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LYNN NOVAK

Celtic Affinities in the Earlier Poems of Kenneth White

The desire of a whole world, the nostalgia of unity and unitive experience, can only appear as mad and aberrant in a civilisation which, while it satisfies many desires (most of which it has previously fabricated), leaves unsatisfied the one fundamental need, of which the poets, above all, are conscious.

It is the expression of this need that runs like a white thread through modern poetry, like a faster, more urgent current in the general turgid or trivial mass of literature.¹

I

In listening to some of the earlier poems of Kenneth White (b. 1936 in Glasgow, presently living and writing in France), one might be led initially to think that one is hearing some of the last, more distant strains of the "Scottish Renaissance" initiated by Hugh MacDiarmid in the 1920s. And yet such a judgment of White's early work would be only superficially true. The cultural affinities in his poems actually date from a past far more distant than the Scottish Renaissance, and, although those affinities are just as deeply a part of the Scottish cultural heritage, they are far more subtle than any mere imitation of theme, dialect, style, or subject matter would indicate. Kenneth White has, in a search for his own creative origins, gone all the way back through Celtic history to the imaginative thrust shaping much of Celtic mythology in an effort to mold his mythopoetic view of the world.

White does not write in Gaelic, although some of his more recent poems (e.g., parts of A Walk Along the Shore, which appeared in Akros in December of 1973) have phrases and whole sentences in Gaelic; and his technique is not obviously imitative of Gaelic poetic technique, as are the techniques of Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas. The affinities in White's case are deeper and more pervasive


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than a linguistic or technical study alone would indicate, and start at the core of Celtic mythology.

Jean Markale, in an extensive study of Celtic mythology entitled *Les Celtes* (Paris: Payot, 1969), asserts that the greatest single talent of the Celts was in their capacity for myth-making (Markale, p. 7). We have enough remnants of Celtic literature to see Markale’s point (the *Mabinogion*, from which were derived the Arthurian legends; the *Tain*; the *Ossianic* and *Ulster* cycles), even if we do not agree with him as to degree. Markale has affirmed from his study that many Celtic myths revolve around the central theme of a hero’s “quest” of some precious artifact (e.g., the Grail) which leads the hero beyond the pale of the known or phenomenal world and into a primordial world of primary life forces, usually associated with an enchanted world of fairies and other deities, who are usually women (cf. King Arthur on the isle of Avalon). The hero, after great trials, must succeed in penetrating this other-world, must submit to its powers, and then must, if he can, carry his treasure back to his own world, which, for lack of it, has been slowly perishing. Thus, if we may very generally summarize Markale’s thesis, it is a quest for unity, via a myth of fecundation—whether of an arid land, spirit, or body—which is represented in much of Celtic mythology.

The fact that Kenneth White reconstructs this mythic “quest” for a unity between two worlds in the course of his poems does not in itself render him different from many other modern poets. The thrust of the French Surrealists was in much the same direction, except that the “other-world” for them was the unconscious mind, attainable mainly through automatic writing. And a great deal of the poetry written in America today (particularly that poetry influenced by the theories of Charles Olson) shares in a similar process—that is, in an apocalyptic effort to penetrate beyond surface reality, into the realm of metaphysical or suprarational perception, in order to unite once again a fragmented consciousness with its own psychic, or sometimes cosmic, sources. Such a symbolic quest for origins as that illustrated in the quest for the Holy Grail might, in fact, be the most apt metaphor we could find to describe what is happening in much of modern poetry since the time of the Surrealists. In Kenneth White’s case, incorporation of Celtic themes into poetic theory achieves uniqueness through White’s conscious use of sources which are so intrinsic a part of his cultural heritage. For this reason, he
is able to use Celtic themes with more force, more clarity, and especially, with a more potent channeling of the religious instinct, than many another modern poet, who often finishes by succumbing to a diffused and subjective religiosity.

2

Kenneth White's early Celticism, in fact, has been noted by more than one observer. In the introduction to his translation into French of White's first book of poems, Pierre Leyris calls White "un vrai barde gaélique . . . qui s'avérerait à la fois immémorial et absolument moderne" ["a true Gaelic bard . . . who seems to be both immemorial and absolutely modern"].

