

Intercultural  
Geopoetics  
in Kenneth White's  
Open World



# Intercultural Geopoetics in Kenneth White's Open World

By

Mohammed Hashas

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To the memory of my grandfather Ali, who chose Mestegmer village  
as our family dwelling;  
To the seekers of plural thinking in the age of global injustice and fear.

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, and I'm sure of that,  
and I intend to end up there.

Why do you stay in prison  
when the door is so wide open?

Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking.  
Live in silence.

Notice how each particle moves.  
Notice how everyone has just arrived here  
from a journey.

Be melting snow.  
Wash yourself of yourself.  
—Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273), in *The Essential Rumi*,  
trans. Coleman Barks, et al. (1997).

The cosmos speaks to man and all of its phenomena contain meaning.  
—Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern  
Man* (1968).

Man is inherently not a discontinuous whole [...]. Our relationship with the world is no longer one where we seek to take away all the secrets of the world in order to exploit it, but to discover them in order to people and develop the earth; nor is this relationship one of detachment from the universe's phenomena but of harmony with them because they are the only key to its innermost secrets.  
—Taha Abderrahmane, *The Spirit of Modernity [Rūḥu l-ḥadāṭa]* (2006).

[T]he ecological crisis [...], in my view, is the result not of scientific deficiencies, but of a faulty relation between modern (chiefly Western) humanity and nature or the cosmos. If this is so, then the basic relationship between nature and humanity needs to be recast, in the direction of replacing the model of human mastery over nature with the model of mutual dependence and ecological responsibility. To a considerable extent, this change requires a dramatic new learning process: where the modern West is willing to learn both from countercurrents in Western thought and from older ethical and cosmological traditions of the non-West.  
—Fred Dallmayr, *Return to Nature? An Ecological Counterhistory* (2011).

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## FOREWORD

# THE GEOPOET: AGENT OF INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

KHALID HAJJI

PRESIDENT, BRUSSELS FORUM OF WISDOM AND WORLD PEACE

Almost every time you mention the word ‘geopoetics’ someone will jump up to correct you: ‘Did you mean geopolitics?’ Indeed, it is not clear what it means to be a geopoet, especially in today’s troubled world, where focusing on the private, poetic quest of the world, instead of politics, might be perceived as a stratagem to dodge the thorny issues of colonization, of culture and imperialism, or of unjust economic globalization. At best, the geopoetic quest for meaning and geography, or for a new mindscape, can be judged to be too radical to be of any practical relevance.

However, while thinking about what to write in this foreword, I came to realize that geopoetics has already become a tradition that binds one to both master and student. For Kenneth White is my ex-teacher; Mohammed Hashas is my ex-student. My impression is that beyond media brouhaha, which comments on the atrocities happening under our gaze, something fundamental is in the process of being anchored in our ways of thinking about the world. There is a palpable, growing need among scholars and students to call upon poetics to provide our experience of a shattered world with some cohesion and coherence.

What I retain from the precious, unforgettable seminars given by Kenneth White in La Sorbonne is the deep conviction that poetry matters when it comes to leaving what he terms ‘the motorway of Western civilization’. With the passing of time and after years of teaching experience, this conviction has crystallized into a firm belief that poetry matters when it comes to leaving the motorways of all civilizations and cultures. In fact, one of the key elements of geopoetics is ‘intellectual nomadism’, or wandering in uncharted territories in search of signs that hint at unsuspected harmonious wholes.

Intellectual nomads, endowed with genuine geopoetic sensibility, can transcend cultural boundaries to listen to the ‘melodious character of Earth’, to use Walt Whitman’s expression. By placing Earth at the centre of human experience, geopoetics equips us today to rethink the relationship between language and being, as it alerts our minds to hidden dimensions that are common to human existence, independently from cultural belonging. No doubt, the space opened by geopoetics furthers the merging of networks of energies into a new intellectual force, capable of federating efforts, of undertaking common action in order to ensure a better future for the planet.

By grounding multiple forms of artistic expression in Earth, geopoetics contributes to blurring cultural borders, empowering hence the geopoet as an agent of intercultural exchange. In the Arab context, geopoetics is felt as an attempt at resuscitating the original meaning of *shi’r* (poetry) which confounds both poetic and ontological heroism. Etymologically, the *shā’ir*, or poet, is capable of ‘feeling existence to the extent of having goosebumps’, is capable of finding the adequate words and word order to express this feeling of existence. Only men and women of such ilk could extract us today from the banality and mediocrity of our so-called wars of cultures, renew our sense of being in the World, and find a new approach to thinking how to inhabit the Earth.

Mohammed Hashas’ words about geopoetics are laden with significance. Beyond the ambitious goal Hashas has set for himself – to open an interdisciplinary space where geopoetics and interculturalism draw on each other – his passionate endeavour to give geopoetic awareness a foothold in Arabic culture and history of ideas is evidence enough to corroborate the claim that geopoetics is not a culture-bound phenomenon, but rather a fundamental quest of meaning likely to appeal to young, dynamic talents throughout the world.

