

ALONG THE HIGH LINES

FIGURING OUT THE WAY TOWARDS A WORLD CULTURE

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EDINBURGH BOOK FESTIVAL, AUGUST 27TH 2006

Good evening, all.

Before getting into my stride, let me say that it's always a pleasure to be back in this city of Edinburgh that was once a capital of literature and, more than that, a capital of the mind. That's the idea I keep in mind here. But, deep down, my feeling is that there are really no capitals of the mind today. Intelligence is decentralized – it's either isolated or scattered abroad, which gives it in fact more scope, but also makes it harder to get at. By intelligence (*inter legere*, in Latin: *inter*, between; *legere*, to read), I don't mean just smartness or technical know-how, what I mean is a reading into the general scheme of things or, more briefly, a sense of world. This word 'world' is a key word in my vocabulary. Hence the title of my collected poems, *Open World*. The world is what we're all ultimately concerned with. If I speak of world, it's not some kind of vague, panoramic cosmopolitanism I have in mind. A world is, in my definition, what emerges from the contact between the human mind and the circumambient universe or multiverse. When the contact is intelligent, sensitive, subtle, you have a world in the strong sense of the term. When the contact is unintelligent, insensitive, careless, you have a shambles, or worse. The world starts on our doorstep. But to understand what's really happening even on the doorstep, you often have to travel, physically, but especially mentally, quite far. At times I may seem to be talking from very far off, but I'm also talking about what's very close. You'll see later in the talk why I felt the need to say all this in my preamble.

Last year at this time, on this Edinburgh International Festival occasion, we were considering the question of world-writing, as distinguished from mere mirror-writing, with reference to two of my recently published books, *Across the Territories* and *The Wanderer and his Charts*, out from Polygon. Right at the end of that talk on the notion of world-writing, I knew I wanted to pick up again from there, come back on the theme of 'world', extending the notion of world-writing, which was seeing things from a literary point of view, to that of world-culture, that is, seeing things from a general point of view.

Hearing me expressing the desire to come back on the same theme, some people, not, I trust, many, but some, might think: 'White's repeating himself'. The fast answer to that is: of course, I'm repeating myself. Do you think the man who, in the midst of confused social ideology, hit on the idea 'Know thyself', or the other one who, in face of a rigid theological cosmogony, said of the earth: 'It moves' – do you think they said those things only once? No, they came back on them again and again, from different angles, bringing new matter and

new light each time, because those notions were, potentially, the pivots of a whole world-turning. It's the restricted vision of things that has to be served up with variety. A big theme needs a lot of continued working, a new cosmology takes a lot of persevering mapping. That, I submit, is what distinguishes real work, real life-work and world-work, from a Variety Programme.

When I was a student in Glasgow, I worked one summer as assistant-cook (very *assistant* cook) in a Scottish hotel. This hotel served up a new soup every day: tomato soup, oxtail soup, Scotch broth, whatever. Variety. But back there in the kitchen, I saw that it was the same basic stock all the time. Every day a quantity of this basic stock would be taken, and to it would be added tins of tomato soup, oxtail soup, and so on, according to whim. Not, you'll agree, the finest gastronomical or dietetic procedure. If I bring it up, it's because, as metaphor, it can be applied to literature, and to culture.

Time now to come to the title of my talk for this year: *Along the High Lines – figuring out the way towards a world culture*.

Once more, quite a mouthful...

The immediate reference in this title – High Lines – is to a new venture of mine in Scotland, a collection of books I'll be directing, The Highliner Series, at Sandstone Press, based up in the North-East. This title, the Highliner Series, can be seen as symbolical of my whole position, my whole strategy, with regard to this country of ours. The first book in the series, *On the Atlantic Edge*, by myself, came out a few weeks back. It consists of the talk on world-writing I referred to above, last year's Edinburgh Book Festival talk, which a lot of people wanted me to make available, along with three talks I did last autumn as holder of an international fellowship started up by the association Hi-Arts, at Ullapool, Inverness and Kirkwall. This work with HI-Arts and with Sandstone Press will continue with work I'll be doing with UHI (the University of the Highlands and Islands project).

