

Tim Winton's *The Shepherd's Hut*: A Post-Pastoral Vision of Nature

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'...man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.'
(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Critical literature concerning Tim Winton's male protagonists is divided. Whilst various critics ultimately celebrate Winton's men and their inchoate yet intimate relationships with place (McCredden, Ashcroft, Birns), others critique these characters as embodiments of male hubris and brute androcentrism (Schürholz, Knox). But there is room to read Winton's representations of masculinity more fluidly, particularly if we take into account the strong environmentalist thread in his fiction. In his most recent novel *The Shepherd's Hut* (2018), vulnerable teenager Jaxie Claxton traverses the Western Australian interior and grapples with the traumatic influence of his abusive father. At the inception of this journey, Jaxie's engagement with his surroundings is anthropocentric, aggressive and at times, explicitly violent. Yet as the narrative progresses, Jaxie jettisons his hostility towards place and adopts a more biocentric way of being in the world. Whilst aware of the novel's overt engagement with patriarchy and Australia's cultures of toxic masculinity,¹ it is these complex *environmental* nuances that this paper seeks to explore—in particular, Winton's ability to draw forth and (re)consider the problematic simplifications of the pastoral literary tradition.

Of equal importance to this reading of *The Shepherd's Hut* is the novel's mythological underpinnings. Ludovic Hunter-Tilney's review, for example, reads Jaxie's journey across the rural salt lands as a kind of modern Australian odyssey:

It is better treated as a work of myth, a parable of the rites of passage from boyhood to manhood conducted in the implacable hinterland of the Australian interior, populated by Ulysses-style castaways and one-eyed monsters like the *Cyclops*. (2018, emphasis mine)

This paper is similarly aware of the novel's allusions to Greek mythology but it goes further than this, arguing that the cyclops/shepherd from Homer's *Odyssey* not only augments the fable-like narrative of *The Shepherd's Hut* but actually informs the text's complex revision of the pastoral mode. The text does not attempt to replicate the plot of *The Odyssey*, rather it draws on the symbolic potential of Greek mythology more broadly. Winton is not alone in this pursuit. Homer's shepherd/cyclops has been reimagined throughout classical pastoral literature; reappearing, for example, in the bucolic poetry of Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's third and ninth *Eclogues*. But Winton's novel is not an archetypal pastoral text. Rather, it is a critique of the pastoral; a project that exposes Romantic idealisations whilst alluding to possible solutions. *The Shepherd's Hut* draws on Greek mythology with subversive intent. It imbues the cyclops/shepherd with ecocritical currency—employing the monster's grotesque single eye as an emblem for the pastoral's myopic vision of the non-human realm.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters a cyclops/shepherd named Polyphemus. Polyphemus lives an isolated yet idyllic existence, cloistered in a cave where he enjoys a

bountiful supply of livestock and natural produce: ‘bowls he used for milking, were swimming with whey’ (Homer 155). Indeed, the archetypal pastoral images of roaming flocks, agricultural abundance and benign nature are overt throughout the story (Glenn 58). Polyphemus’s single eye is emblematic of the monster’s acute myopia. The cyclops is an insular troglodyte, a brutal man-eating monster and a liminal figure who perceives the world through the restricted frame of his dark cave (Homer 113). This paper, however, reads Polyphemus’s short-sightedness from a modern ecocritical perspective, claiming that his myopia extends to the non-human realm. Polyphemus’s reduction of the animal to standing livestock for example, can be read as myopic and quintessentially pastoral.

