

## PART ONE: FICTION



## Tim Winton's "European" Novel *The Riders*

Not much has been written about Tim Winton's recently published novel *The Riders* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1995. Referred to as his first "adult" novel since *Cloudstreet* (1991), it traces the lives of the main character Scully and his seven-year-old daughter Billie, who travel throughout Europe in search of Jennifer, their wife and mother, respectively, only to realize at last that she will never come back to them again. The Celtic "riders" Scully catches a glimpse of at the Leap castle in Ireland at the beginning of the novel, and which both himself and his daughter Billie see again at the end, known from some of the poems written by W.B. Yeats and, more recently, from Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, apocalyptically (like the Riders of the Apocalypse) anticipate the dissolution of his marriage. This is indeed reconfirmed during his second sighting of the riders towards the end of the novel, when he returns to Ireland with Billie only to start his life all over again with a different set of priorities. One of the most qualified attempts trying to define the two visions of the riders described in the novel, in terms of the post-Saussurean concept of the sign, is a recent article by Andrew Taylor "What can be read, and what can only be seen in Tim Winton's fiction" (Taylor 1996). Taylor tries to decipher this "sign" by examining the whole signifying process, the relation between the particular signifier and the particular signified (cf. Jakobson 1971), and posits that in Tim Winton's novels "reading is replaced by vision" which is thus "the alternative to reading" (Taylor 326):

... the Riders *signify*, they are a sign to be read. True, they are static and seem to exist outside the flow of time: while their horses move, 'he riders sat unmoved from their fixed

stations of expectation' (80). ... But both Billie, the daughter, and Scully can, and do, read the Riders. They are neither empty signs, like the grapejuice, nor outside the realm of signification. For Billie they signify her father: "waiting, battered, disappointed" (377). For Scully, 'as he felt Billie tugging on him, curling her fingers in his and pulling him easily away,' they signify unfinished, and unfinishable, business, a defeat - no matter how heroic - and a hopeless waiting to which he refuses to succumb: 'he would not be among them and must never be, in life or death' (377) (Taylor 330).

The purpose of this study is not so much to dwell on the issue of the vision of the riders that constitute the broad framework of the novel, but to examine the various "European" settings of the novel, which is rather unusual for Winton, who sets most of his novels in Western Australia with the sea being the central setting (Taylor 1996). And what's more, Tim Winton's fiction has even been labelled "regional" (Goldsworthy 545), i.e. pertaining to Western Australia and its specificities. It is thus of some consequence that he places the story of an Australian man, who sees himself as "a loser" on various levels of his life, into a European context. By doing so, Winton deftly makes Europe into a symbol of personal defeat, social decadence and spiritual and physical deterioration. In this way he demystifies some of the stereotypes and myths that had been forged about and by Australians, Australia and Europe, respectively, whereby this "deconstruction" process works reciprocally. It is significant that Europe and not Australia should represent "signs" of defeat, namely of Scully's life going down in flames. The novel *The Riders*, which once again confirms Tim Winton to be one of the most important contemporary Australian writers of the younger generation, can be read as an odyssey across Europe, a journey of

almost allegorical dimensions, during which the protagonist is in quest of a solution, of some greater truth about himself and his relationship with the past and his family that is about to fall apart. Fred Scully, the protagonist, waits at the arrival gate of Shannon international airport in Ireland, to meet his wife and seven-year-old daughter Billie. After two years in Europe, they decided to finally settle down in Ireland. He sees new life ahead of them, a fresh start they can make in a cottage in the Irish countryside he has renovated himself. But life does not have that in store for him. Only his daughter Billie arrives and they jointly embark on a search for Jennifer, visiting all the places where they had once been, finding the European sites much changed and showing visible signs of spiritual and physical decadence. The past Scully frequently resorts to cannot be recaptured. The book is on the formal surface level written in the form of a travelogue, but it soon becomes obvious that this is merely the pattern Winton artfully explores in order to create a subtle artistic image of an unsuccessful marriage of a Western Australian, and ultimately of a contemporary marriage as well.