Jean-Jacques Mayoux, in his preface to *Wild Coal*, White's first book, had already remarked:

Un lecteur qui, comme moi, a toujours éprouvé très fortement nos affinités celtiques, les retrouve ici très vigoureuses. Ignorant la séparation linguistique et autre du britannique et du gaélique on croit parfois trouver un frère de Dylan Thomas au lyrisme malicieux, parfois un dernier descendant de la tradition de poésie gnomique et aphoristique des anciens Gaëlics.

[A reader who, like me, has always felt very strongly our Celtic affinities, finds them very vigorously here again. Ignoring the separations, linguistic and otherwise, between the Britanic and Gaelic, one feels sometimes that one has found a younger brother of Dylan Thomas with a malicious lyricism, and sometimes, a last descendant in the gnomic and aphoristic poetic tradition of the ancient Gaels.]

Mayoux also comments on White's Celtic attributes of "irreverence," "valliance," and "resilience," noting at the same time the ancient Celtic affinities with the East, which we find once again in White's poetry.

If by Celticism we can also understand, in addition to the mythic "quest" structures mentioned earlier, a closeness to and acute perception of nature, a simplicity (i.e., a concentrated complexity, a sense of fundamental unity), and a primitivism, White is a Celtic poet.


As such, he is akin to the "naive poet" which Schiller wrote about, who rejects society's models, since, in White's words, "Civilisation has become a danse macabre"; and again: "Civilisation is a refusal of the earth; by this refusal, it warps the very ground of existence" (Candeur, p. 31). Yet, as Michael Hamburger points out in his comments on White in The Truth of Poetry, White's rejection of established social norms leaves him with few sure guides to follow, since he then must confront as his only viable alternative the indifferent welter of nature: "Kenneth White shows little awareness of the greed and cruelty of nature, or of the very great difficulties that arise in any attempt to derive models for human existence from non-human nature alone."  

White's poetic vision, however, implies just such a decision (which may not, after all, reveal "little awareness") as its starting point: that society is lethal, and that nature, though dangerous, offers hope. The difficulty for White then becomes, as Hamburger asserts, one of finding and interpreting apt models, truths, foundations in nature, upon which man can constructively build, rather than surrendering to pessimism. White himself has written concerning the difficulties in this effort (in terms less pragmatic, however, than that of "deriving models"):

Dante says that every being, by instinct, travels to its destined harbour on the ocean of being.

But that ocean is an ocean of storm, I say, and there are more shipwrecks than destinies. Even the earth can lose its cohesion and the hearts of animals can cease to beat. As for the mind of man...  

In another article on White appearing in the Southern Review, John Press writes:

His verse undoubtedly stands against the current of the day, being neither ostentatiously tough and brutal nor... academically decorous and correct.

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4 Kenneth White, "A la lisière du monde" [At the Edge of the World], Les Lettres Nouvelles (Janvier-février, 1965), p. 5. I have acquired the original English text of Kenneth White's works quoted throughout this article, so that although the original publication may be listed in French translation, it is quoted here in English.


Less sure-footed than Walker and Heaney, he is, nonetheless, a poet of considerable power. Press designates White as "less sure-footed" than the other two poets mentioned, but does not explore the reasons why this may be so. If I may hazard a suggestion at this point, it is that the occasional hesitancy in White's stride may in fact be a result of White's penetration into areas of deeper significance than those normally explored. His initial diffidence, then, may be in proportion to the difficulty of the voyage he has undertaken. It is because of the task he has set for himself that he reaches so deeply into his cultural past, beyond that of being Scottish, and into the heart of Celticism.

3

A native of Glasgow, White rarely appears "Scottish" except when he writes in dialect. His concerns are not nationalist, and, in the ranks of Scottish poets (though any such ranking of poets according to mere nationality is more than a little doubtful, since the real identities go deeper, and wider), he can only appear as an outsider, if not a renegade. The schism with modern English poetry is even more pronounced for White, for whom "poetry means worldification." Writing of the New Lines poetry written in England in the 1950s, White comments:

There is no world in this poetry (or, if we prefer it, no fundamental experience of the world), only commentaries on an environment (post-war Britain), and on the "private lives" that are part of this environment. Technically, it is good enough verse, with few obvious faults, but with little or nothing of the power of poetry. Ethically, it is full of the secondary moral virtues, but is existentially flat ("British Poetry," p. 7).