Before trying to get into a more intense area, with deeper intentions, let's take a cool, lucid look at the general context in which we live, move and have our being.

We live in what we call a democracy, and we take it for granted. If it's not the best form of government, it is, we have been told, the least bad. I'd accept that notion, but what we tend to forget is that, if it's not to become debased, it has to be perpetually worked at – not only politically and socially, but educationally, culturally, intellectually, artistically. Because it's so easy to lose sight of that high world-line (there are so many urgent particulars pressing in on everybody), the fact is at the moment that we're not living in a live democracy at all, we're living in what I call a mediocracy.

Before looking closer into this, it's worthwhile re-viewing the inherent inconveniences of democracy as such. Maybe the classic text on this in modern times is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835). De Tocqueville went to the States in 1831 to get 'an image of democracy', its 'inclinations, characteristics, prejudices and passions'. While being not at all

anti-democratic, he saw a very strong downside, calling it 'the tyranny of the majority', and concluded: 'I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.' Lest this be hastily put aside as the judgment of an Old Europe aristocrat, here's the opinion, a hundred years later, of an autochthonous American, Edward Sapir, anthropologist and linguist, who, in his essays on *Culture, Language and Personality* speaks of a 'flat and tedious sameness of outlook', of 'the smug intolerance of the challenging that so imprisons our American souls', of 'a shallowness in the culture', recommending, in contrast to this system of standardization, 'the centrifugal effect of robust, self-sustaining personalities' and, at a higher level still, a 'travelling on the path of the self's illumination'. Lest, again, it be thought that this radical criticism, way outside the usual chit-chat, concerns only the U.S.A. and that in Europe things are better (they were maybe a while back, but are so less and less), here's a French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, in his *What is Philosophy*, talking about 'the lowness and the vulgarity that haunts the democracies', and the general debasement that is taking over.

Why and how did the context get that way, and what can we do about it?

To get some real language on this, some cogent conceptual semantics, let's look, rapidly, but pertinently, topically, at the high line of political thought since Plato's Republic. Borrowing a term from the sub-title of a book, *The Machiavellian Moment*, by J. G. A. Pocock, Professor of History at Johns Hopkins, I'm going to call this high line the Atlantic Republican Tradition (ART) – and if, already, you see a connection between the Atlantic Republican Tradition and the title of my latest book, *On the Atlantic Edge*, you are not, I assure you, wrong.

Plato was out to reform, re-form, the culture of Athens. To do this, to effect a restoration of form, he drew up the blueprint of a utopia on philosophical (metaphysical) principles. To get out of the confused contingency of history, there have been over the ages two main ways: idealistic utopianism (I think, in the wake of Plato, of Thomas More's *Utopia*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, Aldous Huxley's *Island*, etc.), or dialectical materialism (from Aristotle to Marx). The fundamental political question raised by the Greeks was restated at the Renaissance, especially in Italy, by writers such as Machiavelli, Giannotti, Contarini, the focal centres being Florence and Venice – with Rome as reference in the background. With regard to Rome, the problem for Romulus of making Roman citizens out of a bunch of roaming rogues had found a simple solution (later taken up by fascism): turn them into patriotic legionaries. Florence and Venice were more complex: Venice in its watery site trying out ways to be a *serenissima repubblica*, Florence more of a hotbed. But everywhere dialectic was in spate, concerning, for example, order and disorder, locality and universality –, all working towards the constitution (*la forma, la composizione, il temperamento*) of the finest civil life (*vivere civile*).

