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ABSTRACT

Patrick White's support for green issues, especially in his later life, is well documented; however, relatively little attention has been paid to date to the planetary perspective of his fiction which, as Andrew McCann suggests, hints at "the possibility of a renewed relationship to the 'earth' ". Focusing on what is generally considered to be his "greenest" novel, *The Tree of Man*, and adopting a broadly eco-materialist approach, this article assesses White's work in the wake of the recent ecological and planetary turns. What difference does it make to position White, not as a national or an international writer, but as a *planetary* writer?And what if White's work, usually looked at for the insights it provides into human subjects and subjectivities, were to be looked at instead in relation to what Jane Bennett calls "the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things"?

KEYWORDS

Patrick White; Australian literature; planetary perspective; eco-materialism; comic vision; queer ecology

Introduction: Stormy weather

Much of the critical debate surrounding Patrick White continues to revolve around the extent to which he is a "national" or an "international" writer. This has led generations of critics, in Australia and elsewhere, to assess the "Australianness" of White's writing, or to index it to identifiable national characteristics, with one popular position being the view that while his work (especially his early work) subscribed to international modernism, it was also concerned to ridicule "the Australian ordinariness of his time" (During 1996, 99). The debate has been taken up more recently by Christos Tsiolkas (2018), who sees White's work (again especially his early work) as deriving its power from its universal themes of exile and dislocation, and from its "almost animist expression of the spirituality to be found in rituals of labour and dedication to land" (37). A case in point is White's ([1955] 1983) novel *The Tree of Man*, which Tsiolkas sees as "one of the great novels" of our times, a "statement [that] doesn't require the qualification of that lousy adjective 'Australian'" (3). However, this does not prevent him from seeing the novel in terms of its author's attempt to "forge a foundational myth of Australia" (51), or from categorizing White's as an "Australian English. In its themes. In its surprising and intoxicating admixture of the elegant and the vulgar. In its humour. In its starkness. In its frustrations. In its bodies. In its scents and sounds" (18). Tsiolkas can be defended to the extent that it is perfectly possible to be a national and an international writer at the same time, as might

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be said as well of a national literature: Australian literature, for instance, especially since its reassessment as a "world" literature, or after various critical attempts to reimagine it in the wake of the transnational turn (Dixon and Rooney 2013; Huggan 2007; Jacklin 2009).

In this article, I am more interested in another "turn", the *planetary* turn, which revolves around the planet as the main conceptual and political framework within which writers and other creative artists position themselves and their work (Elias and Moraru 2015). The planetary turn shifts the axis of critical inquiry, not just from the local to the global, but beyond them to a planetary level that requires a radical rethinking of temporal as well as spatial scale (Clark 2019). This kind of approach is hardly new, of course. It has been nigh-on 20 years since Gayatri Spivak (2003) enjoined us to "imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities" (73). However, such planetary perspectives have recently come to the fore, many of them crystallized around the Anthropocene and the potentially life-changing challenges it presents to us, not least the challenge of finding a critical language that is appropriate to the times we live in, which requires the rethinking of such taken-for-granted terms as "nature", "culture", and the "natural world". One recent intervention in this wider debate is Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski's (2021) provocative study *Planetary Social Thought*, in which the authors see humanity as being at a both a *planetary* juncture – defined by the urgent need to confront what the planet is doing to us as well as what we are doing to the planet – and a *historical* juncture, in which there is an equally pressing need to contest "the global predominance of Western knowledge claims" (8).

This seems as good a moment as any to re-explore the planetary dimensions of White's work, which have been picked up on without necessarily being pursued by a number of his critics, notably Paul Giles (2019), who detects in White's work a "planetary perspective that destabilizes any humanist centre of gravity" (248–249), and Andrew McCann (2015), who sees White's writing as hinting at "the possibility of a renewed relationship to the 'earth' " (118). What might it mean to see White, not as a national or an international writer, but as a *planetary* writer?Certainly, his green credentials are not in doubt given his support, especially in later life, for a variety of environmental causes – the Green Bans, the anti-nuclear movement – as well as his exploration of human/non-human interdependence and his advocacy for an ethics of non-attachment to the material world (Ferguson 2009; Marr 1991).Similarly, his work seems ripe, paradoxically perhaps, for an eco-materialist reading in which human beings are part of the nature they seek to understand, and "material phenomena are [so many] knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be read and interpreted as forming narratives": a multiply embodied, but also a multiply *storied* world (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1).