Real poetry for White, it would seem, is elsewhere.

8 Yet Scot he is, if we may use the traits of toughness, macabre humor, and a grotesque realism as guides. And he is also Celt, in an unnostalgic, unsentimental, uncultish way. With regard to Celticism, a useful parallel could be drawn between White and Victor Segalen (e.g., primitivism or primordialism, and openings East).
The first book of White’s poetry to appear in England was *The Cold Wind of Dawn*, a collection of thirty-eight poems, some of which had earlier appeared in *Wild Coal* and *En toute candeur*. The book is divided into three main parts, which correspond to the three prose sections of *En toute candeur*: (1) “Virgin Territory,” which corresponds to “The Maternal Hills” in *En toute candeur*, (2) “Zone,” corresponding to “The Glasgow Furnaces,” and (3) “Naked Ground,” corresponding to “The White World.” It is to *The Cold Wind of Dawn* that we now turn to discover there the dominant ideas governing White’s own poetry.

“Preceptor seagull” opens the first section of poems and firmly sets the emphasis, as early as the first two lines, on physical movement and on a kind of elemental religion: “You up there in the lurching church of the elements / mover and moved,” the persona addresses nature’s emissary (p. 9), and the interplay continues throughout the poem. The invocation is for a sign from, or a ritual initiation by, this “archangel of language” (line 14)—“give us the sound at least the note,” (line 9)—and is answered by the creation of the poem itself, which involves, as it often did in early Celtic poetry, the metamorphosis of the poet through a juncture of cosmic and natural forces:

> o bird I see and hear  
> I feel my body bending to your shape  
> your throat is mine  
> and look alive this bird-thing here of words  
> is struggling  
> into  
> flight

The religion evoked, clearly enough, is not of the usual order, but involves White’s mythopoetic usage of a religious sensibility. The church is the elements, the archangel of language is the seagull, and the sacred gift must of course be the poetry created by the visitation, or else it is the poet, here made divine as a result of the metamorphosis, and who becomes the poem. Although unorthodox by Christian standards, there is nonetheless the strong expression of a

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11 Cf. this extract by the Gaelic poet Amergein: “I am the wind which breathes on the sea,/I am wave of the sea,/I am moan of the sea, I am the bull of the seven battles” (as quoted by Markale, *Les Celtes*, pp. 189–90; translation from French to English my own).
religious "genesis" expressed within these first poems, which freely employ symbols from Christianity, and which use them for their abilities to evoke a sense of sacred ritual, enacted on a cosmic plane. In "Morning walk" (p. 12) one can envisage the original moments of creation, wherein "the boy" of the poem is actually the first sensuous companion of the "alone and lonely" earth:

   It was a cold slow-moving mist  
   clotted round the sun, clinging  
   to the small white sun, and the earth  
   was alone and lonely, and a great bird  
   harshly squawked from the heronry  
   as the boy walked under the beeches  
   seeing the broken pale-blue shells  
   and the moist piles of mouldering leaves

The tone of these first poems resembles that of a pre-initiation state for the persona, one where he is still a mute spectator, and passive regarding the wonders surrounding him. Yet he refuses to remain in this passive state of incomprehension, and tries to force the gates of meaning leading to the more-than-human, which open onto maybe heaven, maybe hell, or both:

   Now I shall take my boat again  
   and row out through the great rain  
   to the cold salt blaze of the sun

   I shall rock there in the loneliness  
   the silence that is no man's business  
   till the winds open and let me pass  

   to the sudden crying of a hundred gulls

   ("At the Great Gate," p. 17)

Still within the first section, "The winter of the world" depicts a fundamental modification of the pre-initiation motif; already a perspective is forming, already the strophe form and content reflect a kind of cyclic joy and despair absent from the poems up to this point:

12 Carrying the comparison further, the poem "When the frost came to the brambles" re-enacts the Garden of Eden scene where the first gustatory sensations were awakened: "Red they were and black/and the bitter frost/put tang into their sap" (p. 11).
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Winter the trees are weeping for cold
birds though bonnie their song is bleak
the sun itself a thin snare of light
kind knowledge is more than cunning

fire and a friend and food enough
the world of whiteness is sick and weary
stars are staring streets are stony
the making of music ends in misery

The final strophe ends,

kindness remains though chaste and cold
misery ends in the making of music (p. 21)

Then the anguish of the search to go beyond surface meaning comes fully to consciousness: “what can this life to me in the burning days mean / how can I intricately read / the flashing whiteness of the birch-tree bark . . .” (“Walking the earth,” p. 23). In this last poem of “Virgin Territory,” the ascetic, elemental yearnings of the poet find their full, though bleak, expression in natural images:

lonely in naked desire I walk through the world
and the crying in my heart
is the blind chorus of seagulls before a storm
flying inward
across the masonic township and the birch-tree wood
to the desolate moor
where they perch
on the blackened heather and granite rock
with cold eyes staring

“Zone,” the second group of poems in The Cold Wind of Dawn, represents in fact the full initiation-by-fire, for entering into it we plunge directly into the “Glasgow furnaces.” The poems in this section have probably received greater critical acclaim and more ready acceptance (because more obviously realistic, empirical, and less “far out”) than any of White’s other poetry.13 These poems characteristically show a highly refined technique and a firm mastery of subject; the Scottish influences of Dunbar, Burns and MacDiarmid show clearly in the social satires, and several poems are written in Scots (e.g., “Song about the uselessness of life” and “Ballad of the

13 E.g., Francis Scarfe, in the introduction to Wild Coat, calls “The Coffin-Close” of this section a “masterpiece.”
C. & W."). The city and the squalor of human life, which trails like refuse in its wake, are crisply and lyrically evoked:

Sun a beetroot thrown in mud
six o’clock winter in Dumbarton Road
oatcakes and milk I buy at the dairy
as cars spit their way towards the ferry  (“Zone,” p. 35)

The city symbolizes at different moments both hell and death: death, for those within it, in a poem like “Now in this tomb,” which closes (the “it” is the self):

convinced of hopeless impurity
it subsides in the region where no bird sings

where no rivers flow and no trees bloom
and thought is nothing but an unsealed tomb  (p. 27)

Or again, death as we see it in the ballad of the “Coffin Close,” where life is but the narrow passageway leading to it:

Have you heard of the Coffin Close, boys
have you heard of the Coffin Close
it’s one of life’s rare joys, boys
it smells like a summer rose
yes, it smells like a summer rose

Have you ever fallen down the stair, boys
have you ever fallen down the stair
and buried your sensitive nose, boys
in the filth and muck which is there
yes, the filth and muck which is there

Have you ever seen Bill McNeice, boys
have you ever seen Bill McNeice
lying dead to the world, boys
and a cat being sick in his face
yes, a cat being sick in his face

I live in the Coffin Close, boys
I live in the Coffin Close
very soon they’ll be taking me out, boys
and my head will come after my toes
yes, my head will come after my toes  (p. 29)

Glasgow, however, is also hell. “Before any real going forward is possible,” White writes in a prose section of *En toute candeur,*
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"we have to go down" (p. 30). Glasgow, the "civilised" mother from whose "rusty womb" ("Zone") the poet came, represents the nadir of the point White seeks:

The broad streets of this town, when the sky is pinched with cold, or when the drizzle seeps through the fog, or when the red circular object above your head reminds you of the sun, are hell pure and simple. Here also are all my fathers. Here I plunge into the past which is also the present—into birth, copulation and death, as the man said (Candeur, p. 53).

As such Glasgow remains a symbol, an inspiration and a fundamental point of reference. "All my writing echoes in the womb of Glasgow," White writes in Letters from Gourgouel: "Even in the house of the sun, I do not forget it. . . . It is the delight of the throes of birth, the bloodiest adventure a man goes through" (p. 59).