Terry Gifford distinguishes three types of pastoral. The first is the traditional pastoral: ‘originating in classical Greek and Roman poetry idealising nature, especially the Arcadian, rural life of the shepherd,’ the second includes ‘a broader thematic celebration of country existence and the natural realm,’ and the third is the ‘skeptical use of the term ‘pastoral’ as pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation’ (Gifford 1–2). One aspect of pastoral simplification that is of central importance to this paper, is the reduction of the animal to mere food item. As Gifford (8) explains, the pastoral ‘emphasises fertility,’ rendering the farm animal as an abundant resource that exists solely for human consumption. In Homer’s narrative, although Polyphemus shares some moments of intimacy and communion with his flock (Glenn 52), the animals are ultimately slaughtered to service his immediate corporeal needs and overwhelming appetite (Homer 155). From an ecocritical perspective, the giant engages in a quintessentially pastoral relationship with the animal or what Val Plumwood would define as ‘instrumental reductionism’; an act which ‘identifies the other with what is only a part of their being, the part that is of use to us as flesh’ (60). I read Polyphemus, then, as a symbol of pastoral myopia in its most horrifying form. The monster’s monolithic eye becomes an emblem not only of insularity but also of a narrow vision of the non-human realm. Winton, seemingly aware of Polyphemus’s longstanding connection to pastoral literature, not only alludes to the shepherd/cyclops in *The Shepherd’s Hut* but deploys its single eye with subversive intent.

In *The Shepherd’s Hut*, Jaxie’s abusive father ‘Sid Claxton,’ is constructed as a cyclops—as Polyphemus in human form. Sid is a butcher and hunter, a shortsighted and unintelligent man who lost his eye in a ridiculous attempt to swat a fly (Winton 37). But it is not only the myriad references to Sid’s grotesque single eye (see for example Winton 9, 36, 37, 60) that evokes Polyphemus, but his reductionist vision of the animal and the broader pastoral context in which he is situated. It is important to note here that Winton does not replicate the traditional pastoral mode, rather he inverts it. The novel’s pastoral landscape is not idyllic but violent, austere and, as will be explained later, an allusion to the subversive anti-pastoral genre. The rural farmland surrounding the fictional township of ‘Monkston,’ for example, is antithetical to an archetypal idyll. Although the farming context is present, quintessential characteristics of Arcadia such as verdurous abundance and fecundity are replaced with an arid wasteland: ‘Maybe a broken-down sheep station here and there. Further east, far as I could remember, there was just the desert, the kind of country that’d boil your insides dry in a day’ (Winton 31). This antipodean farming landscape is a severe inversion of Arcadia and further evidence of the novel’s attempts to destabilise the pastoral mode.

Sid is carefully positioned within this inverted pastoral landscape. Although butchery is often strategically omitted in traditional pastoral literature (Gifford 7), Winton positions Sid at the violent end of the agricultural chain. Sid is not a caring shepherd immersed in a verdurous landscape but a savage animal-slaughterer: ‘master butcher, roadkill specialist’ (Winton 10). It

is significant that the farm animals are dead by the time they arrive at Sid's butchery. Winton not only reveals the problematic disconnection between animal and consumer that is inherent to the farming paradigm (Plumwood 59), but thwarts any potential for Sid to cultivate empathy towards the non-human realm. Instead, Sid exhibits pastoral anthropocentrism in its most violent state. He even operates *outside* of normative pastoral paradigms when he slaughters wild horses and attempts to pass them off as beef (Winton 52). Through this narrow vision, the animal is acknowledged only for its economic potential. Whereas Homer's Polyphemus slaughters livestock to abate his immediate cravings, Sid is often nihilistic in his actions, butchering for income and sustenance, but also, for mere enjoyment (Winton 51). Sid is reproducing what Plumwood defines as

[the] Cartesian model of the machine–animal, the dominant model which enables the ontological presence, mind-like and communicative characteristics of animals to be so utterly denied in the factory farm, where their entire lives are defined and distorted by the function of serving human appetite. (59)

Sid's singular eye, as in Homer's narrative, can be read as an emblem for the pastoral's myopic vision of the animal. Sid, as hyperbolic reconstruction of Polyphemus, is a short-sighted monster—the incarnation of pastoral anthropocentrism in its most violent form. Jaxie however, is the novel's antidote to pastoral myopia and the central focus of this paper. Unlike his one-eyed father, Jaxie—albeit fleetingly—becomes aware of animal sentience and alludes to a more imaginative vision of the non-human realm.

