alec Murray '– I'm not forgetting either/MacTaggart's *Encyclopedia*/or MacDiarmid's polymathic *poetica*'. White's geopoetic survey of the Borders is 'a rediscovery of Alba', which, if we remember that Alba means white, amounts to the poet's narcissistic *mise en scène*.[16]

Kenneth White's view of Scotland is also illustrated by his guide to *L'Ecosse*, published in 1980 and still in print. The back cover says: 'The Romantic image fades before the factory smoke, the noise of the machines and the economic talk. This is only one of the contradictions that make the complex Scottish reality and which White strives to shed light on, by drawing from it the elements of a new discourse with truer images'.[17] However, what is between the covers

[15] White, *Open World*, 34–7.

[16] Ibid. For further discussion of White's representation of the Scottish Borders, see Gavin Bowd, 'On the Borders. Geopoetics, Geopolitics', *Edinburgh Review*, 92 (1994), 131–40.

[17] White, *L'Ecosse avec Kenneth White* (Paris, 1980).

does not really break with the Romantic vision. After all, its epigraph is from Jean Giono, wishing he was a native of Scotland, for her mysteries, rains, mists, sparse population and great virgin expanses. In his introduction, White portrays the Scot as filled with wanderlust, extravagant and argumentative, though also puritan.

In the opening pages, White claims spuriously that the Borderer 'defines himself by opposition: he is not English'.[18] White then reduces the region to MacDiarmid, minstrels, Scott and Hogg (though, curiously for a stravaiging Scot, the only Border town to be on the book's map is Newtown St Boswells, seat of the regional council). There are brief sojourns in Glasgow and Edinburgh, but the vast majority of the guide is to the far west, ending, predictably, with the moors and fields of the south-west, then the coast at Fairlie: 'I walk along the beach, to the sound of the waves occasionally punctuated by a gull cry.'[19]

In his essays, poems and lectures, White is keen to de-politicise geopoetics. He seeks to leave the 'motorway of history', to abandon the grand narrative handed down by Judeo-Christianity to the likes of Hegel and Marx. White makes a daring and dubious distinction between geography and history – 'breathing space' is the object of his quest. What is left is the solitary individual, a body moving in the biosphere. Only in the distant future might politics be a beneficiary of the subject's poetic life-work. For White, politics needs a concept of living, a grounding, and that only the single, complex, living intelligence can provide.

It would be very wrong, however, to divorce geopoetics from its historical context. We must try to understand why Kenneth White, who, as we have seen, was propounding more or less the same ideas in 1964, should become a media star in France from the late seventies onwards. White became very much *L'Ecossais de service* (the in-house Jock), his books published by the Parisian mainstream, and, after successfully defending his *doctorat d'état* on intellectual nomadism in 1979 (the year in which he adopted French nationality), was elevated to a chair in twentieth-century poetics at the Sorbonne, alma mater of Michael Scot. Thus the wandering bard joined the ranks of the French *turboprofs*, regularly getting a lift from Marie-Claude to the railway station at Rennes, and taking the TGV Atlantique to the Gare Montparnasse.

A change in intellectual and political climate was beneficial to White. From the early seventies there was a powerful shift against Communism in France. In 1973, the Maoist *Gauche prolétarienne* was dissolved: the masses among whom

[18] Ibid., 13.
[19] Ibid., 172.

these revolutionary intellectuals had chosen to swim revealed themselves to be uninterested in Revolution. In 1972, the signature of a Common Programme between the Socialist and Communist Parties had marginalised the far Left, and filled with dread anti-Stalinist *soixante-huitards*. The brute reality of Mao's Cultural Revolution, then of Year Zero in Cambodia, and the boat-people crisis in Vietnam, became the occasion for public soul-searching by young ex-Maoist 'New Philosophers'. In 1974, the publication of a French translation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was the opportunity for a massive attack on Marxist influence in French intellectual life. Marxism, along with psychoanalysis and structuralism, were accused of being totalising, deterministic ideologies. Belief in 'progress' and 'reason' had bequeathed Terror and genocide. New Philosophers such as Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann traced a Satanic genealogy that stretched from the Enlightenment to Hegel to Marx through to Stalin. Communism and Fascism were collapsed together under the label 'totalitarianism'. Against the 'master thinkers', against 'totality' and 'grand narratives of history', were opposed Nietzsche and nomadism. Sadie Jane Plant sums up well the spirit of such 'post-modern' intellectuals:

> gleeful sidestepping of convention and categorisation reappears throughout poststructuralist writing as a vital form of resistance to the ordered codes of discourse. Transcribing the situationist *dérive* from the city street to the domain of theory, Lyotard used the aimless playfulness of locomotion without a goal to describe the sort of drifting thought with which dialectical criticism can be abandoned, disallowing the arrogance of the theorist who judges, reflects, and represents the world, and providing the only honest form of intellectual practice.[20]

One of the most important works of this period was Gilles Deleuze's *La Pensée nomade*, which can be read as a manifesto for post-'68 radicalism.[21]

The poet and critic Robert Bréchon offers an explanation for White's success: 'Many European minds had been waiting for such an event, such a personality. For too long, Marxist theory, psychoanalytical dogma,

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[20] Sadie Jane Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London, 1992), 121.

[21] For a discussion of the possible affinities between White and post-structuralism, see Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh, 2006). 72–107.

structuralist method, had damped down on literature and spread a reign of intellectual terrorism. Kenneth White's work was seen as the sign of a great thaw'.[22] In the April 1979 issue of *Critique*, a review founded by Georges Bataille, Bréchon went further in his praise of the self-styled 'cosmic clown' and 'transcendental tramp': 'With him, occidental culture is re-sourced'.[23] The work of writer and publisher Michel Le Bris, the man who propelled White into the mediosphere, offers another pointer. Le Bris's itinerary is typical of the May '68 generation. Originally from the west of Brittany, Le Bris became active in the sixties Parisian cultural scene, founding *Le Magazine littéraire* in 1967 before becoming the director of *La Cause du peuple*, paper of the *Gauche prolétarienne*. From 1972 onwards, Le Bris became interested in the struggles of marginal regions such as the Languedoc and his native Brittany. During this period, he founded and directed, with Jean-Paul Sartre, a collection entitled 'La France sauvage' published by Gallimard. He then became the driving force behind the *littératures voyageuses* movement, founding the review *Gulliver* and the hugely successful *Etonnants voyageurs* festival in Saint-Malo. In his essays and novels, Le Bris criticised the *gauchiste* adventure and wrote in favour of 'spiritual' and of 'romantic' revolt. He railed against the deleterious effects of Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism. He attempted to save the creative individual from suffocating determinations: economic, psychosexual and linguistic. He valorised the heroic subject as it is found in adventure novels (for example those of Robert Louis Stevenson) and in travel-writing.[24]

For the likes of Le Bris, Kenneth White was another such heroic subject, dancing free of the wreckage of twentieth-century history. White had no truck with the deterministic ideologies that he held responsible for our accumulated misery. Writing in Maurice Nadeau's influential journal, *La Quinzaine littéraire,* in September 1978, Jean-Clarence Lambert declared that White was nothing less than 'the first coherent expression of the post-modern world.'[25] It can be said that, for the French audience, Kenneth White was a potent and paradoxical hybrid: both postmodern in his nomadism, and, as the Celtic bard with a head full of zen, embodying a form of plenitude which postmodernism normally deconstructs.

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[22] Robert Bréchon, *Presenting Kenneth White* (Edinburgh, 1989).

[23] Robert Bréchon, 'Vers un *yogui* occidental', *Critique*, 35 (1979), 383, 367.

[24] See Michel Le Bris, *L'Homme aux semelles de vent* (Paris, 2001).

[25] Quoted in Tony McManus, 'Kenneth White: A Re-sourcing of Western Culture', *Chapman*, 59 (1990), 23.

The breakthrough of White contrasts tellingly with the French intelligentsia's ostracism of another privileged recipient of Alexander Trocchi's *Sigma Portfolio*, Ian Hamilton Finlay. Finlay's commission to make a garden in Versailles to commemorate the Bicentenary of the French Revolution was cancelled by the Ministry of Culture after a press campaign which highlighted the Scot's dangerous interest in the Jacobin Terror and the Second World War, and especially his playful use of guillotines and the symbol of the Waffen SS. Finlay, who knew the history of the Revolution through Thomas Carlyle, and did not speak a word of French, was crushed by precisely the 'anti-totalitarian' consensus under which White thrived.[26]

