

EDINBURGH COMPANIONS TO SCOTTISH LITERATURE

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THE EDINBURGH COMPANION TO CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH POETRY

EDITED BY MATT MCGUIRE & COLIN NICHOLSON

This is the first book to take political devolution as an organising context for the presentation and discussion of main currents in contemporary Scottish poetry.

The book combines thematic chapters with in-depth analysis of key poets writing in English, in Gaelic and in Scots, to address the central issues raised in work that is responding to changes in the socio-economic and political environment over recent decades: the influence of tradition (both national and international); the question of language; the rise of women's writing; the relationship between poetry and politics; and the importance of place to the Scottish imagination.

The chapters demonstrate a broad range of interests, while also offering detailed analysis of the many ways writers broach their subject matter, including close readings of poetry by Edwin Morgan, Kenneth White, Aonghas MacNeacail, Kathleen Jamie, John Burnside, Robin Robertson, Mick Inkah and Don Paterson, among others. Chapters by practising poets and by academics deliver senses of the current range and quality of poetry in Scotland.

Key Features

- A thorough guide to contemporary Scottish poetry and poets, making the book an ideal course text
- Shows the ways in which the work of Scottish poets reflects a radical cultural independence following devolution
- Provides authoritative essays by the leading experts in the field
- Includes a valuable synoptic bibliography

Matt McGuire is a lecturer at the University of Glasgow. **Colin Nicholson** is Professor of Eighteenth-Century and Modern Literature at Edinburgh University.

ISBN 978 0 7486 3626 6

Edinburgh University Press
22 George Square
Edinburgh

ISBN 978-0-7486-3626-6



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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

www.euppublishing.com

Typeset in 10.5 on 12.5pt Goudy
by Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 3625 9 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 3626 6 (paperback)

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common with Pelagius, Merlin and Thennock from *Cathures*, the last dragon looks back over a 'memory trail' marked by conflict and stress. The Anglo-Saxon lines quoted here translate in Morgan's 1952 version a fighter whose 'breast is vexed within him, while the crowding / memories came down to him from many winters'. Half a century and many winters further down the trail Morgan scouts uncertain horizons, still successfully guarding his 'word-board' against the day when 'the dragon with / his flailing tail':

Sweeps everything away
Leaves nothing to say

Either in turmoil or in peace, and neither poetry
nor song nor all their longing can avail.⁴⁷

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kenneth White and John Burnside

Marco Fazzini

Edward Said (1935–2003) tells us that the exile is an outcast who is 'in-soluble about the past, bitter about the present and the future'. This statement suggests a strong sense of nostalgia for the abandoned patria, a sense of discomfort in the present, and a gloominess about the future. According to Said the exile exists in a 'median state', neither fully integrated in the new system or society nor totally relieved of his or her burden of cultural and personal memories. The ambiguity of the border gives such a figure a dual position which can afford stimulating advantages. One of the most remarkable figures whom Said chooses to illustrate the point is the philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–69), whose *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951) Said takes as his representative work in this context. Adorno's life produces a 'destabilizing effect' which manifests itself in a series of 'discontinuous performances', and his work must necessarily be

fragmentary first of all, jerky, discontinuous; there is no plot or predetermined order to follow. It represents the intellectual's consciousness as unable to be at rest anywhere, constantly on guard against the blandishments of success, which, for the perversely inclined Adorno, means trying consciously not to be understood easily and immediately.¹

We will see in this chapter how both Kenneth White (1936–) and John Burnside (1955–) attract and transcend these characteristics, in different ways showing their enjoyment of knowledge and freedom, so that their personal, transcultural creative positions move from the local to the international through a spaciousness of voyaging and extended horizons.

