Wild Esculents
Jim Mooney

Friend, in my mountain-side demesne
My plain-beholding, rosy, green
And linnet-haunted garden-ground
Let still the esculents abound.

These lines from Robert Louis Stevenson's *'To a Gardener'* are cited by the renowned Highland Scottish writer, Katharine Stewart, in her absorbing account of her garden's progress over the period of one year, in *'A Garden in the Hills'*[1]. She freely confesses to having to look up *esculents* in a dictionary. Esculents, she informs us, are food plants. Stewart was obviously captivated by this sonorous word and conspicuously relished its subsequent use in her book. I was particularly struck by this delight as I too find the word captivating, although, in my case, the first encounter with the term came via the slightly queered version in the form of the Latin nomenclature for one of the Morels, *Morchela esculenta*, a springtime fungus that has so far, sadly, eluded me. I forage for all manner of wild esculents beyond the bounds of my garden which lies by the North Sea on the Moray Firth located in the Far North East coast of Scotland, not too far from where Katherine Stewart's garden, due to her seemingly inexhaustible devotion and determination, miraculously flourished on a wind-swept hill overlooking Loch Ness. As dedicated as I am to the arduous but rewarding task of tending to my garden esculents, I am equally passionate in my pursuit of the 'wild esculents' that abound in the wee bit of the world I call home.

To fully benefit from this natural bounty, I contend that a certain re-visioning of the landscape is demanded. I like to think of this re-visioning as an uncultivated re-visioning as it stands in stark opposition to the cultivation that my garden plants compel. Of course, the knowledge that is required to draw nourishment from nature's larder owes a debt of gratitude to the hard-won sagacity of previous generations who went in pursuit of wild esculents and identified useful medicinal plants and herbs through trial and (no doubt fatal) error. This uncultivated knowledge of the landscape resists the horticultural orthodoxy that weighs heavily on the producer of garden edibles and depends greatly on a shift in sensibility and a re-training of the senses, the olfactory sense almost as much as that of sight itself as many plants and fruits often first disclose their presence to smell, (wild garlic and ceps, to name but two) before they announce themselves to sight. Hearing and touch too play their respective roles in location and identification. In the gustatory regime, taste has a crucial indentificatory role to play and occupies the throne, alongside the olfactory, at the banquet when the day's haul has been transformed. However, it is to the sixth sense that I attribute my most outstanding foraging successes. This is particularly the case when I go in search of wild mushrooms in all their tantalising splendour and promise of feast to come. This sixth sense operates as a hunch that either festers or niggles until I am obliged to respond or more immediately, when on a forest walk, leads me to swerve from my usual path to reveal unanticipated fungal gems otherwise carefully camouflaged and obscured from view. Undoubtedly, I have accrued some useful predictive knowledge about habitat, season etc., but it is most unequivocally my hunch that guides me. I postulate that what we call a hunch really is a *mélange* of all senses acting cooperatively and subliminally below the threshold of conscious awareness.

Re-patterned Landscape

When you embark on a life lived foraging, the familiar landmarks are reorganised and new patterns and priorities are established. Mostly these patterns are temporary, ever shifting with the season and even the day. They are the provisional, dependent on rainfall, high or low tide, temperature, all the vagaries of a highland habitat. You must become attuned and attentive to these vagaries and learn to read the landscape of the wild esculents anew with each season and each day. Happily, there is another tier of pattern that, once discovered, is more reliable, almost invariably dependable, but never quite. I am thinking of those hidden places where yolk-yellow Chanterelles appear and reappear in abundance, so far, without fail, or the patches in the mature pasture by the cottage where wonderful meaty Blewits (*Lepista nuda*) make their late autumn appearance and often last well into the winter lying under a mantle of protective snow until the first hard frosts lay them to rest. The same stretch of ground

