

The post-Maoist geopoetics of Jean-Claude Pinson

In his ego-geographical memoir, *Là* (*There*; a pun on L-A, Loire-Atlantique, the French department in which he has lived most of his life), the poet and philosopher Jean-Claude Pinson remembered a detail which punctured the ‘pastoral idyll of the summer of 68’, that he and his Maoist comrades had been enjoying with radical peasants in the countryside near Nantes:

Disappointment, deconstruction of our illusions, the day when we found, at La Chapelle-sur-Erdre, in a farm where we were working, placed on the wooden plank of an old-style latrine, just next to the hole, as toilet paper ready to use (carefully unstapled and torn) a whole load of glossy pages from *China in Construction*, a colour magazine glorifying the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, printed in Peking.¹

This bad omen was not enough, however, to turn them off ideological course. In 1967, Pinson’s conversion to Maoism had led him to abandon literature, philosophy, petit-bourgeois jazz music, sex – ‘girls’ breasts, when measured next to the Tsingkang mountains/we had decreed them not sublime enough for us’² –, and a sense of place, unless it was attachment to the distant utopia of the People’s Republic of China. He avoided contact with the psychogeographers then active in nearby Nantes – with the exception of a disastrous intimate encounter with a Situationist female student. In the poem ‘*In situ* – Saint-Nazaire’, he remembered:

It was a beautiful spring day I think
But I no longer know if we could make out
With as much clarity as today
The coast opposite and its fringe of pines
Before which pass the cargo ships

Anyway landscape was not my first concern

¹ Jean-Claude Pinson, *Là* (*L-A, Loire-Atlantique*) *Variations autobiographiques et départementales*. Suivi de *Frères oiseaux* (Nantes : éditions joca seria, 2018), p. 100.

² Pinson, *J’habite ici* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 1991), p. 88.

I had come here to distribute tracts³

However, in 1980, disillusionment with the People's Republic of China, Pol Pot's Kampuchea, and the revolutionary workers and peasants Pinson and his comrades idealised, led our poet to break with a moribund Maoism. Another memoir, *Drapeau rouge (Red Flag)*, recounts with humour and profundity the disintegration of his Maoist cell outside Saint-Nazaire:

Flag tragically hybrid ; hope and crime intimately linked. Flag of shame and hope,
Jekyll and Mister Hyde (...)

And yet it had begun so beautifully

Red flag of morning hope

Feast of satin

But very quickly

Red flag of a sad evening

Cutters travails

Swarm of toothless monsters,

Anteaters, abattoirs⁴

Dissolution of the Parti communiste (marxiste-léniniste), the end of 'red ecstasy', leads to liberation, notably when the *ex-moine-soldat* (soldier monk) visits a jazz club: 'Floodgates suddenly opening and freeing into the air flows of abois and rhythms, rolls and cries, geyser releasing its decibels, thousands, millions of m3s, for ten years, more than ten years, walled in,

³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴ Pinson, *Drapeau rouge* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 2008), pp. 32-33.

compressed (February 1980)’⁵. The memoir ends on a different red flag: ‘Outside roared a great storm. Red flag raised on the lifeguard station of Tharon-Plage. No swimming. Deserted beach. Even the keenest windsurfers hesitate. The ideal moment, we thought, to go onto the beach and refresh our ideas with sea spray’⁶.

From then on, Pinson returns to poetry and philosophy and develops an outlook which can be described as ‘geopoetic’ (he uses the word once). The emphasis in his work is, to borrow Hölderlin’s famous line, dwelling poetically on the earth. This expresses itself in verse and prose which is attentive to the spaces he inhabits, above all the river Loire and the Atlantic littoral. In a poem from *J’habite ici* (*I dwell here*), he writes:

For a long time you lived like an insect caught
In the beam of a lighthouse (the distant one
Of the radiant future as we used to say) (...)
Today you try to understand
The meaning of living here
Or at least you invent it according to the light
Which constantly changes for we are in Brittany.⁷

This is accompanied by a ‘poethics’ that seeks a new, ecologically-sensitive, approach to the environment: ‘A poethics always points to a “poethics”. A poem is not just a verbal object offered for aesthetic pleasure or analysis, it also proposes a world – a proposal as to the possible modality of dwelling in it’⁸. There is a place for the pastoral and the ‘local poet’ in our ‘wretched times’:

⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

⁷ Pinson, *J’habite ici*, p. 12.