Rather unexpectedly I came across Tim Winton's "Letter from Ireland" published in 1988 (Hergenhan & Petersson 70), which sheds light on the actual source for the novel. As it results from the letter, the novel is largely based on Winton's own autobiographical experiences in Europe while working on his novel *Cloudstreet*. The letter makes things much clearer and helps to contextualize the novel properly in an extra-literary mode. There is in reality much realistic detail to be found in the novel, combined with fictional characters and episodes, with the book ending in a kind of "magic realism" in describing the vision of the riders. Winton writes in the letter that he had planned to go to Europe, Paris or Greece, but he was one day unexpectedly offered a cottage in Ireland in County Offaly, where he wanted to work on his "non-European" novel *Cloudstreet* published in 1991. Interestingly

enough, during the writing of this novel he got inspiration as well as subject-matter in the form of personal experience for his “European” novel *The Riders* discussed here. In the letter he says just how much he has grown attached to the new setting, the Leap Castle and its Gothic setting near the cottage, history and stories that have entered the folklore, a castle that readily invited a literary treatment and made him “obsessed” with it, just like the Australian of Irish descent, who in reality obsessively renovated the castle to create another Leap story and bring “positive feelings” to the place (Hergenhan & Petersson 73):

What I suspect has affected me, as I mentioned before, is the strength of the place, in its physical aspect, its weight of stories, the way it preoccupies people. Here where every field and some trees have names, where walls and cottages have names, where a cluster of houses has a collective name to distinguish it from the cluster five hundred yards down the valley, here place and region are a serious proposition. This is where a Faulkner could borrow a complete world for his own ends. The Irish do not forget (Hergenhan & Petersson 73).

The novel *The Riders* opens with the words of a song sung by Tom Waits, “Tom Traubert’s Blues”, which provides an ominous atmosphere of the events that are to take place in the novel, and there are, in fact, lyrics from popular songs used occasionally in the novel to provide an appropriate atmosphere. The opening description of the bare scalp of a hill where the cottage stands called the Leap is reminiscent of a pastoral, an Irish idyll. Scully, the protagonist, is fascinated with the cottage that is now his own and that is to represent a fresh new start for his family, wife and daughter, a cottage “older than /his/ own nation” (6). He views in retrospect his life back home in Australia. He never finished his

studies of architecture at the university, did odd jobs, lived abroad for a couple of years, became a husband and a father, and now he was a landowner in County Offaly, fixing an eighteenth-century peasant cottage with his bare hands. After living in Europe for a while, people took to like him and he in fact created a typical “innocent abroad”, a stereotype of a raw, naive but likeable Australian in Europe, “a working-class boofhead with a wife who married beneath herself, a hairy bohemian with a beautiful family, the mongrel expat with the homesick twang and ambitious missus, the poor decent-hearted bastard who couldn’t see the roof coming down on his head” (10). We learn that Scully still suffers from homesickness after two years in Europe:

In the hedge beside him two small birds wheeled in a courting dance. He recognized them as choughs. He mouthed the word, resting a moment and rubbing his hands. Choughs. Strange word. Two years and he still thought from his own hemisphere. He knew he couldn’t keep doing it forever. He should stop thinking of blue water and white sand; he had a new life to master (11).

Winton is very good at reproducing parts of Scully’s discussions with the people he meets, in lively dialogues always written in Scully’s vivid Australian colloquial idiom and Irish speech, and later in the novel there are also non-English phrases and words frequently used. The Irish have preconceived notions about Australia and Australians, just as Scully has about them and Europe. At the post office Scully teases the assistant by exaggerating his “native” story of Australian snakes extending thus the cliché image further, “dugites, taipans, king browns, tigers”, saying that a tiger snake once chased him all the way down the back paddock, while he was on a motorbike (29). One of the Irish he meets, Pete, is curious about how Scully and Jennifer got to

know each other in the first place. Scully tells him they met at the university, in the library, when she asked *him* if he wanted a beer, not the other way around. This is too much for old Pete, so he exclaims by saying: “What a friggin country it must be. Must be because it’s so damn hot. No time for romance” (40).