yields the delectable St. George's Mushroom (*Calocybe gambosa*), a more capricious fungus than the Blewit, in my experience, but one that is all the more welcome for that. Other dependable landmarks encompass the Rowan Tree or Mountain Ash, laden with berries, often standing sentinel on forlorn hillsides; the Elderflower offering its profusion of flowers and berries to the resourceful forager; the forest stands of Beech dressed in appetising nuts or signposting a windfall where Beech mast nestle, buoyed on beds of verdant moss surrounding these majestic trees. I suppose that these patterns of which I write, are best characterised as multi-layered, quixotic, shifting, competing, temporal and oscillating - all at once! They appear and disappear. They signal their presence variously and some only occasionally, a natural semaphore emitted only under certain, sometimes exacting, conditions. Fungi demonstrate in an exemplary and straightforward way that the visible is but a condition and symptom of the invisible. Much of the reading of this re-patterned, re-drawn landscape depends on prior knowledge and anticipation. This does not thwart the thrill and quest of prediction and discovery that is a corollary of decoding camouflage and seeing beyond decoy.

The re-patterning/re-visioning of the landscape of which I write is not a mere strategy to increase the odds of tracking down wild esculents. A new cartography of mindscape-landscape is instigated and entails a revision of my relationship to the land, to nature and to culture. It demands a certain degree of unlearning, de-conditioning, clearing away and rebalancing. This renewed relationship to the natural world induces a radical re-alignment of nature and culture, a fundamental shift, not only ontological, but ontical (as I understand it, the more empirical branch of Ontology) and epistemological is summoned leading to a concomitant review of priorities for living. A re-calibrated relationship between the natural world and culture energises and opens up a field of limitless vitality and bright, sparkling, luminous resonance. This re-alignment of sensitive and intelligent modes of apprehending the world and my place in it seeks to overcome the ever-increasing tendency in contemporary culture to separate human beings from the natural world. This movement, this shift in inclination, is a response to my profound disenchantment with increasingly anaemic, excessively rhetorical modes of cultural production that induces lethargy and torpor. Far too much critical writing and academic activity in the Humanities amounts to little more than the fifth photocopy taken from the fifth photocopy of the original text, the text becoming increasingly faint, faded, blurred and etiolated. A renewed relationship with the natural world opens up new ground, establishes a clearing, a potential dwelling, where one can legitimately take up residence or give expression to presence (*Dasein*). These terms are, of course, conspicuously Heideggerian and deliberately so, as the operations of re-alignment-re-grounding-re-reading-re-connecting-re-orienting–re-mapping and re-awakening profoundly implicate *being* and, as such, establish, reform or enact a shift in this being,

or more properly, this *becoming,* overcoming cultural limitation in the process. These strategies aim to establish a life lived in closer tune with the natural world and the other entities that constitute this world. They also aim to produce other worlds from this plane of potentiality. A *world*, in this sense, is produced from the expression of a poetic encounter of a life with the ground of nature apprehended in all its specificity and particularity. I mean this very literally; the specificity of the rocks, the soil, woods, trees, plants, mosses, lichens, shellfish, birds, mammals and, of course, nourishing esculents. This new tendency inclines toward the poetic constitution of a world where life, nature and culture coalesce and resonate in productive, creative, unison. This calls for a modification of the unchecked drift of an increasingly anthropocentric culture that disprizes the natural world and its non-human inhabitants. In his curious and enlightening book, '*Civilization and the Limpet*', the Cambridge University biologist, Martin Wells, seeks to radically redress this imbalance and give 'voice' and presence to largely overlooked occupants (particularly the invertebrates) of this, our shared world. Wells offers a potent and lively corrective to what he calls 'an excessively cannibalistic diet of articles about *'Homo sapiens*.'[2] It is largely a matter of extending in a democratic manner a greater equality and respect for all other entities while rejoicing in heterogeneity, diversity, differentiation and the promotion of a synthesising nexus. Much of my current consternation arises from a recognition that culture has become deracinated from nature and I wish to reassert the simple recognition that humans are as much a part of the natural world as they are the social world. One consequence of this assertion would be a plea to support the proposition that observation of the natural world is a fecund *source* that encourages and enables profound rumination on nature to be developed into fundamental reflection on matters of human concern. These observations and subsequent rumination approximate what Heidegger called *'anfangliches Denken'*[3] or 'initial thinking'. I strive to develop a particular kind of reification (the task of the artist) of this initial thinking through attachment and being attentive to the phenomena of nature. This calls for an upsurge in phenomenological observation and becoming increasingly sensitive to the poetic matters that arise from the intersections of natural, human and cultural worlds. Crucial to this operation would be a realignment of the sensible and the intelligible realms of experience and their constellations. Equally, a reinstatement of the value of the life-enhancing, sometimes exhilarating, *immediacy* of experience, in particular the experience of nature in contrast to the over-mediated, highly attenuated, character of mainstream cultural production. In the succinct words of Kenneth White, leading proponent of *Geopoetics* and founder of the International Institute of Geopoetics[4]: '… I like there to be a lot of orality in my literality, just as I like a lot of nature in my culture.'[5] This new radical field or 'Open World' as White terms it, charts the ground for a new inter-connective and productive poetics operating in previously disparate discursive and practical disciplines.

