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Writing the Road: On Drifting and Travelling-Seeing in Kenneth White's Geopoetics

Abstract

The article will offer a comparative reading of Kenneth White's poetry, essays and travelogues/waybooks, with the focus on the issue of travelling, in particular the theme of drifting, the practice of writing-travelling and travelling-seeing (*voyage-voyance*). I will also try to demonstrate that there is a link between White's theory of geopoetics and the practice of *voyage-voyance* in his writing. I will focus mainly on selected passages from the chapters of *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* and poems in which White discusses the issue of his writing-travelling and the process of self-realisation.

Keywords: Kenneth White, writing-travelling, waybook, drifting, intellectual nomadism, voyage-voyance, geopoetics

“Drifting, drifting... that's the way it looks on the edges of our civilisation.
A drifting, a searching, beyond all the known grounds, for an other ground.”
(Kenneth White)

1. Introduction

“It's this other ground that is the theme of the here gathered texts – an other ground: a space of being, an area of the mind; and the way(s) to it” (1990b, 7) – this is how Kenneth White begins one of his travelogues, *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*. In his view, his book is “the account of displacement going deeper than geography, by someone who is first and foremost a pedestrian, sometimes a hitch-hiker, always a precarious inhabitant, just passing through” (1990b, 7). From the very beginning he speaks of “an other ground,” understood not only geographically but first and foremost mentally. Characteristically, a book of travelling is seen here as an account of displacement experienced by someone who is “just passing through” or, as we

can see in the epigraph, by someone who is “drifting,” searching “beyond all the known grounds” (see Kocot 2020b). What kind of “drifting” is White addressing here? What “other ground” is he writing about? This article offers a comparative reading of Kenneth White’s poetry, essays and travelogues/waybooks, with the focus on the issue of travelling, in particular the theme of *voyage-voyance*, and the practice of *savoir-voir*. In my opinion, there is a link between White’s theory of geopoetics¹ and the practice of *voyage-voyance* in his writing. I focus mainly on selected passages from the chapters of *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, and poems in which White discusses the issue of his writing-travelling; in my analyses I try to show the link between the practice of travelling and the process of self-realisation. I also refer to “Writing the Road,” a theoretical essay on the philosophy of waybooks from White’s collection of essays titled *The Wanderer and his Charts: Essays of Cultural Renewal*.

In their essay on border-crossers in contemporary Scottish literature, Ian Brown and Colin Nicholson observe that any act of creation involves going beyond established limits of perceived possibility or acceptability:

Out of such transgression comes generic growth. A sense of where the core lies and what is liminal is central to self-definition, whether individual, generic or cultural. Exploratory crossing of boundaries is, therefore, a way of knowing, at least with less uncertainty, one’s identity – or identities. Working in more than one literary genre is, beyond any possible economic advantage from extending a potential audience, to assert the existence of another identity, or at least that one’s identity is complex and multiple. (262)

Brown and Nicholson add that this practice requires not only a variety of skills and complexity of identity, but also the need to find expression in different modes or languages (262). White’s artistic expressions are published in two languages, English and French. Interestingly, some of his writings come originally in French, and some in English. For instance, the theory concerning *voyage-voyance*, or travelling-writing, was originally published in French, and so far only some of the books or essays have been translated into English. It might be argued that White’s capacity to break conventions and established artistic modes depends also on his choice of language.

Brown and Nicholson place White among border-crossers such as Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Tom McGrath, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead, Christopher Whyte, George Gunn and Jackie Kay, but they emphasise that White is “the only Scottish poet to have elaborated a theory of writing out of the notion of border crossings” (268). They mean not only geographical border crossings, but also transgression of generic and cultural limits.

White himself divides his writing into three different forms: poem-books, essay-books, and prose-books or “waybooks”: “At one point, I likened this triple

literary activity to an arrow. The essays, maintaining direction, are the feathers; the prose, ongoing autobiography, or what I like to call “waybooks” (alias transcendental travelogues) is the arrow’s shaft; and the poem is the arrow-head” (1990b, 9). It is important to note that for White the whole arrow is in movement, it is “going somewhere, not just marking time or making remarks about this, that and the next thing” (1990b,9). In his essays, White attempts to “draw up a new mental cartography” (1998, 163), to propose a new, geopoetic way of being-in-the-world, whereas his “waybooks” describe his travels in various parts of the world; one could argue that they form a peculiar testimony of White’s geopoetic practice of *voyage-voyance*, writing-travelling (see Kocot 2020a). In his three waybooks or travelogues, White has spoken of his mental continent as Euramerasia, “with Asia both as background and as ultimate area” (McManus 108). This is why we find numerous references to Japanese Zen and Chinese Ch’an literature and philosophy, not only in *Pilgrim of the Void* (which presents White’s travels in Asia), but also in *The Blue Road* (White’s vision of America) and in *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (which completes the Euramerasian adventure and focuses on White’s travels in Europe).