Yet hell's boundaries spread far beyond the confines of Glasgow for White, far out over the whole "sterile" and exiled modern world, Hiroshima's child. "At the Edge of the World," an essay published in Les Lettres Nouvelles (see note 4), further illustrates White's devastating perception of an absurd modern reality and his instinctive revolt against it, while giving the first clues to his means of deliverance from it.

White opens the essay with an epigraph from Rimbaud: "Je suis un piéton, rien de plus" [I am a pedestrian, nothing more]; he then continues:

It's Sunday, the twenty-somethingth of October, and I'm in exile and I'm writing a book. That's all there is to do in exile. Ideals, love, the spiritual world don't inspire me, either as realities or possibilities. The only way to stay alive at all is to write your daily biography, telling it all as it comes (p. 7).

It is, then, an intense turning-inward which offers the sole means of self-perpetuation—the effort to discover the real self, along with its capacities and potentials, beneath the dead crust of its civilized façade. It is important to note, however, that this intense turning-inward occurs because of the context, because of what in Celtic mythology was known as the "sterile country," which for White also provides no viable outlets—only self-destruction or madness:

Yes, we're in exile. I don't mean just from our countries. That's nothing. I mean from the very idea of country, nation, the very idea of God, the very idea of ourselves. Our minds have exploded. They're wide open. . . . We're beside everything, including ourselves. No scale of being for us.
No definition. We're just sheer openness. The only image familiar to us
is—Hiroshima. That's our faith, philosophy, art and morality.
We're in exile. At the edge of the world (p. 8).

There's no aim or end to our lives, just as there's no aim or end to
our writings, because we're submerged by a gigantic finality. Beside it,
every aim is laughable. That's why we tend to the grotesque, the fantastic,
the crazy gesture (p. 10).

There is a hopeless absurdity, a lack of cohesion everywhere;
even in the images which kindle the imagination, one is only brutally
brought back again to absurdity:

Streets of Paris, old bones with no marrow. Odd scenes and events can
arrest your attention for a moment: the negress with the crimson nails; the
drunk woman with the Chinese skirt and the violin; the baby buying a
lottery ticket. But that doesn't get you out of the prison. These scenes and
events don't mean anything. They're all autonomous (p. 14).

The logic of normal life is absurd. The poet finds his values defining
themselves more clearly as whatever values are opposite those sur-
rounding him:

To be informed means to be deformed. To be in the swim is the same as
to be up with the Joneses: a pastime for the hyper-adapted. . . . No more
hospitals, just a little health; no more culture, just a little pure matter.
And as for writing, literature, it means nothing at all if it doesn't take
a step out into reality (which is damned cold at the present moment).
There are all kinds of ways of staying inside. The idea is to get
outside—taking your body along with you (p. 10).

"Real life" for him, as for Rimbaud, is elsewhere. And so White
reasserts his refusal to become a part of civilization, adding, "In
this refusal (the negation of a negation) is my beginning" (p. 10).

Still in the same essay, we next have indications presented as
to the means of deliverance implied within this "beginning"—the
sea, the earth-matter, the immediate sense perceptions—all implying
that fundamental quest for the materia prima which will take White
even more deeply into Celtic myth:

The cakes are dead, the clothes are dead, the flowers are dead, the meat
is dead, but there's still a vestige of life and freedom about the herring
(p. 13).

What I want is the marrow, the matter. The relationships will take care
of themselves (p. 14).
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A man has to find a root, or accept a convention. I'm trying to find a root (p. 10).

From the point of this fundamental realization, he may go literally anywhere—from madness, to suicide, to the “other-world.” In the closing paragraphs of the article we see that he has indeed whirled out of the realm of the ordinary, and into the chaos of the extraordinary, the Celtic “other-world,” in an all-or-nothing quest to penetrate the area where “real” life is, to find a true, even if demonic, liberty. Faced with the prospect of total madness in a sterile world, his first impulse is toward movement; as he races along the shore, along the “edge of the world,” we see that he has realized what his future course must be: to tread the tightrope equilibrium between two realities—the physical and the metaphysical, or symbolically, as it appears here, the earth and the sea. The explosion of the individual who has “lost everything” (the starting point of the following quotation) indicates, as in Celtic poetry of this type, the total dissolution of the “private” self, and the diffusion of its essence into the millions of elements which make up the fecund universe, in order to reabsorb someday, perhaps, those elements into another, purified, wholeness.