In depth, Hashas’ reading of Kenneth White’s project is a worthwhile contribution to laying the foundation for a better understanding between cultures, namely Arabo-Islamic culture and Western culture. I take his succumbing to the charm of geopoetics as an unmistakable sign that Kenneth White’s hard efforts and intense activity are yielding the expected results outside Western culture. Hashas’ words comforted me in my first impressions, during my first encounter with Kenneth White, that geopoetics is a basic centrifugal activity, likely to untie the human mind from closed systems of thought, and spur it on to retrieve Earth and Language, our fields of being, from oblivion.

## INTRODUCTION

My affinity with geopoetics was immediate, following my first encounter with it at the university in 2004–2005, for two main reasons, which I could outline as follows. The first reason is that it treats of human contact with nature, and my own story with nature must have played a major role in building this affinity. I grew up in a village, Mestegmer, in the east of Morocco, till the age of eight, and memories of natural scenery and direct contact with nature, animals, plants, and simple human life came back to me intensely when I started reading more about geopoetics. I found myself in it. It echoes parts of my past and my endeavours to keep that past alive though in different contexts, cities, and continents. Being a village kid gives you the chance to see, for example, the different stages of the growth of some domestic animals, and the different stages of the growth and death of certain trees and flowers; it also gives you the chance to befriend closely dogs, cats, cows, sheep, chickens, turkeys, pigeons, donkeys, and horses; it gives you the chance to plant tomatoes, potatoes, beans, melon, peach or olive trees, which, after months or years you go back and see are either gone or still there; they become part of your past and memory. That is a real natural life, which busy lifestyles and high-tech means of communication steal from us, if we do not pay attention to that natural memory and mundane contact with living entities around us. The value of life and our own individual life stem so much from that simple life and what it teaches about our being on earth, and our ability to situate ourselves in the natural world, with other animate and inanimate entities around us; it is about *being*, and not mere *having*. ‘Geopoetics is the antidote to world-poisoning, concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world.’<sup>1</sup>

The second reason why geopoetics attracted me is that intellectually it echoes a lot with the tradition I grew up in and with: the Arab-Islamic tradition, mixed with local traditions like those of the Amazighs, or Berbers, in Morocco. Maturity of wo-man is measured, among other things, by the ability to know the land, and how to live with it, in different seasons, for survival, and communion. It is the primary source of meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth White, *The Wanderer and His Charts – Exploring the Fields of Vagrant Thought and Vagabond Beauty* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), 243–4.

because it is the axis of contact with the self, society, and the cosmos. I had already read the philosophical narrative *Hay Ibn Yagzan* (known in the Latin world at the time as *Philosophus Autodidactus*) by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufayl (1105–1185).<sup>2</sup> This work, which is considered to have influenced Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and similar narratives, is the written existential call that the tradition I grew up with, or rather which I pursued, broadly teaches. When I read my first geopoetic texts – an excerpt from *A Walk along the Shore* (1980) and the full texts of *Le Plateau de l'albatros: introduction à la géopoétique* (1994) and *The Wanderer and His Charts* (2004), – and came across the concept of 'intellectual nomadism', I had the work of Ibn Tufayl thoroughly ingrained in my mind as an example of the individual's quest for meaning through contact with earth and the cosmos. When I read the biography of the founder of geopoetics, the contemporary Kenneth White (b. 1936, Scotland), and his world travels later on, I also brought to mind the Moroccan world traveller Ibn Battuta (1304–1369) and his *Rihla* (Journey) narrative which narrates some thirty years of travels worldwide.<sup>3</sup> I found more intertwining territories later when I found a way to, for example, Ibn Bajja's (d. 1138) *Tadbīr al-Mutawahhid* (Rule of the Solitary),<sup>4</sup> Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854),<sup>5</sup> and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883).<sup>6</sup> This is to say that geographies and cultures are rich with figures that share open spirits that travel and enrich the self through contact with earth and the different other, and this is a shared value that the open and interconnected world of geopoetics calls for.

The personal cannot be easily distanced from the intellectual and social. This makes the third additional point that makes geopoetics a radical contribution to modern debates on the management of diversity, theorized in various projects of multiculturalism and interculturalism – despite the claims of big political state figures of the death of (political)

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<sup>2</sup> Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl, *The History of Hay Ibn Yagzan*, transl. Simon Ockley, intr. A.S. Fulton (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, n.d.); Samar Attar, *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Tufayl's Influence on Modern Western Thought* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (1986; Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Bajja, *Tadbīr al-Mutawahhid* [Rule of the Solitary] (Tunis: Cérés Editions, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton and Company, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian del Caro and Robert Pippin (1883; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

multiculturalism: Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, in 2010, David Cameron, Prime Minister of Great Britain, and Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France, in 2011. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche says that great philosophy is but a reflection of the philosopher's confessions and memoirs, be s/he aware of that or not.<sup>7</sup> He also says that 'future philosophers' are not dogmatic; they make a 'new order' that is 'appearing', and they are endowed with a 'free spirit'. Kenneth White and his project of geopoetics may be read in this line of thought in this period of modern history. This makes geopoetics a political statement, a critique of exclusive policies, though its founder avoids labelling it or imprisoning it for now in one field; he defends its interdisciplinarity, as will be shown; still, my intention here is to point to one possible reading of the project, in the age of political and sociocultural malaise, fear, phobias, exclusive nationalisms and populisms. Geopoetics is an optimistic project for the future, despite the anguish that was behind its emanation – i.e. the malaise of the 'Western tradition' of especially the 1950s and 1960s post-world war period, during which the poet-philosopher Kenneth White started his project. Despite the hardships that surround its realization collectively, the geopoetic open world is not utopic. White says:

Today, for the first time in the history of humanity, winds blow from all regions of the globe at once, and each and everyone of us has access to all the cultures of the world. That can give rise to cacophony, to disarray, lassitude in front of so much accumulated richness, but it can also give rise, with analytical work and synthesis [...] to a new way of thinking, a great world poem, liveable by everyone.<sup>8</sup>

Though White appears so critical of Eurocentrism and its cultural malaise in the beginning, one can see that this step is overcome by opening up to world cultures, their richness, and by a return to a more accommodative, reinvigorated, and multicultural Europe. His intellectual anger and thirst reflects post-war Europe, and the productive intellectual period of the 1950s and 1960s. Since then a lot has happened inside Europe itself. A lot of world cultures have migrated to the same Europe that White left for reasons of intellectual nomadism. Migration flows from the rest of the world have reinvigorated the debate in Europe on various levels. For example, theories on postcolonialism, multiculturalism, interculturalism,

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman (1886; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> In Tony McManus, *The Radical Field: Kenneth White and Geopoetics* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2007), 196.

recognition, secularism, liberalism, religion and religiosity, the public sphere, and the identity of Europe have developed since then, and the geopoetic project is part of this development and an interdisciplinary contribution to it.

It is by bearing this context in mind that geopoetics can be read as a radical call for more critique, and more opening up, against various exclusive dogmatic, ideological, philosophical, or religious discourses, and for a better future for wo-man and nature. With geopoetics, no one is only one thing; there are no independent and self-sufficient cultures or entities. Earth which embraces and nurtures diversity is at the centre of geopoetics; it is a force of cosmic unity and particularly complementarity that both individuals and societies should reflect upon when dealing with internal diversity so as to see the other dimensions of life that political and functional concepts such as ‘being a citizen’ in a ‘modern state’ do not grasp fully. Modernity requires the constant refreshing of the conception of man and land, and geopoetics is an intercultural project in that direction, in the sense that it not only recognizes linguistic, cultural, poetic, philosophic, and scientific diversity but demands a genuine interaction among its various components. Intercultural geopoetics, which is multiculturally dialogical, requires genuine interaction of different worldviews, cultures, philosophies, sciences, geographies, and modes of *being*, for the enlargement of human understanding of the *de facto* diversity the cosmos offers. While it appears to be predominantly a personal and existential quest, it cannot be only so, nor does it aim to be only so. Intercultural geopoetics is concerned with the future of man, human relations, and the world. The geopoetic self is Whitmanian (Walt Whitman, 1819–1892); it contradicts itself; it is large and contains multitudes.<sup>9</sup> It is also Rumian (Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, 1207–1273); it washes itself of itself through self-critique and transformative dialogue with the different self.<sup>10</sup> It recognizes itself through the other, be the latter a person, a culture, or a geography; each has its own energies that can enrich the geopoetic feel of *multiple being*. Intercultural geopoetics can be one of the ‘gods’ of ‘thinking’ (in the sense of being a new idea that merges theory and practice) that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) spoke of to overcome what he referred to as ‘the age of technicity’ that is transforming human relations

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<sup>9</sup> Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1991), Section 51.

<sup>10</sup> Coleman Barks et al., transl., *The Essential Rumi* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997), 23.



and human contact with Earth.<sup>11</sup> In his defence of genuine human relations, against excessive technologization of man and nature, the renowned contemporary Syrian poet Adonis (b. 1930) says that it is only poetry as an ‘innate quality’ that can grasp the infinite character of the ‘sublime creature’ of man in relation with nature.<sup>12</sup>

Not to put too fine a point on it here, intercultural geopoetics is about recognizing difference and appropriating it as part of one’s growth in a shared public space, and this becomes clearer in the political and philosophical debate in modern plural societies. Contemporary theorists of multiculturalism, such as the Canadians Charles Taylor (b. 1931) and Will Kymlicka (b. 1962), the Indian-British Bhikhu Parekh (b. 1935), the Pakistani-British Tariq Modood (b. 1952), and the Malaysian-born Australian Chandran Kukathas (b. 1957), to name only a few, have for the last few decades either clarified and enlarged the scope of multiculturalism, critiqued it, or moved *beyond* it – or preferably moved *with* it – to interculturalism as a new paradigm of interaction in the global society as well as national-plural societies.<sup>13</sup> In a nearby geographical mindscape, the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane (b. 1944) proposes ‘trusteeship’ as an episteme of renewal of human relations and being in the world, based on the mutual horizontal trust among people and the vertical connexion with the transcendent that inspire the ethics of this trust (*The Question of Ethics*, 2000; *The Spirit of Modernity*, 2011).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Only a God Can Save Us’, 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, published in Richard Wollin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (1976; Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1993), 91–116.

