

Neo- Geopoetics

You can find out more about Geo-Poetics [here](#).

At the Atlantic Islands Festival on Luing in 2009, we also held the summer school for the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, and many of the speakers talked about the impact of Geopoetics, and in particular the work of Kenneth White on their particular discipline and artistic practice.

We struggled, though, to find a workable and concise definition of what we meant by Geopoetics. Norman Bissell provided an overview at the start of the school, which may be rather brutally summarised as:

1. A world view that is critical of western philosophy and civilisation in particular the division between mind and body and the isolation of the human from nature.
2. It has a holistic view of the universe - a poetics which places the planet earth at the centre of experience.
3. it is influenced by people Kenneth White defines as 'intellectual nomads'
4. it has a new sense of world combining the responses of the intelligence and the senses, using techniques such as meditation or tai chi which 'decondition' the mind to produce a poetics which is the expression of this interaction, in language but also in all forms of artistic expression. It encourages collaboration and multi-media work.
5. It involves networking with all forms of intellectual and scientific knowledge and activity.

There are some extraordinarily sweeping statements here, and if we go into it, we can find plenty of ignorance, prejudice and some rather neat moving of the goal-posts which leave Kenneth White in the privileged position of defining the game and imposing his own rules. Kenneth White is an author I argue with as often as I agree with him. As a medievalist, I find his 'cultural motorway' riff infuriatingly simplistic (and don't get me started on his treatment of Christianity). In my own practice I like to emphasise stability rather than travel (but an extra-domestic stability, equally open-eyed and alert of mind), and I find new possibilities as often among human communities as in nature, in reinterpreting traditions as often as in radical thought. But I think the work-field outlined in geo-poetics is the right work-field for the times we live in. I like his emphasis on bringing together the fields of art and science and philosophy; his cross-fertilisation of eastern mental disciplines and western traditional cultures; his emphasis on the common ground of life on earth.

In his essay *Kenneth White: a Transcendental Scot*, Tony McManus quotes Kenneth White:

“world emerges from a contact between the human mind and the things, the lines, the rhythms of the earth. When this contact is sensitive, subtle, intelligent, you have a world (a culture) in the strong confirming and enlightening sense of the word.

— Geopoetics is concerned with developing sensitive and intelligent contact, and with working out original ways to express that contact.”

It is certainly the case that modern civilisation consists of a lot of over-specialised and over-organised (but seriously under-educated) individuals who are capable of living a lifetime in ignorance of what the weather is like or where their food is coming from. We know we are not as aware of the seasons or the state of the moon and tides as our parents were. Many of us can't identify common wild-flowers, or lay a fire or set a budget without a calculator. Scientists do not know history. Linguists don't understand physics. In short we no longer have our feet on the ground. We don't know who we are or what we really want or what is likely to happen to us.

Geopoetics has a counter to this, and the summer school was an excellent demonstration. We had, among other things, film, poetry, art, sculpture, botany, geology, history, and tai chi. But the most common comment, which came over and over again, was, "It leaves so much out."

Mostly this came from women. Geopoetics has seemed, up to now, overwhelmingly a guys' game, and it's not because the guys are mean and won't let us play. On the contrary, the guys are not mean at all. But women do not get the 'intellectual nomad' thing. It's not just that society makes it hard for women to be nomads (a real issue, though, nonetheless), we just don't seem, by and large, to think like that. It's not that we can't stop worrying about the state of the kitchen and has someone remembered to feed the cat, it is simply that if you have ever undertaken those responsibilities, you don't see the world in quite the same way. It's not even the difference between Ents and Ent-wives (remember Tolkien saying the Ent-wives had gardens so that things would grow where they set them?). Even Tolkien's Ents, though freer and more nomadic than the Ent-wives, were shepherds and took care of the forests. I, for one, find it hard to believe in the value of a world-view that does not lead to involvement and action.

The big question, however, about Geopoetics is: Is it the work of Kenneth White, and therefore absolutely and exactly just what he says it is, or is it something bigger, broader, and more generally applicable? What I mean is, should we think of it like the theories of evolution or psychoanalysis, which depended on Darwin, Freud and Jung for their very existence, but which have been taken beyond the original flaws and limits of the original thinking to become usable disciplines of general science?

