

Interview

Intellectual Nomadism and Geopoetics*

Kenneth White^a

Régis Poulet^b

Susana L. M. Antunes^c 

* Questions proposed
by Régis Poulet and
Susana L. M. Antunes.

Kenneth White is the creator of geopoetics. Whoever wants to understand what geopoetics is, and its immense implications, cannot miss the exhilarating immersion in his work made up of essays, narrative prose and poems which has been unfolding like a vast river system for more than half a century. The general purpose of geopoetics is to give the world a new grounding, implying a radically renewed relationship to what is called “nature”. This happens by understanding the poetics of the natural world, namely its thousand and one ways of spontaneously creating structures in all scales and in all parts of nature, including the human, and by creating a new culture in harmony with the Earth.

Parallel to his written work, Kenneth White early on organized geopoetic colloquia that were collected in the *Cahiers de géopoétique* and he founded the International Institute of Geopoetics in 1989. Since then, the International Institute of Geopoetics has accompanied the creation of geopoetic groups around

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^aUniversité Sorbonne, Institut International de Géopoétique, Paris, France.

E-mail: kw@kennethwhite.org

^bIndependent Researcher, Institut International de Géopoétique, Lyon, France.

E-mail: presidence@institut-geopoetique.org

^cUniversity of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, United States.

E-mail: antunes@uwm.edu

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the world and published several magazines, the latest of which is *L'Océanite* (The Storm Petrel).¹

Régis POULET (RP): It is clear that in many parts of society, concern about climate change and the disappearance of the diversity of living things is pushing many minds to ask questions about our ways of thinking and living. Very often, however, we find that the questions (and the proposed solutions) only address part of the problem. What do you think is the fundamental question that needs to be asked?

Kenneth WHITE (KW): Maybe the fundamental question to be asked is: what is really fundamental? Hard to even put such a question in a superproductive society that is perpetually soliciting our attention, urging us to do this or that, buy this or that, engage in debates on this or that. It can only be cogently put after a deal of existential experience, a dose of intellectual cogitation, and a clearing-up of space-time. That's why I engage in this activity of writing books. And a certain type of books. Among them, think-tank books of essays leading, I would hope, to understanding. Understanding being not only an intellectual pleasure in itself, freeing the mind, but the necessary basis for any worthwhile change. Let's remind ourselves, we're living in this age at the tail end of Modernity. Which radically understood (not just a fast turnover of modes), in the mind of René Descartes, meant a separation of the subject (*res cogitans*, the self) and the object (*res extensa*, the Earth), and a project: the mastering of nature. In the 17th century, the mastery was mechanical. Now, as we all know, humanity has other means at its disposal. The individual can try to forget it, pop a few drugs, do a little *rock'n'roll* and wait for the Apocalypse. But that's not very interesting. The thing now is to open up a new context. If I lay out this context in my essays, I put it into action in what I call *waybooks*, which open a way out of a more and more coded labyrinth. And I worked out a type of poem that goes beyond most of what is normally understood by "poetry" in contemporary society.

Susana L. M. ANTUNES (SLMA): A lot of people hearing you speak will say, but we've got it, or are moving towards it. It's ecology.

KW: I'm no enemy of ecology. I've been aware of it, since I was fourteen years old. That was when I was reading Ernst Haeckel, the biologist who invented the term around 1850: the relationship between organisms among themselves and with their environment. I moved from there to the social ecology of H.G. Wells, *The Outlook for Homo Sapiens* (1942). And thereafter I went to the intellectual and aesthetic ecology of Gregory Bateson, who, in books such as *Mind and Nature* (1979), posited the idea that the finest achievements of the human mind emerged from a deep experience of and insight into the biocosmic context. I was in tune with

¹Information on the magazine and other matters is available in several languages on the Institute's website <https://www.institut-geopoetique.org/en>

a lot of this. However, towards the end of his life, Bateson was saying he'd spent too much of his time in cybernetic tautology, that is, sheer repetition of a numerical half-idea. But that, if he was lucky, he might get round to the flight of the albatros. Another reputed ecologist, Aldo Leopold, in his *Sand County Almanac*, was wondering if "ecology" was the best word for all that was involved. The word I've proposed, on several grounds, is geopoetics. Ecology, well understood and developed, leads into geopoetics.

SLMA: How did it all begin for you?

