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Kenneth White's Essays: Cartography Grounded in Self

Une cartographie très personnelle : les essais de Kenneth White

Lesley Graham



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Kenneth White's Essays: Cartography Grounded in Self

Kenneth White works in three literary forms: long and short poetry; prose travel narratives (which he refers to as *waybooks*) and essays. He compares this triple production to an arrow: the shaft of the arrow being the books, the point of the arrow being the poems, and the feathers representing the essays, giving direction. Using another metaphor, he describes the essays as cartography; the waybooks explorations of particular landscapes and the poems concentrated moments of illumination en route.¹

I would like to focus on this last image of the essay as cartography and on one of White's collections of essays: *The Wanderer and his Charts: Exploring the Fields of Vagrant Thought and Vagabond Beauty. Essays on Cultural Renewal* (2004). I will suggest that although the cartography drawn up by these essays—considered both individually and collectively—maps out a rich textured criss-crossing of influences, interests and perspectives, all tracks inevitably lead back to the writer himself.

While the earlier collections of essays initially appeared in French, these essays were first published in English. By his own account, White writes his poems and prose narratives in English because this is the language in which he lives; a language that he can take liberties with. French is for him a tool and therefore more suited to the work of the essays. It is a language, he suggests, that doesn't like writers to take liberties with it—it's more rigorous and more intellectual, but also more rigid and tends towards overperfection (*On Scottish Ground*, p. 127). Over the years, the distinction between the two languages and their elected uses has become less absolute in White's work although it generally still holds (*Le Champ du grand travail*, p. 109). The language switch to English for the most recent collections of essays therefore signals a shift in tenor and ambition, these short pieces being less rigorous and intellectual than the earlier French collections: *La Figure du Dehors* (1982), *Une Apocalypse tranquille* (1985), and

1. T. McManus, *The Radical Field. Kenneth White and Geopoetics*, Dingwall, Sandstone Press, 2007, p. 160.

L'Esprit nomade (1987). The effect is one of a definite movement towards looser, more relaxed thinking and expression in the essays.

Influences

White defines his concept of the essay form in the preface to *The Wanderer and his Charts*. They are, he says:

[...] attempts at fast, clear cogent thinking. Live thought is erratic and erotic in its nature, full of tentative explanations and existential energy, and the essay-form proceeds by a series of intellectual sensations and logical leaps. (p. vii)

He further specifies that “this thought is always connected to sensed space, a lived existence” (p. viii). Like all of White’s writing, the essays contribute to his grand (some say grandiose) project of geopoetics, that is to say a way of writing that is in touch with the earth, that reflects the lines of the world, and that rejects the mediocrity of contemporary culture.

White provides abundant references to his general influences. Not all critics—especially Scottish critics—have admired the wide-ranging enumerations of writers from whom he has drawn inspiration, judging the references didactic and monotonous.² However, the practice offers pointers towards some specific influences in the area of the essay. Indeed these essays occasionally centre fleetingly on writers who have nourished his understanding and application of the form. White recognizes the excitement and stimulation generated in the eighteenth century by Hume’s *Essay on Human Understanding* and Fabre’s *Essai sur la théorie des torrents*. Qualifying theirs as live thought, he contrasts their essays with the novels that were to “encumber Europe in the two centuries following” (*The Wanderer*, p. 68). He also recognizes in passing the fashion the form enjoyed with certain nineteenth-century writers, notably Robert Louis Stevenson. However, although White has what he calls a great liking, even a fellow-feeling, for the Scottish writer, and although he greatly admires Stevenson’s early essays, particularly the series of essays that developed a complete theory of walking, he concludes regretfully that Stevenson didn’t maintain the course he had set out on but allowed him-

2. James Kelman, for example, has lampooned this and other aspects of White’s essay-writing style in an essay of his own entitled “There Is a First-Order Radical Thinker of European Standing Such That He Exists; or, Tantalising Twinkles”, notably his use of obscure vocabulary alongside plain Scots words and his tendency to over-explore the etymology of certain terms (J. Kelman, *And the Judges Said...: Essays*, pp. 187–93).

self to make too much use of the “box-of-tricks” in his later writing (*The Wanderer*, p. 75).