2. Geopoetics or Open World Poetics

In their essay on border-crossers, Brown and Nicholson note that White’s “geopoetics” “grows out of his elaborate sense of a physical and cultural geography of intersecting centres and peripheries, both ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ always remaining interchangeable terms” (268), and they add: “since it involves what White has called ‘the orchestration of all cultures, an original synthesis,’ it is fitting he shares Alexander von Humboldt’s conviction that the external world and our thoughts and feelings are as inextricably linked as thought and language” (268). One could argue that geopoetic discourse is inspired not only by Humboldt’s theory, but also by the literary movements (such as German Romanticism) White was drawn to. The list of people and traditions that have influenced White is quite long. I hope I will be able to discuss some of these links and associations. We will come back to the issue of centres and peripheries in the latter part of this article.

On the website of *The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics* (founded in 1995 by Tony McManus and others, affiliated to the International Institute of Geopoetics founded by White in 1989 in Paris) we read that White “had always been of the persuasion that the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from a plunge into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the lines of the world” (“The International Institute of Geopoetics. Inaugural Text”). We also learn that the term geopoetics cannot be understood as deep ecology or as a literary school. For White, it should be seen as “a major movement involving the very foundations of human life on earth” (“The International Institute of Geopoetics. Inaugural

Text”). These “foundations” may suggest that we are entering a peculiar space where philosophy (both Western and Eastern) is deeply intertwined with poetry (see Kocot 2019):

In the fundamental geopoetic field come together poets and thinkers of all times and of all countries. To quote only a few examples, in the West, one can think of Heraclitus (“man is separated from what is closest to him”), Hölderlin (“man lives poetically on the earth”), or Wallace Stevens (“the poems of heaven and hell have been written, it remains to write the poem of the earth”). In the East, there is the Taoist Tchuang-tzu, the man of the ancient pool, Matsuo Bashō, and beautiful world-meditations such as one can find in the *Hua Yen Sutra*.² (“The International Institute of Geopoetics. Inaugural Text”)

A similar message emphasising a cross-cultural, transdisciplinary and, last but not least, poetic mode of being-in-the-world can be found in White’s “L’aventure poétique,” translated by the author for Tony McManus:

Today, for the first time in the history of humanity, winds blow from all regions of the globe at once, and each and every one of us has access to all cultures of the world. That can give rise to cacophony, to disarray, lassitude in front of so much accumulated richness, but it can also give rise, with analytical work and synthesis [...] to a new way of thinking, a great world poem, liveable by everyone. (qtd. in McManus 196)

Characteristically, this new way of thinking promotes a rhizomatic framework of associations across many (at times too many) disciplines and cultures, which is why some (especially British) critics find it too (intellectually/aesthetically?) demanding, and they reject its basic assumptions.

For the French, White’s writing has always been much more convincing and inspiring; this is partly related to the fact that White often refers to French philosophers (such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Blanchot or Gilles Deleuze), and literary figures (Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Paul Valéry, to mention just a few). But French influences, both in terms of philosophy and aesthetics, are at least to some extent secondary. As Brown and Nicholson observe, when White first began to talk about “geopoetics” in the late 1970s, “he found preliminary stimulus and encouragement in Walt Whitman” (268), and we can find numerous passages in White’s *The Wanderer and His Charts* where he dwells on Whitman’s geopoetic spirit and his passion for travelling. In the chapter “Writing the Road,” which might be seen as White’s own (and definitely winding) history of road literature, he discusses poetic affinities between Whitman, Emerson, and Carlyle. For him, what had come to Whitman from Carlyle and Emerson, was “Romanticism (transcendental idealism)” but he, White argues, “translated it into Americanese, and gave it a new lease of life. The result was the ‘Open Road’” (2004, 100). And here he quotes his poetic master:

“From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines” (2004, 100). But one could quote further, as those lines describe in almost exactly the same measure both Whitman’s and White’s poetic practice: “Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating, / Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me. / I inhale great draughts of space, / The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine” (Whitman 139). It is also interesting to take a look at what he deems inspiring in Whitman’s poetry:

“breaking through copied forms” (W.C. Williams’ phrase), the oceanic surge of his line, the inventiveness of his vocabulary and these particularly felicitous moments of contact with the “cool-breath’d earth,” when the rant and the brag (so irritating to some, so exhilarating to others, even if they take it, as it must be taken, with a humorous grain of salt) gives way to a quieter kind of poetics. (White 2004, 100)

If one thinks of White’s writing, be it prose, travelogue or poetry, one cannot help noticing how strikingly similar it is to that of Whitman: the flood of images, loosely woven “collages” of “written-through” images or phrases, rhizomatic narrative structures, language games. But, apparently, the similarity can be found not only in Whitmanesque inclusiveness but also in Whitman’s gorgeous egotism: White is aware of the fact that for some readers “the rant and the brag” of the speaking persona might be problematic. We will come back to this issue in the latter part of this article, as the way I see it the issue of emptiness, voidness and silence is inextricably linked with White’s truly insatiable appetite for new words, mind-bending phrases and rhizomatic narrative strands.

