
**The Obsession of Whiteness in Kenneth White's Work
(a literary and psychoanalytical interpretation)**

Pierre JAMET

Kenneth White is a poet from Scotland who has been living in France since the beginning of the 1960s. Although poetry — or maybe *poetics* — is at the very centre of his work, White also writes essays and narratives. With the exception of some early prose and poems, most of his work appeared in France first, translated by his French wife, but it is now gradually becoming available in Britain as well. André Breton happened to send him a letter in 1965 which was to become a kind of literary “passport” eventually, as White sometimes confesses. Currently, White is President of the International Institute for Geopoetics (a notion central to his work as essay writer), which he founded in 1989. In this paper, I wish to take a look at a particular characteristic of his writing which sometimes arouses criticism and sometimes fascinates his readers: I mean the fact that whiteness takes on so much importance in his poetry as in his prose. I wish to go into the “white world”, as he calls it, and attempt to read White’s obsession with whiteness from a purely literary point of view first, then from a psychoanalytical point of view.

I. A Converging Movement

1. The White Iconography

White believes, it seems, that the image is at the outset of creation and perhaps at the very origins of thought. He writes in one of his essays that the image lies “ahead of perception even, like an adventure of perception [...], ahead of thought, ahead of narration, ahead of any sort of emotion”¹. Sometimes he claims that art at

¹ « Bachelard parle de l’ ‘activité prospective des images’. Il y place l’image en avant même de la perception, comme une aventure de la perception [...] avant la pensée, avant le récit, avant tout

its best is always “an iconography”². To be sure, the image is often at the centre of poetics, whether it be abstract, like a spark born from clashing words, or concrete and sensual. In his first book published in France, White wrote that “the sort of art [he] was after was both naturalistic and abstract”, and that “perhaps the recurrence of whiteness in his work was the expression of this drive”³. Whiteness as a component of abstract images is rather rare and to be found mostly in the poet’s early works. Sometimes the poet talks of “white crows”, sometimes of “white obscurity”⁴. But the juxtaposition of a white element against another white element can also create a disappearance of both and a feeling of abstraction, as in the following lines: “the white heron / has disappeared in the mist”⁵. By the same token, when whiteness is associated with the wind, which so many traditions have identified with the anonymous force that gives life (*pneuma* for the soul, *Ch’i* for the spiritual energy), it seems that Kenneth white is trying to create an effect of abstraction through the very tangible world. One of the poet’s favourite images is therefore that of the “white wind blowing”:

My thanks for this handful of April days
for the white wind blowing...⁶

All at once the sky clears
a white wind blowing...⁷

But sometimes a similar feeling of abstraction will emerge from the juxtaposition of whiteness with solitude or silence:

I’m a landowner myself after all —

émoi » (*Le Plateau de l’albatros*, Paris, Grasset, 1994, p. 63). White seems to understand *en avant* (ahead), as something close to “before” or “prior to” (particularly at the end of the sentence), although the metaphor is purely spatial here, the poetical image being described as going farther than thought or narration, reorganizing them to prepare for the deeper understanding of the world which poetry delivers.

² « Le meilleur art, en fait, est une iconographie, et non une collection d’objets esthétiques s’efforçant à la nouveauté » (*En toute candeur*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1989, p. 63).

³ « La sorte d’art vers laquelle je vais, que par endroits j’ai réalisée peut-être, est un art qui serait abstrait et naturaliste en même temps. Le retour fréquent du mot « blancheur » est peut-être l’expression de ce désir » (id., p. 62-63).

⁴ *Atlantica*, Paris, Grasset, 1986, p. 90 ; *Le Grand rivage* (bilingual edition), Paris, Le Nouveau Commerce, 1980, p. 25.

⁵ *Terre de diamant*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 196.

⁶ “Road Fragment”, *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷ “The White Mistral”, *ibid.*, p. 136

I've got twelve acres of white silence
up at the back of my mind"⁸.