III. 1989 and Since

1989, year of the Bicentenary, but also of the Tienanmen Square massacre and the fall of the Berlin Wall, marked a crucial turning-point in the fortunes of Kenneth White. In that year, White launched the International Institute of Geopoetics, whose aim is nothing less than the creation of a new 'world' on the 'earth'. The Institute aims to be the final realisation of White's dream of those vanguard 'groupments' which would re-source Western culture, learning from the successes and failures of such short-lived predecessors as The Feathered Egg, the Jargon Group and Alexander Trocchi's para-situationist Project Sigma.[27] And it was in that year that Kenneth White made a publishing comeback in his native land, with the appearance in Edinburgh of his collected longer poems, *The Bird Path*.[28]

Certainly, some Scottish critics acclaimed what Hugh Macpherson called 'the return of the nomad poet.'[29] Catherine Lockerbie described White as 'taking a different angle, with work of a thirst-slaking limpidity which has thoroughly entranced the French but not, so far, his compatriots.'[30] However, it is interesting to consider the Scottish resistance to the homecoming of White. For example, in the 1990 *Chapman* special issue on White, Graham Dunstan Martin's 'A Pict in Roman Gaul' sarcastically mocks the French fad for White:

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[26] See Gavin Bowd, 'La Cruauté de l'Histoire: Ian Hamilton Finlay et la Révolution française' in David Kinloch and Richard Price (eds), *La Nouvelle Alliance. Influences francophones sur la littérature écossaise moderne* (Grenoble, 2000), 91–114.

[27] See Gavin Bowd, *The Outsiders. Alexander Trocchi and Kenneth White* (Kirkcaldy, 1998).

[28] Kenneth White, *The Bird Path: Collected Longer Poems* (Edinburgh, 1989).

[29] Hugh Macpherson, 'Return of the Nomad Poet', *The Scotsman*, 12 May 1989.

[30] Catherine Lockerbie, 'Bird of Passage on a North Wind', *The Scotsman*, 2 June 1989.

'How exotic we Scots are after all! Could it be the case that so outlandish a people possess some occult lore which the Mediterranean French would dearly love to share?' White offers Parisians a wonderfully barbaric Scottishness. And France, containing north and south, Latin and Gaul, is susceptible to the 'great fresh wind blowing in from elsewhere'. Martin attacks the abstract generalities to be found in White, notably the 'white world' poem I quoted earlier, and contrasts this limited poetics with that of the Frenchman Jacques Dupin – who transforms generalities into allegory – and the Scots Norman McCaig and George Mackay Brown who manage to combine in tension metaphor and sensory detail. This attack on abstraction extends effortlessly to a criticism of the French:

> White's language is very French in spirit and method – it accords with the (currently) most admired French poetic manner. It is not an accident that he has been so successful in France, where his English translates so purely, so directly. He is an excellent ambassador for Scotland – and for the poetry of MacDiarmid. I sympathise with much that he is trying to do, for it is true that reality is more than Cartesian rationalism or Derridean clever-cleverness … On the other hand I have the gravest reservations about the quality of White's poetic language … It is my belief that Scotland does possess great living poets, but that they are most often to be found to the north of Carter Bar.[31]

Martin was not the only acerbic critic. Around this time, in the *Glasgow Herald*, Douglas Dunn described White as 'anti-social' and practising 'thin-witted international zennery'.[32] In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Gerald Mangan concluded scathingly: 'very few French readers will feel the whole weight of [White's] debts to MacDiarmid, Alexander Trocchi, Neil Gunn, W.S. Graham and other Scottish predecessors, less translatable than himself or less translated, who have brought back rather more articulate log-books from regions even more rarefied.'[33] Beyond the strictly Caledonian space, Terry Eagleton applied his cruel wit to the White phenomenon:

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[31] Graham Dunstan Martin, 'A Pict in Roman Gaul: Kenneth White and France', *Chapman*, 59 (1990), 17.

[32] Douglas Dunn, 'Bird Path of an Exile', *Glasgow Herald*, 13 May 1989.

[33] Gerald Mangan, 'Getting Away Scot-free', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20–26 October 1989.