For White, the romantic transcendental travelogue “moves through a spiritual topography, towards what Hölderlin calls ‘completion’” (2004, 96); “it is a journey from self to Self, from confusion and ignorance to a cosmo-poetic reading of the universe” (96). White emphasises here not the destination of these travelogues but their method: “the idea is to give a sense all along the way of what is open and flowing and cannot be defined in any cut-and-dried fashion” (96). In his book *L’Esprit nomade (The Nomad Mind)* he speaks of waybook and transcendental travelogue, and about what he calls “white world,” communication between the self and the world, and the need to “worldify the self, littoralise being” (1996, 34).

In one of the chapters of *The Wanderer and His Charts*, entitled tellingly “Elements of a New Cartography,” White mentions other authors whom he sees as precursors to his geopoetic project: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Charles Olson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Henri Michaux (2004, 163). White also quotes Deleuze and Guattari, who in *A Thousand Plateaux* attempt to define a “nomadic” type of writing: “writing has nothing to do with meaning, but everything to do with serpentine movement and cartography” (qtd. in White 2004, 164). Characteristically, in his writing practice White combines contemporary post-structuralist philosophy of the text with the quite ancient literary aesthetics and philosophical depth he finds in Japanese Zen and Chinese Ch’an literature, but first and foremost in Taoist sources.

Brown and Nicholson observe that White's fascination with establishing a new way of writing in the West is linked with his reading of Far Eastern philosophy and literature: "[i]mmersed in Zen Buddhism, he was also powerfully drawn to the Taoist literary form that he sees making fun of heavy logic, moving rapidly through multiple spaces and mixing up all genres" (268). It is worth pointing out here that the Eastern texts White is drawn to (and here Tony McManus mentions the "whispered teachings" of Tibetan Buddhism, the "white line" of Milarepa and Marpa, the most iconoclastic Zen texts, the writings of Tchuang-tzu) are those which challenge established belief-systems and ritual practices (see McManus 109). White's writing (poetry, essays, waybooks) contains hundreds and hundreds of quotations, paraphrases, epigraphs, multimodal references to Eastern (Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist) religious texts. But that does not mean that White's interest in these texts is religious. In the introduction to *Le Plateau de l'albatros*, he quite explicitly rejects religious discourse. For him geopoetics concerns a new mental cartography (freed from the constraints of ideology and religious beliefs) and the search for a new language that would be able to express this other way of being in the world; it would seem that "a rapport with the earth (energies, rhythms, forms)" is of crucial importance here (see McManus 74; Kocot 2020a, 2020b).

White's deep fascination, if not obsession, with Eastern philosophy, aesthetics and poetic traditions can be associated with his geopoetic idea of nondualistic "finer world-living" (1992a, 167). In the already quoted passage from the website of *The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics*, White refers to Tchuang-tzu (4th century BC, the co-founder of Taoism), Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694, the Japanese master of *haiku*, *haibun* and *renga*), and the *Hua Yen Sūtra*, one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism. Even though we are entering different realms of philosophy (Taoism, Japanese Zen Buddhism and Chinese Ch'an Buddhism) and a number of aesthetic traditions, what seems crucial is the emphasis put on a mind-bending imaginary which aims at making one realise the state of Oneness (of oneself and the world).

I would argue that White is so influenced by Bashō's philosophy of writing that he tries to follow in his footsteps; he does that literally in his *Pilgrim of the Void* where we find whole chapters devoted to Bashō and the history of his school of writing. Bashō's travel-accounts are extremely inspiring for White, not only in terms of their prosimetric form, but first and foremost because of the philosophy of living that informs this writing (see Kocot 2020a). Let us have a look at the quote which opens Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi*, and which could easily relate, at least to some extent, to White's writing as well. This time I am quoting the translation we find in White's "Writing the Road" in *The Wanderer and His Charts*: "The passing days and months are eternal travellers in time. The years that come and go are travellers too. Life itself is a journey. As for those who spend their days upon the waters in boats, and those who grow old leading horses, their very home is the open road. Many ancient died on that road. I myself have long been tempted out

by the cloud-moving wind" (2004, 109). It is quite intriguing that White ends this quote here, as the next sentence introduces a peculiar relationship between the traveller and the cloud; in my view this passage testifies to one more similarity between Bashō and his geopoetically-oriented follower: "In which year it was I do not recall, but I, too, began to be lured by the wind like a fragmentary cloud and have since been unable to resist wanderlust, roaming out to the seashores" (Sato 50). The *wanderlust* and the practice of roaming along the seashores are two features that characterise Bashō's and White's writing. It is even more vivid when one studies White's travels in Japan where he literally follows in his master's footsteps (see Kocot 2020a).

