**A Sacred Ecology of Plants:**
**The Vegetative Soul in the Poetry of Les Murray**

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Abstract:

With developments in the botanical science of signaling and behavior, the idea of plant sensitivity becomes an increasingly real possibility. In conjunction with empirically argued principles of percipience, intelligence, and memory in the plant world, the vegetative soul takes on a new significance. Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and other Western commentators delineated between the ensoulment of plants, animals, and humans. They regarded the vegetative soul as the incomplete basis for the emergence of animal and human life. The vegetative soul resonates deeply in the cosmologies of Aboriginal Australian people who regard plants as spiritually imbued participants in creation stories, or the Dreaming. Circumventing a hierarchical typology of ensoulment, the Australian poet Les Murray invokes these diverse notions of soul in his botanical poetry. Shaped by the convergence of Christian beliefs and traditional Aboriginal conceptions of flora, Murray's verse positions plants within a sacred ecology as ensouled beings with intelligent capacities proper to their modes of existence.

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> I am lived. I am died.
> I was two-leafed three times, and grazed,
> but then I was stemmed and multiplied,
> sharp-thorned and caned, nested and raised,
> earth-salt by sun-sugar. I am innerly sung
> by thrushes who need fear no eyed skin thing.
>
> -Les Murray, "Cockspur Bush" (2012, 35, ll. 1-6)

## Introduction

Adopting a focus on the writings of the poet, novelist, and critic Les Murray (b. 1938) and on the distinctive vegetation of the Australian landmass, I theorize, in what follows, the importance of poetry in a *sacred ecology of plants*. I begin by problematizing the concept of the vegetative soul—or plant-soul—in the writings of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and other Western commentators whose hierarchical typologies sharply delineated between the ensoulment of plants, animals, and humans. These thinkers associated the vegetative—or nutritive—soul with gross materiality, depriving plants of the intellective faculties inherent to higher-order soul-forms. In their schemas, plants are lesser ensouled, stripped of intelligence, and subordinated to the zoological. Although grounded in cultural traditions with markedly different conceptions of nature, plant-soul resonates in the cosmologies of Aboriginal Australian people who regard some plants as spiritually imbued participants in creation stories, or the Dreaming. As a critique of Eliade's sacred-profane dichotomy, a sacred ecology that recognizes—within the potentiality of vegetal self-nourishment and growth—the innate capacity of plants both for ensoulment, on the one hand, and for catalyzing the spiritualities and sacred experiences of human beings, on the other. These assertions are developed in the context of Les Murray's botanical imagination and notions of sacred ecology, cultural convergence, and plant poiesis. Formed at the intersection of Christian beliefs and traditional Aboriginal Australian conceptions of flora, Murray's botanical poetics evokes plants as ensouled beings with capacities proper to their vegetative modes of existence.

## On the (Plant) Soul: From Aristotle to Aquinas

Do plants have souls? To be sure, the possibility incites the botanical imagination of humans with images of floral sprites, garden muses, sylvan dryads, and other mythological plant-people hybrids (Giesecke 2014). This straightforward but multifaceted question—one a whimsical child, overly-imaginative adolescent, or quixotic adult inclined toward episodes of mystical reverie might ask—has, in surprising ways, shaped the course of Western thought. For Aristotle, the answer was affirmative but weak and not without conditions. To begin with, anything—or, more precisely, any *body*—that is alive necessarily has a soul. He defined the elusive life principle of *soul* as "an actuality or formulable essence of something that possesses a potentiality of being ensouled" (Aristotle 2000: Book II.2). In the treatise *De Anima* (or, *On the Soul*), written approximately in 350 BCE, Aristotle recognized that plants have souls, albeit in proportion to a hierarchical matter-mind continuum. In the Aristotelian *scientia de anima*, the *vegetative* (or *nutritive*) soul was the primitive essence out of which emerge the higher order *sensitive* soul of animals and the *intellective* (or *imaginative*) soul of human beings (Boer 2013: 216–217). As the apotheosis of ensoulment, humans bear the gift

of intellection and, thus, possess all three soul-forms, whereas animals are limited to two and plants to one. In comparison to the souls of mobile, expressive, and cogitating animals—including us—the soul of a plant cannot exceed the limits of its mute carnal constitution. Consequently, the nutritive soul is its "only psychic power" (Aristotle 2000: Book II.2). In Aristotle's entelechy, the potentiality of plant-soul is marked by self-nourishment, seeding, flowering, upward and downward growth, movement, decay, and other modes specific to vegetal lives, but excludes percipience, cognition, and intelligence—which belong to the (hum)animal. In other words, plants "live, and yet are not endowed with locomotion or perception" (Aristotle 2000, Book I.5).

My intent is by no means to revise Aristotle's claims in any substantive way or to venture a structured response to the age-old question of plant-soul through the medium of poetry. Without a doubt, the task is better left to metaphysicians who *might* or *might not* determine that contemporary poetic expression has much to do with the venerable idea of soul. Instead, before turning to Australian poet Les Murray's botanical inclinations, I first want to suggest that the idea of vegetative soul has been influenced by the presuppositions underlying dominant Western views of plants as largely unmoving, insensitive, and unintelligent materials—as existing indeterminately somewhere between a rock and an animal. The most cursory reading of *De Anima* reveals the Aristotelian privileging of the zoological at the expense of the *very* essence of the vegetal. Even in light of its origins before the proto-botanical writings of Aristotle's student Theophrastus *(see, for instance, Enquiry into Plants*, 1916) and the much later development of scientific botany, the *De Anima* promulgates an early bias toward plants as lesser beings in their relative sessility. At the same time, the treatise stigmatizes the phenomenon of botanical materiality, the so-called nutritive—which, as we increasingly realize, ensures that the planet's vital systems flourish (Trewavas 2014).