<sup>12</sup> Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, transl. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 1990), 96–7.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. and intr. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000); Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, 2nd ed. (2007; Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2013); Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Taha Abderrahmane, *su’al al-aḥlāq: musāhamah fī l-naqd al-aḥlāqī li-l-ḥadāṭah al-ḡarbiyya* [The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to Ethical Criticism of Western Modernity] (Beirut and Casablanca, al-Markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-‘arabī, 2000), and *rūḥ al-ḥadāṭa: nahwa al-ta’āsīs li-ḥadāṭa islāmiyya* [The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity] (Beirut and Casablanca, al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-‘arabī, 2006).

This said, then, the polemics of whether interculturalism is more inclusive and more dialogically open compared with multiculturalism, which only celebrates difference with little interaction, is of little relevance here. Geopoetics has been developing since the 1970s, which means a bit longer than both multicultural and intercultural political theories. Now that geopoetics has outlined its broad interdisciplinary premises, and can be considered a reinvigorating postmodern project, it is not only possible but also necessary to read it according to societal needs, without demurring its bigger – global and existential – aspirations. Intercultural geopoetics can, then, be a potential contribution to political theory for the accommodation of diversity and difference; it may be considered a modern equivalent for the classical concept of ‘wisdom’. It is no surprise that White himself calls geopoetics ‘an intercultural and transcultural movement’.<sup>15</sup>

Other disciplines can find in geopoetics similar potential, and one that is gaining more and more attention, and is of paramount relevance and importance to geopoetics, is what is known as ‘ecophilosophy’, the equivalent of classical ‘philosophy of nature’, which deals with questions of climate change, nature, ethics, and human future. Geopoetics is also in this regard intercultural, since it strives to rebuild genuine contact with nature as part of human flourishing in a harmonious way, based on different traditions outside the so-called ‘Western tradition’. Included in this are marginal or marginalized voices from within the same tradition. As early as the 1960s, before the question of climate change started to become alarming gradually from the 1990s, the Iranian-American philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) warned against growing deforestation, over-industrialization, and ‘the condition of prostituted nature’, in the sense of exploiting nature without taking care of it ethically and responsibly.<sup>16</sup> As a philosophical engagement with this ecological crisis, the contemporary German-American philosopher Fred Dallmayr (b. 1928) reads some major modern Western figures, such as Spinoza, Dewy, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as the Eastern traditions of India and China, as arguing for the plural need of returning to nature to amend the excessive damage the environment, human consciousness, and *being* are experiencing; Dallmayr admits that it is ‘Western’ modernity that has to be revisited, and enriched by non-Western traditions, to examine the modern ‘faulty relationship’

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<sup>15</sup> White, *Une Stratégie paradoxale, essais de résistance culturelle* (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 1998), 210.

<sup>16</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (1968; London and Boston: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990).

with the cosmos.<sup>17</sup> I go back to some of these critical reflections on ethics in the conclusion of this work.

Now, who is Kenneth White? And what does geopoetics really mean? That is what this work is about. Since my intention here is mainly to trace the beginnings of White's 'project', as he calls it, I provide the main concepts he uses while developing this project. White rethinks space, culture, earth, language, and philosophy. Each is looked at from an interdisciplinary angle so as to lend it a new dimensional aura, a new sense of being in the cosmos. White's geopoetics comes as a sort of diagnosis of the crisis and pitfalls of Western civilization, which 'has been for centuries carried by various powers: myths, religion, metaphysics', and is today 'carried by nothing'.<sup>18</sup>

In analysing the limitations of Western thought, White divides its evolution into seven main stages, which make up what he terms the 'Motorway of Western Civilization'. This 'motorway' is 'laid down' by Platonic idealism and Aristotelian classification (the first stage), Christianity (the second stage), Renaissance humanism (the third stage), Cartesian rationalism (the fourth stage), Romantic sentimentality (the fifth stage), Hegelian historicism (the sixth stage), and the hollow and noisy Current Situation (the seventh stage).<sup>19</sup> It is in opposition to the stages of this 'motorway' that White has conceived of geopoetics and has started to speak about it and use it as a term since 1978.

White does not like to stamp his project with any label (literary, philosophic, or scientific). His focal elements are man, culture, work, world, and how they could be united harmoniously to give living a genuine sensation. It is about grounding human existence; the 'geopoetics project is neither a cultural "variety" nor a literary school, nor even a poetry considered as a proper art. It is a major movement that concerns the foundations of human existence on earth.'<sup>20</sup> Geopoetics is the culmination of White's strenuous readings and wanderings which make up what he calls 'intellectual nomadism', another key term in the project. This makes

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<sup>17</sup> Fred Dallmayr, *Return to Nature? An Ecological Counterhistory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 229.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth White, *Geopoetics: Place, Culture, World* (Edinburgh: Alba Editions, 2003), 7–9.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth White's inaugural speech for the International Institute for Geopoetics in Paris, 26 April 1989, available at [http://geopoetique.net/archipel\\_fr/institut/texte\\_inaugural/index.html](http://geopoetique.net/archipel_fr/institut/texte_inaugural/index.html). The original text is in French. The translation is mine: all citations from French texts are my translation except where stated.

