

Resuscitating the Body: Corporeality in the Fiction of Patrick White

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Patrick White's fiction is arguably best known for its metaphysics, in particular its presentation of identity as open to a transcendental dissolution. His writing is therefore often read as dismissive of the physical world, exhibiting in particular an impatience, and even disgust, with embodiment. Yet White's novels do not necessarily correlate with a desire to escape the body so much as to evade discursive subjectivity. They are primarily concerned with the individual's attempt to attain some kind of illuminating revelation, an intuitive epiphany that occurs when rational consciousness dissolves and the character yields to moments of communion—with other individuals, with the landscape, with all aspects of physicality including the onset of death, or with repressed and transgressive aspects of the psyche. These instances exemplify what Bill Ashcroft names White's writerly striving for a 'synthesis of self and other' linked to the theme of the 'sacred' within his work ('Horizon' 132). Further, they coincide with the disintegration of socialised identity, a dissolution constituting the redemptive reward or grace bestowed upon White's often disenfranchised protagonists. Like Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt's Story*, these characters yearn to 'destroy the great monster Self' (128). It has not been the critical consensus, however, that transcendence in White involves transcending subjectivity rather than corporeality. Andrew Riemer argues that White's fiction is 'dedicated to the notion that the body, the flesh and the senses are utterly worthless' (26). Brian Kiernan reads the work as presenting 'the soul imprisoned in the corrupting flesh' (462). And, for Peter Beatson, White's fiction dismisses the body entirely: 'Every book ends with the implication that the shell has, or will split apart, having outlived its protective and gestative functions' (110).

Because identity may be conceptualised as body image, the yearning to escape it could equate to the desire to evade one's embodiment. As Jacques Lacan has famously contended, when the infant first perceives its mirror reflection it is enthralled by the vision of the body as others see it, by its first perception of a unified self. Through the mirror reflection, the child's body becomes a coherent image and the notion of the ego is accordingly consolidated. Elizabeth Grosz explains: 'through the fantasy of a cohesive, stable identity, facilitated by its specular identification with its own image, [the child] is able to position itself as a subject within the space of its body' (82). Identity thus comes into being through the misrecognition of an external 'self' or body that represents a coherence that does not correspond to the felt experience of embodiment.¹ The child therefore replaces its sense of itself as a series of corporeal sensations with an image of the body that does not express these sensations. By this understanding, rational subjectivity is tenuous and may succumb to the disruptive and obliterating flooding of corporeality into experience, an engulfment occurring in White's fiction as moments of a sublime and supposed transcendence.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the body emerges into our conceptual understanding as an *image* of subjectivity. Corporeality, however, or the materiality, sensations and functions of the body, exceeds our discursive constructions. Ian Burkitt argues that the body must necessarily precede and exceed discourse. He rightly criticises post-structuralism, in particular theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, for subordinating the 'experience of being a body' to the 'mechanism to which the body is constructed' (94). In literature,

however, the experience of embodiment is necessarily an aspect of narrative description. For Patrick White in particular, the ‘experience of being a body’ is fundamental to characters whose material bodies specifically assert themselves against the identities the symbolic order prescribes them, normative identities of class, gender, heterosexuality and colonial Englishness, to name a few. The body in his fiction thus always exceeds discourse—even his own, it would seem. As Ashcroft argues, the sacred is manifested in White’s writing via a concern with the “‘unpresentability’ of the sublime’ evident in the ‘reality of material things, and the persistent inability of language to fully apprehend it’ (‘Presence of the Sacred’ 96). While he refers here to the significant presence of inanimate objects in White’s fiction, the human body also arises frequently to challenge language’s ability to apprehend fully the specificity of corporeality. White is fascinated with the excesses of corporeality, which often seem to equate to a kind of narrative excess within texts that are prolix, poetically ambiguous and redolent with physical detail. His fascination with the materiality of the body specifically and the phenomenal world in general assists his interrogation of the discourses of dualism that define modernity and that are crucial to the formation of subjectivity (the binaries of mind/body, self/other, for example). Moreover, it engenders the pervading sense of sublimity intrinsic to his fiction. As Lyn McCredden has recently argued, White’s fiction exemplifies an ‘incarnational understanding’ involving the ‘sacred and material in constant exchange’ (110). White’s writing, then, does not derogate the body but deploys it thematically to recuperate a sense of corporeal significance that it appears to interpret as lost to modern Western culture, and arguably, by extension, to the language of the novel itself. It foregrounds what has long been a central tenet of Classical and post-Enlightenment philosophy: the ineradicable distinction between mind and body.