Along the same lines, in *Commentary on De Anima* (*In Libros De Anima Expositio*), written circa. 1268 CE, Saint Thomas Aquinas re-inscribed the Aristotelian schema in his tripartite division between the *nutritive*, the *sensitive*, and the *rational* soul. He delineated the vegetative (or nutritive) principle as "that part of soul in which even [merely] nutritive things—i.e., plants—participate [interpolation in original]" (Aquinas 1999: 139). For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the soul was a fundamental life principle that cannot be denied to living things—even the basest and least sentient. As a originary manifestation along the chain, plant-soul constituted the "first soul, which is called the nutritive soul, and which in plants *is* their soul, while in animals it is *part* of their soul [italics in original]" (Aquinas 1999, 183). The nutritive (plant) soul is a kind of autopoietic foundational essence; the sensitive (animal) and rational (human) souls cannot exist independently of it. For this reason, unlike its counterparts, the primitive vegetative soul can manifest "without the sensitive and intellective principles, but these cannot exist without the nutritive" (Aquinas 1999: 114).

In the views of these two thinkers, the vegetative soul embodied the means of multidirectional growth and self-nourishment unique to plants. The phototropic movement of leaves and flowers upward in dynamic equilibrium with the downward extension of roots—coupled to nutritional mechanisms autonomous of animals, much later described in terms of *photosynthesis*—rendered the vegetal world the baseline of ensoulment. According to this framework, if it were completely deficient in formulable essence, the plant would be relegated to the category of inanimate objects along with rocks. As animal essence must emerge from somewhere (or something) living, the vegetative soul became its default source and imperfect medium: "less complete beings with souls exist for more complete beings with souls" (Aquinas 1999: 169). Modern rationalistic commentators, I propose, would be more conservative in their attributions (in order to avoid animist, neopaganist, paranormalist, and

New Age associations). In contrast, Aristotle as author of, and Aquinas as commentator on, *De Anima* did confer ensoulment to the botanical kingdom. They moreover contemplated the divisibility of vegetative soul—i.e., whether the modularity of plants (their ability to be split yet remain alive) yielded multiple souls—"as in the case of plants which when divided are observed to continue to live […] showing that in their case the soul of each individual plant before division was actually one, potentially many" (Aristotle 2000: Book II.2).

Regardless of these allowances from the history of philosophy, plant *potentiality*—a key principle in Aristotelian entelechy—is patently subordinate (yet oddly intrinsic) to animal and human ensoulment. Eschewing plant-animal-human oppositions, Elaine Miller in her book *The Vegetative Soul* (2002) associates the plant-soul with the eighteenth- and nineteenth century notion of creative genius as a plantlike form of subjectivity. According to Miller, "the vegetative soul is radically opposed to the figure of organism as autonomous and oppositional; its stance toward the world is characterized by the promise of life and growth" (Miller 2002: 5). In her view, and in contradistinction to sharply individuated animals and humans, plants undergo processes of metamorphosis that constantly transfigure their subjectivities. However, for Miller invoking critic M. H. Abrams' notion of "vegetable genius" (1953) in the history of Romantic criticism, the vegetative soul is at best a persuasive trope that functions as a symbol of the relationship between nature and unconscious, spontaneous creativity. In reference to the connection between nature, genius, and literary analysis, Abrams pointed out a "recourse to vegetable life as a model for the coming-into-being of a work of art [that] had, in fact, engendered the fateful concept that artistic creation is primarily an unwilled and unconscious process of mind" (Abrams 1953: 173). Here, rather than a genuine essence with a material basis that is possessed by botanical life—as nascent, for better or worse, in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas—plant-soul is construed as a metaphor in service to humanity's intellectual and artistic trajectories. Hence, neither Miller, Abrams, nor the Romantic critics under scrutiny in Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* appears to invest in plant life's "actuality […] of being ensouled" (Aristotle 2000: Book II.2).

**Plant-Soul: Vegetative, Sacred, Profane**

How does the vegetative soul relate to the poetry of Les Murray—a writer who critics regard as "the leading Australian poet of his generation"? (Coetzee 2011: Section 7) and whose fifty-year corpus of work consistently engages environmental themes with unswerving attention to the non-human life of rural New South Wales (Clark 2003, Dunkerley 2001)? More broadly put, how do contemporary poets invest in the potentiality of vegetal beings for ensoulment and, by extension, vegetal percipience and subjectivity? To say it differently, how do poets work creatively with the possibility of plants as sentient, intelligent beings with souls rather than as passive automatons, or the mute foils of animality? And how might an ensouled plant *speak* in poetry? Contemplate, as an example, the "self-espaliered" plant in his poem "Creeper Habit" whose "branches twine and utter / coated leaves" (Murray 2007: 16, ll. 4, 14–15); although it has "little choice" (l. 17) and "spreads where it can" (l. 19), the creeper is an autonomous, adaptive, and percipient being with the capacity to make decisions. However, before turning more concerted attention to these questions through the example of Murray's botanical imagination and his enunciation of a sacred ecology of plants in his poetry, I want to remain a while longer with the idea of plant-soul and its relationship to the sacred in the Australian context. Considering Murray's tendency to lyricize New South Wales flora, as well as his sustained interest in Aboriginal environmental knowledges and the possibility of *cultural convergence*, the Australian dimensions of his poetry should be foregrounded.

In this context, the recognition of *vegetal dialectics* is important: for instance, plants affect and are affected; experience and are experienced; feel and are felt; sense and are

sensed; remember and are remembered; and so forth. The science of plant signaling and behavior progressively affirms that vegetal life possesses an intrinsic disposition toward intelligent behavior that enhances its survival in evolutionary terms; this body of scientific research also signifies the deepening our myriad physical and cultural engagements with flora (Trewavas 2014). Such an appreciation of vegetal potentiality expands the breadth of human-plant interactions beyond a narrow utilitarian paradigm of flora as foods, fiber, dye, medicine, ornament, or otherwise consumable thing; and beyond a principally metaphorical approach to plants and their organs as texts or tropes. Consider, for instance, the prevalence of root, rhizome, flower, and leaf as symbolic mechanisms in literary history and criticism (see, for example, Olney 1980). In light of this and with respect to plant-soul, there is another productive dialectic that should be considered. On the one hand, the plant is ensouled (i.e., inherently bears a soul or spirit by virtue of its vegetal nature) and, on the other hand, the plant is an object, home, conduit, or stimulus of the spiritual experience, insight, or awakening of human beings.