By the seventeenth century, the scene of debate and action was shifting from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, from Italy to England, from Venice to London – but still with

many a reference to the merchants of Venice. James Harrington's *Oceana*, an Atlantic utopia, comes out in 1654. Utopia apart, it's a plea for moving freely about, delivered of gothic tribalism and papal authority. The wind of trade and plantation are blowing over the land, national prosperity is the watchword, and God's Englishman is about to rule the world. Those English trade winds also blew up North as we know into Scotland, where a fair section of the population was eager to get into the act, and ready to sell their grandmother in order to do so. But Scotland being, like France, with which it had been for long in close cultural touch, a more intellectual nation, there was also a strong strand that had doubts and were looking for other perspectives. As in France, where there was a very strong parallel line running say, from Montesquieu (*The Persian Letters*, written after the failure of John Law's *Mississippi Scheme*) to Rousseau (*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*), if these Scottish intellectuals were keen to study the phenomenon of trade, profit and prosperity (as Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*) they, Smith included, also radically questioned it. This comes across in Andrew Fletcher's *A Discourse on Government* (Edinburgh, 1698), with its criticism of stockjobbery and the belittling of humanity by the market, and Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, which, in the face of what he sees as increasing corruption and alienation, refers back to Homeric Greeks, American Indians, and Scottish Highlanders, while Adam Smith, in his moral-political lectures concerning the ill effects of global marketing and purely commercial interests, has this: 'The minds of men are contracted, and rendered incapable of elevation. Education is despised, or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished.'

We're getting close here to what I call the mediocracy – the total embodiment of what those eighteenth century French and Scottish perspectivist historians, ethical-political theorists and culture-critics shadowily foresaw.

Let me make it very clear at this point, if need be, that I'm a democrat, with a strong democratic tradition behind me. But a *demanding* democrat – demanding in the first place a lot of myself, and, in the second place, of the political-social, cultural context. I also have behind me a strong critical discourse concerning democracy as such, and modern marketing developments. But my position lies beyond the critical – it's out to be creative, in a large sense. Among the eighteenth century thinkers and creators just evoked, the man I'm probably closest to (which doesn't mean I agree with all he ever said) is Rousseau. While the critical philosophers sometimes knuckled under (even Hume did), Rousseau stayed out. In this Rousseauist reference, I'm close, by the way, to the national poet of Scotland, Robert Burns, who, liked to think of himself as Robert Ruisseaux, *ruisseaux* being 'burns' in French, and Ruisseaux being close to Rousseau. As we know, Burns simply didn't have the chance or the wherewithal, the time or the scope, to develop the high line he envisaged, open up a larger space of thought and living, and more's the pity. Instead, he was going to be turned into the symbolical excuse for a kind of sub-democratic self-satisfaction, one of the most blatant aspects of the mediocracy.

What characterizes the mediocracy, as it has taken shape, or rather unshape, over the

past two centuries, reaching its final slump, I'd say, over the past thirty years or so is, on the existential plane, alongside tremendous technical innovation and high-speed mechanical locomotion, a saurian sluggishness, only relieved by twittery triviality, and a protozoarian short-sightedness whose elegant form, more evident down South perhaps, is one of debonnaire ignorance. On the psychological plane, it's a pervasive meaninglessness, leaving a gap in which flourish and thrive all kinds of fantasia, from religion on down – down, down and down. Look at the advertisements in the city streets. This, for a novel: 'A gothic horror story sure to shred your nerves!'; this for a film: 'The goriest, sickest film you'll ever see'. Such egregious examples apart, there is communication galore, but the prevalent discourse operates, to say the least, on very meagre semantics. In fact, a middle system of middling communication, what you might call the *mediacracy*, part integral of the *mediocracy*, acts (with rare exceptions, and I salute the exceptions) as bulwark between what live work there is and the population. If there is plenty of communication, or pseudo-communication, there is very little real creation – although there will be a great deal of 'creativity'. Creativity of a kind, easily absorbable into the system, will be encouraged. The creativity in question will be either what I've called mirror-writing, that is description, complacent or pathological, with or without intrigue or drama, of the depleted context, or else it will be based on mere personal emotion, restricted purpose, simple causation – stuff to fill 'leisure time', not to fulfil a life. Within this context, there can be causes, perfectly praiseworthy and meritorious causes: humanitarianism, human rights, etc. – but which get nowhere near the fundamental question, which is: once you have rights, what are the life-possibilities? On the streets and on the screens, democracy yields to demagogy, demagogy to populism, and populism to vulgarism.