White's work is usually looked at for the insights it provides into human subjects and subjectivities; what if it were to be looked at instead in terms of the "material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things" (Bennett 2010, ix)? This need not lead us to neglect the spiritual dimensions of White's writing, for as several critics have made clear there is a dialectical interplay between spirituality and materiality in his work that considers God as being immanent in Nature, and that challenges the manufactured opposition between "pure" spirit and "degenerated" flesh (Grogan 2018; see also Giffin 2017; McCann 2015). Nor should it prompt us to reject those

celebrated "countries of the mind", liberally scattered throughout his oeuvre, which effectively turn "external" things – places, landscapes, natural phenomena – into objective correlatives for the thoughts and feelings of his characters: symbolic representations of their own frequently murky and contradictory "interior" worlds. Rather, symbols are doubly coded in White's work, pointing to a reality beyond themselves but also containing their *own* material reality. This last is irreducible to the various meanings that are projected onto it. Michael Giffin (2017) suggests as much when he quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer to the effect that

> [t]he symbol does not refer to something outside itself, [but rather] presents its own meaning. [The symbol] suggests meaning because it is constantly invoking what is not immediately given. This not-given does not exist apart from the given but is within it. (Gadamer, quoted in Giffin 2017, 41)

White's symbols function in precisely this way; like the words and images through which they are expressed, they are things in their own right, with a material presence and a vitality of their own that cannot be fully understood but that, nonetheless, have discernible material effects. Consider the role of the *elements* in his work, which on one level operate symbolically, but on another provide "the perceivable foundations of which worlds are composed, the animated materialities with and through which life thrives" (Cohen and Duckert 2015, 13). It is tempting to see the floods, fires, and storms that permeate White's oeuvre as evidence of God's work, and they are certainly powerful instruments of vision: famously so in *The Eye of the Storm* (White [1973] 1995), but also in *The Tree of Man*, which White's biographer David Marr (1991) sees as pointing to a "God that moves with the weather, a God of storms, floods, fire and disasters. Lightning is his mark in the sky" (290). Storms are both epochal events, with the "power to open souls" (White [1955] 1983, 151), and tests of faith in which the human beings subjected to them are reminded of forces – definitely natural, possibly supernatural – that are infinitely greater than themselves (50, 105). At the same time, however, they are what they are: major atmospheric disturbances in which the elements interact and human life – all life – is stripped down to the essentials, partaking of a dynamic world of drifts and flows in which solidity dissolves and virtually anything can be translated into virtually anything else (47, 72, 95).

Storms in *The Tree of Man* are the mark of a text that is both pared down and open to the cosmos, simultaneously aware of metaphysical grandeur and physical constraint. But even if they may open up onto other possible worlds, they are very much of *this* world, which is itself a volatile mix of compositional elements: caught in one such storm, Stan Parker witnesses "the whole earth [...] in motion, a motion of wind and streaming trees", and seems at risk of being carried away (White [1955] 1983, 47). In eco-materialist terms, we might describe the two great set pieces of *The Tree of Man*, in which Durilgai's inhabitants are thrown to the mercy of first flood then fire, as natural-cultural "assemblages" in which human and non-human forces violently collide and there is a "swarm of vitalities at play" (Bennett 2010, 32). This interplay emphasizes the precarious hold that human beings have over a planet that may be theirs to shape, but that they will never succeed in mastering. As we are told midway through the novel, "[i]n Durilgai the earth predominated over the human being" (White [1955] 1983, 203); and even Stan Parker, whose circadian rhythms move with those of the earth and who "knew the contours of

the landscape more intimately than he did the faces of men", remains a stranger to the natural world, which is a "perpetual mystery" to him, from the novel's tentative beginnings to its satisfying end (277).

Such attempts to decipher "mystery" have been seen as part of the metaphysical strivings of White's characters, some of whom seem intent on gaining access to a world beyond that of immediate sensory perception, a higher plane of reality "contained within the numinous world that drifts around [them]" (Beatson 1976, 61). However, there is no evidence in his work that this reality is any more substantial than the false solidity conveyed by material objects; and little evidence either, for all his characters' soul-searching, of some overarching order to the universe – some cosmic design or divine dispensation that might give meaning to their earthly labours, or that might allow them, reversing the "descent of the soul into matter, [to effect a] return by Grace, at the end of the cycle, to God" (Beatson 1976, 10; see also Giffin 2017).

