

Elements of geopoetics

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and
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Nb. The Open World Poetics group, started in 1989, has now formed into the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, still coordinated by Norrie Bissell,
See: www.geopoetics.org.uk

'As intelligence and language, thought and the signs of thought, are united by secret and indissoluble links, so in like manner, and almost without our being conscious of it, the external world and our ideas and feelings.'

(Humboldt, *Cosmos*)

1.

'IN each age of the world distinguished by high activity', says Whitehead in *Adventures of Ideas*, 'there will be found at its culmination, and among the agencies leading to that culmination, some profound cosmological outlook, implicitly accepted, impressing its own type upon the current spring of action.'

If we're willing to admit the hypothesis that there exist, in the present age, at least some fields of 'high activity', it may be interesting to see what 'cosmological thought' is in the air, giving its shape to our mental space.

In his studies on the spiritual crisis and revolution of the 17th century (*Galilean Studies, From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*), Koyré reduces the changes made at that time in the conception of the world to two main elements: the destruction of the notion of Cosmos and the geometrisation of space. This new cosmology set aside both the geocentric world of the Greeks (the original *kosmos*), and the anthropocentrically structured world of the Middle Ages, replacing them with the decentred world of modernity. The consequences of such a fundamental transformation were many, two of the main ones being the displacement of the mind from contemplation and teleological philosophy to the mechanistic mastery over nature, and the rise of modern subjectivity accompanied by a sense, more or less vague, of having somehow *lost the world*. The poet of the crisis is John Donne, a sharp and subtle mind, who declares: "Tis

all in pieces, all coherence gone, all just supply and all relation.' The typical writer of the new age, swimming sceptically in the waters of his (learned) ignorance, enjoying, despite everything, the divagations of his floating personality, is Montaigne.

2.

It's difficult to say exactly when modernity comes to an end, and when *something else* begins (by signs here and there), but a useful date is 1917, the year of Einstein's *Cosmological Considerations*. There you have a cosmology which is no longer modern, in the sense I've defined (that so many artists should still be floundering about in what they call 'modernity' is neither here nor there). And the notion of 'cosmos' returns:

'It appeared,' writes Jacques Merleau-Ponty in *Cosmology of the 20th Century*, 'that cosmological thought was again feasible, that the universe was susceptible to thinking, not only to dreaming, and that this thinking was grounded in the most general of physical theories. Astronomy and the Theory of Relativity brought back the desire for intellectual possession of nature, and brought to life again the Greek passion for cosmic contemplation.'

Let it be said in passing that the use of the word 'possession' in this text is a hangover from modernist vocabulary and that if cosmic contemplation was eminently practised by the Greeks, it was by no means restricted to them. Other contemplations, other types of space-poetics can attract and interest us today.

But what is certain is that, if this cosmology has not yet entered the mores (intellectual, existential, industrial), if the fairly simple consequences to be drawn from it are rarely made, it is this new cosmic thinking, what we might call perhaps a *cosmopoetics*, that informs and inspires certain areas of high activity in these times.

I've mentioned the year 1917, and a particularly significant formulation. But you can see it, at the intuitive stage, in Chateaubriand, when, in the *Mémoires*, he talks of a 'kind of confusion, or, if you like, a kind of undefinable unity.' You can see it in the anarcho-poetic thought, the 'chaotico-practical' thought (as Henri Birault says), of Nietzsche: 'You must bear within yourself a chaos in order to give birth to a dancing star.' It's present in, it presides over René Thom's 'theory of catastrophes' and Benoît Mandelbrot's 'fractal objects'. It is the theme of the book *Order in Chaos* by Bergé, Pomeau and Vidal. Likewise in the interviews of those (Hubert Reeves, Richard Schaeffer, Pierre Fayet ...) who took part in the colloquium 'Scientific perspectives' of 1985, interviews collected under the title *Chaos and Cosmos*.

And an aesthetic illustration is provided of it in Theodor Schwenk's *Sensitive Chaos*,

Manuel de Diéguez (*Science and Nescience*) speaks of a 'cosmology of energy'. Given the mobility of this cosmos, and the disparity, the diversity of its localisations, given also the frequency of the word 'chaos' in the above-mentioned titles, I feel justified in using neologisms like *chaosmos* for the cosmological entity, and *chaoticism* for the notion of order in disorder, disorder in order.

What we're concerned with is a new world-sensation.

3.

It's this *sensation* that it's important to get across today. That means more than piling up information about hot stars and cold stars, hyperdense stars and rarefied stars, variable stars and cosmic clouds, plasmas, nebulae, it means becoming aware of the expansion and the singularisation of our universe-multiverse, it means a sensation of immensity and incommensurability (without Pascalian panic), it means a sense of relativity and topology. It means, globally, a heightened sensitivity towards the environment in which we try to live.