Kenneth White

I emerged from the Glasgow proletariat. They're a mixed bunch, the Glasgow proletariat. A lot of them came down from the North. On my maternal grandmother's side, there were Downies, on my maternal grandfather's side, Camerons. On my paternal grandmother's side, there were Mackenzies from Inverness. On

my paternal grandfather's side, it's folk from what used to be MacGregor country. In the old days, I might have been Coinneach ban Macgregor – Kenneth the White of the Gregor clan. But the MacGregors, as you know, being notorious rebels, were deprived of everything, including their patronymic: 'Children of the mist', they were known as.

My paternal grandfather, John Dewar White, was professional piper, strolling actor, soldier (whenever he could, so as to see the world), factory worker and bartender. To say the least, he'd been around.

My father, Willie White, a bright pupil at school, and always a great reader, worked on the railway, and was a strong trade-unionist, active in politics: he was a left-wing socialist, while my uncle, Archie Cameron, was one of Glasgow's staunchest Communists.

As to my mother, she was less socially inclined, more secretive, with all the contradictions of Scottish culture bundled inside her.²

Though he never lost touch with Scotland, in the early 1960s White moved to Germany and France for long periods before choosing to become a French citizen. He took a lot of Scotland with him, including an extensive Scottish library in his various places of residence (Paris, the Pyrenees, Brittany), and was often back in the home country, 'incognito' as it were, moving through cities, towns and villages, along the coasts, into the mountain areas, on the islands. Always with senses wide open and mind alert, he travelled over Scotland more than most people resident in the country. Yet, this Scottish nomad has kept outside:

with the calling of the navigator-wanderer, the terrain of the difficult territory, and a sense of ongoing itinerary. The intellectual nomad (the term used, in passing, by Spengler in his *Decline of the West* [1918], and whose scope I was to develop) is engaged, outside the glitzy or glauzy compound of late modernity, in an area of complex co-ordinates. He is trying to move out of pathological psycho-history, along uncoded paths, into fresh existential, intellectual, poetic space.³

As shown in the following short fragment from 'Walking the Coast', the intellectual nomad feels the strength of a gathering force within chaos, without surrendering to the attraction of any hegemonic 'target' or 'centre' to be reached or any meaning to be prescribed. The speaker here seems to lose not only control over a geographic itinerary, but also, and mainly, over some of the canonised or otherwise assumed speculative, epistemological and political horizons:

living and writing at random
but knowing
that
though living at random

there is a tendency to stress
the essential in the random⁴

White's intellectual nomad is compelled to touch and cross traditions and cultures which he feels to be 'marginal' to the 'auto-route' of the Western world and its Western history.⁵ It is a widely shared perception that nomads, 'clochards', homeless people and wanderers represent a mode of travelling that is often dangerous, amounting in some cases to a real pathology. Yet, what Michel Butor said about nomadism and wandering gives a new and dynamic status to this ontological process which may often acquire all the main characteristics of 'travelling' in a fuller sense, or at least some of its qualities.⁶ Nomadism, together with its founding function in any social collective, translates the plurality contained in each individual, highlighting the interactive complexity of existence. At the same time, it can express the violent or discrete opposition against a fixed order, allowing us both to read the latent rebellious feeling of younger generations and to break the obligations linked to residency. In White's context, terms like 'erratic travel' or 'erratic path' are not only the anti-conformist choice for a geographical move from one place to another, but a clear reference to what the Scottish poet decided for himself and his writing when he moved to France for good in the late 1960s. From Paris, and later from Pau and the Breton coast, White has elaborated an intricate and fascinating series of prose books and poetry sequences in which his personae experience an alternative and enriching path through existence.