it liable to contain a wide scope of disciplines. It is transdisciplinary. The poetic, the philosophical, the scientific, the psychological, the cultural, and the political are all present within its orbit. One may pause here and pose this question: will this change the world? Does it not look like a new mode of thinking and living? Yes, it is a way of life. As to whether it will change the world, White wrote the answer some ten years ago in the ‘Carnet de Bord’ for the International Institute of Geopoetics: ‘We will not undoubtedly change the world (*but who knows?*). What we could achieve with geopoetics is giving density to our lives.’<sup>21</sup> What White means is that geopoetics is an ongoing project, open to future development, and aims at no *coup d’état* to change the world’s political map, yet there is a possibility of change (*‘but who knows?’*), when and only when minds and lands cohabit, when mindscapes correspond to landscapes, and vice versa. When this happens, it will contribute to changing the way of living and being on earth. This is the quest for White.

More about White and his project is probed in this work following this outline: first, root concepts such as culture, place, world, eros, logos, poetry, philosophy, and intellectual nomadism are introduced in the first part, besides the general context within which White sees his project. Most, if not all, of these concepts are encountered in all of the books that make the bases of this work, speaking here about his five major books that started to appear from the 1980s onwards: *La Figure du dehors* (Outdoors Figure) (1982), *Une Apocalypse tranquille* (Tranquil Apocalypse) (1985), *L’Esprit nomade* (Nomadic Spirit) (1987), *Le Plateau de l’albatros: introduction à la géopoétique* (Albatross View: Introduction to Geopoetics) (1984), and *The Wanderer and His Charts – Exploring the Fields of Vagrant Thought and Vagabond Beauty* (2004).

The second part discusses a selection of influential intellectual nomads, poets, historians, and philosophers that White numbers among his ‘companions’ in thought, for they all preach and praise the world and contact with nature as the source of elevation and true existence. The start is from Europe, with names such as Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Van Gogh, Hölderlin, Heidegger, Artaud, Humboldt, and MacDiarmid. The American land is another space where new trajectories are charted by Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, London, and Kerouac, the lovers of nature and earth. From the land of the Indians in America, White pursues the waves of the ocean to the ancient and far Orient, the land of yoga and haiku, the Orient that White sees as fundamental in order for the Occident

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth White, editorial to ‘Carnet de Bord’, International Institute for Geopoetics, Issue 3, Spring 2005, 3. My italics.

to resuscitate its authentic contact with the cosmos. Mainly in Japan, China, and Tibet, White does not tire of citing Tchouang-tzeu, Wei, Bashō, Sesshū, and their inspiring poetry towards a wise mode of being and doing. In these territories many names appear, yet the ones seen as most suitable to the argument are invoked, including the those just cited above.

Finally, the third and last part is devoted to White as a 'practitioner of geopoetics' and inhabitant of the new, open white-world geopoetic targets. This point is elaborated on by working on three of his 'staybooks', i.e., *Les Limbes incandescentes* (Incandescent Limbo) (1976), *Lettres de Gourgonnel* (Letters from Gourgonnel) (1979), *House of Tides* (2000), and two 'waybooks', *La Route bleue* (The Blue Road) (1983) and *Across the Territories* (2004). In these he narrates how he spends his time when at home, at Gwenved, Trébeurden, in Brittany on the western coast of France, or when nomadizing around the globe, thus applying his earlier companions' habits. *Open World – The Collected Poems 1960–2000* (2002) is also frequently quoted from. It should be noted that seven of the ten major books of White worked on in this work are written in French, as the titles show, and the translation of the passages I cite is mine. This issue of bilingualism (French and English), will be briefly pointed out in the part that revolves around White. It should also be noted that the book does not opt for a chronological reading of White's writings, nor does it discuss each book on its own; rather, it discusses concepts and themes.



# PART I

## GEOPOETICS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY BEGINNINGS, OPEN PERSPECTIVES

I have spoken of something ‘going on’ along that high ridge, something that doesn’t fit easily into the categories, something that goes on above all the quarrelsome dialectics, the localist squabblings, and the fantasies of less developed minds. This ‘going on’ is not simply a series of works, the marks of a career. It is a life-path, a wayfaring, and it comprises projections and conceptions as well as artefacts.

—Kenneth White, *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 29.

The emergence of Kenneth White’s geopoetics as a new movement of thought goes back to the 1960s, but the use of the term did not start till the end of the 1970s, ‘when he was walking along the north bank of the St Lawrence River into Labrador [Canada]’.<sup>1</sup> Geopoetics is the culmination of ideas White nurtured early in his life, especially due to his openness to a variety of academic disciplines such as geology, geography, literature, and philosophy, as well as his mastery of a good number of languages, starting with the Latin which he studied at university, and including French and German. This part of the book is mainly about how geopoetics surfaced to take place in academia, and about the key words that go along with it, i.e. culture, place, world, cosmos, earth, geography, poetry, philosophy, science, and intellectual nomadism. These terms intertwine in so many ways because they all contribute to the formation of geopoetics.