Two points can briefly be made here, which also supply a segue into this article's next section. The first is that White's is a *planetary*, not a *cosmic*, perspective. If a cosmic perspective suggests order and holism of some kind, its planetary counterpart emphasizes chance and contingency; as Clark and Szerzynski put it, planets are compositionally diverse and "energetically open", separated from each other but also from themselves (2021, 81). Planets, by definition, are always in motion. To say that they are self-regulating systems does not mean that they are *homeostatic* systems; on the contrary, they are volatile and dynamic, more than capable of shifting from one state to another, or of becoming something else (172). The volatility of planets in general, and of our planet more specifically, is germane to White's work, in which the material world is continually on the move, and life, repeatedly dissolving and reconstituting itself, self-organizes kinetically in shifting patterns, reducing defined things to indefinite flows (White [1955] 1983, 72).

My second point is that the mode that best suits this perspective is the *comic*. As Peter Kirkpatrick points out, the higher strivings of White's central characters often "lurch comically towards bathos", and comic deflation – sometimes cruelly implemented – is one of the most readily identifiable characteristics of his work (Kirkpatrick, quoted in Giles 2019, 254). How should we account for White as a comic writer? And what difference does this comic vision make to the environmental as well as social aspects of his work?

The cosmic and the comic

The cosmic significance of White's novels is usually linked to what Carolyn Bliss calls their "opening of the way to transcendence of the human condition" (1986, 135): a transcendence which, whether achieved or not, "consistently affirms a controlling and often explicitly divine design" (203). Bliss sees White's work in terms of a "felicitous failure" (207) on the part of its characters to achieve the transcendence that sporadic moments of illumination in the novels might point towards, but is less inclined to question the various ways in which such moments, and the larger (cosmological?) patterns within which they are positioned, are repeatedly undercut. At one level, divine design *seems* to be present in his work, but there is little direct textual evidence to support this. Meanwhile, the cosmic symbols around which some of his novels are

organized – the mandala in *The Solid Mandala* (White [1966] 1983), the chariot in *Riders in the Chariot* (White [1961] 1996) – are stylistic devices rather than spiritual conduits, suggesting an aesthetic rather than a religious or supra-human pattern, and almost certainly not, as Bliss has it, the kind of "figural realism" by which novelistic characters and events are predicated on some kind of "comprehensive plan" (203).

Similarly, what uplifting moments there are in the texts tend to be rapidly brought back down to earth, while any temptation we might have to read White's novels as moral fables – the need to accept responsibility, the value of kindness to others, etc. – is counteracted by their high-camp grandstanding, neo-absurdist dialogue, and more than occasional tendency to lapse into what Paul Giles bluntly if accurately calls the "psychopathology of burlesque" (2019, 249). While Giles is mainly concerned to point out the "antiphonal" aspects of White's work, the various ways in which polarized categories and genres – tragedy and comedy, for instance – are intermingled, he gives fitting emphasis to White's "fractious comedy, which sometimes manifests itself in aggressive satire, with the follies of human self-aggrandisement being savagely brought low" (252).

My own view of White as a comic writer is indebted to a book written half a century ago, but one whose pronouncements on comedy, as well as its connections to ecology, are almost uncannily applicable to his work. The book, Joseph Meeker's (1972) *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, operates on the premise that "the origins of environmental crisis lie deep in [western] cultural traditions at levels of human mentality which have remained virtually unchanged for several thousand years" (6). The modern science of ecology, Meeker believes, supports the comic point of view, which he sees as one in which "man's high moral ideals and glorified heroic poses are [exposed] as fantasy, and are likely to lead to misery or death for those who hold them" (26). "In the world as revealed by comedy", Meeker asserts, "the important thing is to live and to encourage life even though it is probably meaningless to do so. If the survival of the species is trivial, then so too is comedy" (26).

This is White's work to a T, as is the comparison between comedy and ecology that shortly follows this assertion: "Comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with avoiding or transcending the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible" (Meeker 1972, 30–31). While Meeker's distinction between comedy and tragedy is overdrawn, and while one of the characteristics of White's work is its capacity to move "antiphonally" between them, his words are suggestive of the processes by which some of White's tragic figures (Voss, Elizabeth Hunter, etc.) *become* comic, as well as the ways in which some of his major characters (his minor ones being *merely* comic) are able to achieve an elevated comic status that marks them out as simultaneously extraordinary and absurd.