⁸ Pinson, *Habiter en poète. Essai sur la poésie contemporaine* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 1995), p. 135.

It is towards another way of life that we must turn ; it is another relationship to the Earth and to places that we must invent – a poetic, non-predatory relationship. And for that humanity needs poets (poets in the widest sense of the word, well beyond poetry alone). It needs them to be as many as possible, for them to go, like an army of climate activist teachers, green hussars of the Earth, everywhere to defend and put into practice the old yet always young pastoral ideal specific to poetry.⁹

The song of Orpheus, in dialogue with Nature, is preferred to Prometheus's predatory will to power.

These quotations invite comparison with the geopoetics of Kenneth White, even though White is never mentioned by Pinson: the latter's poetic contemporaries include Guillevic, Ponge, Bonnefoy, Jaccottet and Prigent. A biographical coincidence: both Pinson and White were the sons of radical railwaymen, and grew up on the shore, Pinson in the Nantes suburb of Saint-Sébastien, White in the Ayrshire village of Fairlie. But differences soon appear. In 1968, while Pinson was seeking re-education among the peasants, White's slogan in Pau was 'Pas Mao, le Tao!'. Such a slogan showed his attraction to an Oriental philosophy that was anti-authoritarian (and thus attracted persecution, including by Mao's communists) and had a holistic outlook which would inspire New Age thinkers like Fritjof Capra. Around this time, White wrote, in *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, of a 'purifying wind' under the red flag: 'The cold wind of dawn. Beginnings, beginnings. Once I lived among pigs, now I live among gulls. The gull academy. Taoist scholars and poets. Cool. Clear, dancing, laughing artists' ¹⁰.

There is therefore no tale of disillusionment in White's ego-geography. For him, it is urgent to quit the 'Motorway of History' and its grand narratives. White was certainly active during the 'events' of 68, agitating in Pau, where he taught English literature, and in Toulouse. The moment of May showed the possibility of a conjunction between poetry and militancy. But, observing the internecine struggles between various communists, Maoists, Trotskyists and anarchists, he quickly realised he was dealing with a party of despair, a Ghost Dance. Typically, to clear his mind, White embarked on a walk along the Basque coast. Back in Pau, in the teeth of hostility from the head of the English department, White continued briefly to lead his proto-geopoetic group, *Feuillage*.

⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁰ Cairns Craig (ed.), *The Collected Works of Kenneth White, Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 273.

In the inaugural text of the Institut international de géopoétique, published in the tumultuous year of 1989, White wrote :

If, around 1978, I began to talk about ‘geopoetics’, it was, on the one hand, because the earth (the biosphere) was, quite obviously, more and more under threat, and that we had to concern ourselves with this in both a profound and effective way, on the other hand, because it had always appeared to me that the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from plunging into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the signs of the world.¹¹

Among the thinkers and poets White references are Heraclitus, Henry Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Tschang-tsou and, inevitably, Hölderlin.

Both Pinson and White have written poems about Hölderlin’s trip to Bordeaux in 1802, which the German Romantic notably evokes in his poem ‘Andenken’, ‘Remembrance’: ‘But now to the Indies/The men have gone’... Pinson and White’s texts show similarities and differences between these two geopoeticians. In White’s ‘Hölderlin in Bordeaux’, the German Romantic eschews the habit, triviality and mere opinion of the times: ‘he tended to go away/for a walk along the river’, accompanied by ‘memories of friends/who had left on a ship/from the windy promontory’. On his way back to Tübingen, he gets lost in the ice and snow of the Auvergne, which triggers an epiphany: ‘the landscape had changed/colder/craggier/more massive -/poetry itself would have to change’. For now on there is ‘a nothingness to face/in an open expanse/He would have to learn how to travel alone’¹². Here Hölderlin becomes part of the ‘White World’: a solitary, biocosmopoetic being walking and evolving in a landscape-mindscape outside decadent mainstream society.