However, Kenneth White seems to be interested in the image for its super-rational powers, so to speak. The fact that he sometimes refers to Breton, Artaud, Daumal and Surrealism in general, or to Ezra Pound and Imagism is yet another proof of his sort of "anti-intellectualism", as he calls it himself⁹. From such an anti-intellectualist point of view, the image takes on an ontological status: it allows an immediate revelation which reasoning cannot but postpone for ever. The image is an "apocalypse" in the etymological sense of the word, it is an unveiling, a revelation of some sort. And since White's images are to emerge from the here and now, from spontaneity and the immediacy of the timeless instant, they will be concrete and simple, mostly. There were many such images already in the "Poems of the White World", which is a section of White's first book published in France. And there are still quite a few concrete white images in more recent books. It would be tiresome to draw an exhaustive list of these images but let us point out the fact at least that whiteness has a tendency to surround a particular object more often than not, so that its perception becomes clearer, as in the following haiku:

Long miles along the coast
Now in the evening mist
The red gates¹⁰.

And sometimes conversely whiteness is central, focal, as in the following one:

The white cell almost in darkness
Outside rocks in abruption, sea-Silence wavering.
It is there¹¹.

At any rate, it never appears in passing but always conveys some sort of significance, some sort of mystery, which some readers find wonderfully intriguing and some deride as a manifestation of the poet's sheer narcissism¹².

⁸ "My Properties", *ibid.*, p. 96.

⁹ *Le Plateau de l'albatros*, Paris, Grasset, 1994, p. 63.

¹⁰ "Autumn at Luk Wu Temple", *Terre de diamant*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 188.

¹¹ "Theory", *ibid.*, p. 70.

2. *Whiteness and Unity of Being*

Quoting from a book by psychologist Hubert Benoît, White gives us yet another clue about the recurrence of whiteness in his work: “*In a general way the relative harmonization of a life... consists in the construction of a world representation (or “inner world”) which is harmoniously convergent.*” The construction, White says, is made around an ‘image centre’ to which the organism of the subject ‘resonates’ in a very consonant fashion”¹³. Therefore there is a psychological dimension to the white world. In *Man and the Sacred*¹⁴, Roger Caillois puts forward the idea that when the sacred dimension of social life has disappeared, man has to internalize it. So White, who claims to be a convinced Nietzschean and believes that “God is dead”, would have attempted to found his quest for unity of being in himself, not in any external principle. And the white world would be the expression of such a quest. “The Territory” is a poem which illustrates the coexistence of a sacred dimension with a personal world, a country for the poet-king:

Up here in the white country

any tree for a totem

any rock for an altar

discover!

this ground is suicidal

annihilates everything

but the most essential

poet – your kingdom¹⁵.

We can safely say that White attempts to recreate in his poems a kind of sacred universe which triggers intense emotional response in him. The white world is the image-centre to which everything seems to be converging. It is both a

¹² See Martin D. Graham: “A Pict in Roman Gaul”, in *Chapman 59 (the Edinburgh literary review)*, Joy Hendry, (ed.), Edinburgh, Chapman Publications, January 1990.

¹³ “Open Letter to All Hyperboreans”, (leaflet) Amsterdam, Raster, 1970, translated into French by Michèle Duclos in *Une Stratégie paradoxale*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1998, p. 65-79.

¹⁴ *L’Homme et le sacré*. Paris : Gallimard, 1993.

¹⁵ *Terre de diamante*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 68.

“foreworld”¹⁶ and a nihilistic, post-historical waste land. It is the origin and the end, the alpha and the omega, a substitute for the lost transcendence, a name for the individual's quest for unity. Let us also mention the fact that White moved to Brittany in the 1980s and that he elicited a place called *Le Champ Blanc* (“the white field”) to settle down permanently in a house that he called *Gwenved* — which is a Gaelic word for the Celtic pagan paradise: the “white world”.

II. A Centrifugal Movement

1. A Paradoxical Pseudonym

Kenneth White therefore puts whiteness at the centre of his poetics (along with the idea of “world”) and he endows it with connotations of completeness, unity of being, plenitude of life and experience. However, we may notice that associating whiteness with perfection and purity of soul is something of a commonplace. And since White is a specialist of the East and of Eastern philosophy, we may point out that it is also very banal to speak of the Void, of the Buddhist Emptiness in terms of a silent blankness or whiteness. This point is particularly interesting. It seems that the very obsessive use of the adjective “white”, the fact that it becomes a stereotype even, could deprive the adjective from its patronymic meaning. There is something mesmerizing about repeating this word over and over. And in a way this hypnotizing phenomenon abolishes the adjective's meaning. The word becomes a mere signifier and White is like a Dervish spinning round and round in his own name until it is no longer his own name but a mere enigmatic sign. In which case, paradoxically enough, the poet's surname becomes a kind of pseudonym. It means nothing but his own anonymity. “What's in a name?”, says Shakespeare's Juliet. Nothing at all. It is arbitrary, like all signs. There was a time when our name did not even exist.