KW: It all began for me in forty square miles of territory on the West coast of Scotland. A village of a thousand inhabitants, which meant I knew everybody, especially as I did several odd jobs, both on land and sea. A little village, with a foreshore and a back-country. The foreshore, that was the rhythm of tides, the cries of seabirds, and the sleek movement of seals and fish. The back-country was, first of all, agricultural lands (familiar to me, I worked on them with spade, scythe and hoe). Where the *strangeness* began was in the forest, in contact with night animals (wildcat, fox) and birds (mainly owls). After that, it was the moor: a sense of space and emptiness, with the sensation, as I walked, hour after hour, of being more and more outside myself. At the culmination point, the mountain, from the crest of which I had a view over the village, the firth, the islands, and, beyond, the Atlantic Ocean. What I knew, globally, was that I didn't have a language for all this. I enjoyed the language of the village streets, but it left me with the impression that nobody really understood anyone else. Then there was the language of the church. I admired the rhetoric of the Bible, but found it too other-worldly. So, I started learning the languages of the world. Not to be able to order a coffee in thirty languages, but to see how they worked, what was their logic, their field of reference. From this linguistic research, I retain principally in my memory two. One from the Sanskrit: *Tat tvam asi* ("You are that"), that is you're not enclosed in your inherited identity, there is an *outside* to which you fundamentally belong. The other from Old Norse: *Ut vil ek* ("I want out"), which was what an Islandic poet said to the king of Norway, who wanted to keep him at his court in an official position. At one time, I spoke (to myself) of "sandscript" (from "sanskrit") to refer to the ripple-lines left by tide and sand and the "writing" of scattered seaweed on the shore. To which we can add as "poetics of the planet", a poetics of chaos, present in rock formations, a poetics of flux, evident in tide and river, and a poetics of meteorology (wind, rain, lightning).

RP: You said once, in *Incandescent Limbo*: "I'm a survivor from some great catastrophe and I'm trying to re-establish connections." Can you explain what you mean by that?

KW: *Incandescent Limbo* – a strange book, very strange. Limbo – an undefined, transient state. Incandescent – white-burning energy in the air. Very different from the back-country I’ve just described, whose lines I would pick up later, in a larger context. With my “Limbo”, I was in the midst of civilization, and in one of its citadels, Paris. Maybe civilization was the great catastrophe: the neglect of a subtle, moving space for agglomeration and construction. What I felt on the surface, after a first attraction, was a refusal, a negation. Including so much of the literature produced. I was for writing, yes – but with no attempt at a literary construction as normally understood. Proceeding by fragments and flashes, snippets of talk heard in the streets, chance encounters, remnants of dreams, multiple readings in obscure, forgotten texts. The avoidance of all false unities. In the first, most obvious instance, that of the integration, by devious means, of Scotland into Great Britain, the so-called United Kingdom. What we have at the start of the book is a Scot remaking contact with Europe, that mobile, restless continent. And thereafter making a connection, at a deep level, beyond all empires and colonialisms, between Europe and Asia. In more general terms still, a move out of history (conflict, conquest, “progress”) into geography: chaos-cosmos. And with some sense of an extension, an expansion as indicated by the subtitle: « The Book of the Seven Rooms ». Not only the seven rooms I occupied in Paris, but stages on the way.

RP: By “way”, you mean both geographical and mental ways, don’t you? Before we speak about your travels, can you explain what exactly is the sense and the perspective of the intellectual nomadism you invented and developed?

KW: I’ve written two big books on the subject, *L’Esprit nomade* and *Au large de l’Histoire*. When I get round to translating those French books into English (I’ve been loathe to see them in an English other than my own), the first will probably be *The Nomad Mind*. That is, “a mind that isn’t mad”. In other words, what intellectual nomadism is fundamentally about is opening paths out of pathology. What pathology? The pathology of civilisation we’ve just been talking about. None of the “alternative cultures” have gone much beyond picturesqueness. None of the various “outsiders”, however sympathetic, have the scope and the scapes of the intellectual nomad.

SLMA: Maybe even before you worked out the theory of intellectual nomadism, you were on such paths. I’m thinking of your book *Letters from Gourgounel* that takes place in a wild part of southeast France, the Ardèche.

