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**“SCOTO-SHAMANISTIC”:  
THE COLLECTED WORKS OF KENNETH WHITE**

*Richie McCaffery*

One of the most well-worn received notions about Kenneth White (b. 1936), other than him being an “intellectual nomad,” is that he is a major poet and thinker often neglected or misunderstood in his native Scotland.<sup>1</sup> White has had no shortage of passionate Scottish apologists, most notably the late Tony McManus, who founded the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics in 1995 specifically focused on White’s work and teachings. Nonetheless U.K. criticism of White long seemed sparse or mealy-mouthed. Perhaps this is something to do with his status as an exilic Scot, a peripatetic gangrel scholar, but surely his long-standing ties with France can be explained away in the spirit of the Auld Alliance? Since the late 1980s articles by Edwin Morgan and the like have started to appear, and White found a very generous supporter in the Edinburgh press Mainstream Publishing. Now, as White himself goes over the midway point of his ninth decade, he has Cairns Craig and Edinburgh University Press to take up his mantle.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Cairns Craig, “Kenneth White and Scotland’s Intellectual Nomads,” *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 5.1 (Autumn 2011): 15-28; Cairns Craig, “Intellectual Nomad,” *Scottish Review of Books* (June 28, 2013); <https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2013/06/intellectual-nomad/>. For White’s own perspective on the phrase, in his “Notes from an Outpost,” *London Review of Books*, 11.13 (July 6 1989), at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v11/n13/kenneth-white/notes-from-an-outpost>.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns Craig, ed., *The Collected Works of Kenneth White: Volume 1: Underground to Otherground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Pp. 328. Hardback, \$120: ISBN 9781474481298; *Volume 2: Mappings: Landscape, Mindscape, Wordscape* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Pp. 728. Hardback: \$172: ISBN 9781474481328. Paperback, February 2023, \$29.95 and \$39.9; also available as ebooks. The EUP edition supersedes a previous project based from RISSS and Aberdeen University Press, which after two separate White volumes (*Ideas of Order*, 2013 and as e-resource 2014, and *Guido’s Map*, 2015),

Another White truism is that his writing career is split into two discrete periods, first his early success, mainly in poetry, in London up to 1967 with Cape as his publisher, and then his emigration or exile, when, scunnered with the lack of a decent critical culture in the UK, White turned his back on it, flitting to France. White is a poet first and foremost, and even these hefty books, *Collected Works*, not *Collected Poems*, can give only a sampling of his prose, his “waybooks.”<sup>3</sup> They show he didn’t have too high an opinion of the sort of poetry in vogue in the UK at the time he left:

Little ribbons of poetry; little shit-pellets of poetry. Poetry of the month. Where’s the poetry of no-time, no place? A poetry that breathes in space, and is alive with mental lightning (I: xxi).

It’s no coincidence that this acerbic tone brings to mind Hugh MacDiarmid, especially MacDiarmid’s description of poetry needing to be “mental lightning.” Reading these books, it becomes clear that, over time, White is trying to realise something akin to MacDiarmid’s rallying cry for a “GIANTISM” in the arts, but without the constricting baggage of an internecine political Scottish nationalism. White never abandoned Scotland but carries it with him, forever fretting, fettling and whittling away at it. This is particularly so in Volume Two where we find White in pedagogical mode, revising our traditional ideas of the university, and expounding ideas for a breakaway education based on White’s teachings and intellectual nomadism. He presents himself as a sort of radical “Scoto-shamanistic” (White is great on epithets) geologist, hacking his way through strata of built-up “common-place, cliché and caricature” to get to the real, then assessing the “mindscape” as a noetic or “projective cartographer.”