Yet one may surmise that this interpretation of whiteness as coincidence between name and namelessness (pseudonym) is only the horizon of a process that the poet would never have carried out to the end. For White is like unto a tight-rope acrobat, here, walking between the abyss of narcissism and the abyss of anonymity. And after over forty years of the white world, it is hard to dismiss the idea that narcissism has prevailed. Particularly if one thinks of his insistence on the idea that there would be some sort of connection between “the word and the world”, the signifier and the signified. This conception, which goes against the arbitrary nature of signs, is at the heart of White's “geopoetics”. For a geopoetician, *there is something*

¹⁶ « Foreworld » is also the title of a poem where whiteness, though never explicitly mentioned, is omnipresent (*ibid.*, 1985, p. 28).

in a name. Alliterations are here to blow into the words the dim homophonic echoes of the wind among the reeds, or of the roar of the sea. As an older poet, as a geopoetician, White refused to acknowledge the fact that when we write “a white wind is blowing among the reeds” we do not write the actual noise that we’re hearing, no matter how many /w/ or /s/ we manage to squeeze into the line.

White would also like his reader to believe that “whiteness” is a specific intuition that any great poet or thinker comes to recognize as central or definitive, eventually — hence his liking for epigraphs or quotations, chapter titles or leitmotifs featuring the white element in a way or another. But more surprisingly even, he allows his reader to suspect that whiteness would be poetical *in itself*. He vaguely implies that some elements of the world, preferably the cosmic ones — and more particularly the white ones — are worthy of the highest kind of poetry, and that others are not. As if there were noble and sacred topics (nature, whiteness...), and base or profane ones (psychological or urban life...). As if the greatest poems could not be written with the most banal elements of everyday, ordinary, perhaps domestic life. As a matter of fact, “poetry for the householder”, which White has loathed from the start, is not at all the sort of poetry that makes use of images taken from ordinary life but the sort of poetry that sluggish or cautious, all too cautious minds will always prefer. It has nothing to do with the type of images present in the poem. Which is why White falls under the suspicion of “substantialism”: though he claims that poetry is the sign of an experience beyond the subject/object relationship, he actually simply denies the subject and takes refuge into the object as a *substance* for what he calls pure poetry.

2. *The White World as an Archaic Circumpolar Culture*

But the white world is not only the expression of a desire, or of an anonymous state of being, it is also an anthropological theory. It may be necessary to recall what White means by “geopoetics”, here. Basically, geopoetics is about placing poetics at the centre of culture again, though not just any kind of poetics. For White, the purest poetry is always about the earth, it always expresses a subtle relationship to our planet. In this respect, what was formerly called “primitive” art would be more valuable than most of what is produced in postmodern urban culture. Therefore, geopoetics is also about anthropology or science in general, as well as philosophy. It is striving for a transdisciplinary knowledge and awareness of the world, at the crossroads between poetry, philosophy and science. Geopoetics is after exactness and enjoyment, conceptual clarity and contemplation. So White started off studying

his own Celtic culture first, and this led him further North to the Hyperborean world. He recalls the early days of his white-world intuition in a short passage of poetical prose:

Up in that white world, existence seemed difficult, if not impossible – till, gradually, I became acclimatized, naturalized, recognizing that others had known these regions before me and that there was even a culture, however scattered, however obscure, attached to them, growing from them [...] When Nietzsche cries: “let every body become a dancer and every spirit a bird”, he is calling for white world culture¹⁷.

In an essay called “The Figure of Outward” (*La Figure du dehors*), which has only appeared in French so far, we can read more about what he means:

The tradition of Finn, the White One (which also means the Sacred One), had always been strong in Scotland. In order to find the origin of this tradition, perhaps we have to go back to an archaic religion based on the cult of deer: Finn's son is called Ossian whose name means “young deer”, and Finn's grand-son is called Oscar whose name means “he who likes deer”. We're close to the Labrador Indians and Eskimos' cult of the caribou, here¹⁸.

