
Kenneth White and Identity

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Introduction

Kenneth White is a Scottish poet and essay writer whose career started in France at the outset of the 1960s. Largely ignored in Britain at the time, he became convinced that there was "a better climate for [his] ideas" on the continent. His essays, in which the influence of 20th century French philosophy is perceptible, are written directly in French but he writes poetry in English and has it translated. Although Kenneth White resents the idea of identity, it seems that he does not reject it completely. It is interesting to see how the postmodern relinquishment of classical philosophical categories (such as identity but also univocal Truth or the Subject) is critical in White's thought, and how he studied his own Celtic identity to relativize it eventually. But we also have to try and understand the contradiction that lies in White's predilection for doctrines of the absence of identity and the simultaneous assertion of a strong, perhaps Romantic self, as it appears in the figure of the radical poet-thinker for instance.

I. A Philosophical Rejection of Identity

1. On Postmodern Ground

Identity being at the core of Western classical thought and culture, it comes as no surprise that many a critic of the West has felt the urge to expose it as potentially responsible for the so-called 'decline' of the West. It features in Aristotle's writings as another name for the imperative of non-contradiction. For the sake of logic, A equals A and cannot equal B at the same time. Therefore reason, logic and identity are inseparable and have prevailed over the

development of Western science and thought until a fairly recent interest of science for quanta or chaos.

Kenneth White is a Scottish poet but he also writes essays in French since he has been living in France for nearly fifty years now. In his books of essays he frequently refers to French (or francophone) philosophers who have sometimes been labelled "postmodern", notably Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, or Kostas Axelos. According to Alain Badiou, postmodern philosophy derives from Nietzsche's suspicion that there was something rotten in the state of Modernity and Western rationality. Badiou contends that modern thought is characterized above all by the notion of univocal Truth. But he also recalls that there is no such Truth without a Subject to voice it, a Cartesian Subject whose backbone is, precisely, identity. "Cogito, ergo sum", "I think, therefore I am", means that the *I* who thinks is the same as the *I* who is and that he even defines him. *I* equals *I*, and cannot equal anything or anybody else at the same time. The logic of modern philosophy is of course different altogether from Rimbaud's poetical logic according to which "Je est un autre". And White very frequently claims that his first masters were Nietzsche and Rimbaud: "À côté de Rimbaud il y a Nietzsche, qui commence dans la saison en enfer, en poussant jusqu'au bout l'analyse de la culture qui a créé cet enfer"¹.

Nietzsche is what White calls a "culture analyst" who identifies the cultural crisis of the West with "nihilism" which he understands as the inner coherence of occidental history since Plato, Aristotle and Christianity. White also holds that nihilism is responsible for the utterly disastrous contemporary situation of Man and his natural environment : "Pour trouver le début de l'aberration, il faut remonter sans doute au moins vingt-cinq siècles en arrière"². The Nietzschean bird's eye view of history can easily be recognized here since (more or less) 25 centuries ago Plato and Aristotle founded what was to be referred to as metaphysics. Nietzsche and his postmodern inheritors were therefore interested in Pre-Socratic and Pre-Aristotelian philosophy. Instead of investigating the categories of the Being, of what really *is*, of what is stable and identical in time or space, they abolished the boundaries between the natural and the human world, they derided the obsession with logic and identity, roping in all sorts of philosophers, artists and avant-garde scientists to promote the cause of what is

¹ Kenneth White, *Basserode (déambulations dans l'espace nomade)*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1995, p. 38.

² Kenneth White, *L'Esprit nomade*, Paris, Grasset, 1987, p. 62.

rather *in the process of becoming* something else. There is more to the world than the mere categories of the Being, there is more to Man than his mere rational self, whose identity allows him to set foot on firm ground and build cities and states. In other words, philosophy has to learn how to swim. It has to learn from Heraclitus and all the doctrines of the fleeting world. It has to acknowledge that man's identical self is only the emerged part of an iceberg of unconsciousness. White undoubtedly takes this Nietzschean and postmodern stance, as we can tell from the following quotation:

Il faudra sans doute abandonner le concept d'Être, sous toutes ses formes, depuis Dieu, en passant par le *Topos noétes* de Platon, le *Praton kinoun* d'Aristote, l'*Ipsum esse subsistans* des scolastiques, le Postulat moral de Kant, jusqu'au *Geist* de Hegel – ce qui, selon toute probabilité, ne saurait se faire en un jour, ou en une nuit³.