This essay contends, though, that White’s fiction emphasises dualism only to subvert it, ultimately promoting the necessity of reintegrating corporeality into our concepts of the self and the text. While I am not suggesting that White is a theorist turned author, or even that his approach to the body constitutes a conscious philosophical framework, his fiction nevertheless suggests its own imaginative and intuitive philosophy of the body that is consistently explored throughout his oeuvre. Most notable in relation to this implicit philosophy is White’s tendency to conceptualise characters as fragments of the self or the literary text rather than as figures complete in themselves. This is not to say that his characters remain flat: they are frequently provided with compelling biographies and complex responses. Nevertheless, White’s writing dramatises personality as founded upon the disavowal or acceptance of aspects of the self traditionally denied or downplayed within Western epistemology. In particular, his writing explores the schism of ‘mind’ and ‘body’ emphasised in philosophical discourse since Plato and becoming particularly important to post-Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity subsequent to Descartes’ radical division of consciousness and corporeality (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). The modern belief in ontological disembodiment is the frequent focus of White’s fiction, contributing to its critique of modernity and its consistent interest in its characters’ differing relations to the body. Further, this interest in these relations is dramatised as the potentially contrasting responses of the self to its inevitable corporeality.

Our inconsistent responses to the body have often been the focus of theoretical interest. Peter Brooks, for instance, takes as examples the multiple ways in which the body is described in language, arguing that attitudes to embodiment are peculiarly changeable: we are, ‘in various conceptions or metaphors, in our body, or having a body, or at one with our body, or alienated from it’ (1). For Anthony Synnott, moreover, the ‘one word, body’, may signify ‘very different realities and perceptions of reality’ (80), both to oneself and between different

people. Furthermore, bodies emerge differently in narrative. In *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Daniel Punday argues that two of the ways in which the body surfaces as a meaningful narratological object is via the sorting of body types and the degree of embodiment accorded to a character. Punday observes that ‘every narrative implicitly or explicitly defines a certain range of body types’, and that it is via the comparison of bodies in the text that ‘character bodies primarily enter into semantic relations, since by sorting bodies into types a narrative defines the contrasts that underlie thematic, symbolic, and psychological patterns’ (61). Further, ‘narratives must define character bodies’ according to the ‘degree to which individuals are embodied’ (66). As Punday explains, the degree of embodiment ‘describes how closely we should associate characters with [their] bodies’ (66). He argues that this gradation is essential to narratology, so much so that the ‘potential distance between body and character is an element of the interpretation of a narrative, just like the potential distance between the viewpoint of a narrator and that of the author’ (66). In White’s writing, the sorting of bodies into gradations of embodiment is particularly important, for his fiction both stages and undermines the myth of dualism defining Western assumptions, and his characters, through his exploratory and imaginative approach to the body, are constructed according to this logic of emphasis and subversion, representing and critiquing or affirming differing attitudes to the flesh.

In their embodiment of different approaches to physicality, White’s characters deny the body, accept it, live it, suffer it, succumb to it, celebrate it, or move between these various positions. Moreover, they slide along a continuum of masochism and sensuality, sometimes exhibiting both responses to their bodies. As White divulges in his autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, ‘the puritan in me has always wrestled with the sensualist’ (151). ‘Patrick White’, the quasi-fictional ‘editor’ of White’s most postmodern novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, similarly admits to being both ‘sybarite and masochist’ (16). In *The Twyborn Affair*, moreover, Gravenor accuses Eadith Trist of having ‘a savage nymphomaniac inside [her], and a stern puritan holding her back’ (344). Such ambivalence dramatises the opposing attitudes White envisions as constituting the self, suggesting, in addition, the tension between civilised morality and libidinal desire made famous in the theories of Freud, Norbert Elias, Lacan and Kristeva. Indeed, White’s fiction foregrounds the dynamic interaction of the contrary forces of social law and bodily, libidinal excess defining subjectivity, sometimes dividing characters into those who represent symbolic Law, and those who embody corporeal excess. Whatever White’s characters’ relations to the flesh may be, these relations define their positions in the narrative, for it is corporeality that ultimately asserts itself and prevails in his fiction. To ignore the body in White, as the object (and abject) of differing attitudes and as an enduring theme, is to deny a fundamental dimension of the work.²