At the inception of *The Shepherd's Hut*, Sid hits Jaxie, causing his eye to close over with swelling (Winton 6–7). At this moment, Sid has literally transferred his myopia *onto* Jaxie and the continuation of intergenerational violence seems inevitable. Jaxie is overwrought with rage and he too becomes symbolic of a mutated, one-eyed monster: '... the eye that was half closed over. Fucking hell, it was like something growing out the side of me head' (Winton 7). Whereas Sid's myopia is permanent and ultimately leads to his death (Winton 12), Jaxie's loss of sight is only temporary. As Lyn McCredden explains, Jaxie is 'monstered and wounded' and yet he is a character who 'learns new possibilities, a way of being open to hope' (2018). As Jaxie traverses the Western Australian salt lands, his eye heals and he begins to circumvent intergenerational violence by cultivating a more benevolent way of being in the world. The remainder of this paper traces this healing process, exhibiting the moments where Jaxie offers what Bron Taylor defines as 'a quieter, more harmonious, and essentially ethical engagement with the natural world' (39). Although Jaxie begins his journey as a mere reflection of his cyclops father, he gradually exhibits a more imaginative, dual and essentially 'post-pastoral' vision of nature.

I define Jaxie's reconsideration of pastoral anthropocentrism as 'post-pastoral.' The 'post-pastoral,' a term coined by Terry Gifford, encompasses the pejorative limitations of the pastoral and critiques them alongside a renewed use of the trope. As Gifford states:

What is needed is a new term to refer to literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional allusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from. (Gifford 149)

Put simply, the post-pastoral critiques Romantic simplifications whilst alluding to possible alternatives. In what follows, I argue that Jaxie exhibits the post-pastoral by

reconsidering *numerous* components of pastoral simplification. Jaxie dismantles his father's myopic vision of the animal but he also disrupts various other forms of pastoral simplification. For example, Jaxie challenges the notion that nature is a refuge reserved for the human subject (Archer-Lean 4) and transgresses the pastoral's metaphorical embellishment of nature (Lawrence 23). Although Jaxie is the most overt site of pastoral revision, this paper will also explore the post-pastoral potential of exiled Irish priest 'Fintan,' who disrupts the pastoral notion that the human subject exists at the centre of the world (Gifford 149). The following sections read Jaxie and—to a lesser degree—Fintan, through the post-pastoral, giving ecocritical scope to Winton criticism whilst revealing various environmental gestures emerging in the author's work.

Post-Pastoral Human/Animal Fusion

As previously discussed, traditional pastoral literature often omits the violent slaughter inherent to the agricultural mode (Gifford 7). Throughout *The Shepherd's Hut* however, Winton exposes this latent violence whilst alluding to a more post-pastoral awareness of common human/animal vulnerability.

From the novel's inception, Jaxie envisions himself as butchered animal: '[m]e hands stunk of meat. I made fists of them, hard and flat as sawed beef shanks' (Winton 6) and: '[w]hen I opened me mouth it made a dry tearing sound. Like the noise a hide makes coming off a beef' (Winton 122). Furthermore, Jaxie begins the narrative sprawled out amongst a 'greasy nest' of chicken bones with swollen 'sausage fingers' (Winton 8). In these moments, Jaxie is not experiencing a Romantic convergence with nature but a gruesome and uncanny fusion with parts of dismembered farm animals. Indeed, these explicit references to animal slaughter contain strong evocations of the provocative 'anti-pastoral' genre—a critical response to the pastoral which seeks to expose agricultural violence through brutal realism (Gifford 18). But Jaxie's fusion with meat ultimately transgresses the anti-pastoral and elicits a more optimistic post-pastoral vision via what Clare Archer-Lean defines as an awareness of 'common human/animal vulnerability' (10). When Jaxie aligns himself with meat, he is identifying with the animals at the butchery and coming to terms with their *shared* experience of physical abuse, alienation and exploitation at the hands of Sid.

These shocking images, therefore, operate *beyond* the subversive anti-pastoral. The images of Jaxie as dead meat not only expose pastoral violence but allude to common human/animal vulnerability. This is an important reconsideration of the anti-pastoral. As John Kinsella states, the radical pastoral must not only expose violence but attempt to destabilise established boundaries between the human and animal: 'the aim of radical pastoral is surely to highlight (even rectify: it is a machine for change) abuses of the non-human "natural," of inequalities and injustices in hierarchical interactions' (7).