The reference to Hegel is significant, here, since Hegel's *Geist* or "Mind" is Reason as the universal and absolute component of history, as its motive element and its very essence. The Hegelian Mind is part and parcel of the ideology of Progress that was to take on so much importance as from the 19th century. But by the side of what White calls "the motorway of the West" a few great companions and intellectual or poetical figures stand and work and inspire whoever feels the urge to live, think or write off the beaten track.

C'est comme s'il y avait, à l'écart de la grande autoroute idéaliste Platon-Hegel-Superavenir, un paysage dans lequel poésie et pensée se rencontrent avec une attirance mutuelle. Il est incontestable qu'une des plus grandes figures de ce paysage-là (...) est Héraclite⁴.

And here again, the link between thought and poetry calls for the 20th century French philosophical avant-garde. Indeed, the postmodern rejection of univocal Truth and of its sole agent, the Subject, implies a parallel understanding that the only world where a Subject can exist is language. One of the major postulates of postmodern philosophy is that there is no Subject outside language, in other words that the Cartesian Subject's reality is purely linguistic. This is borne out by a renewed interest of philosophy for literature insofar as literary works also reveal the non-subjective and hidden part of the iceberg. Literature is where language

³ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 235.

under its traditional form is being queried, debunked – let us say "deconstructed". Poetry is the ocean where identity and distinctness dissolve, precisely, the world where metaphors can draw a link between separate things which now may appear in their fundamental and mysterious sameness. Poets are the tightrope walkers of grammar and syntax which they use in a way that goes against the natural and reassuring progression of meaning, its subjectivizing function. Why could "Je" not be "un autre"? Tame and blind are the words that know nothing but the rank that our gregarious need for security bestows upon them. At any rate, Kenneth White seems to agree with the postmodern criticism of language. He often makes it clear that the notion of identity is even worse than philosophically obsolete: it is also socially noxious. Since there are no real boundaries between the objects of the world, since everything is in a perpetual and Heraclitean flux, nationalism and political borders are also inadequate to the world to come. He contends at least that the most clear-sighted thinkers of our postmodern times should do their utmost to facilitate the advent of an utterly cosmopolitan world. Hence White's geographical and intellectual nomadism.

2. The Call of the East

This nomadism drives him eastwards, primarily. Along with Celtic references, Eastern poets and philosophers are probably the figures that White likes best. He is never tired of coming back to Bashô, Han Shan or Li Po, to name but a few poets from Japan and China he quotes most; or to refer to thinkers like Dôgen, Nagarjuna and Tchouang Tseu. This is in keeping with the prevailing atmosphere at the time when White started off as a poet (the 1960s), but his liking for the East is still unchanged, even though the aura of the Anglo-Saxon Beat Culture, from which he may be thought to have inherited, has waned a little. Yet if White was interested in the Celtic world, it was also because according to him the most fascinating modern Celtic writers — from Victor Segalen to Hugh MacDiarmid — have been irresistibly drawn to the East as to an Eden of existential plenitude: "Si MacDiarmid s'est tourné vers l'Orient, c'était pour sortir de l'intellectualité pure"⁵. So White started to investigate his own Scottishness, going ever deeper into the Celtic and archaic Hyperborean universe, discovering — or speculating — that there might have been long-forgotten connections between North and East. And he also found that Eastern thought and

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 155.

aesthetics seemed familiar to his Celtic mind. These views are debatable but there remains that Nietzsche, following in the footsteps of his early master Schopenhauer, also invited his readers to take an interest in Eastern philosophy:

J'imagine de futurs penseurs chez qui la perpétuelle agitation de l'Europe et de l'Amérique s'associera à la contemplation asiatique, héritage de centaines de générations : une telle combinaison conduira à la solution de l'énigme du monde. En attendant, les libres esprits contemplatifs ont leur mission : ils abolissent toutes les barrières qui font obstacle à une interprétation des hommes : religions, états, instincts monarchiques, illusions de richesse et de pauvreté, préjugés d'origine et de race, etc⁶.

And not only did Nietzsche point to the East but so did postmodern thinkers since a chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* is devoted to the Tao philosophy. The reason for this interest is quite simple: at the heart of Buddhism lies a threefold understanding of existence: Man is in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction (nothing can fulfill him completely); all beings and things are impermanent (they are in an ever changing process), and they depend on all other beings and things (they are interdependent). The last two principles (impermanence and interdependence) are indeed concordant with the philosophy of an ever-moving immanent process (*le devenir*) which Nietzsche and postmodern theoreticians advocate: for Buddhism as for them there is no such thing as a world of distinct objects and beings that would exist in themselves, with an identity of their own. All things change and the ultimate reality of impermanence is the passage between what our senses conveniently but erroneously understand as two different states. But this passage is in fact only a mysterious process, which Buddhism calls the Void. Kenneth White claims that *there* lies a common ground where East meets West, and he feels that it is his task to promote the meeting of these two poles: "C'est dans le vide, justement (mais que de travail avant de concevoir le vide autrement que comme un trou noir), qu'Orient et Occident peuvent se rencontrer"⁷.