I had lost everything. To recover at least myself, I had to stand on the silver backbone of a hare in the middle of the sea and try to grasp the piece of matchstick. Suddenly I was free. On the pier, I told the girl sitting behind the desk piled up with books she should quit, there was freedom enough for everybody. She didn’t believe me. Walking along the shore, I heard young boys discussing me, saying I could have won the race easily if I hadn’t broken my ankle. I was warmed to them, but I no longer cared a damn about the race. I walked along the shore: waves, seaweed, and sand. I come to Danny’s house, and I go in. We talk of brotherhood. I stay the night. In the morning, Danny is dead. There is a crowd of people round the house. I show a chart, written in Scots, but one part was written in German by my grandfather when he was in Poland.

I continue walking along the shore (p. 15).

4

Nietzsche believed in the value of isolation, Thoreau in that of simplification. Kenneth White’s Letters from Gourgouen (1966)

14 Cf. with the poem “Hostile Conjuration” by Taliesin, which describes a similar “explosion” of the private self, in Les Grands Bardes Gallois, ed. and tr. by Jean Markale (Paris: Falaize, 1956).
takes as its point of departure these two motifs. Having bought and
reconstructed in 1963 an old farmhouse in the Ardèche valley of
southern France, which he named "Gourgoueln" to mean "gurgling"
source, White sequestered himself there in a concentrated effort to
renew his contacts with the earth and with himself. Given the
nature of our modern world, such an action must appear anachronis-
tic; but White was marching to a different drummer. To do this
required audacity, wilfulness and perseverance, all of which, as the
book reveals, White possesses in abundance. *Letters from Gourgoueln*
is both entertaining (with hundreds of anecdotes gathered by White
as he buzzes like a Socratic gadfly through the Ardèche community)
and stark (when expressing the quest which is his central mission—
the quest for a unitive experience with the earth). In the chapter
"A Branch of Plums," White sees the plum branch as both symbol
and goal of this quest:

It is all the world I want, but I want it centred. . . . I want to bring
the whole world into myself, and into more than myself—that plum branch
there. I want to be able to look at one thing, and feel its multiple radia-
tions, be aware of the innumerable references which surround it, and
yet still see it in its oneness. I want the one and the many to be no longer
separate. I do not want my self to be separate in the world. I want it to
strike outwards from its centre, the centre it feels and knows; I want it
to feel all its connections, yet still be itself, be manifoldly aware and yet
not lose itself—in that awareness, able to concentrate it. It was to obtain
this faculty of concentration that I came to Gourgoueln. Not to retire from
the world (pp. 87–88).

*Letters from Gourgoueln* opens with a purpose and closes with
a promise, in the guise of a revelation; the quest has penetrated the
frontiers of the other-world, the earth-mother's world, and the poet
holds the chalice to his lips:

I lay there . . . naked in the sunny shadow of the trees, with the earth
strongly, intensely perfumed all around me. I knew I had reached the depth
of living I had so long been looking for. Yet it was not completely mine,
it had not yet absorbed me, for with that realization went, almost simulta-
neously, the fear that I would lose it, that I would not always be able to
reach it and live there, in ease and confidence. It seemed to me for an
awful moment like something I would always have to strive for and would
always lose. . . . There was nothing to hold this presence. . . . The pure
water was there, intermittently, but our pitchers were rotten. So the parable
came to me.
And it was then I thought of poetry, and the idea of poetry flooded into my mind like pure water itself (pp. 140–41).