Even closer to the mark is Meeker's assertion that a "prerequisite of tragedy is the belief that the universe cares about the lives of human beings" (1972, 36). "There must be a faith", he goes on,

> that some sort of superior order exists, and that man will be punished if he transgresses against it. [...] There must be abstract ideas and values which are worth suffering for, otherwise the hero's painful quest for spiritual purity and enlightenment becomes absurd. (37)

Exactly so, or at least for White, who punctures this heroism even as he presents it, revealing in the process that according to the comic vision, "man is a part of nature and subject to all natural limitations and flaws" (37). Still, Meeker and White are by no means an ideal match, and the former's emphasis on the "comedy of survival" is gainsaid by the obvious fact that many of the latter's central characters, from Stan Parker in *The Tree of Man* to Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* (White [1970] 1994), fail to survive. (In some cases – Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*, for instance – it is death itself rather the possibility of regeneration beyond it that becomes a source of comedy; while in others, notably Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt's Story* (White [1948] 1985), survival is more tragic than comic, or is at least deeply compromised in terms of what the future holds.) For all that, there is evidence in White's work of the regenerative properties that Meeker jointly ascribes to the comic mode and the natural world, while early works like *The Tree of Man* in particular describe the general move from the cosmic to the comic in textually specific ways that mirror what Meeker calls "the development of [an] environmental ethic based [not on spiritual transcendence but] upon the human experience of events in the world" (1972, 138). *The Tree of Man*, generally accepted as being White's "greenest" work, associates this ethic first and foremost with the stalwart figure of Stan Parker, who is seen throughout the novel as being inseparable from the landscapes through which he moves and in which he acts (White [1955] 1983, 359). This communion between "soul and scene" (397) appears to be given cosmic significance in the novel's closing sequences, in one of which Stan, his physical strength now in terminal decline, is positioned at the heart of a mandala-like concentric pattern, radiating outwards from his body to take in other material and, possibly, spiritual worlds:

> That afternoon the old man's chair had been put on the grass at the back, which was quite dead-looking from the touch of winter. Out there at the back, the grass, you could hardly call it a lawn, had formed a circle in the shrubs and trees which the old woman [Amy Parker, Stan's wife] had not so much planted as stuck in during her lifetime. There was little of design in the garden originally, though one had formed out of the wilderness. It was perfectly obvious that the man [Stan Parker] was seated at the heart of it, and from this heart the trees radiated, with grave movements of life. [...] All was circumference to the centre, and beyond that were the worlds of other circles, whether crescent of purple villas or the bare patches of earth, on which rabbits sat and observed some abstract spectacle for minutes on end, in a paddock not yet built upon. The last circle but one was the cold and golden bowl of winter, enclosing all that was visible and material, and at which the man would blink from time to time, out of his watery eyes, unequal to the effort of realizing he was at the centre of it. (474)

The passage invites the reader to look beyond the tranquil domestic scene it enacts, conjuring up a "cosmovision" of precarious wholeness in which an entire "cosmos of relations [appears to speak] to the complex entanglements of the human and the more-than-human world" (Adamson and Monani 2020, 2). However, as is typical for White, the scene is immediately followed by a comic exchange between world-weary Stan and a naive young evangelist, eager to tell him the story of the Gospels and to grant him, in

what is clear will be his life's final moments, the redemptive power of God's Grace. This exchange is the prelude to the much commented-upon epiphany in which old Stan, impervious to the young preacher's charms, points to a gob of spittle and calls it God, which has variously been interpreted as possible evidence of White's intuitive link between the sacred and the abject (Grogan 2018), or as a gloriously vulgar example of the restless interchange between the material and the spiritual in his work (McCredden 2014). Both interpretations are valid enough, but both also overlook the extent to which the "base" example as well as the "higher" vision it gives rise to are patently absurd. Indeed, *The Tree of Man*, at several different levels, is a paradigmatic mid-20th-century absurdist text, marked by the conspicuous mismatch between its different component parts – incongruity is one of the main sources for its comedy – and stalked by an existential sadness that it never seems entirely able to rise above. Hence the novel's likening of human beings to worker ants, purposefully but pointlessly busying themselves in a world that is far beyond their measure (White [1955] 1983, 50, 105, 283, 407); and hence the ever-present threat of suicide, realized in some cases (the village postmaster, another of White's tormented artist-figures) and narrowly avoided in others (Stan Parker as a kind of countryfied Hamlet, repeatedly if fruitlessly pondering the purpose of life [323, 331] and waiting, Beckett-style, for an enlightenment that never comes [333]).