Of course, even in the novels, there are traces of the other Stevenson, the “high line” Stevenson. Even in the more simplistic of them there will be flashes, phantasmagorical flourishes, pungent atmospheres, a sense of open space, gusts of vigour, strange emptiness, snatches of distant music, but none of the sustained high flying he himself evokes and of which we know he was capable. (*The Wanderer*, p. 84)

Even the best of the nineteenth century essayists—Stevenson but also Lamb and Hazlitt—rarely reach for anything beyond charming chit-chat and impressionistic rambling, he concludes. Only Emerson and Nietzsche receive unqualified approval and he acknowledges Michel de Montaigne as the originator and master of the form (*The Wanderer*, p. 58). Montaigne’s *Essais* accompanied White from Glasgow to Munich, Paris, the Auvergne, Pau and onwards; his appreciation of them heightened on discovering Nietzsche’s endorsement. Montaigne is evoked at length in “Aquitainian Affinities” (*The Wanderer*, pp. 47–8) although this essay opens with a digression, an account of the life, travel and work of George Buchan, the French essayist’s Latin teacher at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux. He makes this detour into the life of Buchan as a lead-in, he explains playfully, because “an essay by definition has to be diverse and fluctuating” and this, in general, is the way that White goes about building his essays: bringing diverse subjects and influences together in fluid and sometimes unexpected ways.

Meandering Thought

“Aquitainian Affinities” ends with the reminder that Montaigne invented the word essay “to designate a new type of literature, outside the established ruts and full of strangeness” (p. 58). This strangeness, central to the essay as practiced by Montaigne, implies, according to White, “leaving the harbour of a fixed identity in order to plunge into the floating life, following the transformations of the self and the meanderings of thought” (p. 58). In another, related, essay in this collection “Along the Atlantic Coast” (pp. 111–28), White quotes Montaigne’s claim that he doesn’t paint being, he paints passages (“*Je ne peins pas l’être, je peins le passage*”) and continues:

It was in order to paint those passages (from state of mind to state of mind, from feeling to feeling, from attitude to attitude, from mind to place and thing), that Montaigne, master of the floating world, at ease in the relative

(which implies a relationship), invented the essay, a form, a way of writing, that allowed him to follow all the meanders of his thought. (p. 115)

The meandering, diverse, swirling nature of White's dense reference system as deployed in his own essays may be suitably illustrated in the following account of the trail of names embedded in the essay "Along the Atlantic Coast" (pp. 111–28). The epigraph is borrowed from Conrad and then the essay itself opens with a long quote from Gustave Flaubert in Brittany before moving on to other writers who have lived in emptiness: Nietzsche in the Alps, Rimbaud in Abyssinia, Herman Melville by the Pacific and, more surprisingly, Lautréamont in Paris. The intellectual force of the historians Spengler and Toynbee is then acknowledged. The second part of the essay homes in on White's own itinerary—his experience of 1960s Britain, his decision to move out and away, to open up a new space for himself. His move to Pau is accompanied by a move into the third person and a list of the self-styled Hermit of the Tower's reading—Elie de Beaumont, Ramond de Carbonnière, Franz Schrader then Montaigne. "If I go now from Montaigne to Saint-John Perse, some will say I'm not only jumping centuries I'm jumping categories", he writes, adding that his intention is not to draw up a history of literature but to travel "from island to island in a field of energy, according to a kind of quantic map" (p. 116). So he makes the leap and alights on Henry Russell, then Edward Seuss and Fernando Pessoa. In part three we return to Nietzsche before moving on to Walt Whitman and then very surprisingly Freud—albeit for one very carefully chosen passage on oceanic feeling. The essay then returns to Nietzsche before touching on Heraclitus and Hokusai, Marcuse, Bergson and Bachelard. Sandor Ferenczi leads to Dylan Thomas then Wilhelm Reich. Part four starts with the ancient geographers Strabo, Pomponius Mela and Ptolemy then alludes to Seneca and Festus Avienus before jumping to Elisée Reclus and Le Lannou. They are followed by Guillaume d'Aquitaine and Jean-sans-Terre, Echaid, Sebastian El Canto and Champlain. In part five, we return to Kenneth White himself and his movements up and down the Atlantic coast peppered with a few brief references to Jules Michelet, Cercamon, Rabelais, Nietzsche again, Ernest Fenellosa, and Michael Angelo. In part seven, White evokes Eliot and Pound, Dante, Yeats Gerard Manley Hopkins and Joyce then Leonardo da Vinci. We move back to Scotland with Martin Martin then quickly on to Clarence Glacken, William Robertson, Adam Smith and David Hume, Adam Ferguson and Dugald Stewart. Part seven introduces Sully and Colbert and John Law then Fernand Braudel and finally Leo Frobenius. All of this in seventeen pages.