White’s intellectual peregrinations begin in *Volume 1: Underground to Otherground with Incandescent Limbo*, one of White’s earliest pieces of sustained prose but only published in French in 1976 and appearing in this volume for the first time in English. It’s a mentally restless, fascinating but fragmentary bricolage, something of a scrap book of experiences, thoughts and quotations that mattered to White at the time of his first move to France to teach in the early 1960s. This journal is the account of an erudite

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started a *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (2016), matching the contents though not pagination of the EUP vol. 1. The EUP edition is cited below in parentheses with volume and page numbers. White’s *Open World: Collected Poems 1960-2000* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003: pp. xxvii + 624 pages, paper: ISBN 978-1904598015) appears to be out of print.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth White, *Open World: Collected Poems, 1960-2000* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003): pp. xxvii + 624 pages, paper: ISBN 978-1904598015. Out of print, with used copies now fetching upwards of \$180.

young man laying the foundations for his subsequent work and enquiries into “Whiteworld.” It might be a limbo with periods of ennui and dead-ends but it is also “incandescent” when White begins to glimpse epiphanically what his work might become. However, even at this early stage, we see how White’s vision could arguably be called a deeply egocentric one. Page after page has references to terms centred on White’s name: he is the “lone white wolf” in “K-territory” or “Whiteland.” This is a recurrent theme throughout White’s work, an attempt to write his name genealogically and linguistically into all he sees: for instance, in “The Alban Project” he reminds us that “Alba is connected with Latin *albus*, white.” It appears that White was prepared for this accusation from an early age because *Incandescent Limbo* carries this defence:

Egocentric? Yes, what else can you be *centred* on? It’s when you centre on the ego, concentrate on it, and *go through it*, that you enter the open field. Before that, you’re wrapped up in all kinds of *camouflaged* egoism (I: 81).

I can see what White is driving at, but there is a sense that we can only see this open world via the prism or planchette of White’s self, that is a rather proprietorial territory. I also feel that the high-seriousness of this early book militates against it. As Hamish Henderson said, there is an inherent false antithesis to drawing lines between a meridionally high culture (White’s) and more popular or folk based art forms. This is why *Incandescent Limbo* strikes a few contrived notes, especially when Bob Dylan is referred to as “the guitar guy.” Mind you, White would no doubt reply by saying it’s a typically pettifogging Scottish trait to get hung up on the small details.

Volume One also contains *Letters from Gourgounel*, originally published in 1966 and never reprinted until now, which I consider White’s most engaging, enjoyable and satisfying prose book. I would go so far as to consider it a classic of its (admittedly idiosyncratic) kind, having a direct line back to Thoreau’s *Walden*. White reminds us that:

Thoreau wasn’t there at Walden just to gather blueberries. He was trying to get in touch with basics, to work out other developments from there. Witness his later essays on economics and civil liberty (I: 103).

This book includes a wonderful picaresque account of White’s move to a remote and ramshackle farm in the Ardèche region of France, and how White, like Thoreau, wanted to get back to a pure and ascetic (as well as aesthetic) life, away from over stimulation or excitement in the city, to focus on himself, on his philosophy. It’s like a *künstlerroman* where the events really did happen. White fixed up the farm and learned to scratch a physically bare but spiritually rich existence from the land, with the help of

the locals and their own eccentric ways and customs, from the mushroom gatherers to the wine-addicted local postman. It's clear that this book gave White much firmer footing as a thinker, as a way of tangibly living out his philosophy, a symbiosis of land and mind, the beginning of an ascent:

I'm walking on the road back to Gourgounel, which I now know for sure to be first base, source base, of an itinerary that will no doubt lead me to other places, other spaces, towards maybe a newfound world (I: 174).