There is a case for leaving it simply as the definition of Kenneth White's own work. He is an original, outstandingly intelligent and remarkably diverse thinker, with the vision to bring together more different insights and source materials than almost anyone else on the planet. And he expresses himself with verve and precision and an elegant economy that belies the enormous amount of work behind some of his more outrageous assertions.

This hardly justifies his professed ambitions to reform the state of education and culture as we know it. And, moreover, it fails to take on board his influence on many other artists and poets. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that I would not be writing poetry now if I hadn't read him in the early nineties, and realised that it is possible to operate in a mind-field where my deepest interests can come together and fertilise each other rather than fitting into separate 'appropriate' boxes.

It also fails to recognise a big shift in the way we are all thinking, writing and creating, perhaps the biggest since the development of Courtly Love in the early Middle Ages.

Let's be really brutally simplistic (I'm drawing heavily on C.S. Lewis' Allegory of Love, now, despite all its limitations, just to make it easier to see the direction of thought) and say that, broadly speaking, the big thing in literature, the arena where the story takes place, before the twelfth century, was the hero/heroine confronting his/her destiny.

After then, it was love.

Now more and more we find that the arena artists/campaigners/academics want to work in is the relationship of the central character with the earth. It's everywhere. Middle-aged heroines finish up with a garden instead of a marriage. Young men tackle mountains or oceans instead of criminals. Nature writing has become a recognised literary genre and is taught at Arvon courses. Ethical concerns are now about pollution, biodiversity and climate change, as well as political or personal relationships. Kenneth White has given Geopoetics a flying start to organise our thinking in this new arena.

But the bigger it gets, and the more it develops, the more it has to go beyond Kenneth White's original brief. We need a new generation of geopoetical thinkers, who will translate the work of solitary intellectual nomads into the life of communities.

Two writers stand out for me from the Atlantic Islands Festival as significant pointers for the way forward for Geopoetics. These are Norman Bissell, whose book *Slate, Sea and Sky* formed the basis for Mark Sheridan's Atlantic Island Suite, and Jamie Whittle, an environmental lawyer who wrote about all aspects of the Findhorn in his book *White River*, an account of a canoeing trip he took up and down the full length of the River.

It has to be said that Kenneth White is a hard model to follow. His stripped to the bone simplicity and precision can sometimes lead, in lesser hands, to some very impoverished and flat writing, lacking his driving energy and wit - and let's be fair, even Kenneth White doesn't get away with it all the time! There's a temptation, too, to go for buzz-words and motifs (like herons) without establishing an equal context to that of White's mountainous learning. I don't think either of these writers can be said to have escaped entirely from these temptations.

But on the plus side, there is no sense of authorial self-obtrusion in these books. Places, animals, the challenges of rough country and wild weather, are allowed to speak for themselves. And they have both tapped in, at a profound level, to what I perceive to be the essence of the geopoetic vision. Their art, work and personal philosophy are indeed grounded in an open-eyed and intelligent awareness of what it means to live on the planet earth. And they both include what most of us felt to be the missing dimensions - a sense of locality and community.

It is not the earth as a concept or even as an experience that shapes Norman Bissell's poetry, it is the island of Luing in particular, and its people, past, present and future; he knows it in a way we are never confident that Kenneth White knows anywhere. It is not only the wild

landscape that inspires and challenges Jamie Whittle, it is all the landscape and all the communities - fish, forest, farmers, grouse, walkers and canoeists - who live within it.

Both books bring together a wide range of knowledge and experience. Norman Bissell applies ambitious artistic practice and intellectual rigour to what might otherwise be the escapist idyll or the mundane backwater of island living. Jamie Whittle combines his legal training with sport, knowledge of the lives of indigenous communities and an informed passion for Scotland's natural heritage. Neither is looking to the past for nostalgic solutions, and neither indulges in preaching or tub-thumping. They add what I need to feel comfortable with Geopoetics - warmth and humanity - a sense of involvement that might lead in due time, to wise and compassionate action.