In a society which is betting everything on quantitative information, it will be necessary to stress the importance of qualitative information and, farther, the notion of *exformation*: direct contact with the outside, the acquiring of a non-panic sense of dispersion, disaggregation, dissolution.

This will mean moving out of a certain scientific terrorism that has long prevailed and re-discovering something like what used to be called natural philosophy, as well as something we might call cosmo-aesthetics. We should, for example, be able to talk of 'space' without specifying and formulating what mathematical approach we are using. These mathematical lines, these angles, exist, others, many others, might *also* exist, but beyond them all, is ... space, that can be apprehended and appreciated. Annoyed by colleagues that had never anything else in their mouths but mathematical formulae, Niels Bohr ended up by declaring that space is blue and that birds fly in it.

4.

'It'll take many years of patient teaching in a thousand open-air schools ...', said Harry Martinson, in his *Aimless Travels*, referring to initiation into the new space-field.

Let's look at some elements of what we might call *planetary pedagogy*.

It's been said, and it had to be said (Korzybski was the first), that the map is not the territory. But if you want an initial and initiating sense of the world, what's better than a map? Who doesn't remember the first maps he saw as a child? Robert Louis Stevenson found it hard to believe that anybody could fail to be interested in maps. So do I.

If maps provide information as to the shape of the earth, the absolute beauty of some of them can go so far as to *illuminate the mind*. I'm thinking, in no particular order, of the magnificent *Çurat-al-Ard* (image of the world) by Muh'ammad Ibn Mûsâ al-Khuwârizmî, of a certain Spanish map of the coast of California and the Gran Apacheria, of Kuwagata Keisai's *Nihon Ezu* (Japan like a dragon coiled in a green dawn ...), of a Chinese map of the Yellow River, of a Dutch map of the Gulf of Gascony, which is the Bay of Biscay (*De Spaensche Zee*) by Lucas Jansz Waghenauer ... And from the maps themselves, I go to the map-makers and the travellers: those who worked in the House of Wisdom, at Baghdad, in the 8th century; Muquddasî (10th century) who went about questioning old sailors (they'd draw on the sands the coasts they knew around Arabia – gulfs, creeks, capes) and who then drew up his map, tracing 'itineraries in red, sand in yellow, the sea in green, rivers in blue, and mountains in grey'. Then there was Ibn Bat't'it'a, who worked at Idrîsî's map-shop in Corsica. And the *Casa da India* in Lisbon, the *Casa de Contratacion* in Sevilla, the Map School in Dieppe, all working feverishly after the Portuguese, those 'geographers with the wind in their sails' as Lucien Febvre called them, had launched out into the Atlantic from Cape Sagres ... And then finally there are the texts: Marcian of Heraclea's *Periplus of the Outward Sea*, Denys's the Periegetic *Oecumenian Periegesis*, the *Stadiosmos of the Great Sea* ('there's a rock fifteen stadiums from land, a high rock, like a falcon'), Gautier of Metz's *Image of the World* ('a philosopher once there was / who travelled many earths and lands / looking for knowledge everywhere / and on many a good book put his hands'...). And there are even individual phrases, just simple phrases, that are enough to set the scalp tingling, for example this one, from the Saintonge pilot, Jean Alfonse: 'I have sailed over all the seas over eight and forty years, and I've had space to see a lot of experiences (*j'ay eu espace d'avoir veu beaucoup d'expériences ...*). He had space. To 'have space', isn't that a pre-requisite for any kind of decent living?

5.

It will be said perhaps at this point, either in a tone of lamentation or with a cynical snigger, that there is less and less of space, and that this sense-of-space I have been evoking, this earth-discovery, is a thing of the past. Our space, our earth-space, has been filled up, cemented up, and it will be more filled up, more cemented up, with every passing decade.

In this physical and mental context, there are two principal attitudes adopted more or less consciously: get what fun you can in the noisy, crowded circus, or at least try to convince yourself you're getting fun. Or else bet on some other kind of living in interstellar space. I can't share either of these attitudes. While being well aware of the process of filling-up and cementing-up, I say, let's start slowing down this process, let's try and work out other tactics. I'm aware of cosmic space, I like contemplating the starry heavens, but I don't fancy living on the moon, and I'd hate to have the space between me and it full of bip-bip-bipping. Living on the earth, with a cosmic sense, but *living on the earth*. I like this place, I love this place. I don't think we know it yet. I think if we evolved a bit more, we'd know better, we'd love better. It's that evolution that interests me. Towards a finer earth-living.

In *A Grammar for the Living*, David Cooper asks if, given all the encumbrances of our world, given the opaque screen of conditioning everywhere, so that no light ever penetrates, is it worthwhile continuing to live at all? It's a question more and more people will ask – unless, of course, thinking and feeling also become obsolete practices. Less existentially, less suicidally than Cooper, in *Naked Man*, Claude Lévi-Strauss protests against the exclusive attention paid to Man in our civilisation. Man, he says, is 'this unbearably spoilt child who has been too long on the scene, preventing all serious work.'