KW: You're right. At that time, the early Sixties, the Ardèche was part of what the sociologists were calling "the French desert": outlying areas being deserted by the local populations for the big city. It was the kind of desertion I was after, but in the opposite direction. For next to nothing, I was able to buy an old farm, that looked like a fortress, situated on the heights above the valley of the river Beaume, facing the Tanargue mountain range ("tanargue"- from the Celtish for thunder). I called it Gourgounel, a word I found in an old cadastral map. The word gurgled, it spoke of sources. A place of resourcing! And, yes, there were paths galore, mostly overgrown. One of the paths I had to recover lead from the river bank up to the house. I had to hack it out with a mattock, and I can still hear the clink the mattock made as it got down to bedrock. One of the things I wanted to do down there was find out what a real culture felt like. In the South, it was Provençal culture, now called Occitan, neither of those terms being very satisfactory. So, I plunged over the years into the vestiges of Provençal culture, before the Big Powers came in with their bully boys to wipe it off the map. Another thing I wanted to do was explore other ways of writing. For that, I went deeply into Chinese Taoist poetry and Japanese haiku, which was pretty rare at the time. Nowadays, there's much reference to them, but very little depth, because the ground, the earth, just isn't there. If I called the book containing all this (physical work, sensuous experience, intensive study), *Letters from Gourgounel*, "letters" in the plural, it was to put into practice a fast, vigorous dynamic of thought and expression, outside the great mass of "literature", that was piling up all over the place, its thematics running from pathology to commonplace via sentimental banality. At the end of the book, I say I could have lived at Gourgounel forever, but I felt I had other things to do. Which is why the epilogue to the book is entitled "The Path through the Forest", and why the final paragraph reads: "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 spaces, towards maybe a new-found land."

RP: That's a nice transition to what you came to call the waybook. So, what's a waybook and what does it do?

KW: The waybook does a lot of things. But for a fast definition, it's neither a novel, nor a travelogue. Without going into all the varieties of noveldom, the novel is based on a plot, and it follows out the plot. Ways back in the 19th century, Mark Twain, author of *Huckleberry Finn*, a river-book (life on the Mississippi), said that where real writing is concerned, anyone talking about plot should be shot. As a young writer, I went with that right away. More recently, some writers and intellectuals, feeling that the novel was on its last legs, recommended and promoted travel-literature.

That meant little more than literary tourism. The waybook is outside all that. In a sense, it goes back to the trips I did in the back country of my west coast Scottish village: the move from a closed society to an undefined emptiness, which is also a potential plenitude. There's a latent logic running throughout all my life and work, but the itinerary increases in extension and expansion, and is expressed with more alacrity and acuity as time, time-space, goes on. Since it's megalopolis that predominates in our civilization, the waybook will begin there, then move out and on: it goes from city to vacuity. The way is not fixed in advance (there is no model agenda between the lines), it develops according to the space-time movement. For example, in *Guido's Map*, which, among other motives and insights, is out to revisit, revivify, not just the image but the sensation of Europe, which was beginning to disappear under piles of economic reports. I go from Brussels to Scandinavia. In *The Blue Road* and *The Winds of Vancouver*, I explore, with all senses open and via infinite small detail, the northeast (Labrador) and the northwest (Alaska), so as to re-discover an America not bulldozed and flattened out by a certain U.S. In *The Face of the East Wind* and *The Wild Swans*, I try to resuscitate, in quick indications, all the immense past of thought and meditation that is Asia. And so on, in the Indian Ocean, with *The Sea of Lights*, in the Antillean region (I do not like the English term: the West Indies) with *The Hidden Archipelago*, and elsewhere still.

SLMA: I have a question lurking at the back of my mind, which is usually put at the beginning of an interview, or at the end, but which I'd like to insert at this juncture, while we're still in the middle of a very complex and yet coherent process. Kenneth White, you seem so self-complete as an individual, so cool and distant, so serene, unagitated, why do you write, and so much? Why have you felt the need to develop the twin theory of intellectual nomadism and geopoetics?

KW: Why do I write? Not out of a pathology, as if I just couldn't help it, which, as the psychoanalysts know, is often the case. Not for success. The word "success" evokes for me an infant sucking at a maternal breast (that of society). Fine, for a moment. But if you keep doing that sucking, you have a case of arrested development. In French, up to recently, a distinction was made between "success" and "glory", the former being considered vulgar. I like that distinction. But I don't go in for glory either. Too glittery. I prefer by far the silvery white golden light of this October day with its swirling multicolored leaves. As to theory, it's to open a space, like projective geometry, so that what you write doesn't get wrapped up and lost in the great mass of literary production. And within that space to trace the development of a different writing, a different script. As for the "so much", the outer-German Nietzsche said: We know there's a new world out there, but who's got the energy? And the ultra-Portuguese

Pessoa put it more pointedly: When there's no real literature around, you have to make one yourself. That's the kind of context I work in. It can be a pretty exhausting process. But at the same time, you get rid of a great deal of poisonous mental matter, and that makes for a kind of serenity.