As the above examples suggest, comedy is biological in White's work, and biology is comic. If anything is consistent in his work, it is the way in which human beings are represented as embodied animals, with animal drives and instincts; and for all their spiritual yearnings his characters are things in a world of things, if also a world in which things are constantly moving, possessing an "energetic vitality" of their own (Bennett 2010, 5). White's is, to repeat, a *materialist* vision of the world that is best seen from a planetary perspective; it is also a *queer* vision of the world in which social and broader ecological interactions are considered from a non-normative perspective – are viewed aslant. The queer dimensions of White's work have yet to be given the attention they deserve, or have tended to be reduced to his homosexuality; in the next section of this article I want briefly to consider what is to be gained from looking at his work from a *queer ecological* standpoint that opens up alternative understandings of human/non-human relations and questions the "naturalness" of the natural world.

Queer ecologies

The first step in making the case for a "queer White" is to decouple it from his sexuality. There *are* queer characters in White's work, of course, along with scattered episodes – some implied, others overt, many of them camply extravagant – of homoerotic attraction and same-sex love. However, "queer" functions primarily in his oeuvre as a destabilizing force that is linked, on the one hand, to transgressive or marginal states of being and, on the other, to his radical questioning, insistent in his later novels but also apparent in his earlier ones, of the concept of a unitary self (Lang 2015, 195). "Queer", we might say, following Judith Butler and others, is less a descriptive noun or qualifying adjective than a transitive *verb* in White: queer is as queer does – it is a non-normative way of looking at, and acting upon, the world (Butler [1990] 2006; Sedgwick 2012). Paul Giles rightly mentions a "queering of the conventional social realm" in

White's work, associating this – rightly again – with the "sadistic delight" with which he skewers the pride and pomposity of characters who either have ideas above their station or, still worse, seek to protect their social status by conforming to imprisoning societal norms (2019, 255–256).

However, as should be clear by now, White's work pushes beyond anthropocentric understandings of the social. In gesturing to the "material interconnectivity of all things" (Henderson 2015, 190), we might see White as promulgating a form of "queer empathy", Nicole Seymour's (2013) capacious term for the imaginative capacity to forge "empathetic, ethical interrelations between the queer and the nonhuman" (23), suggesting that queer values, which attach in non-species-specific ways to immediate rather than familial relations, might also be the "most effective ecological values" in the long run (37; see also Abberley et al., Forthcoming). Some of White's most empathetic characters – from Bub Quigley in *The Tree of Man* to Mary Hare in *Riders in the Chariot* – are self-styled "children of nature", professedly "in love with animals, birds and plants" (White [1961] 1996, 15; see also White [1955] 1983, 183). Fringe characters such as these are visionaries of a kind, claiming to believe in what they see, but also what they cannot: Mary Hare pledges her faith in "thunderstorms, and wet grass, and patches of light, and stillness" (White [1961] 1996, 60); while Bub Quigley concerns himself, not so much with looking at things as looking *through* things, curious to discover what might be on the other side (White [1955] 1983, 17, 105). Both are cognitively impaired, at least to some degree, and certainly both are deeply strange, although the price paid for their strangeness – their effective exclusion from human society – is made up for by a quality of honesty and directness that allows them to make connections between different orders of existence: to see their own strangeness as mirrored in the strangeness of the natural world. This goes as well for those, like Stan and Amy Parker in *The Tree of Man*, who are able to function more or less "normally" in society, but who – Stan particularly – are often happiest operating around its edges. (Stan, described as queer in this last sense [White (1955 1983), 260], is steady but slow, while Amy is an orphan; queerness is often identified in White's work with the romantic figure of the outsider, a condition he famously recognized in himself [Marr 1991, 311]).

Queerness is an *epistemological* term in White's work, describing alternative – largely intuitive – ways of knowing as well as looking at the world. It is also an *ecological* term that designates a more-than-human – a planetary – perspective. The connections between queerness and ecology are well documented. For Timothy Morton (2010), ecology *is* queer in the sense that its intricate web of natural/cultural interdependencies challenges restricted identity categories, while Stacy Alaimo (2010) has drawn attention to homosexuality as a common feature of sexual relations in the natural world. Perhaps the best-known intervention, however, is that of Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (2010), whose influential edited collection *Queer Ecologies* works largely the opposite way, arguing that queer subjects are positioned, and treated accordingly, as "unnatural": a subaltern positioning – also a treatment – that White examines in some detail in his work. As the term "ecology" implies, "unnaturalness" is an effect of the spaces to which these subjects are assigned or, more accurately, the spaces from which they are excluded, though as just suggested this has more to do with the perceived *strangeness* of their appearance or behaviour than with their sexuality per se.