Of course, Jaxie's understanding of himself as meat is reminiscent of Plumwood's 'predation experience' (13). But Jaxie's epiphany is less a realisation of the human body as meat and more of an acute awareness of the violent mechanisation *joining* his experience with that of the slaughtered animals at his father's butchery. Jaxie is realising, as Greg Garrard explains, that '[t]he boundary between human and animal is arbitrary and, moreover, irrelevant, since we share with animals a capacity for suffering' (137). He is even able to realise common human/animal suffering through his father. Sid holds tightly to a notion of human/animal divide and is unable to envision himself as meat. His single-minded vision of the animal 'blocks sympathy, reduces the risk of *identification* with those so designated, and silences them as

communicative beings' (Plumwood 60, emphasis mine). Jaxie however, draws attention to common human/animal vulnerability via his animalian rendering of Sid, who: 'Had that panicked look like a ram all fucked up in barbwire' (Winton 38).

Despite Jaxie's identification with slaughtered animals, he continues to kill for survival. Although his awareness of shared vulnerability does not stop him hunting on his journey North, Jaxie's understanding of slaughter is much more profound than his father's. When staring into the eye of a dead kangaroo, Jaxie sees himself reflected: 'I looked at his big brown eye and saw meself, a reflection of me, a kind of shadow looming out of the sky and I had this mad idea, like there it is, Death, that's me, that's what I am' (Winton 185). Although this encounter involves violent slaughter, Jaxie is far from replicating his father's mindless destruction of the animal. Jaxie is acutely aware of his hierarchical position as slaughterer or as the animal's 'Death.' His slaughtering of a living entity does not lead to machismo or self-aggrandisement, but a more profound realisation of the sheer magnitude of death. The experience is also a negation of human exceptionalism. Jaxie is an enforcer of death but also, the embodiment of death itself: 'Death, that's me, that's what I am' (Winton 185). Jaxie does not celebrate or valorise his slaughter, rather he becomes aware that death constitutes a primordial commonality between all living things. Jaxie realises that slaughter is not necessarily justified but a natural cataclysm and a central component of the non-human realm.

The Shepherd's Hut's myriad references to dead animals risks a fatalistic or even elegiac construction of the non-human. But it is not the only way in which human and animal are fused together. There are also moments where Jaxie shares an intimate relationship with a dynamic natural presence. Jaxie displays biophilic empathy when his father destroys a beehive: 'That night in bed I thought I heard that bee hum still going but it was just how angry I was' (Winton 163). Jaxie is so enraged by his father's slaughter of the bees that he literally embodies their humming. This particular type of human/animal fusion is far more optimistic than the image of Jaxie as dead meat. Jaxie's connection with the bees is not so much a transcendental pastoral experience but a glimpse of environmental custodianship. Indeed, the bees are dead, but Jaxie is acutely aware of their absence and it is through his infuriation that their hum is sustained. In this moment, Jaxie, as McCredden states, recognises a 'responsibility toward that other, and to the created world of birds and sunlight and song and sun and moon' (2018). Jaxie's encounter with a singing butcherbird is perhaps the novel's most overt allusion towards human/animal vulnerability.

At the beginning of his journey, Jaxie hears a singing butcherbird: 'And in the quiet I heard a bird I always like, one with a sad song that gets me every time. Butcherbird. How fucked up is that?' (Winton 75). Here Jaxie reveals an empathic connection to both the name and melancholic song of the butcherbird. Once again, the animal affords Jaxie a language to express his unspeakable history of abuse and the harrowing experience working in his father's butchery. Although the reference to butchery subsists, the animal is no longer depicted as a slab of raw meat but as a singing bird. For Archer-Lean, moments such as these are ultimately post-pastoral:

Nature is numinous, but it is not exclusively in the service of the human soul, nor is it lost or grieving. Instead there is a complex reworking of the myth of human and nonhuman separation. (11)

During Jaxie's fusion with the butcherbird, nature is employed to make sense of his suffering but its voice and vitality is sustained. These encounters with humming bees and singing birds ultimately act as remedies to the more fatalistic, yet vital, images of Jaxie as butchered meat.