Where find a little disencumbered space? Where, far from invading cacophony, find a *locus* of serious work? How to effect in one's-self a disengagement and an expansion?

That is for the individual, it will be said.

Yes, these are immediate tactics, for the individual – and for the production of a language, a grammar that may have an influence on the general. Politics will also, eventually, have something to do with the process. But politics itself needs a concept of living, a grounding, and that only the single, complex living intelligence can provide.

And try to spread, by example, by teaching, by propagation.

6.

A few years ago, Fernand Deligny left for the mountains of the Cévennes with a group of psychotic children. What he wanted for those children, as a therapeutic, was 'a livable environment', so he settled with them 'in the waves and among the eroded rocks of the hercynian chain'. There, 'in linguistic vacancy', they follow out 'lines of errancy' (*lignes d'erre*), work out a system of co-ordinates between themselves and the landscape, gradually establish a network. Along with the errancy in the territory goes the drawing-up of maps, which Deligny considers not as 'instruments of observation', but as 'instruments of evacuation': evacuation of anxiety, evacuation of false language. But if this cartography is an evacuation process, out of it, at the same time, rises a new topology, a topology of places called, with terms invented for the occasion: 'tangle points', 'black blooms' 'white prints'.

Deligny comes to the conclusion that what was happening there, without there ever having been any precise aim, any prescribed methodology, is the resurrection of 'ancient harmonies'.

It may be said (while following out, and tracing out, my subjectivities, convinced that what is important is no fixed objective, but the subjectivity that *opens most space*, I am also trying to answer objections), it may be said that what is good, perhaps, for psychotic children, has no relevance to the life of normal adults. But who can define what is normal, and who can claim to be so? Are not those autistic children, lacking in 'livable space' and with no adequate language, the revealed image of modern humanity? Isn't schizophrenia, of some degree, one of the marks of our civilisation? Showing a hiatus between our minds, our inmost needs, and that civilisation?

After criticising the modern-traditional attitudes to schizophrenia in *The Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *The Thousand Plateaux*, propose a schizo-analysis: 'Over against psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytic know-how, which clamps every desire, every statement on to a genetic axis or a super-codifying structure, schizo-analysis refuses every kind of reproduced fatality, whatever name be given it: divine, anagogical, historical, economic, structural, hereditary or syntagmatic.' To the psychoanalyst's couch, where everything gets reduced to the dimensions of a family photo, the schizo-analyst prefers an open-air walk: 'The schizophrenic's walk is a better model than the neurotic lying out on a couch. Let's have a little open air, some kind of relationship to the outside.' The new self that gradually emerges from such perambulations and peregrinations is 'a strange subject, with no fixed identity', which

'moves along the rim of a circle whose centre has been deserted.' From this ex-centric field, David Cooper, who shares the same aversion for psychoanalysis ('a lifebuoy jacket for the normal world'), takes a leap into ecstasy: 'By ex-stasy, I mean the fact of being outside one's «self» after passing through an *anoia* (loss of the normal subject) – a liberation from our conditioned «minds». Once *outside* you let things be, you let go («letting be» isn't a psychological context, it's an ontological one), and you retrieve a topological presence. The «I» which is no longer «myself» resides in spaces that are no longer mere places, mere localities, but in such a way that *particularity* is not lost – there is an «incarnation».'

It's this notion of 'topology of being' that we find in Heidegger. Beyond subject and object, the 'being' is thrown into an ex-static presence (a *Dasein*), in which he knows a 'tuning' (*Stimmung*) which isn't just an internal psychic event, but is a delivered way of being in the world. In Rainer Schürmann's reading of Heidegger (*The Principle of Anarchy*), identity, in this context, consists only in 'directive traits'.

By various routes, by various channels, a certain type of identity that has marked Western civilisation for centuries, is in the process of disappearing: 'The image of man is breaking up' – says the biophysician Henri Atlan in an essay 'Man as Open System', and he goes on, seeing in this disappearance no cause for lamentation, on the contrary: 'It's not because Man is being effaced "like a face made of sand at the edge of the tide", as Foucault says, that we have any cause to shed tears or bemoan our fate. This "Man" that is disappearing is not us, it's a fiction of the imagination which has played its part ... This man is being replaced by things, but we can recognize ourselves in those things, because they can speak to us ...'

Atlan evokes the possibility of a 'unified existence'. In his more highly idiosyncratic vocabulary, Heidegger speaks of 'the co-originary revelation of the world and of existence'. And in *The Anti-Oedipus* by Deleuze and Guattari, we find this: 'The day a human being will be able to behave like intentionless phenomena – that day, a new creature will proclaim the integrity of existence.'

To trace what I'd like to call the *biocosmographic* way from the conditioned self to open system, ex-static existence, is not easy (it is the purpose of these essays I write). To find live words with which to proclaim 'the integrity of existence' is not easy either (it is the purpose of poetics, in prose and in verse). At every turn, we come up against problems of language.