This incessant flitting from name to title to place has attracted criticism with some qualifying the essays as over-heterogenous, unsystematic, inconsequential and not reflecting a correspondingly rich collection of concepts.³ White himself rationalises the inclusion of so many references by declaring that they are an attempt “to get away from the little-genius-in-the-corner idea and open up a world network”⁴. For much of the rest of his readership, it has to be said, the overall impression created by these essays is not one of overladen heterogeneity but of sometimes exhilarating, controlled “ingenious articulation”⁵ co-ordinated by an overriding loyalty to one unifying idea.

Language

This achievement can be partly attributed to the language of the essay as practiced by White. Just as he sets out in various places and in various ways what he understands to be the role and function of the essay in his body of work, so he hints at the type of language he is trying to use, often by identifying what he likes or dislikes in others: “a clear and powerful language, able to say a presence and a clarity” (p. 156) avoiding “over-refined rhetoric” (p. 157) or specious vocabulary. Clearly what White is after is a grounded writing—the very opposite of the “frothy discourse” (p. 136) that he so abhors: “*Il faut trouver... trouver un langage qui ne soit pas seulement une communication inter-humaine, mais une communication entre soi et l’univers.*” (*Le Champ du grand travail*, p. 124)

McManus believes that the writing is characterized by a breaking away from many accepted norms, “a free-swinging movement” but also great attention to precision and clarity and a love for great agglutinations of words and references (McManus, p. 162). Perhaps the most salient characteristic is that the writing rings of orality—White confesses to liking oral language almost as much as written language (*Le Champ du grand*

3. “He makes constant quasi-didactic reference to historical names, events and figures in an unsystematic and inconsequential style that is in fact deeply monotonous in precisely the same way Alain Badiou claims that Deleuze’s deployment of a vast array of names is deeply monotonous—which is to say, the constraining of a tremendous heterogeneity to a surprisingly limited reservoir of concepts.” (I. Kennedy, p. 175.) See also Kelman, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

4. Kenneth White interviewed by Hugh Macpherson, *Scottish Book Collector*, vol. 2, n° 1, August/September 1989, pp. 2–4.

5. The term is White’s own. On the subject of the poetics of the essay, White claims that this is “a form that needs ingenious articulation, co-ordination: no heavy cause and effect sequences and yet no scrambled mess either” (*The Wanderer*, p. 58).

travail, pp. 106–7)—and a certain roughness: “*Il y a dans mon écriture une rudesse ‘anglo-saxonne’ et une sauvagerie ‘scotique’*” (p. 128).⁶

Rootedness in self

As the essay “Aquitanian Affinities” closes, White homes in on himself: “And here I am now, in my Pyrenean study this April morning, after many an essay, essaying once again. Trying to keep the high line” (p. 58). This is a recurrent move in White’s essays—the alternation of passages focused on the outside world and historical contexts and passages describing his own past and present context.

Out on a limb in the new creative space that he has created for himself, Kenneth White does often refer to himself and his single-handed development of the individual way of thinking and writing he styles geopoetics, his resolute resistance to the mediocrity of ambient culture. The “me”s and “I”s and even “I myself”s (p. 206) accumulate in certain essays so that his approach might be construed as being overly egocentric, narcissistic⁷ even. They induce the creeping impression that perhaps Kenneth White is geopoetics and that geopoetics is nothing more than Kenneth White.⁸

Due, perhaps, to criticism of this sort, White appears to be increasingly inclined to acknowledge the dangers of the incessant self-reference present in his writing. In one of the essays in this collection, he apparently attempts to defuse the effect of self-centeredness by referring to himself in the third person as “the traveller poet and wandering scholar” (p. 137) [just as elsewhere he refers to himself as our “gallivanting Glaswegian”, “our Scottish-born intellectual nomad”, “our adamant author”, and “our erratic author” (*On Scottish Ground*, pp. 120–1)]. The ruse is not entirely successful.