Appreciating this vital difference requires more judiciously discerning between the terms *soul*, *spirit*, and *sacred* (to the extent possible within the limited scope here) before considering the potential influence of Judeo-Christian metaphysics, as well as Aboriginal spiritual perspectives on flora and their environments, on Murray's poetry. The Greek word *psychê*, for soul, similar to the Latin *anima*, originally signified "breath, breeze, or wind" (Frede and Reis 2009: 1). In ancient cosmologies, the body was considered ensouled with its first breath at birth. In contrast, mortality was the cessation of breath and, thus, soul. The Modern English *soul* stems from Old English *sáwol*, the Old Saxon *sêola*, and several other cognate terms denoting "sea" and inscribing semantically the belief that human souls originated in and returned to sacred lakes following the passing of their physical forms. Correspondingly, *spirit* stems from the Latin *spiritus* for "breath."

Unaware of the function of plants in the global carbon cycle, Aristotle regarded the vegetative soul as unable to breathe and, consequently, base and incomplete (Marder 2013: 31). Other philosophers, such as Hegel, denied ensoulment to plants not for their lack of breath but for their deficiency of the inward-turned qualities (emotion, reflection, consideration) attributed to the psyche (Marder 2011: 87). However, the German idealist Johann Gottlieb Fichte preferred to conceptualize the vegetative soul as primary movement in nature. The first breath of *anima* and *psychê* constitute the first movement of nature, which first enervates vegetal potentiality then furnishes the material matrix for animalistic soul-forms: "the soul of the plant is not only the principle of a determined organization, (is not only the interpenetration and union of different chemical forces,) but is, moreover, the first principle of a *motion* in nature; it is the moving principle" (Fichte 1869: 503). In brief, as the derivation of the term *soul* signifies, plant-soul is incontrovertibly imbricated with breath—a condition rendered more momentous and all-encompassing when we consider the ongoing gaseous exchanges with vegetal life that make animal existences possible in the first place.

The Aristotelian vegetative soul is primitive and foundational—supplying the substrate for the sensitive and intellective souls of animals and humans, respectively. However, as evident in some indigenous cosmologies, the boundaries between plant-animal-human ensoulment are not so starkly drawn. For myriad past and present cultures, a sacred plant is an actual vegetable being with a formulable essence and the potentiality for ensoulment (for example, Cusack 2011). In distinction to powerful mythological flora, such as the ash of Norse cosmology or Yggdrasil, real species in the landscape reveal percipient capacities and sacred qualities recognized by generations of people. For instance, among the Aboriginal Australian people of eastern New South Wales, the woody outgrowths on the lower trunks of many trees are understood as the seats of the arboreal Dreaming Ancestor Daramulun (Clarke 2011: 24). Sacred plants, including Dreaming trees, might also be sources

of physical sustenance, for instance, providing edible leaves and sap—hence bridging the sacred and mundane chasm. However, the example of Daramulun also elicits the difference between the vegetative soul (as intrinsic to the plant) and the living plant as a sacred vessel (or home) for creation beings or dispossessed human souls. The outgrowths offer a medium—a seat—for a Dreaming spirit, but what of the souls of the trees themselves? In other words, does a sacred ecology of plants involve vegetative souls; the spiritual projections of human subjects onto the vegetal; or the integration of plant and human ensoulment? How does the poetry of Murray help to locate the plant within ancient and modern discourses on soul?

Following the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, positioned the sacred as "the opposite of the profane" (Eliade 1957: 10). From his perspective, the principle of *hierophany* signifies the presentation of the sacred to our awareness or "*that something sacred shows itself to us* [emphasis in original]" (Eliade 1957: 11). In their spiritual timbres, hierophanies range from the ordinary phenomenal domain of objects, stones, or plants to unseen noumenal manifestations such as God through Jesus in the Christian tradition. For Eliade, the sacred opposes and, indeed, transgresses materiality and the realm perceptible to the senses. In regard to plants and stones, he expounds that "the sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*, the *ganz andere* [wholly other] [italics in original]" (Eliade 1957: 12). Eliade constructs a chasm between the profane and the sacred, which demarcates the sacred from ordinary surroundings, everyday matters, and commonplace beings, including trees and other vegetal beings.

As a medium or hierophany, the tree manifests the sacred, but its material constitution—its nutritive principle—remains ineluctably profane. In contrast to Eliade's dichotomy, a non-typological approach would shun the theorization of the profane as the foil for the sacred. An idea of the sacred inhering within the profane—or the phenomenon within the noumenon—would conceive of a sacred plant as both a corpus and spirit, as a wellspring of both nutritive provision, spiritual insight, and vegetal ensoulment. The sacred that I have in mind is signalled by anthropologist Jack Goody in his critique of the sacred-profane dichotomy and his rejection of "Durkheim's assumption [the basis for Eliade's model] that the sacred-profane dichotomy is a universal feature of people's views of the human situation" (Goody 1961: 155). In Goody's assessment, based on fieldwork he conducted in Ghana, the sacred-profane opposition is the residue of nineteenth-century intellectualists who wrong-headedly sought to impose logico-experimental paradigms on traditional societies (Goody 1961: 154).

**Sacred Ecology of Plants: Elaborating Australian Contexts**

Having called into question the Aristotelian plant-soul hierarchy and the Durkheimian sacred-profane dichotomy, I want to shift now toward other dimensions of the Australian context of Murray's botanical imagination. A sacred ecology of plants—which, I put forward, manifests in Murray's verse, particularly his collection *Translations from the Natural World* (2012)—is firmly grounded in the poet's phenomenological experience of New South Wales flora. While visually evocative of Australian plant life, Murray's poetry also draws from his own heightened haptic, olfactory, and gustatory sensations. The resulting immediacy of his sensory transactions with plants (e.g., gum trees, melaleuca shrubs, herbaceous wildflowers) converges with an awareness of ecological exchanges and a spiritual consciousness of landscape that hybridizes Christian and Aboriginal Australian beliefs. In Murray's botanical imagination, the souls of plants are immanent in ecological phenomena that can be verified through perception; in other words, multisensorial human-plant contact is a gateway to the

noumenal. To appreciate Murray's sacred ecology of plants is to recognize its partial basis in Aboriginal worldviews—a critical position not explicitly taken by commentators on the spiritual and environmental facets of Murray's poetry (for example, Kane 1996, McCredden 2005).