7.

Practically everything, in 'our' age, is against the possibility of a clear and powerful language, able to say a presence and a transparency.

'Unlike discourse', writes Henri Lefebvre in *Language and Society*, 'speech is initial and unique'. But today, we live under the dictatorship of discourse: political discourse, commercial discourse, journalistic discourse, edifying discourse' ... If you add to that the flood of insignificant images and the mass of mechanical noises that daily besiege the brain one readily understands that speech, far from being initial and initiating, far from being unique and unified, gives way to inane chatter and incoherent palaver.

In such a context, art will be considered all the more 'artistic' the more it is incoherent, inane, incomprehensible. Unless, in reaction to this state of affairs, and nostalgic for some past dignity, it takes refuge in some kind of over-refined rhetoric.

Finding a language that is at once open and effective, re-discovering one's 'expressive self' (Deleuze, in his book on Spinoza: 'Leibniz's *monad* and Spinoza's *mode* both mean the individual as expressive centre') implies a practice which will, for long, be isolated, clandestine and 'inhuman', a multiple and complex practice going beyond not only psychoanalysis and linguistics, but also 'philosophy' and 'poetry'.

In every grammar, there's a logic, and in every logic, there's a metaphysics. To renew a language takes more than verbal jugglery, all kinds of 'innovatory' permutations and combinations within a given system, it means moving right up (or, right down) to the level of metaphysics. This can be done in two ways: either by archaeological work on a language, or by an 'exotic' recourse to other languages with different metaphysics, different initial fictions.

Heidegger belongs principally to the first category:

'Our Western languages', he writes in *Identity and Difference*, 'are, each in its own way, languages of metaphysical thought. Is the essence of Western languages definitively impregnated with onto-theology? Or can those languages reveal other ways of speaking?'

Is it possible for a mind (Cooper, in his *Grammar for the Living*: 'Unlike certain tribes, we can't yet do without words such as "mind", "self", etc.'), to unlearn the grammar of dictatorial principles which have made the West – not in order to enclose oneself in an autism or in some neutral 'literary space', but in order to speak a language freed of principal structure, a language simpler, more direct, closer to the 'physics' of the universe?

I'm trying to talk about the physics of speech ...

Before looking for a primordial tongue, Heidegger establishes the primordially of language. Our consciences are full of notions, according to one of which man thinks and, then, 'dresses up' his thought in language. Heidegger reverses the process: for him, language doesn't 'dress up' thought, thought is rooted and develops in language. We leave the notion of a person thinking in his 'inner self' and who thereafter 'expresses' that self for the speech of a world. We leave the idea of a representation of the world for a presence in the world, which is the *Dasein* (literally, 'being there'). 'The *Dasein*' writes Heidegger in *Being and Time*, 'doesn't emerge from some inner sphere, its primordial way of being means being always outside.'

To this primordial way of being corresponds a primordial way of speaking which the West no longer knows: 'Once, at the beginning of Western thought', we read in the volume *Essays and Lectures*, 'the essence of language flashed like a stroke of lightning in the space of being.'

It might be said that for Heidegger, ancient Greek is a pre-text that permits him to get closer to a primal world-text, but his obsessive archaeology (his etymologising), and his obsession of a 'poem of being' irritates more mobile minds, such as that of Gaston Bachelard:

'Metaphysics', he writes in *The Poetics of Space*, 'has nothing to gain from pouring its thought into fossil linguistic moulds. It should make full use of the extreme mobility of modern languages, while however remaining true to the homogeneity of a mother-tongue, according to the habit of all real poets.'

As a refugee from science, Bachelard is more indulgent to poetry than is the philosopher (and, let it be said, many a poet). Where the philosopher is looking for being (and in most poetry would find only fantasy and psychology), the scientist, trying to rid himself of a reductive rationalism, is less radical and has pleasure in finding himself in an atmosphere of sensitive intimacy, replete with ambiguous complication and imaginative flights. Wary of any adamant notion of 'being there', Bachelard favours a kind of in-between-being that knows alternate movements of opening and closing:

'One should hesitate before talking, in French, of *being there*. Enclosed in being, one has to get out. Once out, one has to get back in. In being, you have circuits, tours and detours, courses and discourses, refrains of couplets without end ...'

Refrains of couplets without end ... To describe the poetry he likes, in which he feels at ease, Bachelard uses an expression that a mind poetically more demanding might use to designate the kind of poetry he can do without.

If Heidegger's studies concerning the poem of being can appear obsessional and logomachic, Bachelard's anthological commentaries

can seem altogether too facile. To find a satisfying poetry and poetics, it looks as if we might go beyond the purist radicality of the one and the poetical complacency of the other.

But are 'poetry' and 'poetics' still useful words for the work-field whose contours are beginning to emerge?