Let us contrast Bashō's travelogue with a passage from White's waybook *Pilgrim of the Void*, where we are introduced to his philosophy of travelling. From the very beginning we can see how much White relies on Buddhist sources, in this particular case on the teaching of the Chinese Ch'an master Hsuan-chuen, the Dharma Successor of Hui-Neng (the Sixth Patriarch). I am quoting a longer passage so that we can notice the way White interweaves Taoist and Buddhist references:

So a book of travels? Yes, no doubt – but more, a book concerning a certain (and uncertain) way of being in the world. Hsuan-chuen gives a pleasant description of the tao-jen, the-man-on-the-way:

Take a look at that easy going fellow, out on the way
 Who has given up all striving
 Neither avoiding the false nor seeking the true
 For ignorance after all is really enlightenment
 And this changing body is the body of deep reality

It looks like there may be something beyond the strict categories of true and false, something beyond the heavy notions of spiritual and material – maybe a space in which these notions and categories are no longer seen as contradictory. Maybe the girl I saw was the body of the Dharma, maybe she was just a figment of my excited imagination. Who can say? Maybe the thing is, not to ask yourself so many questions, but to get out on the road, the life-road, and live it, taking it all as it comes, the up and the down, the sordid and the marvellous, the tough and the gentle. When the monk asked the master: "What is Tao?," the answer came like a shot: "Go!" Wherever we go, we're going home. (1992b, 14–15)

In a slightly rhizomatic fashion White talks of his travelogue as a book concerning a very peculiar way of being in the world. He quotes Hsuan-chuen's *Cheng-Tao-Ko*, also known as *Shodoka* or *Song of Enlightenment*, a text of seminal importance to Ch'an, Zen and Taoism, and he stresses the importance of a spontaneous way of acting, embracing the life-road as it is, without any projections and prejudices. The Tao, the Way, is understood here as a dynamic process where the traveller is open to what s/he encounters on the road, because s/he knows (at heart) that, to quote Bashō, "his/her very home is the open road" (qtd. in White 2004, 109; see Kocot 2020a). As Omar Bsaithi aptly notes, when going through White's waybook

the reader “must not expect a linear narration of exciting adventures or a simple description of exotic locations, but rather an exploration of different *mindscapes*, different manners of looking at the world, which, of course, does not exclude the physical dimension of the journey” (Bsaithi 74; see Kocot 2020a). One could not agree more. As we will see, sometimes the travel is all about not travelling at all.

3. The Practice of Writing-Travelling and Travelling-Seeing

In a collection of interviews titled *Coast to Coast*, we find an interview with Matthew Graves who asks White about the relationship between his writing and travel, and this is how White responds:

From the very beginning, writing, for me, went with walking. That was on the moors, or along the shores, of a village on the west coast of Scotland. And it meant going forward in an unscribed space, noting everything that sprang into the mind: signs of growth and passage, such as the lines on the bark of a tree, or the tracks of animals and birds. Walking was a way of getting rid of the weight of society, and at the same time a way of opening my senses [...]. Afterwards came thought-patterns, and roads of culture. Moving about meant leaving narrow frameworks, congested areas, and entering a territory. It meant accumulating details, while maintaining a sense of movement, and the approach to an emptiness, a silence, a poem. (1996, 32)

White makes it explicitly clear that for him writing “goes” with walking. In other words writing is inextricably linked with walking with no particular aim or direction in mind. I’m using the phrase “in mind,” as in White’s writing walking is often referred to as a walking meditation, as a practice of mindfulness. At the same time one cannot help noticing the similarity between the message of this quote and the passage on drifting quoted at the beginning of this article. Perhaps “drifting” might mean both aimless walking, wandering, and the practice of mindfulness?

The emptiness and silence White mentions in this passage are often associated with the process of “spacing out.” We can see that for instance in the poem titled “Coastline” where White shares his views on writing poetry:

Write poetry?

rather follow the coast
fragment after fragment

going forward

breathing

spacing it out (1990a, 55)

It is important to note the spacing between the lines and the emphasis put on “following the coast,” on “going forward,” but also on breathing and the process of ordering, arranging (the coast by going forward and breathing?). One could argue that for White the process of spacing oneself out and the activity of spacing something out do not have to exclude each other. The way I see it, this is what makes this process so intriguing from the cognitive point of view. By letting go, becoming detached but focused on studying the details of the (natural) surroundings, the speaker is slowly entering the “nowhere.” And this is precisely where the dynamics of emptiness or whiteness begin to operate.