### 1. Culture, Place, World

Geopoetics has appeared in an age when the European modern man’s discontent and cynicism have reached an intense degree, and when contact

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth White, *Le Plateau de l’albatros: introduction à la géopoétique* (Paris: Grasset, 1994), 13.

with the earth and nature has become an odd and rare activity. Rare are those who stop by a natural phenomenon or scene and ponder over it. Equally rare are those who question the use of science and its unprecedented advancement, and rarer still are those who can re-read their past, their culture, and their contact with their space through walking and meditation. Geopoetics is a movement which raises such issues and pushes them to 'indefinite' extremes.

White re-reads mainly Western thought through geopoetic-multicultural lenses. White believes that Western thought, and the whole world with it, has been the victim of what he calls the 'Motorway of Western Civilization'. This 'motorway' is illustrated both in an essay entitled 'An Outline of Geopoetics' in *The Wanderer and His Charts* (2004) and in *Geopoetics: Place, Culture, World* (2003), which will be referred to 'so as to see where exactly we now stand'.<sup>2</sup>

The first stage in the 'Western motorway' is the Classical Age that is summarized and dominated by Plato and Aristotle. The first is known by his metaphysics and idealism (the ideal world), away from the real world. To White, this philosopher is 'a person interested in something beyond "mundane" concerns: the Good, the True, the Beautiful', which implies that he should not build ivory towers and forget to 'get his feet on the ground, and get back to "the real world"'.<sup>3</sup> The second, Aristotle, is known by his classification, which 'most of our knowledge is based on'. White does not oppose this system in its entirety, but only when it is used to divide studied things/phenomena into separate parts, and the study of each alone leads to distortions or unsatisfactory scrutiny of the parts as a whole; the problem for White is when parts are studied while conclusions about the whole are forgotten, a phenomenon which 'narrows' the mind, and makes it 'flow' over the study of real, living life.<sup>4</sup>

Stage two in the 'motorway' is characterized by Christianity which would build vertical towers in preparation for a transcendental life in heaven. The 'obsession' with the Original Sin and the Second Coming of the crucified Christ is another main hindrance that has made the Christian world 'agonizedly demoralized'.<sup>5</sup> With the Renaissance, which constitutes

<sup>2</sup> *Geopoetics*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 232. This work does not dwell much on the question of religion in geopoetics. But one could infer from White's words that geopoetics does not limit itself to any religious discourse. In *La Figure du dehors* he says, 'note well that there is nothing "religious" in all this'. Kenneth White, *La Figure du dehors* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), 166.



the third stage, the Classical Age heritage reappears after its disappearance during the dark Middle Ages of Christianity. Such a rebirth of a tradition was embodied in mythological creatures (gods, goddesses, naiads, dryads) that took the forests and mountains as spaces of interest, which would in turn raise the importance of science and nature. However, such a rebirth of interest in science and nature was, according to White, influenced by Aristotelian classifications and the New World, and turned out to be ‘a blow-up caricature of some parts of the Old’.<sup>6</sup> For example, when a new island was discovered, it took the name of its discoverer or the name of a king, when it should have been given the name that best suited its geography.

With Cartesianism, we enter the fourth stage, Modernity, in which ‘nature becomes more and more objectified’, and ‘considered exclusively as raw matter to be exploited’. That is, nature became an object, while man the master, the subject, was soon to be either ‘robotized’ and ‘wrapped up in some clinical, scientific, astronautic, military uniform’ – if he did not turn into a frustrated object in psychoanalysis clinics.<sup>7</sup> As a reaction against the abuse of nature and science came the Romantics, who make up stage five in this ‘motorway’. With Romanticism, the call for a return to nature became the focal point. The aim was to arrive at some ‘wholeness of thinking and being’ that went beyond classification and ‘compartmentalization of thought’, though in so many cases it did so sentimentally.<sup>8</sup>

The Historicism of Hegel constitutes the sixth stage in White’s chronology. Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel advanced the idea that history has an orientation, and that this orientation is *Weltgeist*, ‘the spirit of the world’. Put differently, for Hegel, history ‘has a purpose’, and it leads ‘somewhere’, a theory which marks the birth of ‘the ideology of progress’.<sup>9</sup> The endeavours of different Western communities to keep up with the idea of progress through differing economic and political ideologies could be summed up in the idea of markets as the source of development and progress where values are measured by how beneficial they are, and not by how far they push man to a better presence in the world. Such a presence is far from being achieved in the Contemporary Situation, stage seven. Hollowness, helter-skelter, discontent, and mediocracy (instead of democracy) are the traits that characterize the Contemporary Situation. The literature and art of this era/stage are a good

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<sup>6</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 233.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>9</sup> *Geopoetics*, 11.

illustration of the situation. They are shallow and have no value imbedded in them.<sup>10</sup>

After having enumerated the various stages of the Western motorway, White finds himself at a point where this question raises itself: ‘Where to, then?’ One of the answers could be either ‘towards geopoetics’ or ‘towards somewhere better via geopoetics’. *Le Figaro littéraire* comments that ‘Kenneth White lifts the mind from so much stale discourse and raises intelligence to a rare level’;<sup>11</sup> ‘it seems we are looking for a new prophet. It could be that White is the very man.’<sup>12</sup> For the magazine *Belles-Lettres*, in Geneva, geopoetics seems the remedy to the modern-age malaise and ‘cultural illness’.<sup>13</sup>

White’s movement, both deeply sensitive and highly intelligent, may well be heralding a new world-epoch. At a time when a certain mediocrity is reaching planetary proportions, one of us has stood up, turned his back and, possessed of real knowledge, moved off. Coming back, he reveals a method of thought and a way of being in the world which announces an art of life.<sup>14</sup>

The definitions White gives to geopoetics make of it ‘an art of life’, as will be seen below.