'Sometimes', says Cooper in *A Grammar for the Living*, 'a kind of poetry seems to be the most appropriate form of discourse.' Sometimes ... a kind of ... While Lefebvre, in *Language and Society*, has this: 'What we want is a *poïesis* or creative word', taking care to use the Greek word so as to differentiate what he envisages, what he would like to hear, from mere 'poetry'. He makes this even more clear when he mentions Nietzsche (a strong poetic figure), saying that in *Thus spake Zarathustra* we witness 'the upsurge of a Word which is out to be poietic and is only poetic.' The *poïesis* which is lacking in so much poetry is a 'poem-act that tries to appropriate the world.' In *The Principle of Anarchy* (sub-title: 'Heidegger and the question of action'), Reiner Schürmann comments on the famous phrase of Heidegger's in *The Experience of Thought*: 'That thought is poetry is something which has not yet been revealed. Where it manifests itself, this characteristic of thought evokes a utopia of poetic understanding. But the poem of thought is in truth the topology of being. It's topology of being that says the place where the poem can deploy its power.' Schürmann, like the others quoted, takes care to distinguish the German *Dichtung* from 'poetry': 'The «poietic» characteristic of presence is what Heidegger calls *Dichtung* (poetry) ... Needless to say, this has nothing to do with the art of composing verse, nor even with human language. The poietic nature of thought is only the echo of the poietic nature of presence.'

When he says all this has nothing to do with human language, Schürmann is exaggerating – Heidegger looked into the work of poets (some poets), and wrote poems himself. But most of the restrictions listed above can be taken. What we are trying to delineate is a field of presence and activity which has poietic characteristics, but which has little in common with what is habitually known as 'poetry'.

8.

Around the end of 1978, I began talking about 'geopoetics'. It seemed a good word for what, vaguely enough at the beginning, I felt I was 'into' and 'after'. It has something to do with geography, certainly – maybe a new type of geography. That I'd felt when, in the Ardèche, I'd read Henri Pourrat's *Vent de Mars* (The Wind of March) which contains this fine page on geography: 'Geography, as we now see it,

draws itself up to its full height in the sun, with the wind blowing though its hair, a little farther forward than geology and history. It is geology and history, it's even a kind of novel, but in a more serious way. It is the great investigation of man in action, action allied to the Creation, from the grain of wheat to the amazing nebula.' It had geography behind it, as well as cosmology and philosophy such as I've outlined in the previous pages. But while the concept was growing in my mind, like a coral reef, I was also looking for actual writing. Working at it mainly in my own writing, but also searching for hints, directions, maybe at times corroborations in other writers scattered over space and time. Of that quotation from Henri Pourrat, I said it was a fine page. So it is. It's in the right space, if I may say – but it's all too metaphorical, anthropocentric, humanist, theological. I wanted something else.

I took up my Whitman again, the first poet who had ever really meant anything to me, and I looked through the *Leaves of Grass* for signs of geopoetics. I found them. Take, for example, these lines written (1881) in Platte Cañon, Colorado:

*Spirit that form'd this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit – we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own:
Was't charged against my chants they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicatessen?
The lyrist's measur'd beat, the wrought-out temple's grace –
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou that revelest here – spirit that form'd this scene,
They have remember'd thee.*

There you have almost pure geopoetics. I say 'almost pure', for that 'spirit' is probably too much, but it hardly matters. What matters is what's there, it's in it – in those rock-piles – that the poetics lie. It is another art. Still continuing my whitmaniac investigations, in those *Notes and Fragments* brought together by Richard Bucke and published in Canada (for private distribution) in 1899, I came across this curious cosmopoetic meditation which Whitman recommends, and which he must, I imagine, have to some extent practised.

'To you. First of all prepare for study by the following self-teaching exercises. Abstract yourself from this book: realise where you are at present located, the point you stand on that is now to you the centre of all. Look up overhead, think of space stretching out, think of all

the unnumbered orbs wheeling safely there, invisible to us by day, some visible by night; think of the sun around which the earth revolves; the moon revolving round the earth, and accompanying it; think of the different planets belonging to our system. Spend some minutes faithfully in this exercise. Then again realize yourself upon the earth, at the particular point you now occupy. Which way stretches the north, and what country, seas etc.? Which way the south? Which way the east? Which way the west? Seize these firmly with your mind, pass freely over immense distances. Turn your face a moment thither. Fix definitely the direction and the idea of the distances of separate sections of your own country, also of England, the Mediterranean sea, Cape Horn, the North Pole and such like distinct places.'

And then, to cap it all, in the same book, I came across this note on style:

'Rules for composition – a perfectly transparent plate-glass style, artless, with no ornaments, or attempts at ornaments for their own sake ... Clearness, simplicity, no twistified or foggy sentences at all – the most translucid clearness without variation.'