> The French have a perverse habit of enthusing over British writers who remain, for us, stubbornly mediocre. 'The foremost living English-language poet', raves *Le Nouvel Observateur* about the Glaswegian Kenneth White, a commendation which might uncharitably be translated as 'one of the few widely available in translation' … Perhaps the regard the French have for this émigré Scot isn't all that mysterious. He is the prototype of the anarchic Bohemian which, as James Joyce reminded us, is always the stout bourgeois' image of the poet. Spaced-out and laid-back, a kind of tartan troubadour or Rimbaud in a sporran, he belongs to the 'it must be poetry because it's happening to me' brigade. His is the vagrant, visionary spirit travelling the roads from Leith to Labrador, a song in his heart, a fuzzy orientalist thought in his head and a bottle of Irish Mist in his rucksack.[34]

A protégé of Douglas Dunn, Adam Thorpe, also joined the Gallo-sceptic chorus: 'Perhaps, as I also at times desperately assume of theorists like Derrida or Kristeva, White works better in French. Or perhaps his beguiling ideas of wholeness and primal relationships and life-energy strike more of a chord over there'.[35]

This native distrust of the Frenchness and foreignness of White finds its mirror image in the claims of White's disciples. In his posthumously published study *The Radical Field*, the late Tony McManus quoted uncritically from Francophone critics praising White, as if to be praised in Paris necessarily means that White is right, and confers grandeur and gravitas on his oeuvre.[36] Symptomatically, these quotations are often not dated, which detaches White from the context in which his writings were received.

I would argue that the changing context has brought a decline in, or even reversal of, Kenneth White's fortunes. After 1989, and the collapse of the totalitarianism against which White was promoted as a biocosmopoetic, postmodern alternative, France entered a new and uncertain phase, demanding a new poetics. Now that the victory of freedom has brought the insecurities of rampant individualism, social exclusion, globalisation and the clash of civilisations, the French seem more morose and anxious than ever. This is not the time of Gilles Deleuze and *jouissance textuelle*. This is the time for neurotic

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[34] Terry Eagleton, 'Rambles through a Mist of Rhyme', *The Independent on Sunday Review*, 22 July 1990.

[35] Adam Thorpe, 'Turning off-White', *The Observer*, 29 July 1990.

[36] Tony McManus, *The Radical Field* (Dingwall, 2007), vii–viii.

chick-lit and autofiction (see Amélie Nothomb) and, above all, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary French letters, Michel Houellebecq.

To illustrate this change of mood, let me quote one of Houellebecq's prose poems, in which, for sake of argument, we could replace the swallow with a seagull:

> Swallows fly off, slowly skim the waves, and spiral up into the mild atmosphere. They do not speak to humans, for humans remain tied to the Earth. Swallows are not free. They are conditioned by the repetition of geometrical orbs. They slightly modify their wings' angle of attack to trace spirals ever wider in relation to the surface of the globe. In short, there is no lesson to be learnt from swallows.
>
> Sometimes, we drove back together. On the immense plain, the setting sun was enormous and red. Suddenly, a rapid flight of swallows came zooming across its surface. You shook, then. Your hands gripped fast the leather-coated steering-wheel. Then, so many things could draw us apart.[37]

Here we are far from the radical subjectivity of a body moving freely in the biosphere.

It is hard to see White in the world of Houellebecq: the supermarket aisles, commuter trains, swingers clubs and sex tourist resorts blown up by Islamic terrorists. It is difficult to see him wax lyrical about Dolly the cloned sheep, or concur with Houellebecq's wish for 'the total destruction of nature, and its replacement with a more rationally organised world'.[38] On the other hand, Houellebecq's love-hate relationship with New Age in his most important novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*), expressed through his attraction to Buddhism, in the interweavings of the Book of Kells, and in the main character's disappearance into the sunlit waves on the far western coast of Ireland, are not that far away from the White World.[39]

There are, indeed, French philosophers who echo White: Michel Serres' 'Natural Contract', Edgar Morin's 'Planetary Patriotism', and, from the younger generation, Michel Onfray's *Théorie du voyage. Poétique de la Géographie*.[40]

[37] Michel Houellebecq, 'Untitled-3', *Lines Review*, 142 (1997), 30. Author's translation from the French.

[38] Michel Houellebecq, 'Je crois peu en la liberté', *Revue Perpendiculaire*, 11 (1998), 16.

[39] Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised* (London, 2000).