A sacred ecology of plants is intrinsic to the Aboriginal principle of *country*. As a living entity requiring reciprocal obligations, country is a place of belonging, where Dreaming—or creation—narratives center around the actions of ancestral entities in the form of plants, animals, winds, fire, stars, and celestial bodies (Turpin 2007: 95). Acknowledging its life-generating qualities, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose describes country aptly as "nourishing terrain"—as a sentient and conscious topography that "gives and receives life" and therefore commands respect and ethical regard (Rose 1996: 7). Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham asserts that the cultural perception of land as sacred consequently shapes social interactions, cohesion, and identities. From Graham's perspective, *land* denotes plants, animals, interspecies relations, and the activities of Dreaming ancestors—not merely visual landscape features or physiographic regions. She argues that "the land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land" (Graham 2008: "A Brief Description of the Two Axioms").

In Aboriginal cosmologies, the sacred is the presence of the divine within the profane—spiritual immanence within the physical environment—and signifies a departure from the binarism of Eliade and Durkheim's models. The contemporary ethnobotanist Philip Clarke identifies a fluid interplay between the sacred and profane in the worldviews of many of Australia's Aboriginal cultures. Rather than the diametric foil of the profane, the sacred is ubiquitous in the antipodean landscape, its flora, and ordinary ecological manifestations. He observes that "the Aboriginal landscape is considered full with sacred plant manifestations. Even when plants do not represent the actual Ancestors, they may be seen as having been involved with Dreaming activities in the Creation" (Clarke 2011: 23–24). The spiritual qualities of plants intergrade with everyday phenomenal awareness, prompting a sympathetic human outlook on the physical landscape as suffused with the sacred: "Aboriginal people see plants as sacred signatures in their country that, along with topographic features such as hills, creeks and waterholes, came into existence through the actions of Dreaming Ancestors" (Clarke 2011: 24). From an Aboriginal perspective, a sacred ecology ascribes percipience, intelligence, and subjectivity to vegetal life in close connection both to the mundane world and the spiritual domain of Dreaming ancestors. Clarke also refers to the idea of "plants as spirit homes" in which spirits occupy particular botanical formations, which are then recognized by people as dangerous or off-limits (Clarke 2011: 26). Indeed, *spirit home* is the expression of extrinsic plant-soul: a vegetation community (e.g., thicket, hollow, forest) or individual plant becomes territorialized by displaced human souls. Accordingly, the souls of the plants themselves—a key facet of vegetal dialectics—is not fully articulated in Clarke's account.

The principle of a sacred ecology of plants, at the core of my interpretation of Murray's poetry, extends anthropologist Fikret Berkes' research on traditional environmental knowledge systems. Seeking a post-positivist approach to human-environment relations—one which resists the mechanistic reduction of ecological systems to their structural components—Berkes observes that the ecological practices of many indigenous peoples infuse nature with sacredness, and vice versa (Berkes 2012: 11–12). For Berkes, an expansive, non-reductionistic conception of ecology—beyond a narrow scientific paradigm—rejects the materialist tradition of plants as mute matter (that is, as mere chemicals, cellulose, anatomical parts) and embraces the sacred as "unity" in nature, following the work of

systems theorist Gregory Bateson on the sacred. Moreover, the premise of a sacred ecology represents a form of distributed subjectivity and an inclusive community-of-beings ontology (Berkes 2012: 286). While Berkes offers a useful framework for theorizing the nodes between traditional worldviews and plants, it is not entirely complete. For instance, in his text *Sacred Ecology*, there is no mention of the word *soul*. Most cultural allusions to flora appear resolutely lodged in the ethnobotanical tradition of plants as usable objects: medicines, foods, fibers. Moreover, Berkes fails to distinguish between *intrinsic* (soul in nature) and *extrinsic* (human soul manifested in nature) senses of sacred ecology. Instead, his model presents the natural world as a theater for human dramatization of the sacred rather than as a living substrate for the ensoulment of animate and inanimate things.

The sacred ecology operating within Murray's botanically disposed poems—one which is informed by the intermingling of Aboriginal and Christian beliefs—centers on some of the most ancient and drought-tolerant plant species known. Expressed in the Australian context, a sacred ecology—defined as a view of plant-animal-human souls in dynamic exchange with the material landscape—reflects the particular qualities of antipodean plant life: unique, endemic, ancient, adaptive, xeriphilic, evocative, sensorial. Australia's extremely arid, fire-prone landscape with generally low-fertility soils consists principally of flora that is sclerophyllous (bearing hard leaves and best adapted to Mediterranean-type climates) and xeromorphic (shaped by adaptation to prolonged drought conditions) (Crisp and Cook 2013: 303). In total, Australia counts over seventeen-thousand species of flowering plants, an unparalleled sixteen endemic plant families found nowhere else on the globe, and more than half of the mangrove species of the world (Steffen et al. 2009: 10). Eucalypts and acacia trees dominate the botanical makeup of the landmass; and most floristic species come primarily from a few families: the Myrtaceae (myrtle), Proteaceae (protea), and Fabaceae (legume). In the late Cretaceous (roughly between 145.5 and 65.5 million years ago), Australia formed part of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana. Around 45 million years ago in the late Eocene epoch, the Australian landmass separated from Antarctica, effectively isolating the biota for millions of years and resulting in the pronounced diversification of species (Steffen et al. 2009: 9). As a result, a staggering ninety-one percent of all Australian flowering plants are endemic (Steffen et al. 2009: 8).