*Travels in the Drifting Dawn* is effectively White's exploratory field-work into this "newfound world." The book came about because White took part in the Soixante-Huitard protests in France and lost his university post as a result, enabling him to embark on a period of "great drift." White published an account of the protests as *The Phenomenon of May* (1969) which carries as epigraph two lines from Whitman:

Always our old feuillage  
always the free range and diversity.<sup>4</sup>

It's a good way of thinking of White's writing as this fecund feuillage (feuilletons, however, his essays are certainly not!). The book begins in the literary demimonde culture of London (Trocchi and Project Sigma) but opens out into White's exuberant "mondomania," an odyssey across the globe. In one place White finds a perfect objective correlative for his own life's work, rather like MacDiarmid's "gowden lyric":

But what struck me most was a musical instrument, now lodged in the upstairs room, which he had been working at when he died: a stringed instrument, its base a drifted treetrunk. I had never played a musical instrument myself, but for years I had the idea of a musical instrument, *sui generis*, which would play an absolute music.

I would like to have known this man. Also trying to express, by some *unedited* sound, what was deepest in himself (I: 280).

*Volume 2: Mappings: Landscape, Mindscape, Wordscape* is an immense book that charts the development and evolution, through three separate studies, of White's open-world philosophy of intellectual stravaiging to find a place as a world citizen, to dwell deeply and poetically, in a Heideggerian sense. However, White asserts that these books and essays are a

journey to the edge, a preparation for an encounter with what is, as yet, unknowable. Geopoetics is ... a process, not a completion (II: xxiii).

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<sup>4</sup> Walt Whitman, "American Feuillage," in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Redfield, 1871), 159, lines 2 and 9.

It is the very ineffable, speculative and conjectural nature of what geopoetics is that, to me, makes some of the theoretical work sound mystically nebulous and at times repetitive, in a formulaic way, as the essays are often structured in a similar style. For instance, the opening essay “The Alban Project” ends by saying “What we need, badly, is a new grounding” without really articulating what that new grounding might be. Most of these essays/lectures end with a pithy sentence that is supposed to sum-up what has been discussed, but often the essence of what has been said remains slightly out of reach, with signposts for a “possible future” and a fatalistic “we shall see.” After more than 700 pages, this book ends with a clipped sentence about the “aim of geopoetics” rather than what ground geopoetics might have covered or mapped.

White is clear what his work is not, and there is much opposition to established literary schools and criticism of the Scottish Renaissance and many of his contemporaries, such as David Black and Robin Fulton, two outstanding literary critics and poets. The impression some of the work gives is not of a luminous depiction of what White’s work is or to where it is aspiring, but how White’s intellect and work are *sui generis* and transcendent in embattled tones that are highly reminiscent of MacDiarmid:

Some of the articles I read on my own work ... were a hotch-potch of feeble argument and reductiveness that I hardly care to spend time analysing them. One recent piece in a respectable Scottish literary magazine concerning my relationship to French culture was not only totally inadequate, it was ridiculous (II: 78).

With such a scornful attitude to the criticism of his work, it’s daunting for future critics to engage at all, and this hints at one of the fundamental paradoxes in White’s work. He complains of a lack of engagement with his work, especially in the UK, yet seems to denigrate any attempt by people to do so. He presents himself as a “shaman without a tribe” and a “lone voice in the wilderness,” yet many of these articles are revised lectures. He has a school of geopoetics, which as a field of study is rather cultish but with many adherents across the world.

That said, White’s lifelong work in opening up the field of geopoetics is an epic and monolithic one. His complete works in poetry and prose could potentially take up over a metre of shelf space. His is a mountainous noetic effort on a par with MacDiarmid’s *Clan Albann* or *Muckle Toon* projects or Pound’s *Cantos*. Like those works, White’s writing can be fascinating and frustrating, heroic but flawed and destined never really to be completed because completion would mean the terminus of the mental and spiritual quest. It’s a salutary and at times overwhelming experience to be in the presence of a mind far more ambitious, voluminous, energetic and complex than your own. I might not be able to get onboard with some of

White's manifestos but it behoves us all to give his life-long mission the attention it clearly deserves. On the basis of these first two volumes of his *Collected Works*, we should have no qualms in adding White to the great pantheon of Scottish polymaths: Buchanan, Urquhart, Miller, Carlyle, Geddes, MacDiarmid, and others.