[40] See Michel Serres, *Le Contrat naturel* (Paris, 1990); Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern, *Terre-patrie* (Paris, 1996); and Michel Onfray, *Théorie du voyage. Poétique de la*

The latter seems to lean heavily on the (unquoted) work of the lad from Fairlie (although with his references to gypsies and homeless people, Onfray gives a militant edge to nomadism). The White World can still draw the crowds. In May 1996, I was invited to take part in a debate at the *Printemps celte* in Paris. Kenneth White was performing at another event in the programme. The festival was held in a big hall in the science park of La Villette. At the entrance to the hall were placed deck-chairs. On the PA was broadcast the sound of the sea: waves, gulls (but no holiday-makers or ice-cream vans). It expressed the urban alienation and reification of the coastline which explain why some people are so attracted to White.

Nevertheless, White is no longer the star he was. His essay and especially poetry production in France has declined considerably in the course of the last twenty years. After some good symposia and issues of the *Cahiers de Géopoétique*, the Institute shrivelled to a scrawny archipelago stretching from the Isle of Lyng to Belgrade. There are two vast white spaces on the geopoetic map: China and Russia. The homelands of Han Shan and shamanism remain doggedly resistant to White's nomadism.

Certainly, the publication in 2007 of his *Un monde ouvert*, in the 'domaine anglo-saxon' of Gallimard's prestigious Collection Poésie – the only Scot to have ever been included, and the only living English-language poet – showed that he was still on the French literary map.[41] The distinguished biographer and critic, Gilles Plazy, could write in the preface: 'A poet he is, one of the most significant today (few oeuvres have as much force, coherence and perspectives), and, beyond the genres, outside reductive definitions, he is, above all, someone who, to quote Hölderlin's phrase, "dwells poetically on the earth" and knows how to say it in various ways'.[42] In *Le Monde*, Monique Petillon wrote of a 'poet of strong wind': 'Insatiable reader and traveller, geographer and ornithologist, such is our poet, in love with solitude and liberty'.[43] On the other hand, apart from an interview on *Radio France Internationale,* the book made little media impact and its sales are well below those of his books on *L'Ecosse*.

It is rather in his home country that White seems more prolific and in view. The last shards of Scottish publishing, Polygon-Birlinn and Sandstone,

géographie (Paris, 2007).

[41] In the 'domaine anglo-saxon', White has for company Auden, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Browning, Dickinson, Donne, Faulkner, Keats, Lawrence, Melville, Milton, Plath, Poe, Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Whitman, Wordsworth and Yeats.

[42] Gilles Plazy, 'Poétique du monde ouvert' in Kenneth White (ed.), *Un Monde ouvert. Anthologie personnelle* (Paris, 2006), 7.

[43] Monique Petillon, 'Un poète de grand vent', *Le Monde*, 9 March 2007.

have published his prose and poetry, 'catching up' just as French interest fades. White certainly seems to have been welcomed home by some: every year between 2001 and 2007 he was invited to monologue for one and a half hours at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, directed by Catherine Lockerbie, daughter of a Professor of French. On the other hand, he remains excluded from most anthologies of Scottish poetry. In the words of Stuart Kelly, literary editor of *Scotland on Sunday*, 'anthologies are the most blatant statements of canon formation, and, judged by his representation in these alone, it would appear that the "neglected" label fits White well'.[44] In his new history of Scottish literature, Robert Crawford devotes only two sentences to him, while devoting several pages to J.K. Rowling and his own St Andrews' colleagues John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie and Don Paterson.[45]

In conclusion, the movements of Kenneth White in 2007, forty years after he settled in France, give us an idea of the situation and status of our author: guest appearances at the *Festival du Livre de Bretagne*, the *Festival Interceltique de Lorient*, and the *Etonnants Voyageurs* festival in Saint-Malo, these appearances intercut with those at Inverness, Ullapool and the Edinburgh International Book Festival. The persona of the wandering Scot, the neglected exile, no longer has any credibility, though it is essential to the White phenomenon. Instead, White seems to have become genuinely migratory: monogamous as seagulls, Kenneth and Marie-Claude White annually follow established routes between France and Scotland.

University of St Andrews

[44] Stuart Kelly, 'Canons to the left of him, canons to the right of him: Kenneth White and the Construction of Scottish Literary History' in Gavin Bowd, Charles Forsdick and Norman Bissell (eds), *Grounding a World: Essays on the Work of Kenneth White* (Glasgow, 2005), 190–1.

[45] Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (Harmondsworth, 2007), 624.