At the end of his sojourn at the hut, Jaxie embodies the cry of a wild bird: 'Any of youse heard my voice now you'd think it was weather. Or a bird screaming' (Winton 4). Here, the novel completely jettisons the anti-pastoral and attempts a post-pastoral fusion with an animal that is dynamic, vocal and emancipated from pastoral paradigms. But it is important to note that Jaxie does not achieve a complete transcendence of violence. He continues to kill for food and at the end of his journey, Jaxie—the avenger, driving in his stolen car with blood on his hands—is a character who is dangerously vulnerable (Winton 4). Winton engenders a malaise of uncertainty and incompleteness here that is typical of the post-pastoral. The renegotiation of violent anthropocentrism is a process that requires constant attention. The reader is positioned to question what Jaxie's next actions will be, what kind of man he will ultimately become.

Post-Pastoral Engagements with Place

A fundamental characteristic of traditional pastoral literature is the construction of nature as a place of refuge reserved solely for the human subject. For Claire Lawrence, the pastoral replicates nature as a 'repository of emotion' (19). The natural realm is often constructed as an empty vessel for the human subject to project their suffering upon—a place that exists to service the renewal of a damaged, deficit self. In essence, pastoral literature is driven by the notion of nature as 'a transcendental vehicle for the human soul, a site to retreat to for insight' (Archer-Lean 4). Archer-Lean draws attention to the consequences of such a vision, claiming that the pastoral often reduces nature to 'a place to defend the self against, rather than as an integrated part of human existence' (4). But Jaxie's engagements with place are far more complex. Although there are moments where he replicates the notion of nature as repository, he eventually learns to observe his immediate surroundings.

If we trace Jaxie's journey North, the healing of his swollen eye is synonymous with his gradual transition towards a less hostile engagement with place. At the genesis of his journey, Jaxie is a one-eyed brute who mimics the aggressive tendencies of his cyclops father. His hostility is overt as he ploughs forward and rages at nature. Jaxie is 'walking and yelling all day' and reflects on how he 'pleaded with puddles and stars and piles of rocks' (Winton 36 24). Although Jaxie replicates the aforementioned notion of nature as a repository of emotion, the novel's retrospective narration affords him the space for self-reflexivity and parodying of his own anthropocentric behavior: '... I did so much shouting out there. Yelled till it burnt. That was me, gobbing off at trees like a loony' (Winton 36).

As Jaxie journeys deeper into the Western Australian interior, he begins to internalise his reflections. As he puts it: 'Keeping up a good speed. And kinda lost in my thoughts' (Winton 79); 'You go somewhere in your head. Otherwise you're fucked' (Winton 105); and 'Some days you hoof along with your head full of memories' (Winton 85). Jaxie's internal musing signifies a transition from outright projection to internal reflection. But during this stage of Jaxie's journey, nature is primarily employed as a symbol. The surrounding trees, for example, become metaphorical representations of his father: 'Standing round like old blokes with their shirts off. Scars and divits, man boobs and everything' (Winton 36). Although Jaxie is no longer projecting his voice, he has begun to project symbols onto nature. Sid plagues Jaxie's consciousness and constantly diverts his attention away from the sheer presence of his surroundings. This employment of nature as symbol for human predicaments is quintessentially

pastoral. As Lawrence Buell explains, in pastoral literature nature ‘exists for its formal or symbolic or ideological properties rather than as a place of literal reference or as an object of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake’ (85). At this stage in Jaxie’s journey, his one-directional projection of language has been jettisoned, but nature is yet to become an independent agent with intrinsic worth.