**Murray's Botanical Imagination: Hybridic Conceptions of the Sacred Plant**

Considering Australian's rich floristic diversity, it is understandable, then, why endemic plants feature conspicuously in the botanical imagination of one of the country's seminal poets. Despite tendencies toward botanical nativism, Murray is not obsessively (or ideologically) concerned only with endemic Australian plants—those species extant within the environment at the time of British colonization in 1788 (in the present-day eastern state of New South Wales) and the early- to mid-1800s (in Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory). Instead, Murray's view of vegetative ensoulment applies to both native and introduced taxa. I suggest that the poet's direct sensory contact with the flora of the rural inland regions of New South Wales, in conjunction with his knowledge of natural history and a positive disposition toward the potentialities of vegetative ensoulment, is the triangulation through which his sacred ecology of plants emerges. Moreover, Murray propounds the broader ideal of *cultural convergence*, which provides the conceptual footing for plant-soul in his poetry with respect to Aboriginal values.

It is far from coincidental that the title of Murray's first published collection, *The Ilex Tree* (1965), co-authored with Australian poet Geoffrey Lehmann, evokes an ancient plant subject with the ability to speak and otherwise express itself. The work appeals to the Western pastoral tradition both in its title and through an epigraph from Eclogue VII of

Virgil's *Eclogues* (circa. 37 BCE). Eclogue VII relates: "It happened Daphnis sat beneath a singing ilex. / Thyrsis and Corydon had drawn up both their flocks—/ Thyrsis his ewes and Corydon his goats, all udder- / Swollen. Arcadians both, they boys were in their bloom" (Virgil 2010: 51, ll. 1–5). Rather than "singing," in the translation quoted by Murray and Lehmann in the epigraph, the ilex is a "whispering" plant being (Matthews 2001: 39). Along with the vines, trees, bees, and insects of other long poems, including the *Georgics* (circa. 29 BCE), the *whispering* ilex—a common holly but also a sentient, expressive subject with a kind of voice—exemplifies the animistic conception of plants as sacred beings in Virgil (Thomas 1988: 263) and also intimates Murray's identification with such a metaphysics of flora. Murray's poetry hybridizes diverse cultural views of flora, leading to a syncretic interpretation of vegetative ensoulment that derives from several traditions: ancient Greek, Aboriginal, and Christian.

To be sure, Murray's fellow feeling for the natural world and the eminence of animals, plants, and landscapes in his poetry reflect the poet's country upbringing on a dairy farm in the town of Bunyah between Forster and Gloucester—and between the Aboriginal districts of Coolongolook and Bucca Wauka—in the Manning River delta system of New South Wales (Alexander 2000, Murray 2005). It is at least partly because of a childhood in the countryside that all manner of plants—both domesticated and wild, introduced and native, ground-hugging and skyward-reaching—factor into Murray's botanical imagination and provide the vehicles for his perception of animism in the natural world. His father Cecil Allan accrued substantial knowledge of the plants, especially the forests, cleared on his property. Murray recalls his father assessing the suitability of a living tree for timber by listening closely for "pipes" (or hollow inner sections) upon tapping the trunk with his fingers (Alexander 2000:15). In 1986, Murray returned to his family farm and 'spirit country' in Bunyah to take up residence and pursue a living as a writer after numerous years in Australian urban areas. During this period of transition to rural life, Murray's interest in local plant ecology intensified, as evident in his poetry and prose.

The title of his prose non-fiction work, *The Paperbark Tree* (1992), invokes the *Melaleuca* genus of nearly three-hundred species, most of which occur in Australia. The collection celebrates the vegetative landscape in a manner evocative—in tone and content—of other seminal works of Australian natural history, specifically Vincent Serventy's *Dryandra* (1970), George Seddon's *Sense of Place* (1972), and Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres* (1981). For instance, an excerpt from *The Paperbark Tree* reveals Murray's technical knowledge of indigenous eucalypt growth habits in dynamic relation the cultivated landscape of rural New South Wales: "Eucalypts are by and large extremely fussy about their requirements for drainage and soil chemistry, and really the best way to 'plant' them is to fence grazing animals out and see what comes up. Heads of trees are left on the ground after felling, to shed their masses of seed and replenish the forest with their species" (Murray 1992: 386). Even the ostensibly metaphorical characterization of eucalypts as *fussy* implies the trees' responsiveness and capacity for affective states. Rather than a hollow trope or a hackneyed mode of personifying the tree, the choice of the simple adjective *fussy* represents an expression of material poetics. The qualifier imbricates the ecology of eucalypts with the capacity for sensitive and intellective ensoulment in the plant world.

Murray's botanical imagination is inclusive and integrative. It is not limited to technical appreciation of plant ecology—for instance, "drainage and soil chemistry"—nor to the practical interventions of a conservationist-cultivator "'planting'" the land. His sacred ecology of vegetal life epitomizes Fikret Berkes' expansive, non-reductionistic framework that—while maintaining grounding in the discourses of natural history and science—engenders dialogue with non-Western epistemologies, particularly those of Aboriginal Australian cultures. In other words, Murray's consciousness of the vegetal hybridizes his own

observations of farming country with an acute awareness of the exchanges between domesticated and non-cultivated species. In his poetry, empirical knowledge gained both through science and experience melds with an ethos of plants as ensouled beings that manifest the sacred *in* and *through* the mundane manifestations of their ecologies. For Murray, traditional Aboriginal environmental practices are vital to his syncretic impulse in their sharp attunement to the cycles of the Australian landscape and its primordial flora (Clark 2003: 41–42). His ongoing critique of the impacts of European modernity—including the colonial appropriation of the Australian landmass and the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples—involves poeticizing alternative modes of subjectivity (Clark 2003: 42), including the voices of plants, animals, rocks, water, and other elements of the landscape.

Hence, rather than objectively commenting on the botanical world, Murray strives to enable percipient subjects to speak through his poetry. A notion of ensoulment is forwarded most persuasively in *Translations from the Natural World*—a collection of poems that represent an "attempt to speak *for* nature, the majority being short dramatic monologues by various beings, animate and inanimate [italics in original]" (Dunkerley 2001: 80). The collection demonstrates the role of polyvocality in his theory of cultural convergence, defined by critics as his "hoped-for integration or fusion of what he considers Australia's three main cultures, the Aboriginal, the urban, and the rural" (Kane 1996:194). In order to facilitate such an ambitious integration, Murray aligns his work with the animistic beliefs of Aboriginal cultures, thus allowing plants and other beings to speak both through the poet and the medium of poetry (Clark 2003: 43). However, it would be infelicitous to claim that the form of plant ensoulment found in Murray's work is strictly a fusion of Aboriginal beliefs and ancient Greek allusions gleaned from canonical sources such as the *Eclogues*. A fuller appreciation of vegetative ensoulment as plants speaking through Murray's poetry also requires deliberation on his long-standing Christian faith and his investment in poetry itself as a means for manifesting God as the divine. Consider the religious overtones of "The Broad Bean Sermon" where garden-variety beans are "upright like lecturing, outstretched like blessing / fingers" with "edible meanings" (Murray 2007: 12–13, ll. 25–26, 35).