Additionally, in the spirit of Heidegger's initial thinking, I would like to propose a complimentary term: geoerotics. I have in mind an erotics that goes beyond mundane, everyday, definitions and reaches out to other forms of attachment; bliss, *jouissance*, ecstasy, and unsettling modes of the delightful, rapture, the libidinal and the joyous. The geoerotics I have in mind would serve to induce modifications to settled views of our selves and the constitution of our sense of Self. One sympathetic version of this kind of modification, is outlined by Henry David Thoreau when he writes:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body
is one sense, and imbibes delight through every
pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature,
a part of herself. [6]

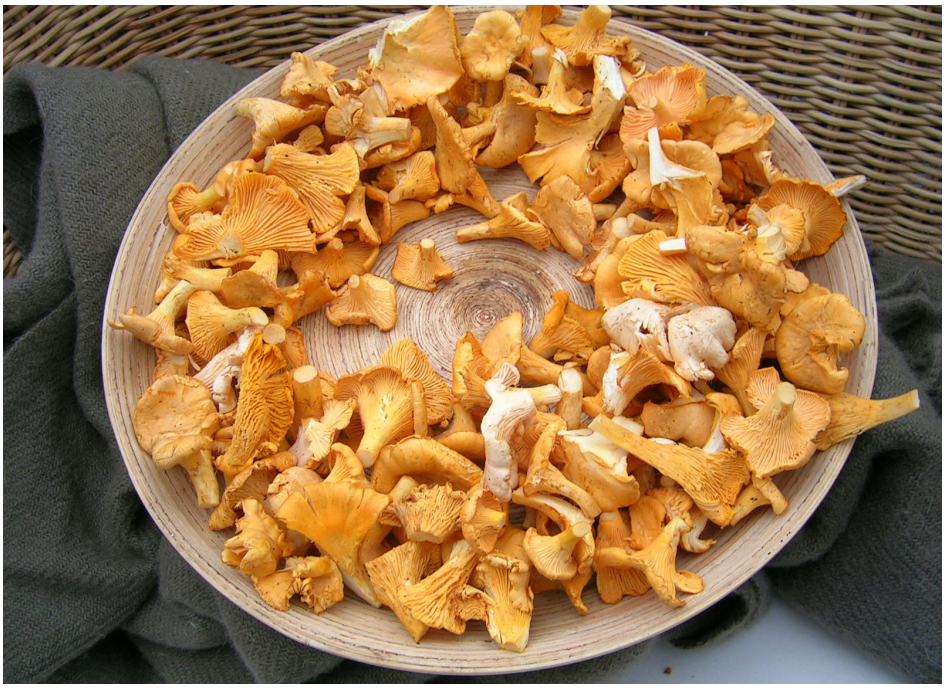
As a linked tangent of geopoetics, *geoerotics* would serve to remind us of the fact of our possession of a desiring/thinking sensate body and that all activities that fall under the rubric of geopoetics ultimately depend on our inhabitation of a carnal body. Towards this end, or rather beginning, I have in mind Michel Tournier's *'Friday'* and the erotics that propel that particular text. Other texts that could serve as pointers, as ground-works toward the development of a geoerotics that I might add to the list would include Walt Whitman's *'Leaves of Grass'*; the works of Thoreau; much of D. H. Lawrence and the philosophy of Alphonso Lingis. In discussing the character of *lust* in his work '*Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*', Lingis turns his attention from the usual lustful attractions provoked by the physical bodies of one and another, to a different kind of lust provoked by nature:

'*It is provoked by the hard edges of reality radiating in twilight halos and perfumes, landscapes flowing into mists and languor, leaves incarnating into glands, rocks and sands liquefying and vaporising, beams of sunlight caressing like fingers. The communication with the other that is in lust is not a communication with the idealised signals nor with the postures of things, but with their material states, a materiality freed from information and even from the formation into states – a materiality not holding its own forms, undergoing transubstantiations, suffering.*' [7]

In part, this step towards a geoerotics involves a turn away from increasingly abstract, self-reflexive, thought towards the realm of sense and sensibility, of carnality; opening up a space, not only for the emergence of a radical poetics but for the emergence of an eroticisation of thought. I am particularly taken with Hans-Georg Gadamer's formulation of 'belongingness' or *Zugehorigkeit*; a condition he posits as making possible: "the venture into the Alien" and "the enrichment of our own experience of

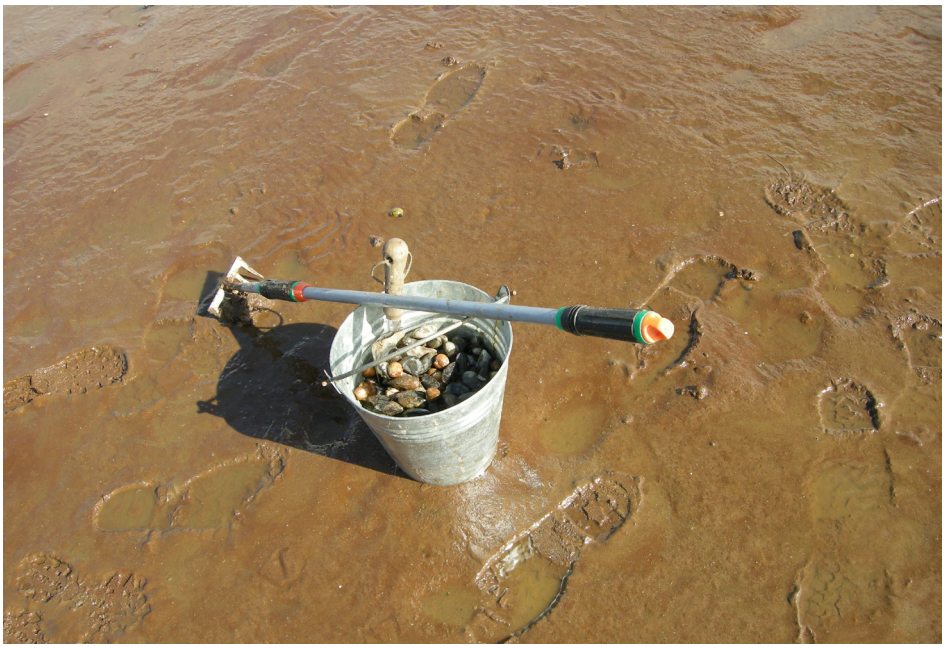
the world" [8]. The imperative I urge is to recuperate this condition of belongingness in nature as a necessary adjustment to the excessive clamour of capital-driven, synthetically saturated, cultural production in order to return attention to the murmurings of the natural world and its many potentialities.