It is even more explicit in his poem “White Valley.” We find the poem in the second book of White’s *Open World* collection. The book is entitled *In the Backlands* and it is preceded by an introduction where White stresses the importance of Alba, the Scottish Gaelic name for Scotland, which also means “white” or “bright.” It is one of many instances in White’s writing where the issues of Scottishness and whiteness become interwoven with the theme of emptiness, silences, and spiritual investigations: “Going back into the silences. Gathering cold elements. Alban investigations, white world. At the tentative limits. No metaphysical solemnity, no encumbering religiosity. A great emptiness – broken now and then by exclamations, like the cry of a Laughing Gull” (2003, 43). “White Valley” begins with images of emptiness, the experience of which is essential to the process of freeing one’s mind; this time “breathing” refers not only to the act of breathing as such but more importantly to the act of letting go which might open the space of self-realisation (which again is associated here with experiencing oneness of self and the universe):

Not much to be seen in this valley
 a few lines, a lot of whiteness
 we’re at the end of the world, or at its beginning
 maybe the quaternary ice has just withdrawn

as yet
 no life, no living noise
 not even a bird, not even a hare
 nothing
 but the wailing of the wind

yet the mind moves here with ease
 advances into emptiness

breathes

and line after line
 something like a universe
 lays itself out (2003, 52; original emphasis)

The whiteness of the scene, its phenomenal emptiness, with only a few contours (lines), brings to mind classical Japanese and Chinese ink on paper landscapes where the invisible (hidden) is more important than the visible (present). The viewer/the reader is gently introduced to the space of voidness and silence; we learn that the mind moves here with ease, precisely because of the immensity of this empty space. The mind “breathes,” it does not feed on hundreds of stimuli like a typical “monkey” mind; it is calm, and that is what initiates a peculiar process: “line after line / something like a universe / lays itself out,” in other words the universe slowly, sequentially appears out of nothing as it were. White’s obsession with voidness and whiteness and their relation with non-dualistic “finer world-living” (1992a, 167) and the process of self-discovery or self-realisation is of utmost importance here.

Brown and Nicholson aptly note that White’s “world-ranging fields of energy and sometimes arcane philosophical investigations repeatedly ground themselves in Scottish specificities” (268). The importance of Scottish roots, Celtic roots to be precise, is emphasised in one of the chapters of *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* where White dwells on the theme of Scotus Vagans, the Wandering Scot. For White, the motif testifies to a long history of travelling, or passion for travelling, for going beyond established geographical and cultural borders (see Kocot 2020b). At the same time, he stresses the idea of a mental journey. This link will be made even more explicit in the passage on Taoist travelling. When addressing his practice of wandering, he immediately combines it with moving beyond a historical and geographical context (out of MacNies, Camerons, MacKenzies, MacGregors), and entering “the white,” the space of breathing, the space of meditation in motion:

Scot. I like the etymology of that word as “wanderer.” Yes, that’s it. The extravagant (*extra vagans*: wandering outside) Scot. *Scotus vagans*. Wandering, more or less obscurely, in accordance with a fundamental orientation. Which brings us (going hither and thither, but you get there in the end) to the Orient. I no longer remember when that seed of the East got planted in me, but the soil was ready and it took root, naturally, unobtrusively, without straining or excessive flourish. It went along with that urge, always present, not to be embedded in history, but to work a way out of it. Out of MacNies and Camerons and Mackenzies and MacGregors – the white. A kind of transpersonal thing. A breathing space, a cool area. *Kenshō jobutsu*. Seeing into your own nature is becoming Buddha. But what is Buddha? Seeing into your own nature, *entendu*. Listen to that curlew out there. (1990b, 133)

As I have mentioned, some of White’s books or essays published in French have not been translated. Here is a short quote from an essay titled “Petit Album Nomade” in which White dwells on the philosophy of his transcendental travelogues and the way his travels (*voyages*) relate to two words in French which sound almost like homophones: *voie* (life-way) and *voir* (seeing):

Dans une série de livres, *La figure du dehors*, *Une apocalypse tranquille*, *L'esprit nomade*, j'ai essayé (il s'agit en effet d'essais, un genre explorateur) de dégager l'espace de cette littérature-là et de dresser la généalogie d'une sorte de récit de voyage d'un type nouveau, qui pourra bien sûr prendre plusieurs formes, adopter plusieurs tonalités, selon la personnalité des écrivains. En anglais, je l'ai appelé *waybook*, en allemand *Wegbuch*, et en français, faute de la possibilité d'un terme aussi court: *voyage-voyance*. Dans tous ces termes, en plus de la notion de voyage, il y a la notion de voie (ligne de vie) et de voir (percevoir un autre espace, ouvrir d'autres dimensions). S'il n'y a pas cet autre espace, cette autre dimension, on ne sort pas de l'"universel reportage" que stigmatisait déjà Mallarmé. (1999, 180)