The "queerness" of Bub Quigley in *The Tree of Man* is of this general, desexualized kind, linked mainly to what others take to be his "terrible simplicity" (White [1955] 1983, 117), but also to his predilection for taking pleasure in things and situations that others find at best trivial or irrelevant and, at worst, perverse. During the flood, he incurs widespread disgust for stroking the face of an old man, previously found dead upside down in a tree, whose unnatural pose and rictus smile he reads as signs of inherent goodness; restrained from exploring this possibility further, he takes solace instead in a "curious round stone", which commands his full attention, an entire "world [now] concentrated in his hand" (84). This second example points to a "mysticism of objects" (384) which, as so often in White's work, implicitly represents a queering of perception: an everyday form of queer phenomenology, as Sara Ahmed (2006) expresses it, that "emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, [and] the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand" (2). What strikes Bub as perfectly natural is often deeply disquieting to others; early on in the novel, Amy Parker – some of whose actions are themselves seen as queer – is slightly nauseated by the sight of Bub, whose harmless attempts to share the patterns he is making with a cat's cradle make her feel as if she is "beginning to slip"; as if she hasn't "a hold on anything in this world" (White [1955] 1983, 52–53).

This disorienting effect is likened by Ahmed to the fact that "queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact" (2006, 4). Phenomenology is full, Ahmed contends, of queer moments of disorientation in which we are made aware, either through our own actions or those of others, of "our own contingency, and the horror with which it fills us" (Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Ahmed 2006, 4). Uncanny perception of this kind brings queer ecology into concert with queer phenomenology, suggesting that "spaces are not exterior to bodies; [...] they are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (9). Spaces, to expand this suggestive idea, are not external to *either* the human *or* the non-human bodies that fill them. Rather, both belong to a vast planetary network of shifting energies and forces that orients itself in different ways, and where orientation – what Ahmed describes as the process of "making the strange familiar through the extension of [material] bodies into space" – alternates with *dis*orientation, which is what happens "when that extension fails" (2006, 11).

This planetary appreciation of White may seem fresh-found, but the fact of the matter is that it has long been recognized in the dynamic, distinctly painterly composition of his fictional work. "White's characters have a living, organic relationship with the sensuous world that surrounds them", argued the myth-critic Peter Beatson back in 1976, unwittingly anticipating today's arsenal of "new materialists", who present similar sentiments albeit in dissimilar critical terms (1976, 133; see also Coole and Frost 2010). In White's work, Beatson continues no less presciently, "there is a [strong] sense of 'being there' in the phenomenal world, an openness to the pulsations and emanations of places and things which is more commonly found in poetry than in the novel" – and perhaps more commonly found in painting than in both (1976, 133). Where Beatson errs is in his insistence on reading the mythical/mystical elements of White's novels according to a series of more or less fixed codes that move from the literal to the anagogical level, with the elements, for example, ultimately serving as "interchangeable symbols for the

spiritual life" (143). As previously argued, this is *not* the case in White, where the elements are material forces rather than symbolic indices, possessing an agency and power of their own that is beyond human consciousness and control. Much closer to the spirit of White's work is the eco-materialist view that supports – in Iovino and Oppermann's terms – a "distributive vision of agency [and] the emergent nature of the world's phenomena" (2014, 5). According to this view, there are few boundaries to speak of between "human semiotic processes, knowledge practices, and the very material world itself" (28) – a vision probably most apparent in the treatment of everyday objects in White's work.