That's the mediocracy seen from the inside. From the outside, it appears to be almost totally inverted, marked by an almost complete lack of sentient, intelligent, creative contact with the environment – that contact without which (this is one of the axioms of what I call geopoetics) no live world can come into existence and be maintained.

Lest this analysis of mine be considered by some as the ravings of an extravagant poet, here's a scientist, professor of theoretical physics at Birkbeck College, talking about the world, the piecemeal pseudo-world, in which we live:

'It is especially important to consider the question [of fragmentation and wholeness] today; for *fragmentation* is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual; and this is leading to a kind of *general confusion of mind*, which creates an endless series of problems and interferes with our *clarity of perception* so seriously as to prevent us from being able to solve most of them. Thus art, science, technology, and human work in general, are divided up into specialities, each considered to be separate in essence from the others. [...] Society as a whole has developed in such a way that it is broken up into separate nations and different religious, political, economic, racial groups, etc. Man's natural environment has correspondingly been seen as an aggregate of separately existent parts, to be exploited by different groups of people. Similarly, each individual human being has been fragmented into a large number of separate and conflicting compartments,

according to his or her different desires, aims, ambitions, loyalties, psychological characteristics, etc., to such an extent that it is generally accepted that some degree of neurosis is inevitable, while many individuals going beyond the 'normal' limits of fragmentation are classified as paranoid, schizoid, psychotic, etc. The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion. Indeed, the attempt to live according to the notion that the fragments are really separate is, in essence, what has led to *the growing series of extremely urgent crises that is confronting us today*. Thus, as is now well known, this way of life has brought about pollution, destruction of the balance of nature, overpopulation, world-wide economic and political disorder, and the creation of an overall environment that is neither physically nor mentally healthy for most of the people who have to live in it. Individually there has developed a widespread feeling of helplessness and despair, in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming mass of disparate social forces, going beyond the control and even the comprehension of the human beings who are caught up in it.' (David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*).

It was on the basis of this analysis of our civilisation, with input coming at me from experiences of direct contact with physical territory in Scotland and elsewhere, from studies in the cosmo-, bio-, geo-, and psycho-sciences, from exploration in the philosophies and different types of poetics across space and time, that I gradually worked out the theory and practice of geopoetics.

I don't intend to go into a lay-out re geopoetics here this evening, simply because I have done this frequently elsewhere, both on the lecture platform and in my books, and there is a useful summing-up in the booklet *Geopoetics: Place, Culture, World* put out by Alba Editions, the imprint of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics. Geopoetics, and the International Institute of Geopoetics are the latest public phenomena arising out of the work I do (the work itself – prose, essay, poetry – is not all geopoetics, it may contain other virtualities), part of a sustained effort that goes back to the mid-sixties in Glasgow, when I started up the Jargon Group, devoted to what I called 'cultural revolution' (no reference to Mao, I invented the term for my own purposes). I no longer use the word 'revolution', I consider that term as outworn vocabulary. If the history of the twentieth century has taught us any thing it is that, unless basic ground work is done, revolutions can lead to situations worse than that of the point of departure. I think and work rather in terms of evolution.

I've just spoken of 'basic ground work'. What we badly need – biologically need, and most of what is called 'culture' doesn't satisfy it – is re-grounding. That means going into the background, re-examining the territories.