As for Pinson, in “Hölderlin humbement”, there are echoes of his own political disillusionment. As the German made his journey to Bordeaux, ‘maybe he advanced with in his heart the hope/of finally reaching an athletic country/open to the full light/and then no doubt he found in Bordeaux/too much disenchantment since there had ended long ago/the surge to the open sea to poetic invention’. At the same time, Pinson’s Hölderlin anticipates an eco-poetic *prise de conscience* among poets and philosophers: ‘perhaps instead of seeking/heavens of a more adorable blue/today they try to stare into/the darkness of a vanishing earth’. As for

¹¹ *Cahiers de Géopoétique*, volume 1 (1989), p. 151 [our translation].

¹² White, *The Bird Path. Collected Longer Poems, 1964-1988* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1989), pp. 91-93.

Hölderlin's return to Tübingen, Pinson mentions his passage through his own *pays natal*: the inhabitants of Charentes have 'something a bit Greek about them', but on the edges of the Vendée, 'he was worried to see the burns of war'. He therefore rediscovers home with joy. However, unlike White's Hölderlin, he is not all alone. He spends the last 36 years of his life in the home of Zimmer the carpenter, and, writing his verse, paradoxically 'went away into the proximity of things'¹³.

For, unlike White, there remains in Pinson a sensitivity to the human, and notably to social injustice. In this way, he resembles another writer from the Nantes area, Julien Gracq, who left the French Communist Party over the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, but who, Pinson writes, did not completely abandon politics:

Having quit the *vita activa*, militant life, Gracq took on the rôle of a simple spectator. However, he did not yield to the temptation to forget the world; he did fall into that 'acosmism', as Arendt calls it, which lies in wait for the *depoliticised* intellectual, awoken from his political illusions. He did not yield to that disgust with the world which often accompanies withdrawal into the sphere of the *vita contemplativa*.

In *Laius au bord de la mer* (*Laius by the sea*), Pinson describes walking along the Loire to give a philosophy lecture at the University of Nantes: 'Nor do I pretend not to see/On my path those who have come here/With their fishing rods on the riverside/To flee their schemes and the noise of the ring-roads /To forget unemployment with packs of beer'¹⁴.

As for the red flag, 'it's got lost in dust in space. Vainly in eternity, for, it knows too well, it doesn't have the right to commit suicide, having always to carry out the heavy, the difficult, the ever urgent task of finding equality. However much it may burn, on Earth we never cease to make and re-make it. All you need is a rectangle of red cloth'¹⁵. And in his essay, 'Carrefours de la poésie' ('Crossroads of poetry'), Pinson calls for a 'poetariat' that would create 'forms of life liberated from the deadly logic of capital'¹⁶. The nightmare of History still weighs on the minds of the living, the Motorway roars relentlessly on. Is there a place for both geopoetics and geopolitics?

¹³ Pinson, *J'habite ici*, pp. 101-106.

¹⁴ Pinson, *Laius au bord de l'eau* (Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 1993), p. 26.

¹⁵ Pinson, *Drapeau rouge*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Pinson, 'Carrefours de la poésie', *The Irish Journal of French Studies*, No. 18 (2018), p. 22.

A last word from our geo-poet, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Nantes in March: 'Post-Maoist geopoetics'? I like that expression. Today, in fact, I would happily adopt Kenneth White's expression, 'Tao rather than Mao'. No doubt I should even have become aware of its relevance much earlier! I also can agree with your assessment : the contestation of capital and a keen interest in geopolitics have not left me.

So two or three great minds eventually met, at least partially.

The Author

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