The different relations to embodiment evinced in White’s fiction arguably represent the author’s own conflicted attitude to his body. In *Flaws in the Glass*, White famously imagines his writing as an introduction to the ‘cast of characters of which I am composed’ (20), claiming his face to be ‘many-faceted’ and his ‘body protean, according to [...] the demands of fiction’ (153). David Marr’s capacious biography maintains that bronchial difficulties and homosexuality placed White in ambivalent relation to his body. While, as Marr suggests, White masochistically despised his sickliness and resented his status as a social outsider (Marr 75), his fiction shows that he sought value in the body, which, despite being the site of social stigma, is also a source of sensuous delight. Moreover, White questioned the metaphysical significance of physicality and arguably found solace in locating meaning, sacred and banal, in the flesh, despite, and indeed because of, the historical refusal of Western culture to do so. However, White’s writing does not merely provide a tentative theatrical

stage for creative authorial ‘selving’ and thus for the dramatisation of his conflicting personal attitudes toward the body. The notion of the extension of the self into the lives of others, which requires the mirroring and contrasting of characters, is overtly thematised within the fiction. In *The Living and the Dead*, Elyot Standish eventually recognises himself as central to a pattern of the lives of others: “Alone he was not yet alone, uniting as he did the themes of so many other lives’ (18, 357). Similarly, Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* advances the idea that ‘we are not one but many’ (100). Accordingly, White’s characters may reflect disavowed aspects of a self that is often embodied by a significant protagonist, a character who must reintegrate the elements of existence that he or she has abjected and that others represent. This dramatisation of psychological fragmentation informs what Manfred Mackenzie has identified as White’s allegorical dimension. Mackenzie focuses on Theodora Goodman’s tendency in *The Aunt’s Story* to invent phantasmagorical characters as the externalisation of her troubled and fragmented psyche, arguing that she ‘selves in this way because she is the typically “generative” hero of the morally charged allegory, who generates characters that are aspects of himself [sic] and who can only be understood as such’ (9).

White’s fictions are indeed ‘morally charged allegories’, emphasising the ethical necessity of accepting the flesh. In their recuperation of abjected aspects of the self and society, moreover, they challenge discourses of normality, celebrating the disavowed, ‘transgressive’, or ignored aspects of existence: physicality, sexuality, or sensual immersion in the landscape. Further, White’s fiction challenges the narcissism that corresponds to the idea that the self is a disembodied entity merely tied to, and thus always superior to, the material world. This is evident in *Voss*, where the imagery of evolutionary biology is deployed to foreground Voss’s dualist, hubristic consciousness:

Blank faces, like so many paper kites, themselves earth-bound, or at most twitching in the warm shallows of atmosphere, dangling a vertebral tail, could prevent him soaring towards the apotheosis for which he was reserved. To what extent others had entangled him in the string of human limitations, he had grown desperate in wondering. (178)

To counter the notion of the transcendental ego, White’s writing revolves around the human body, consistently returning to corporeality as a focus of narrative drive and interest. The body, moreover, becomes particularly ethically significant within writing that compels characters and reader alike to locate value—often spiritual—within embodied existence. As Stan Parker famously proclaims at the conclusion of *The Tree of Man*, while pointing to a goblet of his saliva, ‘That is God’ (495).

Nevertheless, White contends with a history of Western dualism that would dismiss the body as, at the least, a mechanism or shell, and, at the most, a prison-house of corruption. His fiction acknowledges this philosophical position seemingly to contest it. Conflicting attitudes toward the body are therefore often quite explicit in his writing. In the short story ‘Dead Roses’, for example, two characters vie comically over a toilet seat, their respective indignation revealing their attitudes toward corporeality. The first character, Mrs Scudamore, insists that the seat should remain closed, ‘otherwise the room becomes—well, without wanting to be crude—frankly—smelly’ (*Burnt Ones* 51). The other, Mr Mortlock, resolutely resists such primness:

Mrs Scudamore continued to close the lid and Mr Mortlock to open it. Their principles made it difficult for them to face each other any more. And Mrs

Scudamore realized her hair was falling out; she discovered handfuls of it in her comb. (51)

This example neatly encapsulates the corporeal conflict central to White's work. Nevertheless, White's excremental vision supports Team Mortlock, consistently disallowing repression and denial, and figuratively opening the toilet seat when the repressions of civilisation insist upon keeping the lid firmly closed. Indeed, because Mrs Scudamore closes herself off to physical processes, her own body ultimately betrays and overwhelms her: her hair loss confirms that the body will continuously assert its presence and that its processes are beyond the grasping control of a supposedly foreclosed human consciousness. The inevitable return of the body to those who deny it is a common theme in White's writing, and his novels of fragmentation thus depict those aspects of the self that require integration.