In a series of books, *La figure du dehors*, *Une apocalypse tranquille*, *L'esprit nomade*, I tried (these are indeed essays [attempts], an exploratory genre) to clear the space of that literature and to constitute a genealogy of a kind of travel narrative belonging to a new type, which can of course take several forms, assume several tones, according to the personality of the writers. In English, I called it *waybook*, in German *Wegbuch*, and in French, for lack of a similarly short term: *voyage-voyance*. In all these terms, in addition to the notion of travel, there is the notion of a path (the life line) and of seeing (perceiving another space, opening other dimensions). If this other space, other dimension, is not there, one does not escape the "universal reporting" that was stigmatized already by Mallarmé. (1999, 180; trans. Justyna Fruzińska)

We read that the genre is called *Wegbuch* in German, *waybook* in English, but the name in French says much more than the one in German and English. In French it is called *voyage-voyance*, which Mohammed Hashas translates as travel and vision that cannot exist without each other (49). In the passage we are looking at, White associates the notion of the way (*voie*) with the line of life (*ligne de vie*) and with seeing (perceiving that other space, opening other dimensions) (see Kocot 2020a). Without the element of vision and seeing, we are not talking about the waybook but about the "universal reporting." Hashas aptly notices that for White, travel (*voyage*) should be both mental and physical "so that the mindscape will correspond to the landscape, and vice versa, which will in turn be expressed in a particular wordscape that is fraught with whiteness and desire for the white world" (49; see Kocot 2020a). We will come back to the theme of whiteness in a moment.

In *L'Ermitage Des Brumes: Occident, Orient et au-Delà* White adds that waybooks are not only travel accounts but first and foremost books of the way (*livre de la voie*), and the most important thing is spiritual affirmation of the new, opening our eyes to the unknown (see Kocot 2020a):

Tout en traversant des territoires, à l'horizontale, si je puis dire, ces livres cherchent à découvrir des chemins de culture occultés par l'histoire, des pistes de pensée (un lieu, un moment, peut-être l'occasion, non d'une vague réflexion, mais d'une percée de l'esprit), et des sentiers du sentir, où jaillissent les sensations les plus fraîches

possibles: “à chaque pas le vent pur,” comme dit le koan zen. Sous le voyage, il y a toujours la voie (*waybook* – livre de la voie, non seulement livre de voyage) – mais d’une manière discrète. (2005, 79)

While traversing territories, horizontally, if I may say so, these books try to discover cultural paths overshadowed by history, ways of thought (a place, a moment, perhaps an opportunity, not for a vague reflection but a turning point of the spirit), and pathways of feeling, where the freshest possible sensations appear: “each step pure wind,” as the zenkoan says. Within the journey [voyage], there is always the way [voie] (*waybook* – a book of the way, not only a travel book) – but in a discreet way” (2005, 79; trans. Justyna Fruzińska).

In the passage from *Le poète cosmographe*, we read that for White travelling (*voyage*) should be accompanied with *voyance*, with knowing how to look in order to see (*savoir voir*), with mindful being in the world, and with constant movement (see Kocot 2020a): “Il y a beaucoup de choses à découvrir, à partir du moindre signe, sur la culture picte, la culture celte, la vie des Vikings [...]. Pour cela, bien sûr, il faut être sur le qui-vive. Voyager, pour moi, c’est bouger, certes, et j’aime le mouvement, mais c’est aussi savoir voir. C’est pour cela que je parle de voyages-voyances” (1987, 53). [“There are many things to discover, starting with the slightest sign, about Pict culture, Celtic culture, the life of the Vikings [...]. For that, of course, one needs to be on the alert. Traveling for me is about moving, of course, and I like movement, but it’s also about knowing how to see. That’s why I’m talking about sites-sights [voyages-voyances]” (1987, 53; trans. Justyna Fruzińska)].

Hashas aptly observes that if the *voyage* is to be accompanied with *voyance* (*savoir voir*) and with movement, then the term *voyage-voyance* can be approximately synonymous with “intellectual nomadism,” the term often used by White, especially in his book *L’esprit nomade*, devoted almost entirely to the philosophy of intellectual nomadism. Interestingly, he takes the term from Emerson who describes intellectual nomadism as “the faculty of seeing far in all directions” (2004, 8). In *The Wanderer and His Charts*, White writes that for Emerson “the house of the intellectual nomad is a chariot in which, like a Kalmuk (a member of a Buddhist Mongol people), he will traverse all latitudes, never forgetting his ‘inner law’” (8). This Emersonian image stuck in White’s mind to such an extent that texts from Mongolia and adjacent territories were to constitute a significant section of his library, including an album of documents printed in 1985: images of gateways and roads, together with manuscripts in six languages (Sanskrit, Prakrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Mongol and Uigur) (2004, 8).