Any conventional journey can be easily transformed into an erratic path by a banal or fortuitous accident: a storm can delay or divert a ship from her route; the sight of a huge deer can lead the hunter astray or into a dark wood where he has to face unexpected experiences; or the lack of a detailed map can force the traveller to accept an occasional guide who changes routes and diversifies planned experiences. This happens, for example, in *The Blue Road* ([1983] 1990) when the narrator agrees to be guided by fortuitous acquaintances met on the way to Labrador; or, again, when 'By a stroke of good luck that morning I'd come across a taxi-driver who'd offered to take me to a hill-tribe village off the normal circuit.'⁷ So, even though we have still to distinguish between a traditional journey which, by accident, may be transformed into an erratic one and an intentionally pathless itinerary, the two dimensions, like some of the differences between the exile and the immigrant seem to blur when one admits the presence of 'unexpected' or 'strange' events. But what is the relation between literature and travel? What's the rationale for transforming a poem or a prose book (a *way-book*, in White's case) into a kind of travelling amulet, or of transforming a repeated journey or a definite move (like exile) into an imaginative attitude to experiential life? White's

refusal of every sort of classification or category that customarily defines literary genres, as well as the intimate essentiality of East and West, underlines once again the median condition of this new 'intellectual nomad':

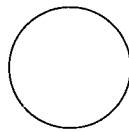
walking in the stillness
half-way between the Old World and the New
trying to move in deeper
ever deeper
into a white world
neither old nor new⁸

Much of the attraction of White's writing derives from his determination to experience wilderness on his own terms. His prose writings, but especially his poems, chronicle his emancipation from the category of macho tourism or solitary travelling:

[T]he pilgrim trip has an aim, the sacred spot. But beyond the sacred, there's emptiness. 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.⁹

This represents a fine and personal introduction to the final part of one of White's best-known poems, 'The Residence of Solitude and Light':

Thinking
of Khalil's definition of reality:
A + A - A - A + A - A + A . . .
maybe that's what I've been working at
these last nine years
the result being:



- a pleasant sensation of nothingness-potential
a breathing space
the beautiful breast of emptiness¹⁰

White described this as 'one of a series of "Pyrenean meditations"':

For nine years I worked away down there in the Pyrenees, in distance and in silence. If Descartes composed *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, maybe what concerned me were *Meditationes de prima poetica* - a new mental cartography in general. The poem presents the situation and the elements I was working with, as well as the horizon I had my eyes on.¹¹

One of the significant features of poetry is its 'sacral' quality. Christopher Whyte observes:

While it is important to be extraordinarily tentative in ascribing a therapeutic function to poetry, there can be no doubt that, in moments of acute tension, whether this be the first experience of sexual love, a major bereavement, or dizzying ontological uncertainty, again and again isolated individuals have encountered, in a poem, normally within the space of a few lines or even in one single line, a formula, a spell almost, which helped them survive, a sort of talisman.¹²

This is the spell the reader often experiences when reading White's books. This is the spell contemporary men and women need because of the devalued relationship between 'human' and 'non-human' in our society. This is the talisman which can recall for us ancestral reminiscences and insights, serving as both a walking and linguistic yoga: writer and reader together become the field of experimentation where the internal landscape coincides with and faces an external one for an eternal resymbolisation of *being* in the world, so exchanging flux and energy, steps and passages, 'limites et marges':

Now I have burnt all my knowledge
and am learning to live with the whiteness naked
what I call art now is nothing made
but the pure pathology of my body and mind

at the heart of a terrible and joyous world¹³

He has described this as a 'poem of the radicalisation process':

presenting the attempt to get beyond knowledge *about* things into knowledge with and in things. If it passes through a stage of pathos (*pathos, logos*), it moves over into a synthesis of *eros, logos* and *cosmos*. Art, then, is no longer simply artefact, more or less attractive, more or less interesting. It comes from a deeper source, opens a larger space.¹⁴

Within a space where we have been spectators of the decline of philosophical, ethical, and historical fundamentals, as Lyotard has observed, it is no longer possible to start a new system of values: only a creative crossing can be accepted, a crossing where poetic erudition and an erratic route mingle and support each other. This is the only way to free our geographical landscape of all its lines encrusted by power and corruption: White's non-linear and non-logically-sequenced language-itinerary tries to redeem us in the world, transforming us into active presences whose culture finally interacts with nature, and whose agility of movement and thought manages to become the

burning knot of a new congregation of illuminating trajectories. Gary Snyder (1930-), one of White's chosen 'companions' since his university years in Paris, wrote in 1984:

We can all agree: there is a problem with the chaotic, self-seeking human ego. Is it a mirror of the wild and of nature? I think not: for civilization itself is ego gone to seed and institutionalized in the form of the State, both Eastern and Western. It is not nature-as-chaos which threatens us (for nature is orderly) but ignorance of the natural world, the myth of progress, and the presumption of the State that it has created order. That sort of 'order' is an elaborate rationalization of the greed of a few.¹⁵

Of his own experience, White has observed:

... I am not suggesting that we celebrate any mountain goddess. I am suggesting that we try and get back an earth-sense, a ground sense, and a freshness of the world such as those men, those Finn-men, knew when they moved over an earth from which the ice had just recently receded. This is the dawn of geopoetics.¹⁶

It seems that moving from America to Europe, and from Europe to Africa, more than one 'eccentric' writer has decided not to treat nature as a guest in our world, or to act as nature's superior. Instead, he (always a 'he' in White's case, allowing us to identify the author more directly with his poetical voices) has focused on how it can improve the human standard of living. Kenneth White's persona loves the mountains and the deserted areas and feels he must go and live there for shorter or longer periods. The journey can be difficult (as in *The Blue Road*), where White's protagonist travels through Labrador, slowly moving out of civilisation and the urban areas of an industrialised society; many efforts are often tinged with a certain ascetic quality (as in *The Wild Swans* (1990) where the protagonist gradually moves towards an epiphanic moment of illumination and extended horizons); or an ironic intent is used to guide the reader towards a deeper understanding of our urban Western environment, as happens in many of the stories in *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (1989). White's persona seeks in wilderness not only a denial of the weakness of the self but also emotional experiences and extended vistas which become a reward for his attempts to get far enough away from cities and settlements so as to experience nature alone. He is often found in nature where he comes to a better understanding of his place in the world, while seeking transcendental experience in contemplation of a cosmic totality. Yet, as an urbanite travelling through wilderness, he takes no pleasure in being a frontier traveller partaking of the commodity development in the West, or the destruction of the geological and biological landscape. His work can be readily studied according to an earth-centred approach, showing that

the Scoto-French poet's 'world' must necessarily include the entire ecosphere where any theoretical discourse built upon it must dismantle surviving remnants of ecological imperialism for a negotiation between the human and the non-human:

[T]hat's what I called 'white world'. But maybe I'd formulate the thing differently: I wouldn't say 'communication between writing and the universe, between literature and the world', but communication between the self and the world. For a great part of the work goes on *outside* writing, outside literature. You have to worldly the self, littoralise (if I may say so) being. Otherwise you remain in the pathetic, the illusory - in 'literature' (or 'poetry').¹⁷

White's favourite literary 'persona', the so-called 'intellectual nomad', walks the path that leads away from the Motorway of Western Civilisation. Along this path he looks for a power of synthesis which European culture has forgotten since the building of that 'auto-route' directed by Platonic idealism, Aristotelian classification, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, Cartesian and Hegelian historicism, and so on.¹⁸ What Anne McClintock says in her study on race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context has some relevance to the kind of refusal White has maintained during his literary career. She notes that all the terminology which uses the prefix 'post' in contemporary intellectual life (post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-feminism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-national, even post-history) is a symptom of a 'global crisis in ideologies of the future, particularly the ideology of progress'.¹⁹ Discussing US Third World policies, the New World Bank projects adopted after the decolonisation of Africa, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its master narratives, and the failure of alternative forms of capitalist or communist progress, McClintock questions the value of the metaphor that has represented Western progress as a 'Motorway' or 'auto-route' able to guarantee security and development to certain human civilisations. Her desire for a new intellectual era includes the birth and the growth of innovative theories of history and popular memory, something which could replace all the words prefixed by 'post' with a multiplicity of intents and powers. Similarly, White likes to speak about his creative purposes in this way:

and when a Japanese literatus
speaks of the series of *waka* poems
(sometimes as many as 100 in a sequence)
written in the Kamakura period
(13th and 14th centuries)
saying 'the result
was often a kind of kaleidoscopic beauty
with infinite variety

revealed to the reader
in a slowly evolving movement'
I recognize my aim²⁰

There is no doubt that the 'auto-route' White speaks about in many of his books and articles signifies the violence or debasing values of so-called civilisation. There is also no doubt that in recent decades the attention that has been paid to travel and to the literature produced around and about it has been significantly enlarged. Obviously, such a phenomenon has been partly produced by both the recent accessibility of travelling, its regular banal uses, and in the politics and economics of mass tourism. This has often caused an impoverishment of the value given to travelling, especially to travelling as a means of acquiring and transferring knowledge. Yet, since the years in which White produced one of his core reflections on the 'nomadic intellectual' (encapsulated in *L'Esprit nomade*) he has given this figure the power to transform his exile into a soul-searching investigation through meditation. The aim is to attain a heightened illumination where emptiness ('blankness') and 'whiteness' are reconciled through their etymologies. This opens the possibility of a final (postmodern?) discourse where the sign, in its larger signification, generates an 'atlantic' and 'hyperborean' poetics which contours the world in the circle of an immortalising cosmology, the white shimmering world of

Pelagian discourse
atlantic poetics

from first to last.²¹

John Burnside

John Burnside, who moved from Scotland to England when still a boy, felt 'angry, just being there, and wasted huge amounts of energy and time giving expression to that anger'.²² Yet, exile for Burnside seems to be not only a personal and geographic trauma, but also something related to the loss of a kind of prelapsarian state, a condition longed for and idealised especially when he feels frustrated by the industrial/capitalist erasure of the possibility of 'being' in the world:

I think exile – from the land, from other animals, from the sensual and truly erotic, from a lived sense of justice, from his/her true nature – is the fundamental experience in industrial/capitalist society. I believe that my writing (and the work of those writers who tend to interest me) is an essentially ecological pursuit: ecological in the sense of being a study of the art and science of

dwelling meaningfully in the world – or, in a piece of shorthand I have adopted, of 'living as a spirit'.²³

This kind of exile involves moving from no specific state, no specific nation, so that even though Scotland is always in the background, it is an imagined and unspoilt world which has given up to business and corruption, being owned by polluting companies and corporations exploiting and destroying lands, and keeping many people in poverty. Burnside has written about all of this from his very first book *The Hoop* (1988), where he started listening to 'the song of the earth' in order to attain a re-attunement to the 'continuum of objects and weather and other lives that we inhabit'.²⁴ This discipline of the imagination, defined by Burnside himself as a kind of 'religious' enterprise, aims at reconquering a oneness, 'a renewal of the connection to the continuum of the real, a discipline for happiness'.²⁵ In an early poem called 'Out of Exile', which Burnside excluded from his *Selected Poems* (2006), the poet is inventing things 'as they might have been' if that dream-desire for 'home' had finally turned into something real:

Driving early, through the border towns,
THE DARK STONE HOUSES CLANGING AT OUR WHEELS,
AND WE INVENT THINGS AS THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN:
A LIGHT SWITCHED ON, SOME NIGHT, AGAINST THE COLD,
AND CHILDREN AT THE DOOR, WITH BAGS AND COATS,
Telling stories, laughing, coming home.²⁶

The 'exile's return' instead counterbalances that mythical idealisation of land and time. The poem that follows 'Out of Exile' in *The Hoop* collection is much more realistic and ironic: here, the idealised 'home' has been turned into something like a clichéd attraction for tourists who drive through hills or into a fake Scottish identity linked to some combination of colours in a tartan:

Hard to imagine it, lying intact,
folded into books: identity
to be assumed like tartan,
or spelt out on museum clocks
from heretic stones and peat-blackened pots,
history by strip light. Do we know
where we are in these tourist hills?²⁷