I've done this with various territories all round the world, trying to get at an open coherence. *Open World* provides a kind of survey via poems. Certain prose books go into particular instances with mere detail. I did it with regard to Scotland in general in the book *On Scottish Ground*. The latest book *On the Atlantic Edge* can be seen both as an application

of the principles set out in *Place, Culture, World*, and as a prolongation of *On Scottish Ground* into the particular area of the Highlands and Islands.

Scotland's always been at the centre of my attention, as my original ground, as a focal point, as a significant example on several issues, as a terrain of projection.

That's what comes across, in *On the Atlantic Edge*. I don't want to paraphrase the book, partly because it contains so much material, and in a way I wanted both concentrated, intricate and flowing. But maybe, here at the book festival, I should at least give some indications of its contours and configuration.

Let's begin with that notion of 'edge'. That we're at the edge of a long tradition is something a lot of people feel, and the space before us can appear, now hopelessly confused, now desperately blank. The shores (the edges) of Europe are littered with the rusty remains, the flotsam and jetsam of metaphysical systems. Some (the logical positivists) would say: get rid of them, let's sweep the shore clean (and then set up MacDonalds for the tourists). I'd say there are still interesting elements to be picked up, in the interests of a new coherence. To create new unities, a new unity, that is the deepest creative activity. So what this book, indeed all my essay-work, is trying to get at, are the edges of a large (~~Atlantic~~) conception.

After the theory, the geography. In his book on the republic of Venice, to which I referred earlier, Contarini begins, before talking of anything like governmental structure, of the geographical site. Using an artistic image, he suggests that the primary essential, for any real 'definition and amplification of the nation' (*patria firmanda et amplificanda*), is to sketch the outlines (as of a painting), rough out the stone (as of a sculpture). I go with that, and to the art-images would add that of geometry, thinking, for example, of my intellectual compatriot Robertson's 'co-moving co-ordinates'. The only way to renew vision is to go right back to the ground. There is great physical satisfaction in brute fact, and great intellectual satisfaction in the lovely encounters that can take place between thought and brute fact. There you have the basis of a paradigmatic language that can, in successive waves, be enlarged. With particular regard to Scotland, we have had many narrative studies about the successive political situations of the Scottish nation. I do not deny their value. But for real cultural renewal, I submit, what we fundamentally need is a new cartography, both physical and mental. For Aristotle, narrative was secondary to poetry and poetry was secondary to philosophy. In my work, I try to bring the three together, in a new, cogent and coherent synthesis.

After the geography of the territory, the cultural currents. Just, as I suggested, there are metaphysical elements to be picked up, for a new coherence, there are cultural elements to be picked up and given new relevance, outside the confused mass in which they lie, as so much heirloom. In this book, I go back, for example, into pelagianism, into Norse culture and the Viking expeditions, into the Finn tradition. You might say that Scotland's last contribution to European and world culture was *ossianisation* (the whole Ossian thing that ushered in

Romanticism). What I'm working at in *On the Atlantic Edge* is an *oceanisation* – opening elements of Scottish culture out on to that larger context I evoked.

From Scotland to open world...

When I think of real creative work, what I see all round the world, across space and time, are wild, lonely characters, representing what Aristotle called 'megalopsychic' (large-minded) man, trying to create something adequate to the strange and beautiful complexity of the universe.

Working away, even in isolation, working away, working out a way.

Time to conclude for today.

With regard to working in the historical context, including the sociocultural context, the image that comes to mind is that of Sisyphus. You remember, the guy who rolls the big stone up to the top of the hill, then sees it rolling back down, at which time he starts the whole process all over again. It may sound desperate. History *is* pretty desperate: oscillating between inertia and hysteria, futuristic dream and abysmal nightmare, with triviality (as, increasingly, at present) in between. But to come back to Sisyphus, you can say, well, at least he develops his muscles. But you can go one further and say that, in the course of his efforts, it's he who keeps the height in view, he who keeps the very notion of 'height' in the mind, even at times when things get low, villainous low.

That's what I've been trying to do, before you, with you, this evening.

Thank you, once again, for listening to me.