To return to the matter of esculents and the fleshy delights of fungi: it is said that flowers embody hope in that they anticipate fruit. Some of the most anticipated fruits among the wild esculents do not make an appearance heralded by flowers. The fruiting bodies of the vast kingdom of fungi whose extensive mycelia, (feeding threads or filaments, variously parasitic or symbiotic, that constitute an underground network that can extend to many miles) are largely invisible and their hidden presence is betrayed only under the most propitious conditions when they yield fruit in the multifarious forms of mushrooms and toadstools, surely among the most varied and erotic of all plants! I say plants, but this is of course, erroneous, as fungi constitute a distinct kingdom from those of plants and animals. Fungi have no chlorophyll and do not photosynthesise which immediately banishes them from the plant kingdom into a splendid realm of their own.



The reach of the landscape of which I write is not extensive, but nevertheless embraces diverse habitats from seashore to woodland, mountain heath, salt marsh, river estuary and inland loch-side. Some of these habitats are renowned and protected others overlooked, disprized and neglected. My favourite forest walk is through Balblair Wood which runs alongside Loch Fleet, the most northerly sea estuary on the Scottish mainland and haven to many over-wintering wild birds including: Dunlin; Bar-tailed Godwits; Icelandic geese and Eider duck. Welcome summer migrants include Common, Arctic and Little Terns from North Africa. At differing times of the year, I can reasonably expect to successfully forage for Chanterelles (*Cantharellus cibarius*); Bay Boletus (*Boletus badius*); Orange Birch Bolete (*Leccinum versipelle*); Brown Birch Bolete (*Leccinum scabrum*); Amethyst Deceivers (*Laccaria amethystea*); Slippery Jacks (*Suillus luteus*); Shaggy Parasol, (*Macrolepiota procera*); Penny Buns, Ceps or Porcini (*Boletus Edulis*); Puffballs (*Pleurotus ostreatus*); Cauliflower Fungus (*Sparassis Crispa*); Field Mushrooms (*Agaricus campestris*) and Fairy Ring Champignons (*Marasmius oreades*). I deliberately cite the Linnean classification as these names are every bit as succulent as the mushrooms themselves and induce a mental summersault of verbal delight. These poetic names resonate with sensate pleasure and take up residence in the specialised vocabulary of the forager. Not unlike the onomatopoetic sway the term *esculent* held for Katherine Stewart.

In the appropriate season, June-September, the haul of mushrooms is complimented by handfuls of coveted (especially by London's fashionable fishmongers and restaurateurs) Samphire (*Salicornia spp.*), a salt marsh succulent exposed to the tidal salt washes twice daily upon whose nutrients this highly specialised little plant depends. It is at its edible best early in the season. Importantly, it should never be uprooted; only the fleshy upper parts are judiciously cut using scissors, leaving enough behind for speedy renewal. Sustainability is the watchword that governs, or should govern, all foraging expeditions. In the face of increasingly bleak predictions arising from Global Warming, it is heartening to delve into these complex eco systems and explore habitats that exhibit such fecund and healthy bio-diversity, pockets of land where all seems well – for the time being. Territories where the infinitely sophisticated balancing act of interdependence is everywhere, and at every level, evident, bring a certain solace, hope and consolation. Encounters with these micro-environments solicit a powerful response of care and responsibility, for it is here that we dwell, become entangled and ensnared, it is through this modest recognition that dwelling comes to the fore. On a beneficial day, the fungal esculents are supplemented by other, even more, succulent delicacies gathered from the muddy estuary - bivalves in the form of wild mussels and cockles!