I was beginning to feel quite excited. I felt that we were very definitely going places. There was a line that had not been seen, and that I was now able to trace, and maybe lead to completion.

In Victor Segalen's *Journal des Iles*, under the date 10th January 1905, I found the following note, which refers to Arthur Rimbaud:

'On the strength of the few documents that have come to light, I'm trying to imagine the nature of the *explorer* in him. Others have spoken of the poet. And might it ever be possible to reconcile those two beings, so distant the one from the other? Or maybe those two sides of the paradox can be subsumed into an ever higher unity that hasn't yet shown itself?'

Poetry, geography – and a higher unity: geopoetics ...

As is well enough known by this time, Arthur Rimbaud's last published text were geographic reports sent to the *Société de Géographie*. Here's part of a report he wrote on the Somali coast, about 1883:

'According to Sottaro, the central region of the country, Ogaden, whose average level is 2700 feet, is a vast stretch of steppe land: after the light rains prevalent in this area, it is a sea of tall grass interspersed, here and there, with stony fields ...'

One can well understand Rimbaud preferring a text such as this to so much 'poetry'. And this meeting in his movement of the poet and the geographer is certainly a sign of things to come. I remember seeing, in the Rimbaud museum at Charleville – and it was a moment of some emotion – the poet's travelling trunk, and in it two maps: one of Vienna, the other of Abyssinia, *Justus Perthus' Afrika, Sektion Abessinien* ... But it is not in Rimbaud that we can see realised that

'higher unity' Segalen speaks of. Rimbaud goes, without transition, without dialectics and without hesitation from an explosive transcendentalism to a positivistic professionalism, in a way that Spengler, who came to the same conclusions, would have approved: the 'knuckling down to business' seen as the only means of survival in an age of decline.

Segalen himself is in fact a better example, who left Europe first for Polynesia, then for China, and achieved that 'higher unity' when he travelled down the 'great river', the Yangtse-kiang, or when he approached the frontiers of Tibet ...

To come back to Europe, and to Spengler's analysis of the situation. According to Frobenius, if Spengler's analysis is unsatisfactory, short-sighted, unable to discover latent possibilities in what he peremptorily called 'decline', it was because he lacked what Frobenius called 'the cartographic method.' All he saw was the end of a history. The cultural cartography inaugurated by Frobenius remains to be developed, as well as the cultural programme he lays out at the end of *The Destiny of Civilisations*. It will be remembered that for Frobenius there have been four great cultural periods: the mythological, which flourished on the shores of the Pacific and Indian oceans, the religious, whose domain is Western Asia; the philosophical, which began in the Western Mediterranean before spreading throughout Europe; and the techno-economist, whose domain is the Atlantic, and which was initiated by French rationalism, English realism and North-American materialism. This age is now coming to its end, and the time has come to move towards and into another cultural space. Since a world economy is now, more or less, in place, this culture must be a world-culture, and it will have two main characteristics: on the one hand, it will mean the orchestration of all cultures, an original synthesis; and on the other, the ability to move away from the 'slavery of fact' to the 'liberty of the real', which means a disengaging of the mind from rationalism, realism and materialism, and an openness to direct apprehension.

A cartography and a programme such as this will be achieved by those whom Harry Martinson called, in his *Aimless Travels* (there again was confirmation of my own researches and movements) *superintellectual nomads*:

'In what unheard of intimacy of exchange does man live on earth! And how the earth breathes through him! My own travels have been too accidental, too much the movements of a will-o'-the-wisp, to provide anything more than chaotic impressions. But I know at least a bit about multiple life on earth.'

Rambling from harbour to harbour, Pierre MacOrlan practises what I'd call picturesque geopoetics. Blaise Cendrars' geopoetics are

more energetic, more projective, but the tough guy with the million-dollar deals tends to take over from the intellectual nomad. There are aspects of geopoetics also in Saint-John Perse, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, René Char, Charles Olson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Henri Michaux, and several others. But, after readings and re-readings, I dreamt of a Whitman free of naïve progressivism and less burdened with Spirit and Self: of a Saint-John Perse with less rhetoric; of a more extraverted Michaux; of a Pound out of history and ego; of a T. S. Eliot out of the wasteland without enclosing himself in religious structures; of a René Char less knotted; of a more coherent Olson; of a Rilke who's moved beyond the elegiac, etc., etc.

In short, as MacOrlan says in *The Little Bell of the Sorbonne*: 'Poetic geography is still in the making.'

9.

'Production as process cannot be contained in ideal categories', declare Deleuze and Guattari in the *Anti-Oedipus*. And in the *Thousand Plateaux* a whole sequence of phrases attempts to define a 'nomadic' type of writing; 'writing has nothing to do with meaning, but everything to do with serpentine movement and cartography'; 'a book has no object and no subject, it is made up of variously formed matters, written at different times, at different speeds; as you attribute a book to a subject, you're neglecting this work in matter and its exterior nature; you set up a Lord God in the place of geological movements'; 'writing will never be done enough in the name of the Outside – the Outside has no image, no meaning, no subjectivity'; 'establish relations in the heterogeneous'; 'to write, to produce a rhizome, to augment one's territory by deterritorialisation, to prolong the line of flight till it becomes an abstract machine extending over the whole plane of consistency'; 'to produce the most tortuous and the most abstract line, with *n* dimensions and broken directions' ...