Body-denying characters are important within such fiction of psychological fragmentation. They promote a rational, dualist view of the world, which the texts consistently work to subvert. Elyot Standish of *The Living and the Dead*, Johann Ulrich Voss and, initially, Laura Trevelyan of *Voss*, Waldo Brown of *The Solid Mandala*, Hurtle Duffield of *The Vivisector*, and Austin Roxburgh of *A Fringe of Leaves* variously attempt to disassociate themselves from the body. They may—like the bloodless, Casaubon-ish intellectuals, Elyot, Waldo and Austin—view it as inessential yet threatening to the notion of the self. Elyot privileges the mind over the body, promoting the 'intellectual puzzle as a substitute for living' (*Living and the Dead* 174). His desire to 'take refuge behind what people told him was a scholarly mind' arises from a fear of death that paradoxically resolves as a kind of alienating death-in-life (176). Waldo Brown, like Elyot, repudiates the flesh signified by his brother, Arthur, in favour of a spurious, narcissistic intellect and the 'cultivation of personal detachment' (*Solid Mandala* 177). Voss maintains a state of corporeal aversion: he is 'revolted by the palpitating bodies of men' (*Voss* 13), and convinced in his transcendental egoism that he can 'dispense with flesh' (34). Laura, before her values change and she challenges herself and Voss to accept the body, is devoted to the rational logic of Enlightenment thought, spending her leisure time working 'fanatically at some mathematical problem, just for the excitement of it, to solve and know' (9). Austin Roxburgh rejects what he perceives as his wife's distasteful sexuality and prefers to view death merely as a 'literary conceit' (*Fringe of Leaves* 54). Each of these characters reacts masochistically to any surrender to sensuality. For Voss, it is 'wrong to surrender to sensuous delights' and he must 'suffer accordingly' (129).

White's body-deniers, particularly his arguably most notable egoists, Voss and Hurtle, may also objectify the body. As the title of *The Vivisector* proposes, the artist works invasively upon the living body, scrutinising it to further his art, despite the suffering such objectification may cause. In objectifying the body, White's characters diminish its importance and hubristically elevate the apparently disembodied consciousness. Consistently, White associates egotism and body denial: Voss, for example, is forced into confrontation with 'the material world which his egoism ha[s] made him reject' (*Voss* 36). The narcissistic enclosure in the self is presented as a human evil in White's writing—hence his devotion to materiality, which promotes what he endorses in *The Living and the Dead* as the 'escape from the disgusting, the nauseating aspect of the human ego' (168). Within fiction intent upon the destruction of foreclosed, transcendental subjectivity, characters like Voss and Hurtle cannot maintain their idealism and will have to face the fact, as it is wryly phrased in *The Vivisector*, that 'much more depend[s] upon the bowels than the intellect [is] prepared to admit' (396). As it is with the cynical intellectual Le Mesurier—who mirrors that aspect of Voss that defies the mind and diminishes the flesh—the 'throbbing' body becomes a 'deafening reality' (*Voss*

35): persistently, it returns to White's body-denying characters as the fundamental basis of existence.

White's characters that repudiate the body may exhibit an unconscious longing for the flesh, looking to seemingly more embodied characters, sometimes with revulsion, but also frequently with envy or the gaze of a potential acolyte. Laura of *Voss*, for example, looks to the heavily-embodied Rose Portion to help her reintegrate the physical aspect of her character that she denies, and, indeed, Rose's surname suggests that she embodies a fragment—a 'portion'—of Laura's character. Austin Roxburgh of *A Fringe of Leaves*, 'far removed from his physical activity' (41), looks to the 'mystery of virility as embodied in his brother Garnet' (198), hoping 'to borrow some of Garnet's health and strength' (15); he also appreciates, although he tries hard to deny it, his wife's rude country strength. Most famously, Waldo Brown is drawn to, yet resists, his brother Arthur's animality and bodiliness. *The Solid Mandala*, with its emphasis on the symbol of its title, a Jungian image of totality, underscores White's interest in the notion of the integrated self. Body-denying characters are balanced with body-affirming characters in his work, and the need for the former to incorporate the latter's attitude or perception is frequently rehearsed.