As the narrative progresses, Jaxie begins to simply observe his immediate surroundings: ‘But I chilled a bit. Just from walking really. There was birds to see, finches and quail, things to take me mind off him’ (Winton 183). He eventually acknowledges the limitations of projection *and* reflection—choosing instead to listen to what is immediately present. This is a crucial transition. As Kate Rigby exclaims, we need literature that attempts to ‘draw us forth into the polyphonic song of our nonhuman earth others’ (434). Rigby, drawing on both Bakhtin and Heidegger, calls on a literature where the human is integrated into a diverse soundscape and no longer the central voice. Jaxie ultimately becomes immersed within this polyphonic soundscape: ‘The northerly was up with a coupla points of west in it and that was all I could hear except birds and the sound of me own breath’ (Winton 204). Here, Jaxie’s breath situates him within the environment not as a dominating linguistic force but as a neutral and decentered entity. Breath functions here as an atavistic presence—a common thread that connects Jaxie to all sentient beings.

There are various other moments where Jaxie becomes immersed within a polyphonic soundscape. For example: ‘And for a while it was real peaceful. If you know what I mean. Quiet. Just footsteps. Until I didn’t even hear them anymore. All I heard was birds’ (Winton 42). In this fleeting moment, Jaxie has jettisoned his original engagement with place. Jaxie’s focus has shifted beyond his predicaments to the extent that his own presence is completely silenced—the birds are all he can hear. Lisa Dresdner claims that moments such as these are vital because they establish a ‘place-centered’ narrative (3). Jaxie’s decentering of the human subject is similar to Fox’s revelation in Winton’s novel *Dirt Music* (2002), which for Steven Harris, draws forth the: ‘inward flare and pulse of sheer being—the Zen-like breath of utter presence, without “self” or “identity”: less heightened than intensified and expanded consciousness’ (11). In *The Shepherd’s Hut*, there is also a reciprocal act of deep listening at work. As Jaxie’s eye heals, his engagement with place becomes less hostile and more biocentric. Although he begins by replicating the pastoral notion of nature as repository, he develops a post-pastoral engagement with place. Jaxie becomes a decentered yet immersed component of a polyphonic natural soundscape.

Post-Pastoral Visions of Nature

In archetypal pastoral literature, nature is employed as metaphor and rarely valued as an independent agent. The pastoral celebrates nature’s beauty but primarily *through* the author’s exceptional use of poetic devices. As Lawrence states, ‘nature tends to function metaphorically, to stand for some human idea or construct’ (23). Jaxie’s construction of nature, on the other hand, employs figurative language alongside more immediate and elemental observations. Jaxie’s vision, then, is not parochial but multifocal—he celebrates nature’s sheer ecological presence whilst also attempting to poetically capture its essence. In doing so, Jaxie is post-pastoral—he extends beyond the pastoral’s prioritising of figurative language and celebrates nature in and for itself.

For Lyn Jacobs, Winton’s characters often ‘illustrate complex ways of knowing and seeing’ (312). Jaxie is no different, he exhibits a knowledge of regional biota that suggests a mature

level of ecological comprehension or what Buell would call ‘eco-precociousness’ (108). For example, Jaxie identifies ‘salt-bush and low mulga’ (Winton 206), ‘Salmon gums’ (Winton 78) and ‘finches and quail’ (Winton 183). For Tom Wilson, such ecological understandings of the Australian landscape directly counter early colonial writing or what he defines as ‘naïvely destructive’ pastorals which ‘almost necessarily lack a biocentric complexity’ (6). But Jaxie’s observations go beyond ecological observations. He also observes Indigenous uses of land (Winton 77) and the complex *interrelatedness* of nature. For Barry Lopez, learning to observe nature’s relationships is integral: ‘One learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it—like that between the sparrow and the twig’ (64). Via empirical observation, Jaxie becomes aware of this interconnectedness: ‘Round then a breeze got up from the east. Or maybe I just noticed it because of the noise in the trees’ (Winton 93). Here, Jaxie is not attempting to categorise his surrounding environment. Rather, his experience is partial, transitory and phenomenological. The human narrator is not omniscient but a peripheral observer of a fleeting ecological exchange.