"The poem is a sign, not only an object," White writes in "The White World" (En toute candeur, p. 63), and as a sign, indicates the way to something beyond itself. Beyond the poem lies the myth. "There is a burning need of an intellectual culture, centred around some unifying myth," writes White in the essay "Into the White World" (p. 3). "To propose a myth," he continues, "... which is a complex of images with an idea of life both personal and social, is to invite, first and foremost, the development of the human mind as a whole and the development of a life, personal and social, corresponding to it. It is to reawaken the sense of a fully and harmoniously developed humanity" (p. 3). The myth which White proposes is his own modernization of the "quest" theme of Celtic mythology. His efforts to create that myth are evident in the third section of The Cold Wind of Dawn. The terrain here is that of the cold and sterile world left behind, on the one hand, and the white unknown world (toward which the poet moves), on the other—both areas of "Naked Ground"—the title of that third section. Poetry is the sign that brings the two worlds together, as shown in the poem "Fishing Off Jura," in which the other-world contains the sustenance for this one:

White moon in your light
the sea is the ghost of the land
the unholy ghost
and full of red fish of poetry

. . . . . . . . . . . .
the deep-down poetry I trade my life for
and I feel it as I feel my blood (p. 55)

And in "Solstice," the final poem of the book, the poet closes with a final affirmation of the liberating power of poetry:

for long the world was an inn
an ale-house back of heaven
where all were benighted and lost
but I say the world is a range of possibles
and the flight of wild poems (p. 58)

Entry into the "white world" (White's metaphor for the Celtic "other-world") indeed is no longer simply a desire, but an unfolding reality, into which the poet now penetrates:
now in grey grandeur and glory seve e
words I strike
from the raging roaring air
and cup
in my hollow tongue
the brine
of the brimming fields
and ascend the high hills of praise
the sun in my hand

("Aurora," p. 48)

Again:

here at the rising of the sun
the white sea-organ thundering
on the Christmas shore
crossing the holly and ivy wood
and the rippled stream running
through the crimson thorn
I have come again into my own

("Primrose Hill," p. 50)

And again:

This holy-of-holy rock
this barnacle-crowned
and wrack-encumbered
ridged and rifted, worn
and weathered stone
is the altar whereon I
man and poet
make abrupt communion
with the virgin world

("Ars Poetica," p. 53)

And yet again:

Beside the evangel sea
I strike my path
along the ascetic shore
where the seamen's cry
and the sun
has his hand on my shoulder
and beyond the isles of the sea
at the Great Gate
where the ocean begins
and my life ends
I see a lighted place
with a single tree
and it's there I lay me down
the gulls crying over me

("Pilgrim," p. 54)

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The initial quest, then, into the unified "white world" has been undertaken and achieved, with poetry itself as the "religion" which is able to unite the two worlds. With a firm grasp of the rediscovered "earth matter," which had been the goal of White's initial quest, he then moves on to other quests, which seem to involve him in greater and greater abstract reality. White's method in this would presuppose that such "abstract" poetry as that he is now engaged in (e.g., since publication of The Most Difficult Area in 1966) would be impossible without the materia prima first being ritually and mythopoetically repossessed. "Whiteness," for example, in White's more recent poetry (that after 1966) is no longer symbolic of this lost "other-world," but speaks out as a known territory, with which the poet is familiar.

Yet, in terms of White's recreation of the Celtic myth of the "other-world," it is no wonder that his initial "white world" is cold, wintry, and forbidding, since it is the desolated domain of the raging earth-mother, long sequestered in her frigidity. In the course of White's poetry a slow transformation of this frozen element takes place, and that change in function with the mutual exchanges between subject and object, between poet and world. Both are modified; both are enriched. As masculine and feminine principles, they are, in fact, intended to complement one another. After the poet's penetration through to the utmost depths of this foreign world, the phenomenon of reversibility operates once more, as it has with Celtic literature of this type: the signs change. After accepting and living long within this glacial element, the poet perceives that it has, with infinite languor, desolidified, and is melting. It is then that the two forces symbolically interpenetrate, unite, and slowly reconcentrate into one incandescent center comparable in intensity only to the sun itself. This is the "white world" of White's more recent poetry:

Many images blur the mind
the highest poetry
is stricken
with poverty of image
when the white light
is at its blindingest
all objects disappear
the skull like a sun

At the same time that he has, in a literal sense, left Scotland, Kenneth White has also, in a metaphorical sense, returned to it, by journeying in his poetry deeply into its mythopoetic heritage. Firmly rooted as he is within his cultural landscape, and closely in harmony with those Celtic myths which appear as relevant today as they must have appeared centuries ago, Kenneth White may be all the more able to address a modern audience far beyond his native and cultural boundaries.

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