For Murray, poetry is a practice that summons the sacred. Since the mid-1960s, he has consistently dedicated his books "to the glory of God." Raised a Presbyterian, Murray converted to Catholicism around the time of the publication of *The Ilex Tree*. As he comments in *The Paperbark Tree*, poetry is "the prime channel through which I ever achieve (or am given) any apprehension of ultimate and divine things" (Murray 1992: 252). From Murray's perspective, poetry is, to borrow Eliade's term, a hierophany or a manifestation through which the sacred presents itself to us. Moreover, with respect to the Australian context, many of his poems, such as "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" (2007: 20–30), convey a belief that the sacred is communicated to mortal beings through the interplay of indigenous motifs and Christian spiritual resonances. In other words, cultural convergence entails religious and spiritual convergence. The poet is in dialogue with the sacred of myriad Australian belief systems, including chthonic ideas of plant-soul, vegetatively based Aboriginal spiritualities, and the ideas of Western literatures, symbologies, and faiths brought to Australia from elsewhere.

The process of *translation* between the sacred and the mundane, between the non-human and the human, takes place through—rather than outside of—poetic language (Davidson 2013). This outlook is evident in his poem "Poetry and Religion" in which, as he asserts, "Religions are poems. They concert / our daylight and dreaming mind, our / emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture / into the only whole thinking: poetry" (Murray 2007: 94, ll. 1-4). On this note, critic Lyn McCreddon argues that Murray's hybridic conception of the sacred as elicited through poetry involves three enactments: (a) the ordinary world as a locus of the sacred; (b) the cultural convergence of Aboriginal country,

rural life, and the city; and (c) propheticism in which the poet is a messenger of the divine and poetry his device (McCredden 2005: 166). The tendency in Murray's poetry to bring forth through poetry that which is normally regarded as beyond representation includes the plant-soul. Murray pursues an ideal of poetry as a conversation with the divine in direct reference to—and not on the margins of—the community-of-beings ontology of Aboriginal cultures and the discourses of his Catholic faith.

**Loci of Ensoulment: Eucalypt Trees, Gum Forests, and Lightning Strikes**

Murray's botanical poetry presents the soul of plants as immanent in their material presence. As sacred entities in their own right, plants are neither merely mechanistic vessels for displaced human souls nor screens for the spiritual projections of humans. Moreover, the vegetative soul is a complete manifestation of plantness, not an imperfect medium for the development of so-called higher animalistic entelechies. As expressed in Murray's verse, a sacred ecology of plants materializes independently of the hierarchical schemas of Aristotle and Aquinas in which the vegetative is the basest soul-form and the sensitive and intellective the highest. The poietic potentialities of botanical systems—their capacities for ensoulment as expressed in ecological expressions of growth, decay, transformation, and movement upward, downward, and rhizomatically—figure significantly in "Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn" (2007: 65–66). The poem reflects an immersive sense of interspecies poiesis during the autumn months of March, April, and May when the native tree becomes a self-governing community-of-beings. The eucalypt's copious flowering and accompanying production of nectar instigate transactions within an ensemble of living things. This results in a state of pronounced activity transliterated by Murray from ecological to poetic language: "That slim creek out of the sky / the dried-blood western gum tree / is all stir in its high reaches" (Murray 2007: 65–66, ll. 1–3). Even the "high reaches" of the tree—those arboreal zones typically outside of everyday human grasp—reverberate with the bustle of flowers, birds, insects, and other organisms. A metaphor with resonances in both natural science and traditional indigenous knowledge, "dried-blood" denotes the astringent kino gum produced by Australian eucalypts and used by many Aboriginal cultures as a medicine.

Murray renders botanical poiesis—spurning the preconception of plants as insensate things analogous to sculptural works—through the twists and turns of lyrical language. Instead, the eucalypt is "a spray in its own turned vase" (Murray 2007: 66, ll. 19)—a metaphor inverting an aesthetics that construes flora as pleasing, though static, objects deferential to and acted upon monologically by animal life. The poem's internal vitality and movement intergrade with those animate qualities of the eucalypt within its ecosystem. The co-becoming of poetic vision and plant ensoulment crystallizes in the nodes between plant, insect, animal, and human lives: "its strung haze-blue foliage is dancing / points down in breezy mobs, swapping / pace and place in an all-over sway" (Murray 2007: 65, ll. 4–6). To reiterate Miller's contention, the vegetative soul speaks to "the promise of life and growth" (2002, 5). In "Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn," Murray reveals that the vegetative soul is ecologically imbued with the promise of the "tough delicate / raucous life" of the other soul-forms of the autumnal eucalypt system (2007: 65, ll. 17–18). This does not exclude the intellective soul of Murray himself as sensate participant-observer-poet *in* and *of* the scene. The active participles of foliage *dancing*, mobs *swapping*, and fragrance *crisping* function synergetically with the poiesis of inventive imagery in phrases such as *night-creaking* and *fig-squirting* bats, food *bristling*, and petals *drizzling*. The rendering of the quintessentially Australian botanical landscape is neither static, delimited strictly by visual data, nor constrained to the plant kingdom alone.