In contrast to White's deniers of corporeality, other characters are usually aligned with the body in one of four discernable ways, although these categories are not necessarily discrete. The first set of body-promoting characters lives comfortably as physical entities, conscious of a world of tangible objects, including the body, that it invests with spiritual significance. These characters of an 'empirical nature' (*Voss* 176) are accorded a strong degree of embodiment: they are heavily associated with their solid, emphatic bodies, from which they cannot or do not distinguish themselves. Julia Fallon of *The Living and the Dead*, Stan Parker of *The Tree of Man*, Judd and Rose Portion of *Voss*, Ruth Godbold of *Riders in the Chariot*, and Mary de Santis of *The Eye of the Storm* fit into this category. Judd, for example, is comfortable within his physical limits: having weathered the tortures of his convict life, he has learned physical endurance and come to terms with his body. Unlike the explorer, Voss, he does not aspire to transcendental apotheosis and is 'intensely interested in natural forms' and 'wedded to earthly things', rather than desiring to rise above and subjugate them (243). Always presented as a stalwart presence of the material world, Judd's physical being is compared to that of a tree or a rock. He is a 'union of strength and delicacy, like some gnarled trees that have been tortured and twisted by time and weather into exaggerated shapes, but of which the leaves still quiver at each change, and constantly shed shy, subtle scents' (133). Upon looking at him, moreover, Voss recalls a 'mass of limestone, broken by nature into forms that were almost human, and filled with a similar, slow brooding innocence' (135-36).

'Slow brooding innocence' indeed exemplifies this group of characters—an innocence of humility reflected in material objects and the natural world, both free of the egoism of human consciousness, a narcissism that White associates with Enlightenment humanism. Like Judd, Ruth Godbold of *Riders in the Chariot* is described in imagery of rock, emphasizing her solid physical presence. She embodies permanence and biology and is the most physically tangible of the novel's four visionaries. Ruth's reliability is a function of her maternal presence, emphasised by her nursing of others, her most recurring duty of faithfulness. As a solid physical presence concerned with the care of others' bodies, and as a character consistently aligned with spirituality and the abject semiotic (Julia Kristeva's term for the pre-symbolic, which she links to the maternal body³), Godbold's faith itself is emphasised as bodily and maternal:

Faith is not less persuasive for its fluctuations. Rather, it becomes like a living thing, like a child fluttering in the womb. So Mrs Godbold's faith would stir and increase inside the grey, gelatinous envelope of morning, until, at last, it was delivered, new-born, with all the glory and confidence of fire.

This almost biological aspect of his wife's faith was what the husband hated most. (301)

Ruth Godbold's associations of body and faith are continued in *The Eye of the Storm* in the figure of Mary de Santis. A 'votary of life' and one of Elizabeth Hunter's nurses (154), she too is a figure of reliability and duty, linked to the care of the body: 'I've only wanted to serve others,' she says, 'through my profession—which is all I know how to do. Oh, and to love, of course [...] but that is so vast it is difficult to imagine—how—how to achieve it' (156). Mary does, however, understand love, at least as it is promoted in White's fiction: 'love is a kind of supernatural state to which I must give myself entirely, and be used up, particularly my imperfections—till I am nothing' (157).