White’s geopoetics envisions a world in which the human being comes to good terms with the universe. White started using the term after long years of intellectual nomadism. At first he used the term ‘biocosmopoetis’, which stands for the energy of life (bios) that poetry should be rekindled with, as well as the movement that gives this energy a form, weight, and coherence (cosmos).<sup>15</sup> In *Le Plateau de L’albatros: introduction à la géopoétique* (1994), he says:

The project of geopoetics is neither a cultural variety, nor a literary school, nor a poetry considered like a personal art; it is a movement that concerns

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth White, ‘Pathways to an Open World’, in *Islam and the West – For a Better World*, ed. Khalid Hajji (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2007), 34–8. The article was delivered as a talk at the first international forum of the Aljazeera Center for Studies Forum, ‘Islam and the West – For a Better World’, Doha, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Blurb to *House of Tides*, by *Le Figaro littéraire*, Paris. Kenneth White, *House of Tides* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Blurb to *House of Tides*, by *The Sunday Times*.

<sup>13</sup> *La Figure du dehors*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Blurb to *Geopoetics*, in *Revue des Belles-Lettres*, Geneva.

<sup>15</sup> In Emmanuel Dall’Aglia, *Kenneth White: du nomadisme à la géopoétique* (Évreux: Centre Départemental de Documentation Pédagogique de l’EURE: 1997), 13. In a letter from Kenneth White, 05/10/2007. The translation is mine.

itself with how man finds his existence on earth; it is not a question of building a system, but of accomplishing, step by step, an exploration, an investigation, by being situated as a start somewhere between poetry, philosophy, and science.<sup>16</sup>

The intention is not to establish a literary or philosophic school. The quest is beyond that. Geopoetics 'is concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world'.<sup>17</sup> However, a deconstruction of the word into – at least – its two components may clarify the picture better: geo-poetics.

Because geopoetics is not intended for a particular culture but for world cultures, it takes the earth as the basis, the 'central motif' that all cultures (North, South, East, West), could share, thus the implementation of the 'geo' in geopoetics. Regarding poetics, this does not mean a particular use of language; rather, it is a language that stands on its own: 'I tend to use the word poetics the way others use the word mathematics. That is, as a language.'<sup>18</sup>

With geopoetics, 'the fundamental question is cultural'.<sup>19</sup> For White, culture could be understood from two points of view: first, in the context of the individual, it stands for 'the way human beings conceive of, work at, and direct themselves. Culture implies some conception of the human being.' Within this scope of culture, White suggests that man should be a 'poetic inhabitant of the Earth',<sup>20</sup> which comes through work embodied in cultivation, for 'there is no culture without work'. Here, cultivation of the individual is analogous with the cultivation of land; without cultivation, no crop grows, and thus no man's mind flourishes.<sup>21</sup> Culture within the second collective scope is defined according to what is essential to this collective group. And since 'this [geopoetics] great cultural work-field'<sup>22</sup> concerns itself with a world culture, it seeks to find what could be the central motif, the 'central concern' for this culture that is 'able to be shared by all, North, South, East and West'. The same point is expressed in *La Figure du dehors*, where the aim 'is to search for an archipelago of

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<sup>16</sup> *Le Plateau de l'albatross*, 11–12.

<sup>17</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 243.

<sup>18</sup> *Geopoetics*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Geopoetics*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> White usually capitalizes the *e* in earth to show its value, and its unique characteristics which fuel movement in life. We sometimes do the same.

<sup>21</sup> *Geopoetics*, 4–5. Later on we see how land and mind intertwine in White's project for a better sensation and expression of the world: landscape, mindscape, and wordscape.

<sup>22</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 242.

thought which trespasses the opposition of East and West, and which could be shared by all'.<sup>23</sup> This makes what White calls in *Une Stratégie paradoxale – essais de résistance culturelle* (1998), 'an intercultural and transcultural movement'.<sup>24</sup> The mutual ground (space, geography), that could embrace different cultures around a central motif is 'the very Earth on which we try to live', hence the presence of 'geo' in geopoetics.<sup>25</sup> With this geopoetic conception of culture in mind, the culture(s), spoken about in newspapers, TV, and markets is/are in miniature and in fact a distortion of the real meaning of culture. While real culture means cultivation and work, the commonly known culture now stands more for consumerism, 'infantilism', and 'intellectual platitude' than any more open work. What White wants is a 'cosmosculture' instead of a 'show culture'.<sup>26</sup>

The world White proposes 'emerges from the contact between the human being and cosmos, represented by the Earth', which implies that the cosmos is larger than Earth, and that the sensation of Earth is what makes being in the cosmos sound and interesting. The contact White speaks about

is intelligent, sensitive, subtle, you have a world in the full and positive sense: a satisfying context, an interesting and life-enhancing place. When the contact is unintelligent, insensitive, heavy-handed and clumsy, what you have instead of a world is a diminished context, if not a precinct of horror.<sup>27</sup>