As Jaxie treks through the Western Australian interior, he attends to various changes in his surroundings. His observations are often elemental: ‘The sun come up over one shoulder and went down by the other’ (Winton 21) and, ‘The shadows got long. And the ground got a bit more stony. The dirt was pink now, red in patches’ (Winton 36). In these laconic depictions, nature is a kinetic entity that operates in and for itself. Jaxie is not attempting to augment nature *through* figurative language but is using his body as a way of navigating his surroundings whilst finding his place within it. The retrospective narration momentarily slips into present tense, accentuating not only Jaxie’s erroneous vernacular but his immediate experience of place. But not all observations of nature are unsentimental and immediate. Jaxie also draws attention to nature’s Romantic aesthetics: ‘Salmon gums all bunched up like that, they made hard country look pretty’ (Winton 78–79). And, on various occasions, he even employs figurative language in an attempt to capture nature’s numinous essence: ‘The lake was so bright it looked like a sea of milk’ (Winton 236). This maternal image of the barren salt lake parodies the simplistic pastoral vision of verdurous Arcadia and agricultural abundance. Jaxie is ironically able to locate idyllic beauty in an arid antipodean landscape.

Along with these ecological, elemental and metaphorical observations, Jaxie also draws attention to nature’s spiritual presence:

When the sun come up I saw there was a billion spiderwebs all shining along the ground across the dead timber. Like the silver lining people talk about. And I felt maybe I’d be alright. (Winton 29–30)

This is Jaxie’s encounter with the sublime, a moment in which he exhibits a ‘deeply awed sense of the created world’ (McCredde 2018). Most interestingly, nature is not a vessel endowed with heavenly presence but a mystery that is holy *in and of itself*. Silver lining, a proverbial symbol of heaven and the ethereal, is repositioned as ephemeral skeins of spider web upon the earth. This directly counters the Christian monotheist duality of heaven/earth or what Norman Habel (in Plumwood 93) calls ‘heavenism’: the notion that ‘earth is at best a temporary lodging; the true human home is beyond the earth, in heaven.’ Jaxie is engaging here with a presence that is not elevated into an isolated spiritual realm but laid gently upon the earth. Ultimately, Jaxie exhibits *multiple* ways of perceiving place. His multifocal vision is post-pastoral because it transgresses the pastoral’s prioritising of metaphorical embellishment and celebrates nature in and for itself.

Fintan MacGillis: A Post-Pastoral Father Figure

While Jaxie is the text's most overt site of pastoral critique, the exiled Irish priest Fintan MacGillis offers a more nuanced post-pastoral vision. Fintan shares various ontological insights with Jaxie. Most significant to this paper's exploration of pastoral anthropocentrism is his ability to evoke an acute sense of marginalisation. Fintan's insights into marginalisation are post-pastoral, because they directly oppose the Romantic notion that the human subject exists at the center of the world (Archer-Lean 4).

At the inception of his sojourn at the hut, Jaxie has already begun to jettison his father's parochial violence and various other aspects of pastoral simplification. But Jaxie's ontological conversations with Fintan, although combative, broaden his emerging post-pastoral vision. Fintan, for example, corrects Jaxie's reduction of the salt lake to an inert backdrop, arguing that it is a kinetic and dynamic force: 'It's a salt lake, I said. It can't do nothing. Ah, but it moves all day, he said. It's forever changing' (Winton 150). Fintan exhibits an alternative kind of man, an imperfect yet positive post-pastoral figure who shepherds Jaxie further away from anthropocentric myopia. As McCredden claims, Fintan 'presents us with a palpable ritual, the movement of Jaxie's boyhood into manhood. There is a fathering that takes place, a making of home, a sacramentalizing of Jaxie's self-worth' (2018).

In order to understand Fintan, it is important to unpack the mythological allusions through which he is constructed. Fintan MacGillis's name makes an intertextual reference to *both* Saint Giles and Fintan mac Bóchra. Saint Giles was a Christian holy man, 'patron of cripples, beggars, and blacksmiths,' and 'an Athenian who became a hermit near the mouth of the Rhône,' where he: 'lived on herbs and the milk of a hind' (Livingstone 482). Fintan MacGillis is also a hermit and holy man who lives off his goats. This intertextual reference further accentuates Fintan as a *marginalised* religious figure who nurtures Jaxie—the spiritually crippled adolescent—back to health. Fintan mac Bóchra, on the other hand, can be located in Celtic mythology. He is a seer, a shapeshifter and the only Irishman to escape the biblical floods: '[i]n surviving he had been transformed into a *one-eyed* salmon, an eagle, and a hawk' (MacKillop 239 emphasis mine). Symbolic references to Fintan mac Bóchra, the one-eyed salmon/hawk, are abundant in *The Shepherd's Hut*. Jaxie constantly draws attention to salmon gums (see Winton 78 142) and when creating a secret code with Fintan, he decides to let out the noise of a hawk (Winton 142). Most significant is the salmon's single eye. Whereas Sid is a myopic cyclops, Fintan is a one-eyed fish and 'seer'—his alignment with *both* myopia and animal depicts his struggle to abandon parochial Christian values and replace them with a more biocentric consciousness.