The social lives of things

Things have lives of their own in White's oeuvre, possessing a seemingly mystical power that goes well beyond their immediate exchange- or use-value. White's characters are frequently defined by the things they own: things that others may also covet. Social relationships are also defined by things: Ray Parker's homoerotically charged friendship with Con the Greek in *The Tree of Man*, for example, the terms of which are negotiated in "hard [conversations] about objects, nails and saws and knives" (White [1955] 1983, 228). Ray is intrigued by what Con owns, and wants his possessions for himself even if he doesn't understand their significance (229). Things, thought of as essentials to some, may be mere accessories to others, while still others, confusing the one with the other, are reduced to the ornamental objects they own: Madeleine Fisher's showy brooch, Thelma Forsdyke's ugly crocodile bag (425, 395). Things may also disappear only to make an unexpected return – the Parkers' "stolen" nutmeg grater (476) – or lodge indiscriminately but obsessively in the memory (320). Things have independent lives whether or not they are technically alive, and whether or not they are connected to the people who handle them. At times, they possess the people who supposedly possess them, changing in shape and size as they change in significance. One such instance is when Amy Parker, foraging irritably in her cabbage patch, pleads with Stan to sell a few, only for both to be left standing there, with

> what had been bright jewels in the field of past and present [now reduced] to ludicrous lumps of cynical rubber. [...]
>
> "You get worked up over nothing," he said tautly.
>
> To explain in that way.
>
> "I like to know the reasons for things" she said. [... But neither] could explain their continued existence in [the] plot of cabbages, and magpies came over, and jolly peewits, and little anonymous birds, descending and picking in the moist earth, as if the man and woman had not been there. (398)

The passage is typical of White's work in shuttling between different orders and levels of association, as well as between different spatial and temporal realms. But it is also typical in accentuating the material realities onto which these various associations project, realities that simultaneously invite and resist explanation. People, cabbages, birds: all are living, moving things in a world (a planet?) of things which includes the words being used to describe them; and each thing is incalculable in its own way (Bennett 2010, 63).

The word "thing", far from conveying the quality of being inert, conjures up a liveliness that is shared, if not always evenly or equally. Similarly, the interaction between things suggests what Jane Bennett (2010) calls a "congregational understanding of agency" in which human and non-human actors function collaboratively, and things, however categorized, operate "in excess of the human meanings or purposes [they are designed] to serve" (20–21). White's fiction is a good match for Bennett's distinction between *objects* and *things*, the latter of which she describes as "vivid entities, [neither] entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them [nor] entirely exhausted by their semiotics" (5). His novels are awash with non-human energies and forces that are highly suggestive of what Bennett calls the "vitality [that is] intrinsic to matter" (10). This vitality is then replicated in human bodies, which can themselves be seen as complex material systems, enmeshed in a "knotted world of vibrant matter" in which all bodies, human and non-human, are related even if no two bodies, human or non-human, are alike (13).

Two previously mentioned examples from *The Tree of Man* suffice to bring this out, both of them related to the spectacular set pieces, the flood and the fire, around which the first half of the novel is arranged. These mock-trials by water and fire, respectively, are marked by a fluid interplay between human and non-human actors which is strikingly resonant with eco-materialist understandings of the vitality of matter, highlighting the extent, as Bennett puts it, to which "human being and thinghood overlap" (2010, 4). Flood and fire destroy what people have made, but also wash away any pretensions they might have to self-importance: they thus act as dissolving agents in both a broad metaphorical and a strict material sense (White [1955] 1983, 71). In the aftermath of the flood, a boatload of local men, Stan Parker included among them, is conscripted to rescue whomever and whatever they can in a "half-submerged world" that merges seamlessly with their fearful memories and thoughts (73). Stan, drawn inexorably into this liminal realm,

> remembered the face of his mother before her burial, when the skull disclosed what the eyes had always hidden, some fear that the solidity of things around her was not assured. But in the dissolved world of flowing water, under the drifting trees, it was obvious that solidity is not. (73)

Stan's experience of the fire is equally disorienting. Here, too, a rescue party is formed and the men in it are forced to consider the implications of their impermanence – and the impermanence of the things they have fashioned for themselves – as they scan a starkly "blackened hillside [where] each [of them] remembered his house, whether of brick, wood, iron or bark, which until now he had considered solid, and all those objects he had accumulated, and without which he would not have been himself" (White [1955] 1983, 171). The fire, like the flood, is both a material force and an immaterializing agent. It has the capacity to reduce men to things, but also to remind them of the insubstantiality of their own "thinghood"; at the same time, it opens them up to wider horizons: the workings of the earth system, the planetary dimensions of fire-scorched ground which, like fire itself, "links the small to the great, the life of a log to the life of the world" (Bachelard 1964, 16; al [...] so quoted in Clark and Szerszynski 2021, 52).