Unsurprisingly, Judd is eventually the only survivor of Voss's expedition: his association with the body links him to life, as do Ruth Godbold's and Mary de Santis's corporeal relations. Both *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Eye of the Storm* conclude by focussing respectively on these characters. The novels' endings emphatically celebrate the living body through their foci on these figures of embodiment and their final affirmations of existence. *Riders in the Chariot* concludes with Ruth Godbold's 'own vision of the Chariot': 'her very centre was touched by the wings of love and charity. So that she closed her eyes as she walked, and put her arms around her own body, tight, for fear that the melting marrow might spill out of it' (640). Here, the metaphysical image of the Chariot is located within the body itself and White's famously alchemical imagery locates golden value in fluid and subject-engulfing corporeality, the 'supernatural state' that White associates with love. In the final words of the novel, moreover, Ruth's feet remain 'planted firmly on the earth' (643), suggesting that meaning resides in embodied existence rather than the transcendence of the material world. The closing sentence describes her 'breathing heavy, for it was a stiff pull up the hill, to the shed in which she continued to live' (643). Mary de Santis, too, is associated with life and continuation. At the conclusion of *The Eye of the Storm*, her 'veins, her heart, were throbbing with life' and she 'continue[s] throbbing, flickering, inside her clumsy flesh' (588). In what is arguably White's most poetic episode, as she feeds birds in the garden, she is trapped in 'this prism of dew and light, this tumult of wings and her own unmanageable joy' (589). Her conclusion of the novel, after the deaths of Elizabeth Hunter and Lotte Lippmann, affirms the sensual ecstasy of embodiment and locates worth in the corporeal, libidinal excess of *jouissance*, a sublime transcendence of subjectivity that is nevertheless the immersion in physicality.⁴ This group of body-promoting characters, then, although they often struggle with their corporeality, are for the most part—or ultimately—content in their bodies. Like Amy Parker in *The Tree of Man*, they 'hold[...] the slow throb of [the] heart in [...] folded arms' (112).

A strong theme in *The Tree of Man* is the contrast between 'the nostalgia of permanence and the fiend of motion' (8), a distinction observable in White's body-promoters. While those who live comfortably as embodied entities personify permanence, the second group of emphatically embodied characters is associated with motion—with corporeality as a powerfully destructive yet intuitively creative force, opposed to Enlightenment notions of rationality and aligned with poetry, nature and the unconscious. These characters often break normative social rules via various modes of bodily transgression, figured in their physical

‘otherness’, their inability to uphold the heteronormative values of Western culture initially dictating their identities, or their associations with the transgressive, corporeal instances of poetic language that White foregrounds. Through his transgressive characters in particular, White’s writing transforms into a language of physicality, of embodiment. Characters like Catherine Standish in *The Living and the Dead*, Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt’s Story*, Elizabeth Hunter of *The Eye of the Storm*, and Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves* experience the engulfment and dissolution of their socialised identities within and by their corporeal, libidinal selves. Each of these characters transgresses societal roles—in particular, the construction of femininity—due to bodies variously unacceptable, or becoming unacceptable, to normative Western society. In *The Aunt’s Story*, the masculine and gawky Theodora Goodman, flouting decorum, ‘transcends’ her body in a wild dance that paradoxically emphasises her physicality and desire. For those who observe it, it is ‘shameful, because they [do] not understand’ (76):

the proud striped skirt of Theodora streamed with fire. Her body bent to the music. Her face was thin with music, down to the bone. She was both released from her body and imprisoned in the molten gold of Frank Parrott. (76)

E. Twyborn of *The Twyborn Affair* embodies White’s critique of gender constructions most emphatically. He refuses the seemingly natural yet socialised correlation between his male body and masculine gender: his transgender defies the symbolic law that requires him to adopt and perform masculinity. Other characters, like Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt’s Story*, the four ‘riders’ of *Riders in the Chariot*, Arthur Brown of *The Solid Mandala* and Rhoda Courtney of *The Vivisector*, trouble the social order because of their physical ugliness or their status as outsiders. In the patterning of White’s narratives, the corporeality of these characters often extends into the theme of mysticism that pervades his texts. Contrasted against those who deny the body, whose closed perspectives on the world correspond to their abjections, White’s corporeally-invested, and often afflicted characters, extend into and open up to the world, their otherness reflecting, moreover, the sense of mystery that White imputes to physical existence.

The last two ways in which White’s characters may be aligned with the body are neither incommensurate with the two categories mentioned thus far, nor with each other: characters may exist in an intensely embodied communion with the natural landscape (like Judd of *Voss*), and they may appear as heavily embodied due to intellectual incapacity (like Arthur of *The Solid Mandala*). As Ingmar Björkstén observes, White’s characters are frequently a ‘reflection of Dostoevsky’s “idiots”: the humbly good, the divinely crazed’ (2). Mary Hare of *Riders in the Chariot* is both saintly and mad. Moreover, she merges with the landscape to the extent that she represents the possibility of a white indigeneity: she is ‘speckled and dappled, like any wild thing native to the place’ (18), and her moments of spiritual illumination—which occur, it is suggested, during seizures—are described in terms of her metamorphosis from a human individual to an element of the landscape: ‘her thoughts would sprout in tender growth of young shoots, or long loops of insinuating vines’ (46).