I shall leave it to anthropologists to confirm the validity of White's assertions. Sometimes White himself confesses that he cannot prove what he says anyway¹⁹. But what we have to mark, though, is the strange connection established between Kenneth White and Finn, the great mythic Scottish hero whose name does indeed mean “white”. What I find embarrassing for the poet-thinker here is that he actually suggests that he is, shall we say a reincarnation, of the great Scottish mythic hero. One has to recall the kind of lukewarm reception of White's work in Scotland, in this context. To cut a long story short, he sometimes has the reputation of someone who

¹⁷ “The Gannet Philosophy”, in *Mahamudra*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1987, p. 70. Bilingual edition.

¹⁸ “La tradition de Finn, le Blanc (c'est-à-dire le Sacré), avait été forte en Écosse. Pour trouver l'origine de cette tradition, il faut sans doute remonter à une religion archaïque fondée sur le culte des cervidés: le fils de Finn, Ossian, porte un nom qui signifie le ‘faon’, et le nom de son petit-fils, Oscar, signifie ‘qui aime les cerfs’. Nous ne sommes pas loin du ‘culte du caribou’ chez les Indiens et les Eskimos du Labrador”, (*La Figure du dehors*, Paris, Grasset, 1982, p. 28). Translation by the present author.

¹⁹ “I cannot prove this, it is only an intuition” (“Je ne peux pas prouver cela, ce n'est qu'une intuition”). *La Danse du chamane sur le glacier*, Rouen, L'Instant Perpétuel, no page numbers. Translation by the present author.

did not make it home and therefore marketed himself abroad. White certainly puts it in different words and says he exiled himself due to an utterly indigent intellectual climate in Britain. But maybe White is in fact sending a message to his fellow countrymen, like Finn talking to the Fianna, his companions. In some interviews with British people, he does claim that “[his] Breton home is a Scottish outpost²⁰”, and that he is continuing a tradition of Scottish intellectual immigration dating back to the Middle Ages. Once again, with this portrait of the artist as a self-exiled Scottish hero, the tight-rope acrobat seems to be dangerously close to falling into the abyss of childishness. But it is up to everyone to decide.

III. White World, Psychoanalysis and Zen

It is a great shame that Kenneth White mostly has contemptuous comments to make on psychoanalysis in general. Though he may sometimes drop the names of Freud or Jung or Ferenczi in passing, he never condescends to examine important concepts in a detailed way. His transdisciplinary drive leads him to comment on history, ethnology, philosophy, biology, geography, physics, politics or literature of course, but never on psychoanalysis. I find it rather puzzling that Kenneth White should so often revel in flouting religion or theoreticians of the subjectivity, and at the same time be unaware that only those who will refuse to bring into question the unity of subjectivity will be suspicious of psychoanalysis. Religious people need a Subject with a free will, but so do people whose godless religion is Materialism, Science or the Progress of Reason, all of which make room for a Subject with a free conscience and will. So there is something incoherent about White’s sporadic contempt for psychoanalysis. And yet there are so many details in White’s work which call for a psychoanalytical approach, starting with the glorification of the father’s name. In the very commonly shared fear of psychoanalysis something of a denegation is perceptible, something of a refusal to go into the dark and face our unknown desire. Better flee into the white world than walk into this scary dark room.

It could have been of interest, though, to pour on the notion of “drive”, for example. There are even quite a few positive comments to make on White’s work thanks to this concept. A drive is different from an impulsion insofar as it does not aim at satisfaction but simply at the reproduction of itself as drive. Sisyphus pushing his rock uphill for ever again is a perfect illustration of what psychoanalysts call a drive: he represents the continuous approach to an object that nevertheless

²⁰ *Coast to Coast (interviews and conversations)*, Glasgow, Open World and Mythic Horse Press, 1996, p. 102.

preserves a constant distance. And is not Kenneth White continuously approaching the elusive and mysterious white world? Is he not preserving the desiring nature of his desire? This interpretation is all the more interesting since it has an equivalent in Indian Buddhist philosophy, of which White is a great admirer, where such pure desire is called *sarvakarmaphalatyâga*. But this notion has never been quoted or commented on by White.