Burnside's prose experiment, 'Suburbs', from his second collection *Common Knowledge* (1991), opened the ground to a personal way of presenting problematic issues, which he would later include in *Feast Days* (1992) in properly structured sequences. Two of these sequences, called 'Aphasia in Childhood'

and 'Urphänomen', insist on the gap between two worlds, symbolised in a series of dichotomies such as childhood and mature age, or reality and dream or, better still, here and there, being and non-being. This is a kind of revisitation of the technique Geoffrey Hill used for his *Mercian Hymns* in 1971, with the addition of strong personal and autobiographical elements:

Maybe you could say that the *general* trend in twenty century poetry has been towards this *secular/ agnostic* sacrality. Perhaps we could even say that there was a similar trend in the wider range of twentieth century thinking – in Bergson, in phenomenology, in 'Lebensphilosophie'; in Merleau-Ponty, in Heidegger, even in some of Wittgenstein; in the emergence of eco- and eco-feminist political thought, and in a growing appreciation of the knowledge, skills and insights of 'indigenous' people; in literary criticism and commentary (from Gary Snyder, say, through Mary Oliver, to Jonathan Bate); in the work of musicians such as Michael Tippett, Arvo Part, John Adams, and the increasing recognition of music created outside the 'Western classical' mainstream (Adams, for example, has cited Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as a significant influence). In the visual arts, one looks to the painter Agnes Martin, or the photographer Raymond Moore, in film to Terence Mallick, Andrei Tarkovsky and others – the list could go on and on.²⁸

It is by using the form of the religious prose hymn style that Burnside questions issues such as identity and place, framing them into a mock-religious structure which is his particular way of giving sacrality to a series of philosophical and existential questions:

The questions I asked ... all the time, but never aloud: where is the soul? WHAT does it most resemble? I had an image of something transparent, a fine yet indestructible tissue of buttermilk or chitin ...

That one day I spent in the woods, digging leaf-mould: I kept finding thin silvery threads of mildew that dissolved in the air, and I was sure, if I dug a few inches deeper, I would find a being which resembled me in every way, except that it would be white and etiolated, like a finger of bindweed growing under stone.²⁹

Memory (mainly of childhood years) holds the ground in these prose sequences, creating a hinterland where personal recall of past details mixes with dream fantasies. The mixture emerges from a mysterious darkness or a half-waking state, where memories 'form in my skin like a tumour: a quiet, untenable life surfacing through coffee and after-shave when I lock up the house of summer nights, and linger at the door to taste the distance'.³⁰ These are the 'mystery years' where long-past vistas and half-remembered details can be contemplated 'far in light and silence', and everything lives through a half-perceived distance from a personal time which enlarges together with the awareness of a threshold space, a liminal space, through which we can

conjure up the dead and our pursued truths. This 'other country' is not only the terrain of difficult territories inhabited by animal presences, but also the unbridgeable distance between living and dead, self and other, religious values and human doubt, a responsibility to all living things.

It is relevant here to remember what André Gorz (1923–2007) proposes in his *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989) because it will be particularly important for Burnside's writing after 1992. Gorz says that we need to re-evaluate what he defines as the post-Marxist force in the Western conceptualisation of politics and philosophy, and abandon the trite praxis leading to the consideration of the Other as another human being or, worse, as a subject to be subjugated. Instead of insisting on the re-evaluation of the Other as a sensitive subject, Gorz longs for the equation the Other = the external environment, replacing the power relationships between two conflicting human beings or social classes with the relationship between human and non-human.³¹ So, in order to annul the power of the *malin génie* that Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) speaks about – a kind of central scrutiniser of all the simulations of the external world – and fill the gap between Self and Other, it is necessary to attract and destroy what lies at the very base of that prevaricative mode of perception.³² This is exactly what Burnside himself has recently stated about the relationship between humans and the rest of the world:

I am very much affected by Levinas's philosophy, especially with regard to our responsibility to 'The Other'. But this other, I would read not just as the human, but as the 'more than human' other, i.e. all living things. Our responsibility is to respect and protect all living things. To honour this vast 'Other', however, we must also respect all habitat: for we cannot honour other living things if we damage or destroy their sources of shelter, nourishment and play. Thus we must honour all things, from the air, to rocks and soil, to trees, to all waterways, to the ocean, to the wind, to pond life, to Arctic mosses, to temperate forest, to silt, to reedbeds, to glaciers – everything that is, is a habitat. At the same time, this demand that we honour The Other is also a call to enlightened self interest. For the truth is, we are not separate from The Other, we do not, and cannot, live 'apart' from the rest of the world. Every action in the world, however seemingly insignificant, has some consequence for us, as individuals, as human societies. The one blessing of the twentieth century is that we have just begun to understand this.³³

Burnside's philosophical reflections on the large topic of responsibility to the Other become particularly strategic for his recent poetry and helps him discuss the problem of 'healing' as a kind of starting point for a non-belligerent and neo-harmonious co-existence in the world:

My poetry works at the borderline between 'self' and 'other' – partly with a view to undermining the feelings of separateness that make us capable of damaging

the world in which we live, the meta-habitat that we must share with all other things. Of course, I have other concerns, but this is central. Naturally, this relationship between 'self' and 'other' can be explored in many ways – in the so-called 'nature poem', or in love poems, for example. At the core of these explorations, however, I believe, lies a fundamental concern with healing, in its broadest sense: not the healing of the world, or of 'the other' so much as a healing of oneself, sufficient to allow for a continuation of meaningful and non-destructive play between self and other.³⁴

This is the poetics of 'tolerance' issuing forth the unsaid and unsayable details of another life. In the depth of darkness or of unconscious states, we are presented with alternative personas or untouched secrets, or with various possibilities of relating ourselves with the Other:

and someone is having the dream
I had for weeks: out walking on the beach
I lifted a pebble and split it
open, like an apricot, to find
a live child hatched in the stone. . . .³⁵

In his 1994 collection, *The Myth of the Twin*, Burnside engages his persona in a subtle and painful game of remembrance and invocation of his relatives, as in the poems he dedicates to his grandfather ('Grandfather' and 'A Photograph of My Grandfather'), or to his grandparents ('My Grandparents in 1963'), or to the drowned children at the pond, or to his sister, or to the dead in general. He has described invocation as 'the mode by which we reintegrate the things of the world':

One might see this mode as essentially metaphorical: for, as Hannah Arendt says, 'Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is brought about'. Invocation, then, is an attempt to bring about the oneness of which Arendt speaks: a oneness which is 'out there' in the world, and is only ever fractured in our imaginations. I see the invocative aspect of poetry (of all art) as a healing power, in so far as it restores the oneness of the world, and our continuity with 'the things of the world', especially with other living things. To this extent, invocation can also be described as an ecological pursuit.³⁶

Lilias Fraser has observed that

Becoming proven. . . is a process where both poet and reader can describe and recognise their adult responsibility to acknowledge where, when or how they began to grow up. Something which seems as ubiquitous as motherhood, or looking out at a street, can have all the remarkable familiarity of a 'closeness in the mind', yet it is as much a test, or proof of identity, in these poems for the

poet or reader to recognise and reassess how forceful these familiar settings or words can be.³⁷

While declaring his special way of shaping his own identity, Burnside professes his 'religious' attitude towards all the details of the world and questions if in his 'secular/ agnostic sacrality' there is still room for an ordinary epiphany which could reveal the very essence of a Deity:

I would love it if more people abandoned a belief in g(G)od, but I wouldn't expect them all to start writing poetry. I think the arts generally do have a significant part to play in reminding us of the real, at transitional times (which I hope this time is), when we are shifting from one belief system to another (and I hope, rather than trust, that we are). The real is here present with us: water, air, stones, plants, animals, gravity, light. I think the best art has always worked against orthodoxies of religion and politics, to reassert the worth of the ordinary, the physical and the transient against the grandiose, puritan, metaphysical ideas of church and state. Don't the poems we love best sing of the transient beauty of hedgerow flowers, the fleeting joys and pains of love, of our occasional and tentative epiphanies in a mysterious world, as against the thousand year Reich, the tyrant's desire for immortality and the promised eternities of the official religions?³⁸

In this context we might consider the following lines from *The Myth of the Twin*:

In the morning you would have stood
alone, at the edge of the world
with your face to the light,
and God would become the camphor in a bush,
the whisper of something local and banal,
a personal event, which you would grasp,
inferred from the wind like a shiver of ash or pollen.³⁹

In one of his essays Burnside talks about Paul Eluard's (1895–1952) secular programme to uncover the *autremonde* ('that non-factual truth of being: the missed world and, by extension, the missed self who sees and imagines and is fully alive outside the bounds of socially-engineered expectations') by means of a radical 'illumination, a re-attunement to the continuum of objects and weather and other lives that we inhabit', which becomes a way for him to define what a lyric poem really is: another point of entry to the quotidian, 'another source of that clarity of being that alchemists call *pleroma*':⁴⁰

Consider the body: changeable, incomplete,
yet still continuous:

think how it holds the perfect likenesses
of all the former selves that it is not,
how casually it gathers and renews
the forms we have scarcely noticed

...

and how, on a morning like this, with our everyday lives
suspended
in these white parentheses

we start again from scratch: the coming night;
the ferry that runs to the island;

the sullen ice;

the shapes we have scarcely noticed, bearing us on
to all we have yet to become
to the blank of a future.⁴¹

This attempt to glimpse into the oneness of our worlds (including Eluard's otherworld, the true Kingdom of Heaven) through radical illumination invites us to use, as in many of Kenneth White's theoretical assumptions, a new strategy and a new attitude towards our environmental context, spatially, in language and in our existential selves:

The lyric offers the same radical illumination that chance affords us when we wander off the map. For poetry works where maps are useless: like a passport, the lyric allows us to enter the otherworld, but is neither road map nor field guide. Upon arrival in Eluard's Kingdom, all we have is imagination and the difficult leap of trusting our own (many) senses; over there, we are not who we are in our public lives, but being there is how we come to be revealed.⁴²

This strategy, at times seemingly unconscious or perhaps half-perceived, allows Burnside to combine a passion for sensuality with a convincingly secular empathy between humankind and our natural environment, inviting the reader to enjoy a revived sacralty relieved of institutional agendas and ceremonial convention. It becomes a compelling invitation when we consider how religious hierarchies routinely hijack the sacred from everyday lived experience and 'set it apart':

in the tabernacle, on the altar, for [their] own purposes . . . to obtain and enjoy power: over others, over natural 'resources', over the earth itself. And poetry is a democratic art, one might say, in so far as it opposes this power with joy, with the affirmation of all that we cannot control, of everything which has no market value, of that freedom which, as Marx said, arises naturally from 'the recognition of necessity'.⁴³

Whereas the prose writer is generally concerned with what Wittgenstein allows him or her to say about the world, the poet here is working in an area where the ability to speak precisely about the world needs to be informed by 'a new way of thinking' in a transforming 'song of existence', so that we are forced to press our ears to the earth and listen. If we can hear the beating of the heart, we may continue to live as humans, like the man blind from birth in Burnside's 'One Hand Clapping', still able to perceive the presence of a twin and lighter self in rainfall or the small hours:

Remember the myth where everyone is twinned
with something in the fog
a lighter self
that knows its way by feel
and finds us out
in rainfall
or the small hours
finds us out
and leads us home
where danger never goes
to start again
one moment at a time
grammar and kinship
wedlock
collective nouns? ⁴⁴

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