In terms of writing, his intellectual nomadism takes on the form of essays (*L'Esprit nomade* being perhaps the most revealing one), where he develops the ideas we have just examined with a liking for quotations that some disregard as mere indulgence in name-dropping. But his nomadism is not just about a

⁶ Cité par Jean-François Lyotard, *Nietzsche aujourd'hui*, Paris, 10/18, 2 vols., vol. I, p. 152.

⁷ Kenneth White, *Une Apocalypse tranquille*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 208.

transdisciplinary art of quoting, it is about travelling too and writing books of prose that describe the very movement from theory to practice, at the centre of which lies the experience of poetry at its purest. Hence his reputation of travel-writer. *The Blue Road* or *The Face of the East Wind*, are such narratives. But the central experience to which travel-writing leads being ultimately that of an enlightenment, a brief and concise but precise understanding of the absence of identity, of the absence of definite self, White finds that nothing fits it better than the three-line Eastern poetical form known as the haïku. If we read the following poem:

In the wet green silence
of the pine wood
a crow's black call⁸

we can notice that the play on synesthesia makes us move through the senses of touch (wet), sight (green) and hearing (silence), and that sight and hearing are finally blended together in the "black call" of the crow. This call sounds awakening and somehow central; and although it remains unseen, the crow flies through the reader's imagination like a black bolt of lightning through the pines' branches. White tries to instil the feeling of an underlying continuum that the senses only arbitrarily cut down into separate objects with an identity of their own.

So there we have a Scot who became French and promoted the advent of a global, planetary consciousness both in terms of culture and experience. His own personal identity White claims to be fluid and shifting, certainly not restricted to his psychological self. Therefore he imagines the life of other artists in some poems and let his reader surmise that he is in fact talking about himself. Such is the case in many narrative poems like "Brandan's Last Voyage", or "Black Sea Letter" for example (where Ovid in exile speaks with White's recognizable voice)⁹.

⁸ Kenneth White, *L'Anorak du goéland*, Rouen, L'Instant Perpétuel, 1986, pas de pagination.

⁹ Respectively in: Kenneth White, *Atlantica*, Paris Grasset, 1986 and Kenneth White, *Les Rives du silence*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1997 (bilingual editions).

II. Perplexing Paradoxes

1. Identity and Desubjectivization

Coming back to the question of language, which no radical thinker can possibly overlook – and White claims that he is a radical thinker – a puzzling contradiction between his work as essay writer and his poetry must be highlighted. For the postmodern philosophers we have mentioned above, European languages convey metaphysics automatically – and it would seem that metaphysics is no longer desirable. The influence of Martin Heidegger is critical in this perspective. In *Introduction à la métaphysique*¹⁰, Heidegger recalls that Greek grammarians defined language for the first time as an object of study organized according to the difference between a fundamental form and less important "accidents" (declensions, inflections etc). Any speech act stands on a cornerstone which is assumed, never questioned and never thought through. This fundamental unit is the primitive "BE", the copula; it validates our judgements and it is, according to Heidegger, the condition of rationality's very existence. It allows us to communicate but it also has remarkable consequences since philosophy became in Greece an ontology, that is to say the study of the Being. It turns out, François Châtelet recalls, that metaphysical philosophers attributed I, God, or Nature to this copula, and said "I am" instead of saying something like "there is I"; they said "God is" and "Nature is" instead of "there is God" or "there is Nature"¹¹. Yet by giving in to the feeling that "I" or "God" or "Nature" have an existence of their own outside language, we are metaphysicians 'sans le savoir', as Molière would have it. It takes a lot of words and metaphors to catch a glimpse of what I, God or Nature might be like – it takes literature. Therefore, the postmodern rejection of identity goes along with a destruction of the subjectivizing forces at work within common language. And this is precisely what White's poetry does *not* do. Beckett, Joyce or MacDiarmid effectively ruin the subjectivizing powers of language. Which is why some say they are difficult to read. So the question of identity in White's work, however appealing in the essays, remains abstract. His poems do not evidence any forceful desubjectivizing processes. They abide by the fundamental subjective rule and mainly describe from outside identifiable forms while they were supposed to reveal from within anonymous forces. But this is not denying White a true sense of the picturesque. Though he does not venture down

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

¹¹ François Châtelet, *Hegel*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 81sq.

into the linguistic manufacture of identity, his naturalistic poems are still lovely landscape vistas, as from the point of view of a privileged lonely wanderer.