It is also very interesting to meditate Jacques Lacan's concept of "object (small) *a*" (*objet petit a*) in relation to White's paradoxical pseudonym. For Lacan "*a*" means both the other as our own alter-ego (*le petit autre*) and an *absence*, something we cannot put a name on at the heart of our desire. The object small *a* is a hole in the wall of our signifying structure, it is a surplus that our living system produces but which remains heterogeneous to the system — to put it like Rimbaud, it is the other that I *is*. We never know what it is but it sucks us up into action and it gives consistence to the chain of signifiers that we become conscious of. Isn't it precisely what whiteness is about? A blankness and a pseudonym which even contains alter-egos like Finn, the White One, the mythic Scottish hero. It is certainly more interesting to look at the white world from this point of view than to imagine some superstitious story about White being another Finn — not to mention the naive belief that there could be something specifically poetic or intuitive about whiteness in general. Whiteness in the work of Kenneth White is a filter which distorts things. The poet paints the world white. But it is desire that distorts our view in such a way, it is desire that uses such filters. Only by looking at things through such filters can we catch a glimpse of the Real.

And yet we need to become aware of this fact, we need to realize that looking at things straight on in order to eliminate subjectivity and see things "as they are" is a dead end. Things can never be seen as they are simply because they are not: *they only appear*. Things are not solid, substantial and objective. They can always be seen from another perspective, their outlines can always be defined differently, and we never come face to face with "the thing itself". We never reach the pulsing presymbolic substance, this blank image that White believes to be prior to thought and perception, because if we did, we'd sink into sheer psychosis. All we can become aware of is the ultimate character of the Void, the Emptiness of everything. All we can do is awaken to the inaccessible nature of things and enjoy the shimmering surface of an ever receding world. If there is one lesson to remember from the Buddhist Emptiness (which has often been paralleled with the teachings of Western mystics and thinkers such as Meister Eckhart), it is certainly that we can never set

foot on firm ground, ultimately, or that nothing can be said to have a definite substance. The Emptiness tells us that we need to learn how to swim the world. So that a question arises: how can White claim on the one hand that the Void is the ultimate experience available, and on the other hand maintain that poetry is about coming back to a “natural” state very much like the one in which the inhabitants of the circumpolar white culture took things for what they were? There has never been a natural state for human beings any more since the day language and consciousness appeared. For an adept of the Emptiness, the Emptiness is everywhere, not only in nature, and poetry is everywhere too, not only in nature. It is in the room where Mallarmé wrote his *Coup de dés* as well as on Walt Whitman’s *Open Road*.

But we might be broaching a dangerous question here. Could it be that the Emptiness is an experience that can be instrumentalized by virtually any ideology? Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek interestingly comments on this problem in his in-depth reappraisal of the very vexed East-meets-West question²¹. Let us only recall that Professor Suzuki, who practically introduced Zen into the West, had also been a staunch supporter of Zen in kamikaze military disciplin. He advocated the doctrine according to which “the sword” never kills anyone since identity and individuality have no existence for Buddhism. Noone dies and noone gives death because noone really exists as a separate individual. Therefore Suzuki justified the principle of sacrifice as total involvement into action.

By way of a conclusion, I think it is possible to surmise that when Gilles Deleuze wrote that there were “micro-fascist” dangers in Kenneth White’s work, he was thinking of this, precisely. He certainly did *not* mean that Kenneth White is a potential suicide bomber, of course, but that for all his postmodern rhetoric of “desubjectivization” he still preserves subjectivizing processes; and that for all his Orientalism and “intellectual nomadism” (an important whitian concept), he still remains ensconced in narcissism and mere travel-writing or erudite sightseeing:

One can clearly see the dangers [...] inherent to such an undertaking [...], Deleuze writes. For: how to avoid the race motif turning into racism or into domineering, all-inclusive fascism [...], or into a folkloric and micro-fascist sect? And how to avoid the pole of the East becoming a mere fantasy that would bring back to life, though differently, all kinds of fascism, all kinds

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Cambridge (Ma., USA), The MIT Press, 2003, chapter I.

of folklore too, be it yoga, zen or kung-fu? To be sure, travelling is not enough to rid oneself of this fantasy²².

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²² Gilles Deleuze (with Félix Guattari), *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 470-71 (translation by the present author). See also Pierre Jamet, "L'Altercation entre Gilles Deleuze et Kenneth White", in *Philosophique* (Louis Ucciani, ed.), Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006, p. 145-53.