Although Fintan constantly projects onto landscape, replicating the aforementioned notion of nature as repository (see for example Winton 102, 234), he also understands his marginalised place within the universe. Fintan invalidates anthropocentrism via what David Robinson explains as an 'acceptance of a world in which we are not the pinnacle or the center' (23). This alternative vision is no more focused than in Fintan's uncanny encounter with the moon:

Some nights I could see my shadow trailing and the great white eye of it peering down. I tell you, I felt . . . transparent. Like clean? No, no, see-through. As if God, or the universe if you will, could read me like an open book. (Winton 224)

Once again, there is a reference to a singular eye, but, quite inversely, this ‘great white eye’ is not a symbol of myopia but an emblem of the universe’s omniscient presence. For Fintan, the moon is not merely a *cynosure* to be gazed upon but an all-seeing entity that can return the gaze and provoke a profound sense of maginalisation. The moon, which can read Fintan ‘like an open book’ (Winton 244), directly negates what Plumwood defines as ‘modernist liberal individualism,’ which assumes that: ‘we own our lives and bodies, politically as an enterprise we are running, experientially as a drama we are variously narrating, writing, acting and/or reading’ (91 emphasis mine). Fintan’s book metaphor destabilises the pastoral by claiming that nature is not merely a static backdrop to the broader and more important narrative of humanity.

Most interestingly, Fintan’s encounter with the moon does not lead to spiritual rapture but an essentially purgatorial and pantheistic awareness of mortality. The moon itself is not a religious symbol or hierophany but sheer atavistic presence. Fintan draws Jaxie’s attention to his alienation within the non-human realm: ‘Tiny, he said. That’s how I felt. Just a speck. And so terribly alone, as if I were a man in a space film’ (Winton 152). Most interestingly, Fintan shares a complex understanding of the temporal when he ventriloquises the moon: ‘*Before you even drew breath, I am*’ (Winton 152 emphasis mine). This temporal paradox constructs nature as primordial but also, as extant and ubiquitous—nature is not so much immutable or fixed as it is an enduring presence that demands our attention. Fintan’s ontological insights into human marginalisation shepherd Jaxie further away from anthropocentric pastoral myopia. His understanding of human liminality is a prominent post-pastoral feature of the text.

The Shepherd’s Hut is a narrative of hope. The protagonist and narrator, Jaxie Claxton, is the novel’s imperfect hero—a possible antidote to pastoral simplification and his father’s violent vision of the animal. By envisioning himself as meat and singing bird, Jaxie disrupts the human/animal binary, draws attention to common human/animal vulnerability and even gestures towards animalian sentience. As his grotesque eye heals, Jaxie offers a more imaginative vision of his surroundings. He jettisons a combative engagement with place and, momentarily, becomes an integrated voice within a polyphonic soundscape. Whereas his father’s vision of nature is parochial, Jaxie’s is multifocal. In his constructions of nature, Jaxie is not restricted to metaphorical embellishments for he also ponders nature’s immediate, elemental presence. Through Jaxie, and to a lesser degree Fintan, *The Shepherd’s Hut* not only offers a rigorous critique of pastoral simplification, it also alludes to the possibilities of a more complex, imaginative and post-pastoral vision of the natural world.

NOTES

1 See Stan Grant’s interview (ABC News): ‘Tim Winton laments the power of toxic masculinity on young men’ and Winton’s article (*Guardian*) ‘About the boys: Tim Winton on how toxic masculinity is shackling men to misogyny.’

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