2. Identity and Egopoetics

The contradiction between an anti-identity theoretical stance and a kind of poetry that does not take on the consequences of this stance also shows on the surface of White's writings when he takes the attitude of an egotistical poet-thinker. His egotism may be understood first as a salutary reaction against the social environment of his youth. Most poets become poets because they are ill at ease among normal – all too normal – people. And in fact, White willingly admits that he is egocentric in one of his earliest books of prose: "Égocentrique? Oui, bien sûr, sur quoi d'autre voulez-vous vous *centrer*? Il faut se centrer sur l'ego, se concentrer sur lui, et le *traverser* pour entrer dans le champ libre. Sans cela, on est pris dans toutes les sortes d'égoïsme *camouflé*"¹².

This statement sounds very convincing indeed, but it was written in the 1960s and whether White actually managed to step beyond his ego is a question that remains open. The poet believes in the superiority of artists. In Joyce, he recognizes "l'égoïsme du créateur qui n'accepte pas de renoncer à sa puissance vitale, à son besoin de synthèse imaginative en faveur d'on ne sait quel altruisme dicté par une philosophie ou une religion"¹³. But how does White manage to reconcile this typically Romantic attitude with the idea that identity is in fact only a mere garment for an anonymous and complex process: that is the question. Not that this self-assertive attitude is necessarily despicable. After all, part of the charm of Nietzsche's work, for example, is due to a kind of narcissism too. But Nietzsche is extremely ironical in his narcissism and even declares that he overacts it in order to drive some readers away from him. Nietzsche's trans-narcissism, so to speak, can be demonstrated, whereas the feeling that incoherence pervades cannot be got rid of easily if one reads White's work attentively. And even if incoherence is not so important for a poet compared to the creative works he brings forth, it would seem that a radical poet-thinker cannot disregard it without losing the radicality he claims for himself.

Which is why the concept of "geopoetics" put forward by White at the end of the 1970s irresistibly evokes the symmetrical notion of *egopoetics*. What we are to

¹² Kenneth White, *Les Limbes incandescents*, Paris, Denoël, 1976, p. 114.

¹³ Kenneth White, *Une Apocalypse tranquille*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 154.

read in White's poems is in fact the lyrical love for nature of a post-romantic wandering scholar, not the anonymous and identity-free texts of a postmodern artist. The recurrence of "white" elements in these poems, which has stirred the interest of a few critics, though it is supposed to evoke at the same time a personal mythology and a radical anonymity, in fact does not quite reach the second objective. The egotistic element still prevails. Or if some sort of anonymity has effectively been achieved by White psychologically, the reader cannot see it on the page and has to infer it. But then the writer ceases to be a poet to become a preacher demanding faith from his flock of readers.

Conclusion.

Identity is a philosophical notion that Kenneth White rejected when he was a young writer along with thinkers of enormous influence worldwide. He does not however deny the fact that, in terms of origins for example, one always comes from somewhere, from a particular culture, contemporary or ancient as his own Scottish and Celtic culture. Yet studying this context was to lead him further away, as is necessarily the case if one goes back far enough in time. If identity is to be understood as a cultural principle, White stands on the side of cosmopolitanism, though he contends that the Celtic and Eastern cultures are of particular importance to our global era. But if identity is to be taken in the logical sense of the term, with all the consequences it has on the rational or poetical uses of language, then we have to admit that there is a gap between theory and practice in what he writes, a bridge between what the essays claim and what the poems actually do. The postmodern criticism of classical thought is radical because it queries fundamental assumptions in philosophy, redefining Man and his attitude to the world. But this radicality is not restricted to conceptual thought, it lives effectively in Man's only use of language where expression and experience meet: in literature. From this point of view, Kenneth White can be seen as belonging to a generation of naturalistic lyrical poets whose genealogy can be traced all the way back to Romanticism: he describes nature and the way he feels about nature almost like a landscape painter. But the kind of (contemporary) literature that attempts to see and say differently has to be looked for among a completely different family of writers. One may think of the avant-gardes, in this respect, and of a few solitary figures. But this is another subject.