The poem's sensuous specifics are mimetic of the eucalypt, the autumn season, and the mounting ecological activity, expressing what Paul Carter defines as *middle voice*: the

folding of time "in the sense that it dissolves the subject-object relation, grounding each in the other, continuously redefining both in terms of each other, so that the two sides exist echoically or simultaneously" (1996: 331). In the same poem, Murray's memory of the shedding of the petals of a Japanese plum tree causes him to ask, "what kind of exquisitely precious / artistic bloom might be gendered / in a pure ethereal compost" (Murray 2007: 66, ll. 25–27). In contrast to the cosmopolitan plum flowers with their universally recognized beauty, ancient domestication, and origins in Europe, Asia, and America, the "swish tatters" of the eucalypt flowers underlie the genesis to the Australian landmass itself, represented through the image of "a crusted / riverbed with up-country show towns" (Murray 2007: 66, ll. 32–33). Unlike the plum, the vegetative soul of the eucalpyt is chthonic; its sacred ecology is specific and adapted to the rural locale that Murray lyricizes—his home-place. In other poems, Murray further enunciates the idea of being spiritually at home and bioregionally emplaced within the eucalypt forests of the inland New South Wales environment. "The Gum Forest" opens with the following unequivocal couplet: "After the last gapped wire on a post, / homecoming for me, to enter the gum forest" (Murray 2007: 31, ll. 1–2). The regenerative processes of the forest unfold before the human subject's senses. In its intensity, the emergence of vegetal beings is rhythmic and processual yet stupefying and all-enveloping: "New trees step out of old: lemon and ochre / splitting out of grey everywhere, in the gum forest" (Murray 2007: 31, ll. 5–6). As new trees spring from the old and the colors of nature change from dull to vibrant hues, one is reminded of Aristotle and Aquinas' speculation over the divisibility of the vegetative soul.

Notwithstanding Murray's immersion in the eucalypt scene, one "can never reach the heart of the gum forest" (Murray 2007: 31, l. 10). In other words, a glimpse and grasp of the plant-soul is both limitlessly accessible to ordinary perception while, at the same time, ineffable. The instance the poet begins to synthesize the sensory data acquired through his euphoric rapture in the forest, the plant-soul—which is one and many, a condition of "being singular plural" (Nancy 2000) or, in other words, a community of ecologically-threaded souls—evades and exceeds him. Such are the "mysteries of the / gum forest" (Murray 2007: 31, ll. 22–23). The structure of "The Gum Forest" mimics this oscillation between entrée and elusion—the tension between being allowed into and being barred from the sacred. Murray's concrete observations of plant ecology follow his recognition of the forest's elusiveness as well as the limited capacity of language to communicate the vegetal sacred. As in "Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn," the lyricizing of ecological interdependencies is the one potency available to the poet-observer grappling with the vegetative soul as a community-of-beings, as a sacred ecology: "Flooded-gums on creek ground, each tall because of each. / Now a blackbutt in bloom is showering with bees / but warm blood sleeps in the middle of the day" (Murray 2007: 31, ll. 14–16). *Flooded-gum* refers to *Eucalyptus grandis*, a species occurring throughout the New South Wales coastal area on loamy alluvial soils. Additionally, *blackbutt* is *Eucalyptus pilularis*, also common to the region. For Murray, the vegetative soul of the native gum community and its individual trees diverges sharply from the "autonomous and oppositional" figures of (animal) organisms and their particular expressions of percipience (Miller 2002, 5). The ecological principle of "each tall because of each," as observed by Murray, brings about the transformation of vegetal subjectivities—from old to young, from short to tall, from plant to insect and animal species. In these terms, a sacred ecology is a "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Berry 1999: 82), each and the whole bearing soul.

In Murray's botanical imagination, the forest is a locus of the duality between plant ensoulment, on the one hand, and human spiritual experience, on the other. Rather than a matrix for human intimations of the divine—objectified, reduced, and split off from the intellective soul—the gum forest *is* the sacred immanent in its material presence, sensory

expressions, and ecological relations. Not a hostile and threatening domain to be subjugated or manipulated by zoological energies, the forest is an epicenter of reverie, reverence, rejuvenation, and enlightenment: "Delight to me, though, at the water-smuggling creeks, / health to me, too, under banksia candles and combs" (Murray 2007: 31, ll. 24–25). The allusion to *Banksia*—another quintessentially Australian genus of around one-hundred-and-seventy species—contextualizes the poem further in the native plant life of Murray's home-place (Collins, Collins, and George 2008). The sensoriality of the eucalypt forest initiates human catharsis and a heightened contemplative state: "singed oils clear my mind, and the pouring sound high up" (Murray 2007: 32, l. 29).

The poem concludes with a powerful final image that interweaves the forest with the preternatural, earth with sky, nutritive with sensitive and intellective: "Why have I denied the passions of my time? To see / lightning strike upward out of the gum forest" (2007: 32, ll. 30–31). What echoes—on initial inspection—as an inwardly-looking and brooding question can be read as a transcendental device of rhetoric in line with Murray's theory of cultural convergence and my extension of Berkes' idea of sacred ecology. For diverse Aboriginal cultures, lightning expresses the activities of spirit beings. It directly articulates—rather than superficially symbolizes—the world of Dreaming ancestors. Lightning strikes are spirits manifested on earth, and can confer powers of healing and clairvoyance to the living (Johnson 2014: 28). Correspondingly, numerous instances in the Bible allude to lightning as an encounter with God and divine inspiration so potent as to disperse enemies. For example, in Book 2 of Samuel, "out of the brightness of his presence bolts of lightning blazed forth" (qtd. in Elwell 1991: 191).

**The Sacred as Plant Presence: Figs, Sunflowers, and Stone Fruits Speak**

The poems "Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn" and "The Gum Forest" link the potentialities of plant ensoulment to the botanical poiesis of eucalypt trees and their habitats. The sensitive and intellective souls of bees, birds, mammals, and humans co-exist in an even, non-binary field of ecological interaction with the vegetative soul. Contrary to Aristotle's assertion that plants "live, and yet are not endowed with locomotion or perception" (2000: Book I.5), research in contemporary botanical science demonstrates that the vegetal world abounds with movement at various scales, including the transit of complex signals via volatile compounds (Baluška and Ninkovic 2010), as well as evolutionarily-structured forms of sensory perception (Mescher and De Moraes 2015). It goes without saying that Aristotle and Aquinas lacked the access that modern plant-thinkers have to scientific studies in botanical signaling and behavior. Nevertheless, the long-standing hierarchical construction of the vegetative soul has been formative to our views of plants and needs scrutiny. Such a reconsideration situates the intuitions, insights, and experiences of poets such as Murray in relation to emerging empirical trends. Whereas the two botanical poems of gum trees narrated Murray's perspective, the next set of examples from *Translations from the Natural World*, particularly the poems of Part II titled "Presence," involve different kinds of domestic flora addressing the reader in the first (plant) person.