The seashore is not to be overlooked in the pursuit of edibles. Crabs, limpets, periwinkles and creel-trapped lobster apart, esculents include: Frosted Orache; Sea Rocket (disappointingly bitter); Sea Beet; Sea Buckthorn berries; Wild Thyme; Sea Kale and Rock Samphire. Esculents are, of course, available in abundance in the form of seaweed. All British seaweeds are in fact edible with the exception of the species *Desmarestia* (this species is poisonous, but fortunately grows at depth, well out of easy reach), a few are delectable; as edibles the majority, however, are simply hard work! Mostly, the seaweed I gather is used to support the allotment esculents in the guise of soil improver and nourishment. There is a long tradition on the Scottish Islands of using seaweed as fertilizer. One of the best uses is to burn the seaweed in large pits dug out of the land and use the cooled ashes (very high in minerals like potassium and iodine) to spread over or dig into the vegetable plots.

I gather Sea Lettuce (*Ulva lactuca*); Kelp (*Laminaria digitata*); Sugar Kelp (*Saccharina latissima*); Dulse (*Palmeria palmata*) and the seaweed with the most unprepossessing name of all, Gutweed (*Ulva intestinalis*) for the pot as well as the garden. Sea Lettuce is good in soups, but I prefer it lightly boiled then sautéed in sesame oil and tossed in sesame seeds. It is then sprinkled over newly lifted garden potatoes as a satisfactory

accompaniment to fish. It also provides a flavoursome protective wrap for juicy scallops, quickly fried in olive oil with a squeeze of lemon. Gathering sea lettuce can be a rather prosaic task involving no more than a casual saunter down to the seashore at low tide to scoop some fronds from the bobbing sea by the rocky promontories. On other occasions harvesting sea lettuce can be turned into an adventure. I have gathered this bright green sea vegetable from the side of the causeway connecting Brough of Birsay, one of Orkney's most dramatic geological features to Mainland Orkney; it comprises a narrow walkway that can only be crossed at very low tide. Undoubtedly, however, the most memorable harvest was gathered from a sandy bay a good hour's walk along the coastal path from the cottage. Lothbeg Point is a haven

for wildlife and boasts a large colony of common seal. Recently, two friends were visiting from London and we determined we'd have a swim. Tentatively, we dipped a toe in the water and quickly established that the tentative approach wouldn't work. We had to take the plunge! Soon we were totally immersed and discovered, to our delight that a recent storm had washed in an abundance of torn shreds of translucent, near-phosphorous bright green leaves of sea lettuce. Sea storms always deliver great deposits of seaweeds and an endless variety of useful flotsam and jetsam. As we focussed on gathering this covetable, paper-thin seaweed for supper, we were initially oblivious to the numbers of baby seals slowly gathering in the bay beside us, slowly, so imperceptibly slowly. Watched from a safe distance by their mothers, unquenchable curiosity brought these mesmerising creatures closer and closer. Eventually, and only just before, the chill from North Sea waters got the better of us, we were merely a few feet from each other. Only our heads were visible above water-level, each eyeing the other with an intense, yet benign, gaze. To share another mammal's territory, habitat and company, even for a brief episode is to commune with a species at once so alien and yet so strangely familiar and proximate. This unexpected encounter prompts idle reckoning of inter-species understanding and communication where distance is reduced and deep mammalian kinship asserted. Somehow, as a consequence, we become more animal and the animal more human.

Another wild esculent that has many purposes and is as good for the pot as for the garden is the Common Nettle. The young spring nettle tops make a delicious soup, can be turned into nettle gnocchi or risotto, or a fine salad mix of wilted bitter weeds (Sorrel, Chickweed, Hairy Bitter Cress, young dandelion leaves) enhanced only with good olive oil and some lemon juice. It was a Highland tradition to eat nettles in the springtime as a tonic 'to cleanse the blood'. It also makes a good nettle tea to offer to the garden esculents as a pick-me-up tonic and feed. The leaves, infused in boiling water then cooled, make an excellent scalp-tingling shampoo. Nettles are almost invariably found growing by abandoned crofter's cottages in the Scottish Highlands. They thrive in the places where 'middens' (heaps of organic household and animal waste) once lay.