This is exciting, and if a certain hypermodern feverishness may attach to it, in its haste to get out of what Nietzsche called 'corpse-books', this can be tempered through recourse to cultural spaces outwith the hypermodern West, where a similar kind of writing was practised, but without fever-heat. In the *Spirit of Tao*, Jean Grenier evokes 'the loose texture' of the Indian epic and, especially, 'the literary form adopted by the great taoists', which makes fun of heavy logic, moves rapidly through multiple spaces and mixes up all the genres. What I'm suggesting is that a passage through 'the exotic' (with no attachment to any exotic orthodoxy) might help the posthasteness of some would-be postmoderns not to fall over its own feet.

Then, there's the question of residence. For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Baudrillard, this is not a question: concerned with flight from constrictions, stifling enclosures, and with a line of flight anxious only to flee farther and farther, beyond all emplacement, into a dimensionless abstract, they are like men who leave a hôtel to hop into a jet. Heidegger is the opposite. He is much concerned with residence, dwelling, with quiet paths of thought around a well-felt place. Think of that house of his in the Black Forest.

Might it be possible to conceive of a 'great residence' that would reconcile movements and things, removing and remaining, stravaiging and staying?

That's what I think I see in the 20th chapter of the *Chuang-tzu*, where we hear of someone who 'can stretch out like a dragon and remain folded in himself like a snake.' And in Rinzai's text concerning the *real man without situation*: 'He's on the roads, yet he hasn't left the house. He's in the house, yet he hasn't left the road.'

10.

Very often, in my house on the Breton coast, I take a trip on a snow-boat.

I'm referring to the landscape-scroll painted by Sesshu (literally: snow-boat) in 1486. The original is about 17 metres long, but I read it in a reduced version put out by Tuttle of Tokyo.

I like that name 'Snow-boat'. According to the story, Sesshu got it when he left China, where, while buying up Chinese paintings for Japan, he had been engaged in various studies for the pursuit of his own work. When departure time came, so many people on the pier threw farewell poems on to his boat that it was as though 'covered in snow'. That's the story, but if Sesshu kept that name, I think it's because he had other things in mind. 'Snow-boat' – the word evokes one who moves at ease in a turmoil, one who is at home in a moving white space. Doesn't every artist, every writer with some sense of a high dimension, live in a snow-boat that sails among white flakes, I mean white sheets of paper, knowing one day he'll disappear into a white ocean silence? But let's come back to the actual scroll.

An inscription at the beginning states: 'This scroll was painted by old Toyo Sesshu, who once held the First Chair at the Tendo temple, one quiet day of his 67th year.'

It's difficult to believe that Sesshu really painted those 17 metres in one day. Maybe we should think of a 'great day', one of those lengths of concentrated work that last more than 12 or 24 hours.

The journey begins in Spring: abrupt rocks, trees clinging to a cliff, temples bathed in mist. On the road, a baggage-carrier and a

travelling monk. Between this scene and the next, a flood of misty whiteness. Then more trees, twisted, eccentric, useless for anything but being marvellously there. And another meditative monk, followed by his disciple or his servant. They're skirting a turbulent mountain-stream, maybe they're going to cross it. If anyone is tempted to speak of Zen, let him hold his tongue. We are travelling. Here's a harbour. Ah, the beautiful Summer morning: fine-lined boats (washing out to dry!), the undulation of the waves, and the open sea, white and empty. Over there beneath the willow, an inn where we can drink tea or sake together. And then we go back into the white space, till we come to steep cliffs and pine trees dancing on the edge of nothingness. A Chinese pagoda there. And then more rocks, trees, temples, and two people meeting on the road, and two others sitting in a roadside kiosk looking at the landscape. Emptiness again, then, for a few miles, a few days. And we plunge into Autumn: fantastic rocks, all kinds of foliage, and boats, but quieter now, less animated. We cross a bridge, alongside two monks and a baggage-carrier, see more rocks, more trees, more temples – and an inn, a popular inn where (a flag-advertisement proclaims it) they sell good wine. After which we go back into the solitude: misty forests and the first snows, the first of the great snows that will finally cover the entire landscape. It is Winter, it is silence, it is, at last, the Great Residence.

Ahhh ...