Differently put, contact with Earth enlightens man's existence, and instinctively teaches him sane ways of living. However, when such contact is absent, changing society cannot occur as prophesied or desired. A world where this sought-for contact is missing is no longer a world, '*un monde*', an open and vast space for genuine being, but is an '*immonde*', originally 'meaning disgusting and repulsive' in French, or *mundus*, related to 'mundane' in English, 'meaning platitudinous and uninteresting'.<sup>28</sup> White thinks that it is time man returned to the aesthetic connotation of the word 'cosmos', which etymologically means 'a beautiful, harmonious totality'

<sup>23</sup> *La Figure du dehors*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Une Stratégie paradoxale*, 210. For more on the sociocultural background of White's project, see Christophe Roncato's *Kenneth White, une oeuvre-monde*, preface Régis Poulet (Rennes: Rennes University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 243.

<sup>26</sup> *Une Stratégie paradoxale*, 164-5.

<sup>27</sup> *The Wanderer and His Charts*, 245.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

(*Kosmos* in Greek).<sup>29</sup> To be able to lead change towards this ‘beautiful and harmonious’ world, one needs to be cultivated, and it is here that culture intervenes: ‘a world is a place, a space that one cultivates. And in order to be up to that world-cultivation one has to cultivate oneself [...]. There is no real culture without work.’<sup>30</sup> By work, what is meant is the sharpening of man’s senses for a better recognition of space, and for a better presence in the world, a process which behoves an intellectual energy. This knowledge of space is also investigated by geography, geology, and ecology. But White’s geopoetics is all-encompassing. More than that, White’s ‘open world’ is not oriented commercially, politically, ideologically, locally, provincially, nationally, or secularly. Rather, it is universally oriented; it takes world culture as its quest, which the intellectual nomad is supposed to figure out. Such work is both mental and linguistic, hence the importance of poetry in White’s geopoetics.

## 2. Poetry, Philosophy, Science

Poetry, philosophy, and science undergo a denotative metamorphosis in geopoetics. Poetry is most of the time linked to melodious and highly polished language written in a rhythmic form that pleases the ear, especially if sung. This kind of poetry is now rampant; very many poems are written to be published in newspapers or to be sung in video clips. Nonetheless, it remains a fake poetry for the reason that it is not the fruit of an intellectual effort, nor is it the fruit of a true sensation of the world. White believes that poetry in general has succumbed to ‘personal and socio-personal ideas’, far from being ‘grounded’ on a ‘larger space’. That is why it is void of the poetics White thinks of. It is ‘a poetry without world, without poetics’, ‘verbose rhetoric’, in contradistinction to poetry that ‘has a world’,<sup>31</sup> – ‘the poem of earth’ which ‘is still to be written’, as Wallace Stevens writes.<sup>32</sup> White’s cry is clear: ‘We are badly in need of poetry that “has a world”.’<sup>33</sup>

Poetry, accordingly, does not mean carefully chosen words; it is, however, a reflection of ‘a poetic listening to nature’, in the phrase of the Belgian Nobel Laureate in Physical Chemistry Ilya Prigogine (d. 2003).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>31</sup> *La Figure du dehors*, 153.

<sup>32</sup> *Geopoetics*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth White, *On Scottish Ground – Selected Essays* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), 67.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth White, *Une Apocalypse tranquille* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 31.

In the foreword to *Open World* (2002), White writes that what he is interested in is ‘world poetry’:

In the poem, without going back to myth, metaphysics or religion, I tried to get out beyond personal poetry and social poetry and linguistic poetry, into what I called ‘world poetry’, poetry concerned with *world*, that is, what emerges from the contact between the human mind and the matter-energy of the universe.<sup>35</sup>

With this definition White moves on to his own ‘image’ of poetry after having tried ‘institutions’ and ‘doors’ of poetry and finding none which satisfied him. To his new image of poetry he invites the poets of the world, as ‘Autobiography’ pictures:

**Autobiography**

I’ve been in and out of institutions  
banged a few doors

in and out of lives and loves  
come away with a few scars

I’ve gone deeper into poetry  
the space where the mind clears –

now I’m walking in my own image  
follow me who dares.<sup>36</sup>

Poetry is a solace for White; it is his own ‘world’ when the outside world exasperates him: ‘the world is a provocation to me. Over against it, I evoke my own world, which is a more real world. Poetry is affirmation of reality. No more, no less.’ These are White’s words when he was still only twenty-seven years old, expressed in *En Toute candour* (1964).<sup>37</sup> This ‘world poetry’ harbingers what is called in *La Figure du dehors* a ‘new poeticity’,<sup>38</sup> by means of which thought becomes poetry.<sup>39</sup> Here we enter the realm of mind.

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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth White, *Open World – The Collected Poems 1960–2000* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003), xxvi.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth White, *Terre de diamond* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 56, in Pierre Jamet, *Le Local et le global dans l’œuvre de Kenneth White* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), 185.

<sup>37</sup> McManus, *The Radical Field*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> *La Figure du dehors*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.