Being both mad and simple, Mary Hare is perhaps more complex than White’s more typically simple-minded characters. The embodiment of these characters is presented more directly, as it emphasises the simple affective intensity experienced by these characters. When upset, for example, Bub Quigley of *The Tree of Man* is described as running ‘up and down on his long, clothes-prop legs’, his ‘dribbly desperation [...] terrible in the landscape’ (48). For White, compassion increases when the narcissism he associates with reason diminishes. Because of

their heavy embodiment, then, White's slow-witted characters are always figures of heightened affective and empathetic intuition. Thus Bub, with his 'child's face on a young man's body' (48), looks into the 'faces of people with such candour' that it is "obvious he [is] mingling with their thoughts' (84). Moreover, he exemplifies the humility and goodness of one whose simplicity renders him passive and receptive, rather than active and ego-bound. This is more emphatically the case in the representation of Arthur Brown of *The Solid Mandala*. Arthur is Waldo Brown's half-wit brother, but, unlike his twin, he is 'not impressed by reason' (31) and affirms life in all its physicality, messiness, suffering and joy. While Waldo imprisons himself in his dry, inward-looking consciousness, Arthur is open to the healing force of the environment and the redemption of embodied empathy. As such, he is associated with love, which is beyond the limits of rational consciousness and therefore 'too big a subject for me to altogether understand' (208). Thus White employs the device of twinship to emphasise opposing relations to embodiment: the closed, controlling intellect that asserts its supposed superiority over the physical world and is incapable of love, and the animal, embodied, childlike consciousness that revels in an ecological and empathetic merging with the physical landscape and the bodies of others. Arthur's persistent presence in his brother's life dramatises the impossibility of denying the body and the imperative of accepting it:

There was no escaping Arthur. At best he became the sound of your own breathing, his silences sometimes consoled [...]. [L]ife, as [Waldo] began in time to realise, is the twin consciousness, jostling you, hindering you, but with which, at unexpected moments, it is possible to communicate in ways both animal and delicate. (77)

Waldo's nevertheless increasingly desperate attempts to cast aside and escape his brother are ultimately presented as dangerous: Arthur eventually murders Waldo (or accuses himself of the murder—the description is unclear) and the twins' pet dogs, themselves representative of corporeality and animality, defile the corpse, ripping open the throat and mutilating the genitals (303). If Waldo represents Enlightenment reason's disavowal of embodiment—he is the archetypal Enlightenment subject ardently believing in 'human progress' (59) and boasting that he knows 'in which direction enlightenment [lies]' (56)—then his eventual fate emphasises White's consistent interest in showing that the repressions of the body and the abjection of animality result in their overmastering return. Indeed, Arthur drags Waldo 'back repeatedly behind the line where knowledge [doesn't] protect' (46).

In conclusion, White's fiction promotes the ethical, metaphysical and ontological acceptance of the body. Although his writing focuses intensely on corporeality, this is not because of a fascinated and dismissive disgust. Rather, it stems from his interest in endorsing an integrated self that incorporates its 'others' and that extends into the physical world. This is a self of humility and simplicity defined by compassion and love rather than hubristically elevated by means of repudiation, repression and abjection. White's fiction works towards integration via its emphasis on and subversion of dualism, a dynamic strongly observable in his attention to his characters' varying degrees of embodiment and relations to each other. His literature by no means perceives the body as 'worthless' (Riemer 26), but rather endeavours to present it in all its simplicity *and* complexity, persistently foregrounding our troubling relations to the body, yet emphasising its existential, experiential and metaphysical significance.

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Endnotes:

¹ According to Lacan: “the *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality [...] and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4, original emphasis).

² Although his writing becomes increasingly scatological from *The Solid Mandala* onward, as well as increasingly interested in the topic of homosexuality (explored extensively in *The Twyborn Affair*), White’s treatment of corporeality remains for the most part stable across his oeuvre.

³ See Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).

⁴ Lacan describes *jouissance* as “the sense in which the body experiences itself” (in Braunstein 103). For Kristeva, this is a sublime moment of “oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (*Powers of Horror* 9). It occurs when the “ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other” (9), Lacan’s term for radical alterity.