The elements – living embodiments of vital materialism at work – open up what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls the "social history of things" (1988, 34) to a planetary perspective in which they are dwarfed by deep time, but also potentially endowed with cosmic significance. This dual perspective is embedded in the elements themselves as the basic building blocks of life and as that which takes life away, with earth, air, water, and fire all participating in a continual process of ruin and regeneration that represents a "kinetic intermingling at every [imaginable] scale" (Cohen and Duckert 2015, 3). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert use this double-edged conception of the elements to support their view of matter at large as a "dynamic entity [rather than] a reservoir of tractable commodities" (2015, 5), as well as to advocate for an eco-materialist criticism in which elemental activity and environmental justice are conjoined. Moving swiftly now to my close, I want to ask whether White has the capacity to support a similar form of environmental advocacy in his fictional work.

Conclusion: A poem of life

In the last chapter of *The Tree of Man*, Ray Parker Jr (Stan's grandson), left to carry on the legacy of his recently deceased grandfather, first envisages composing a "poem of death", but soon switches his attention to its living counterpart:

> His poem was growing [inside]. It would have the smell of bread, and the rather grey wisdom of youth, and his grandmother's kumquats, and girls with yellow plaits exchanging love-talk behind their hands, and the blood thumping like a drum, and red apples, and a little wisp of white cloud that will swell into a horse and trample the whole sky once it gets the wind inside it. (White [1955] 1983, 480)

The poem is never written; or, if it is, it is scribbled indecipherably on "the already scribbled trees", which, standing sentinel "in the gulley behind [Stan's] house, on a piece of poor land that nobody wants to use", guard what the young boy sees as being the secret of his grandfather's greatness (479–480).

Whether the word "greatness" applies to Stan is moot – as for that matter is whether it applies to White himself. Simon During (1996) rather sourly sees White's fiction in terms of a vainglorious attempt to convince himself of his own greatness, though other critics, Christos Tsiolkas among them, are prepared to grant the accolade to at least some of his written work (Tsiolkas 2018; see also Introduction above). Michael Giffin is probably closer to the mark when he wryly remarks, near the beginning of *Patrick White and God*, that "[i]n the 20th century, many Australians liked White's work having read all of it. Many disliked it, preferring to judge it without having read it. Most were in between" (2017, 16). As for our own times, there is some evidence to back up During's late-20th-century view – or, perhaps better, his hope – that White's work would gradually diminish in importance, but also the equal and opposite view, supported by a number of recent commemorative collections, that it has never been as important as it is now (see, for example, Henderson and Lang 2015). Again, the truth probably lies in between. "White studies" today act, as perhaps they always have, as a touchstone for the latest critical trends, from New Criticism to deconstruction to queer theory, though – as Giffin

mischievously points out – it remains uncertain as to whether these trends "fit" White's work or are made to fit it, and in so doing redirect readerly attention to themselves (2017, 16).

Literary criticism, whether this is acknowledged or not, is always a battle over method, so the second of Giffin's observations (backed up by a seemingly fixed view of the methods he finds most relevant to White) is little more than a throwaway point. Nevertheless, there is always a risk in staking claim to the validity of a "new" critical approach, especially at a time when literary and other forms of cultural criticism are under pressure worldwide to be "transformational", playing their part within a neo-liberal knowledge economy which is aggressively global in its scope, if not always evenly experienced in its local and regional effects. An eco-materialist approach to White should thus probably come equipped with some kind of accompanying caveat, though as I hope to have shown here there is much to be gained from reassessing the broader ecological as well as the more narrowly social and psychological dimensions of his work. White's fiction is not "environmentalist" in the most commonly accepted sense of that always tricky term, and there is precious little evidence in it to suggest that it might work as a stimulus to environmental action beyond the text. However, individual works such as *The Tree of Man* can certainly be seen, in their own idiosyncratic way, as exploring the imaginative possibilities of an environmental ethic: one located in the kinds of everyday actions and behaviours that promote care and respect for non-human animals and a broadly egalitarian attitude towards the natural world. Ecocritical approaches to Australian literature more generally seem to be on the rise, though these are still arguably outflanked by ongoing work in environmental and/or ecological humanities: broad cross-disciplinary formations in which literature, if it features at all, often performs a relatively minor role (Rigby 2019). Such critical balancing acts are a healthy part of national culture; still, whether the idea of a self-sustaining "national culture" is itself healthy seems worthy of continuing debate, especially in the twin contexts of entrenched Australian cultural nationalism and tediously persistent commentaries to the effect that Australian literature and the critical industries that support it are dead.

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