Kenneth White. Born in Glasgow, 1936. Raised on the west coast of Scotland. Studies in literature, languages and philosophy in Glasgow, Munich and Paris. After publishing his first books in London, settled in France in 1967 where most of his work (translated from English into French, and from there into other European languages) was published for about twenty years: largely acclaimed and winning some prestigious prizes. White returned to English language publishing in 1989. Since then, Mainstream (Edinburgh and London) have published *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (narrative), *The Bird Path* (Collected Longer Poems), *The Blue Road* (narrative) and *Handbook For The Diamond Country* (Collected Shorter Poems). *Pilgrim of the Void* (based on Asian travels) will appear from Mainstream in the Spring. White holds the Chair of 20th Century Poetics at the Sorbonne and lives on the north coast of Brittany.

Open World Poetics

Norman Bissell

What do you do when you turn up at your meeting-place on a wild and wet winter's night only to find it's closed because of a major fire in the next block?

If you're the Open World Poetics group you go round to the house kindly offered by one of your number and eighteen of you crowd into a big front room to hear readings from Chinese poetry and hold your discussion regardless.

So over two years on from its inaugural meeting in Glasgow, Open World Poetics is alive and not only well but thriving.

Basic data

We have discussions on a Tuesday night, initially once a month now once a fortnight, in Glasgow. The average attendance is over twenty, of whom some regularly travel from Edinburgh and Fife.

We also do poetry and prose readings and make music at least twice a year in the Scotia Bar, Glasgow, at its writers' nights which are held on the last Tuesday of the month.

We have been known to go away for a day to places like Kilmartin, Argyll, to explore stones and are planning a spring weekend away near Leadhills to explore ourselves.

Some of us are also assisting Tom Hubbard and others in trying to develop a Scottish poetry theatre.

The first issue of our magazine *OPEN WORLD* published in August 1991 contained articles, extracts from discussions, a reading list, artwork, photographs and poems from those involved. It aimed to give others some idea of what we are about and quickly became a collector's item. Our second issue came out in March 1992.

We are not funded by the Scottish Arts Council, Glasgow District Council or Strathclyde region but by a £6 annual individual subscription and our own fund-raising nights.

But what's it about?

In our first two years it's been about geology, Taoism, Patrick

Geddes, saving the environment, Kenneth White, dialectics of nature, Gary Snyder, geopoetics, Hugh MacDiarmid's 'On A Raised Beach', mapping, ethnopoetics, Edwin Morgan, a poetics of experience and Chinese poetry.

In 1992 we will add: the inexplicable in our health, modern physics and eastern philosophy, Shiatsu, Thoreau's 'Walden', gender and nature, a world without waste, computer/poetics, desert island poems etc. And there's plenty more to keep us going for many years to come.

It's about being open to different ideas, being prepared to question one's own and other people's assumptions. Searching out new ways of looking at the *world* – learning to become more open-minded.

It's about world in the sense of wholeness – trying to break down, cross over or even go round what Fritjof Capra calls 'the narrow confines of current academic disciplines'. It's about making the connections between areas of knowledge and experience, seeking points of contact, unifying conceptions. The wide interests and backgrounds of our speakers and participants assist this process. Patrick Geddes lives.

It's also about world in the sense of seeing ourselves and today's countless social and political problems in the wider context of the development of the planet earth, its geological formations, vegetation and many life-forms. This does not necessarily mean abandoning social and political action. Some of us remain as active as ever. It does however mean seeing that continuing struggle for much-needed change in a wider, more life-enriching context.

It's about making the connection with like minds in other cultures, for example Eastern ways of thinking like Taoism and Zen, and some American West Coast networks represented by Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg. It's also about trying to learn from more earth-rooted ways of thinking in pre-industrial cultures whether Celtic, native Indian or Inuit.

Kenneth White has been a seminal influence on some of us because he has been tuned into these concerns for years, and his poetry and perceptions get to the heart of them.

It's about a *poetic* approach to the world, by way of sharpening our senses, being more acutely sensitive to our surroundings, developing a well-grounded, creative response to everything around us. Writing poems? Yes, but also walking hills, exchanging ideas, cutting peat, making maps – washing dishes?

Expanding our thinking, heightening our awareness, seeking out like-minded souls, sharing poetic experiences – Sky One viewers eat yer hearts out.

As I write this on the last day of the year known as 1991, the feel of the day keeps changing as clouds sweep across a pale blue sky bringing overcast spells and wild bursts of rain (rotten weather fur gettin' yer kerry-oot in). Above the rooftops a big swan from the nearby pond joins gull and crow in free flight, soaring this way and that in the gusting wind.

Our awareness of that ever-changing world, and of our existence as part of it, is of fundamental importance.

Further information about Open World Poetics can be obtained from Norman Bissell 340 Lincoln Ave Glasgow G13 3LP tel 041 959 6033, or from Catriona Oates 22 Caird Drive Glasgow G11 5DT tel 041 334 9649.

Norman Bissell comes from Glasgow where he became an active socialist. He taught history for many years and now works for EIS members in Lanarkshire. A co-founder of Open World Poetics and Workers City, he has begun writing poems again.