Innes Kennedy claims that, “Absolutely no other British writer is as prepared to risk being so embarrassingly pretentious as White. As he himself says, such pretension contravenes Anglo-British strictures on taste” (Kennedy, p. 177). In the interview transcribed in *Le Champ du grand travail*, Claude Fintz evokes the dangers of “*gourification*” (p. 39),

6. But this too has been a source of criticism: his prose technique has been criticized as being overly naturalistic and downbeat: “the naturalism far too often descends into the dead language of clichés, obsolete sixties slang and dreary narcissistic digressions. No less alienating is the constant recurrence of the one-line paragraph, slightly rephrasing, in the form of a gesture, part of the point of the previous longer paragraph. The effect of this is usually bathos.” (Kennedy, p. 174)

7. Pierre Jamet refers to “the sheer narcissistic tendency in his work” (p. 108).

8. Ian Bell voices the suspicion thus: “Geopoetics seems, at bottom, like a personal credo” (p. 18).

White responds vigorously, denying that he is or wants to be anyone's guru. He takes the subject up again in *The Wanderer and his Charts* (having just compared himself to Michael Angelo, as he had compared himself, albeit apologetically, to Dante some pages earlier) and counters: "there is no desire whatever for pedestalization, pantheonization, or any other phoney glorification" (p. 123).

White awareness of the perceived "hatefulness" of centering one's work on oneself is thus increasingly obviously and without being apologetic for it, he is moved to explain his overt and recurrent presence in his texts. He quotes Thoreau's phrase from the first chapter of *Walden* "I know no one better than myself", and adds "Talking about oneself isn't always such a hateful enterprise, so long as you go about it radically enough. It's the only way to go beyond flat sociology" (p. 18).

I had my companions behind me: Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Nietzsche, with Whitman and Thoreau before them. It's good to have companions, to believe in the possibility of a community. But at bottom you're all alone, and there comes a time when you know it. (p. 21)

"Aquitainian Affinities" opens out reassuringly onto the outside world in the final sentence. Having referred to himself seated at his desk in Pau, he appears to look up and points out that he is "In the constant company of the Vignemale, the Maltetta and the Pic du Midi d'Ossau" (p. 58).

The essay as cartography

White's self-reference has to be seen not as a preoccupation with his own person but as a reflection of his belief that his own keeping to the high line has been exemplary. By his own judgement, his is one exemplary itinerary in a cartography of many real, imagined, possible itineraries in wordscapes and landscapes: "It's in this context that my own itinerary has to be read" (p. 235). This brings us back to White's image of the essay as cartography. He has described his work as a map with itineraries (paths, tracks, trails) and points of concentration—a few large dots and a multitude of smaller dots (*Le Champ du grand travail*, p. 102). The itineraries and the points represent references to important works and places and words that all come together to constitute a coherent overall project; a geopoetics that is rooted in territory. Elements that we might not expect to see together sit side by side in startling strangeness like snow capped mountains by pacific lagoons. Unexpected words from German, Greek and Gaelic stand out on the page like so many landmarks. There are, of course, great swathes of white in this cartography too—spaces

of emptiness and oceans—and coastlines, lots of coastlines, and the certain knowledge that a monstrous motorway of mediocrity lies just off the map.

White is as we have seen painstaking in his description of the genesis and terrain of his own mindscape, what he has referred to elsewhere as the tributaries of his river, cataloguing the writers, the books, the places, the landscapes, the atmospheres and the encounters that have been important in shaping him and his work (*Le Champ du grand travail*, p. 64).

Maybe thought can be like a landscape—with fields and running waters (fluid concepts). A landscape-mindscape. That's maybe what we could make our way towards. (p. 63)

We have also seen that Kenneth White inhabits his essays through recurrent self-reference, as a living figure—the only living figure—in this cartography. The essays are strewn with elements of autobiography and indeed he considers that biography plays a central role in his approach.

On peut suivre une ligne biographique à travers tous mes écrits. À tel point que je parlais à un moment donné de *biocosmographie*. Il ne s'agit pas de confession. Plutôt de configuration, de conjugaison. Voire d'auto-analyse (analyse en marche, en mouvement), d'auto-poétique. (*Le Champ du grand travail*, p. 67)

He admits to currently thinking about writing a fully-fledged autobiography; of setting out the ups and downs of a personal itinerary.⁹ That would certainly be a book worth reading, for irritating as the self-important grandiosity may occasionally be, it is difficult not to agree with White when he protests in an essay entitled “The White Bag of Books” (pp. 169–81):

My stance may seem highly individualistic. It is. I submit that it's with individuals (individuals who have concentrated in their work-field the maximum of general energies and elements) that the really significant developments begin. It's the individual who has taken the time and the pains to develop his/her life and thought who has, in the long run, on the long view, in the last analysis, the most to offer society in general. (p. 178)

9. *Le Champ du grand travail*, pp. 67 and 108.

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