Pacha Mama

Interestingly, as I write, I hear on the radio that today (22 April) is World Day of the Earth or Earth Day, an approximate translation as I am writing in Cusco, Peru. The purpose of this dedicated day is to shine a spotlight on environmental issues and rally the world's populace to take action to stem what appears to be an inexorable decline of the environment's well being. This call chimes with my own reflections. We have

been hard at work restoring and planting our kitchen garden in the outskirts of Cusco and are awaiting the arrival of a *'curandero'*, a Quechua sacred man or shaman. His services will include the preparation of various libations or *'ofrendas'* to *'Pacha Mama'*, Mother Earth. These libations and other offerings continue an age-old Andean tradition dating from the times of the Incas and include coca leaves; wine; *chicha* (fermented *choclo* or maize) and incense. The immediate beneficiary will be the small courtyard garden. These *ofrendas* are believed to be a form of nourishment for the earth and payment of an obligation (*El Pago*) for all the benefits the earth has formerly provided and will hopefully donate again. The *offrenda* is ceremoniously wrapped in floral gift-wrap paper and the list of items I can recall includes: rice; biscuits; lurid fluorescent pink and yellow ice-cream wafers; sweets; confetti; hundreds and thousands; jelly babies; broad beans; chick peas; kiwicha; coca leaves; aniseed; chicklets; sugar; Alpaca fat; raisins; chocolate medallions and a chocolate effigy of bride and groom. This list illuminates the way in which the traditional indigenous *ofrenda* is opened up, extended and adapted to accommodate the new and current; from *choclo* to jelly babies! The *ofrenda* is carefully placed in a hole dug in the garden; carnations are then laid on top and buried under light layers of earth. Liquid libations, *Oporto* wine and *Inca Kola* are poured on top and the resulting ferment of bubbles interpreted by the *curandero.* He assured us that were we to dig in the same spot the next day, having been devoured by *Pacha Mama*, no trace of the *ofrenda* would be found. We did not test this assertion or his faith. The entire ritual revealed an exemplary form of syncretic religious practice where the centuries-long Quechua shamanistic ceremony is overlaid with Catholic paraphernalia and observation. I love this culture of respect and care extended to the earth that is everywhere so evident among indigenous Quechua and Aymara peoples and extends to addressing elderly women as '*Pacha Mama*'; a term of deep respect. Most negative events are attributed to humans being out of kilter with *Pacha Mama*, I even heard a radio report on a terrible road accident with a high death toll on the Pan American highway being blamed on a lack of respect for Mother Earth. This may require a stretch of the imagination, but it does demonstrate a firm belief in the interconnectedness of events and the enduring generative force of Mother Earth. I think back to the bit of land I try to care for and the nourishments I offer in return for the benefits bestowed. We ask the *curandero* if the offering I made in Cusco will reach my garden in Scotland. Not for the first time, he regards me with a certain affectionate indulgence bordering on pity and assures me in the affirmative. *Pacha Mama*, you see, is just that, Mother Earth, singular and indivisible. Thus, with beguiling simplicity, a common-sense understanding is advanced that we urgently need to heed.

[1] Katherine Stewart, *A Garden in the Hills*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 1995).[2] Martin Wells, *Civilization and the Limpet*, (Massachusets: Perseus Books, 1998), p. viii.
[3] See Kenneth White, *Coast to Coast*, (Glasgow: Open World in association with Mythic Horse Press, 1996).
[4] Kenneth White is a highly acclaimed Scottish-born world-renowned poet, writer, Sorbonne professor and self-declared citizen of the world. White instituted the International Institute of Geopoetics in 1989. He coined the neologism to open up a theory-practice space intended to appeal across a wide range of disciplines and practices. There are many centres affiliated to the Institute including the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics.
[5] Kenneth White, op. cit., p.126.
[6] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, (New York: Dover publications, 1995), p. 84.
[7] Alphonso Lingis, "The Body Postured and Dissolute" in Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), p. 64.
[8] Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, On Gadamer, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Philosophers Series, 2000), p. 57.

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