Characteristically, *voyage-voyance* and intellectual nomadism are often associated in White’s writing with “drifting” and with a strong desire to reach “nowhere.” We find passages of this kind in the second part of *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, tellingly entitled “The Gates,” which opens with an epigraph from *Mumonkan*, a collection of Japanese koans: “The great path has no gates /

When you go through the gateless gate / You walk freely between heaven and earth." This quote clearly signals White's preoccupation with gates leading to "an other ground: a space of being, an area of the mind" (1990b, 7). Here is how he discusses his aimless aim in the chapter written in Brittany: "Travelling this way, where am I going? – nowhere. I pass through many places of the mind – to get nowhere. Nowhere is difficult, but I'll get there some day. [...] Nowhere is anywhere, is mywhere" (1990b, 68). But the passage I find most intriguing in terms of philosophical investigations and cross-cultural inspirations is the one written in Marseilles. Interestingly, the passage is almost entirely quoted from *The Book of Lieh-tzu* (also known as *True Classic of Simplicity and Vacuity* or *Classic of the Perfect Emptiness*), one of the major Taoist works, compared to the poetic narrative of Lao-tzu and the philosophical writings of Tchuang-tzu. Let us have a look at the quote and see how the motif of drifting takes on a new meaning when seen in relation to the Tao of travelling:

In the beginning Lieh Tzu was fond of travelling. The adept Hu-ch'iu Tzu said to him: "I hear you're fond of travelling. What is it in travelling that pleases you?"

"For me," said Lieh Tzu, "the pleasure of travelling consists in the appreciation of variety. When most people travel, they merely contemplate what is before their eyes. When I travel, I contemplate the processes of mutability."

"I wonder," said Hu-ch'iu Tzu, "whether your travels are not very much the same as other people's, despite the fact that you think them so different. Whenever people look at anything, they are necessarily looking at processes of change, and one may well appreciate the mutability of outside things, while wholly unaware of one's own mutability. Those who take infinite trouble about external travels, have no idea how to set about the sight-seeing that can be done within. The traveller abroad is dependent upon outside things. He whose sight-seeing is inward, can find all he needs in himself. Such is the highest form of travelling, while it is a poor sort of journey that is dependent upon outside things."

After this, Lieh Tzu never went anywhere at all, aware that till now he had not really known what travelling means. (1990b, 145–146)

Here White finishes the quote and offers his comment on the relation between the story and his practice of travelling and search of a no-place:

I suppose I'm still at the stage of "going places" – yet this going from place to place always leads me, sooner or later, to a no-place. It's the no-place that fundamentally attracts me. Whether or not it is possible to settle there is [...] what remains to be seen.

But even then, even if I really get to the no-place, that won't mean the end of drifting. As the Ch'an master O Hu says: "Do not say that only those who have clearly realised the self are forced to drift about. Even those who have clearly realised it continue to drift." They continue to drift, just as they continue to eat rice. Otherwise they would be imprisoning or corpsifying the living truth. You've got to remain in the current. (1990b, 146)

Quite surprisingly, White suggests that his travelling resembles the practice of “drifting” in Ch’an master O Hu’s story. It is important to note that this post-enlightenment kind of “drifting” has nothing to do with simple wandering, moving with the current, or searching for an other ground; on the contrary, master O Hu speaks of “drifting” which comes as a result of the advanced practice of mindful living (Yü 212). It would be interesting to note that in the latter part of his teaching, obviously not quoted by White, master O Hu elaborates on “drifting” and admonishes his interlocutor against speaking about this kind of “drifting” by saying that it is like “a cangue round the neck and fetters on the legs” (Yü 212).

4. Conclusion

In White’s writing, be it poetry or prose, epigraphs or, as in this case, longer quotations, they set the scene for reflection on the nature of things, or open the space of dialogue with seemingly distant texts. It is important to study how White uses these quotations, and how he often omits a significant part of the text he quotes in order to direct the readers’ attention to what he deems crucial. This is what happens in the story in question. Here is the ending of Lieh Tzu’s story on travelling; in my view, it offers a significant but latent context to White’s meditations on travelling. Seeing that Lieh Tzu stopped travelling, Hu-ch’iu Tzu tells him what real travel is all about:

Travel is such a wonderful experience! Especially when you forget you are travelling. Then you will enjoy whatever you see and do. Those who look into themselves when they travel will not think about what they see. In fact, there is no distinction between the viewer and the seen. You experience everything with the totality of yourself, so that every blade of grass, every mountain, every lake is alive and is a part of you. When there is no division between you and what is other, this is the ultimate experience of travelling. (*Lieh-tzu: A Taoist Guide to Practical Living* 58)