In *Translations*, presence *is* vegetative ensoulment—"an actuality or formulable essence of something that possesses a potentiality of being ensouled" (Aristotle 2000: Book II.2). Of all Murray's works, examples from *Translations* grapple the most ostensibly with the vegetative soul by assuming the perspectives of vocal plants within a sacred ecology of interacting, percipient beings. The inherent difficulty of 'speaking for nature' that has historically been a central concern for ecocritics and rhetoricians (for example, Manes 1996, McDowell 1996, Watts 2001). After all, these poems are ineluctably Murray's *I* at work on behalf of figs, sunflowers, and stone fruits; the word choices, metaphors, and enjambments

(though prompted and shaped by flora) remain his. Nonetheless, the tenor of the mediation and the poetic impulse to approximate plant-soul in his poetry are concerns. For instance, the poem "Strangler Fig" opens with the propinquity of an ensouled plant's address and alludes, in the second line, to the Aboriginal nomenclature of the common *Ficus* species: "I glory centennially slow- / ly in being Guugumbakh the / strangler fig bird-born to overgrow / the depths of this wasp-leafed stinging tree" (Murray 2012: 31, ll. 1–4). The reverse-nominalization of glory (noun) as glory (verb) presents an intriguing intertextual reference to the standard dedication of his books, "to the glory of God" (Murray 2012: 4). The self-professed glory of the fig interleaves with the glory of God. Accordingly, the "bird-born" overgrowing of the tree by the strangler fig is both a divine and ecological—sacred and mundane—manifestation. It is of the spirit and in the body. As conveyed through the active participles *muscling* and *cross-lacing*, in conjunction with somatic descriptors, such as "luscious fat leaves," the embodied soul of the fig enunciates gesturally in a language without the words recognized as such by linguists (Murray 2012: 31, ll. 5–8).

For Murray, the vegetative soul with respect to a sacred ecology renounces the Aquinian pronouncement that "less complete beings with souls exist for more complete beings with souls" (Aquinas 1999: 169). The poietic growth and decay of plants are akin to the transubstantiation of water to wine, wine to blood, bread to flesh, spirit to lightning: "my wood into the crystal mode of roots / and I *complete* myself and mighty on [emphasis added]" (Murray 2012: 31–32, ll. 10–12). Significantly, through internalized process of transformation, the vegetative soul becomes complete unto itself. The notion of plant-soul extant as a whole within an ecologically-referential "communion of subjects" (Berry 1999: 82) metaphysically intensifies in "Sunflowers," in which the ubiquitous field plant declares, with a forceful pitch, "I converse in my myriads with the great blast Cell / who holds the centre of reality" (Murray 2012" 65, ll. 2–3). The poet conceptualizes the sunflower as a temporally expansive being in dialogue with God and one synchronized with the origins of the universe; within its lack of human language inheres a conversation with an all-encompassing sacred—which is presence, embodied and otherwise. Yet, the presence of the vegetative soul in its ecological context cannot exceed the elusiveness of the sacred—constituted by the dynamic tension between expulsion and inclusion, banishment and salvation, transcendence and obscuration, body and spirit. As the poem concedes, "the more presence, the more apart. And the more lives / circling you" (Murray 2012: 65, ll. 5–6). This presence—this vegetative soul that corresponds with and to the universal sacred—is the upshot of the sunflower's locomotion and perception: "*Falling, I gathered such presence that I fused to Star, beyond all fission*—[emphasis in original]" (Murray 2012: 65, ll. 7–8). Through these examples, we see in plain sight the constituents of Murray's sacred ecology: soul, sense, poiesis, materiality, relation.

The collectivity of a sacred ecology of plants—as a communion of ensouled subjects—is a theme further developed in "Stone Fruit." The poem, again rendered in the first (plant) person, eschews the preconception that the vegetal world cannot register interiority: emotion, reflection, and other qualities attributed to the psyche. Instead, the stone fruit as a presence materializes from "the inner world, singular and many" (Murray 2012: 75, l. 1). Rather than propounding the hierarchy of vegetative, sensitive, and intellective (plants, animal, and human) souls, the poem troubles the order by advancing a concept of animal within plant, as the fruit announces, "I am / the animals of my tree" (ll. 1–2) and "animals are plants' genital extensions" (l. 3). The fruit's ensoulment is contingent upon its sensuous embodiment within a sacred ecology and other subjects with whom it engages and exchanges: "perfumed, flavoured by the mouthless, by insect-conductors / who kill / and summon by turns" (ll. 17–19). As in other examples of Murray's botanical imagination, the inner world—the plant-soul within its sacred ecology—paradoxically remains (in)accessible,

as the enigmatic final lines of the poems signify: “I emerge / continually / from the inner world, which you can’t mate with nor eat” (ll. 21–23).

**Conclusion**

As reflected in Murray’s poetry, a sacred ecology integrates the ensoulment of plants—as active, percipient, and responsive beings—with the materialities of their seasonally-fluctuating habitats and the exigencies of vegetal bodies in their ever-changing phases of growth, decay, flowering, seeding, spatial movement, and physical articulation. The botanical imagination forwarded by Murray through his poetry recasts the ancient idea of the vegetative soul, traced back to Aristotle and Aquinas, in radically new terms that integrate diverse spiritual traditions as part of his ideal of cultural convergence. The vegetative soul, in Murray’s syncretic conception, is etched in the myriad transactions between plants, insects, animals, soil, rocks, and humans. The wild and domestic, native and introduced, plant species of the inland country of New South Wales of Murray’s spirit country are simultaneously ensouled and earthed. Not the mute, immobile, and insensate things connoted pejoratively by the term *vegetative*, Murray’s poeticized plants are active, self-directed, percipient, and responsive beings in dynamic exchange with the spiritual and material lives of humans.

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