RP: Thanks for that central point, Susana, about the center of focal energy. And thanks Kenneth, for those precisions. I'd like to come back now into the process. For a start, I want to pick up on Susana's need to go into the nature of the book *Letters from Gourgonel*, where it's less the intellectual nomad we see on the way across territories than the geopoetician experiencing the deep inhabitation of a place. You yourself have made a playful phonetic distinction between *waybooks* and *staybooks*. The main companion to *Letters from Gourgonel* is *House of Tides*, the parallel to inland Gourgonel being the house you've been living in now for years on the seacoast of northern Brittany.

KW: *House of Tides* – in the very title, there's a unity of stability and movement (residence and errancy). I named the house Gwenved ("white world") because this was the name given in old Brythonic Celtic (Breton, Welsh) – in Gaelic Celtic, it was *finn mag* – for the place of the greatest concentration of the mind. The house is only a stone's throw away on this rocky coast from what in geology is called a "centred complex", which, for my mental geography, was singularly appropriate. It's here I was able to gather together all the elements of so many years of travel and travail, and to continue working at them. We were talking about "glory". The old monks of the Atlantic Western Isles worked, in difficult times, at their manuscripts, many of them beautifully illustrated, for what they called "the glory of God". I feel a close affinity to those people, except of course in the domain of belief. Even to the creation of illustrated books. In that part of the house, I call "the Atlantic studio", I've done well over a hundred of what are called "artist books", working in collaboration with artists from all over the world. As to "belief", I have none. I've said time and time again, and written many an essay on the theme, I've been trying to work out a space of thought outside what have been the pillars of society: myth, religion and metaphysics. I keep working at it all.

SLMA: From what you sometimes refer to as your "outpost", what do you think of, how do you see, the contemporary world we live in?

KW: The contemporary situation is rarely very interesting; you have to hunt through history for those short periods. Hegel referred to what he called "white spaces". I've done that hunting, it's in the work. Concerning the present situation, let's not waste time on what's in all the gazettes: the so-called "natural" disasters, a politics fallen flat or gone crazy, a culture that is only a pseudo-culture, an education so often a mess,

with one measure following on another, narrowing perspective and jeopardizing wellnigh ruining the art of teaching. The first chapter of my book *Au large de l'Histoire* (not yet translated into English) is entitled "The Empire of Mediocrity". This isn't a plea against mediocrity. I'm no intellectual snob. It's a plea against mediocrity raised to a socio-political power: demagoguery in place of democracy. Of course, fortunately, there are pockets of resistance: in the schools and universities, in publishing, in criticism and journalism. I've worked with them and still do. They have a hard time of it, but the strength is there: a network of keen, far-seeing individuals. As for myself, what I've mainly concentrated on, and the intention continues, is a complete work. And why? Because, on a long, large, distant view of things, I think it's owing to the existence and presence (a lot has been lost to negligence, fanaticism, vandalism) of such complete works (maybe five in a century across the world) that humanity keeps its head above nonentity. Maybe I'll have accomplished one.

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Kenneth White is Scottish by origin, French by adoption, European in spirit, global in inspiration. After studying languages and philosophy in Glasgow, Munich and Paris, White defended a state thesis on intellectual nomadism. From 1983 to 1996, he held the Chair of 20th Century Poetics at Paris-Sorbonne. In 1989, he founded the International Institute of Geopoetics. He currently lives on the north coast of Brittany.

Régis Poulet is a professor and researcher, geologist, and Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature, since 2013 he has been president of the International Institute of Geopoetics following Kenneth White. He is the author of geopoetic essays such as *Le Vol du harfang des neiges* (2015) or *La métamorphose d'un monde* (2023), and poetry books such as *Planktos* (2018), and *Gondawana* (2023).

Susana L. M. Antunes is a PhD from UMASS-Amherst, on Brazilian, and Portuguese Contemporary Literature (minor on African Literature Expressed in Portuguese). Associate Professor and coordinator of the Portuguese program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her main research interests focus on contemporary poetry, in literature, island literature, and geopoetics. Among other works, she is the author of the book *De Errâncias e Viagens Poéticas em Jorge de Sena e Cecília Meireles* (2020), and editorial coordinator of the volume *Ilhas de vozes em reencontros compartilhados* (2021).