The real journey does not happen outside of oneself; on the contrary, it happens within, and when this type of journey takes place the “other ground,” the “no-place that fundamentally attracts” White imperceptibly emerges within. This oneness of the self (Self?) and the (natural) world is inextricably linked with the process of self-realisation. White speaks of this process in many of his poems, but I would like to come back to his “White Valley” which concludes with the emphasis on a discrete and secret process of self-realisation which takes place in solitude:

without doing much naming
without breaking the immensity of the silence
discretely, secretly
someone is saying

here I am, here
I begin. (2003, 52)

In *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (the chapter written in Scotland's North) White's Tao of emptiness is presented in a similar fashion. The speaker is accompanied only by birds, and he is sinking deep into the state of "no-who-where," transcending the limits of self-identity and place (see Kocot 2020b):

To travel north is to travel into the mind. I suppose the same might be said for the south, the east, and the west (any "pure direction," as it were), but I'm not sure if the north, with maybe the east, isn't privileged. As you go north, the landscape becomes more naked, points of interest become rarer. The self becomes spaced-out. That blue-grey silence among the reeds of the stream – a heron! Wind scouring the sands, and a grey gull struggling to make headway. Little black lochans full of water lilies. Spaced-out, and lost in the high open joyance. (1990b, 143–144)

Marco Fazzini observes that ever since White published his reflections on the "intellectual nomad" (in his *L'Esprit nomade*) "he has given this figure the power to transform his exile into a soul-searching investigation through meditation" (2009, 118). For Fazzini, White's aim is to "attain a heightened illumination where emptiness ('blankness') and 'whiteness' are reconciled through their etymologies" (2009, 118). I would only add that in the process of "drifting" – which can be understood as intellectual nomadism, *voyage-voyance*, and even the practice of mindfulness – White seeks to (re-)discover this other ground: "a space of being, an area of the mind" he mentions in his *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*. And just as the dawn is drifting, those white epiphanies he experiences and silent hierophanies he witnesses bring him closer to the suchness of things. It might be argued, however, that writing about those experiences is so challenging for White that at times, instead of post-enlightenment internal "drifting" he refers to by quoting Ch'an master O Hu (and Hsuan-chuen with his *Song of Enlightenment*), he offers narratives of postmodern intertextual "drifting." White seems to be obsessed with finding his way, or the Way. He says: "I'm not out to cover kilometres, or to reach a particular place, I'm out for a kind of spatial poetics, with emptiness at its centre. And you begin again, for the pleasure, to get at an even finer sense of emptiness-plenitude" (1996, 37). He collects stories and quotes that take him places both in the sense of physical journeys or mental journeys (intellectual nomadism). Both types of travelling bring him images and sensations which in turn become the backbone of his travelogues and poems. It has been quite some time since White produced his last travelogue. I wonder what the next one will be like. Perhaps it will be much more minimalistic, similar to Bashō's later *haibun*?

Notes

- 1 The theory of geopoetics and its links with the motif of open world poetics and intellectual nomadism have been the subject of a number of books and articles. I will only mention a few, focusing on those written in French: Duclos 2006, Delbard 1999, Margatin 2006, Roncato 2014, Bowd et al. 2005. In my view it is easier to discuss White's writing in French as the majority of his waybooks, poems, and (theoretical) essays are originally in French; sadly, some idiosyncratic aspects of White's writing disappear in English translation. Two highly comprehensive studies of White's *oeuvre* in English are Tony McManus's *The Radical Field* and a collection, *Grounding a World: Essays on the Work of Kenneth White* edited by Gavin Bowd, Charles Forsdick and Norman Bissell. In French, Michèle Duclos's *Kenneth White nomade intellectuel, poète du monde* and a collection of articles, *Le Monde ouvert de Kenneth White*, remain important points of reference. Olivier Delbard's *Les Lieux de Kenneth White* and especially his PhD thesis on poetics of space in Kenneth White's and Gary Snyder's writing offer fresh comparative perspectives on White's literary and cultural practice. Unfortunately, the scope of this article does not allow me to develop my views on White's reception in francophone and anglophone environments. The list of publications on White's *oeuvre* in French can be found at: http://www.kennethwhite.org/oeuvres/index.php?rub=fr&srub=sur_kw&tag=1561495427, whereas publications in English are listed at: <http://www.kennethwhite.org/oeuvres/index.php?rub=en&srub=narrative&tag=1570560061>. <http://www.kennethwhite.org/oeuvres/index.php?rub=en&srub=interview&tag=1561495441>
- 2 *Hua Yen Sutra* (Sanskrit *The Avatamsaka Sutra*), is one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, rendered in English as *Flower Garland Sūtra*, *Flower Adornment Sūtra*, or *Flower Ornament Scripture*.

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