One day Scully receives mail from home, from Geraldton, W.A., the past and present from Australia catching up with him. He is stirred to homesickness by his mother’s postcard with a distant tone to it, which “showed the Swan River at dusk with the lights of Perth budding against a purple sky” (55). It is then that he for the first time starts asking himself had anything been wrong between himself and his wife Jennifer:

In the registered envelope were all the documents relating to the sale of the Fremantle house ready for signing, and under separate cover, a cheque from Jennifer for two thousand dollars. The cheque was in her name from an account he didn’t recognize, a bank neither of them had accounts with. The writing and the signature were hers, the envelope postmarked Fremantle a few days ago. Why didn’t she just transfer money into the account here with Allied Irish. It must be something specific (55).

The last item in the mail is a card from Billie with a photograph of the Round House, the old convict prison on the beach at Fremantle, where he and Billie would often go while Jennifer would be at work. He becomes sentimental and realizes just how fond he is of his daughter, for “he didn’t have so many friends anymore, as if the kid was suddenly and unexpectedly enough for him” (56).

Scully gradually gets to know better some of the Irish characters, who emerge rather as types; they act as background interviewers that enable Scully to reveal himself to the reader. He presents rather unorthodox views of various European settings he

and his wife had been to, dependent on the kind of life they led there. Paris was “a black hole” where he did “shit work” so she could write, but she was not satisfied with her writing. In Greece, which is “like Australia invaded by the Irish” and where “nothin works and no one gives a shit” (73), he worked for a stonemason humping granite up a hill and Jennifer tried her hand at painting. One night while at the cottage he has a vision of the riders down below at the castle that for the second time appear at the end of the novel to both Scully and his daughter Billie. The vision Winton describes so vividly is very concrete and physical, not really a supernatural phenomenon, an apparition really, the result of his tormented mind in doubt.

With his pulse like an animal trapped beneath his skin, Scully moved between the riders, all but touching the heaving, rancid flanks of their mounts. Some of the horses had black, congealed wounds on their chests, and they looked as tired and cold and dazed as their riders. Some were boys, their scrawny legs bare and stippled with gooseflesh. And how they craned their necks, these riders. It was as though any moment some great and terrible event would explode upon them, as if something, someone up there could set them in motion. The sky was a comfortless blanket on them. The ground was mired and trodden. Shit stood in vaporous cakes between hoofs. The castle keep rose as a cudgel before them. He felt himself craning, waiting, almost failing to breathe. A horse shook its mane and Scully felt the mist of sweat against his cheek. His feet took root in the ground as they continued to wait and he waited with them. It was true, he knew it, something was about to happen (80-1).

Well, it did indeed happen. His daughter Billie arrives from Australia, unaccompanied, without any message from her mother.

Apparently she is in Europe somewhere and took off the plane in London. Scully wonders which flight she might have taken, to go maybe somewhere they had already been together, Greece, France... Before changing the setting to Greece, Winton introduces one Arthur Lipp, an expatriate in Greece, "the Englishman he once was" (119). He recalls Scully and his family while in Greece, "those strange Australians" and looks back on their stay on the island Hydra, "the real innocents abroad" (120). Lipp feels somewhat sorry for them, being stranded in Europe, and feels the best for them is to avoid Europe, the source of their ultimate disillusionment, where they do not find what they had come to look for. This symbolically holds true for all Australians in Europe:

Well, stay home on your own big island, he thinks, and do yourself a favour and never leave. Never grow old. Never chase the hard buttocks of Scandinavians. Do not stand for winter, by God. And never leave your teeth in a glass of Newcastle Brown Ale at night, lest ye become a sad, sick travesty like someone we all know but do not quite care for (121).

Back on Hydra, in winter, with no tourists the place feels "cleaner, happier for winter", Billie gives Scully "the illusion of soundness, of family solidity" (129). Winton is especially good at describing the expatriate colony living on Hydra, one that has in reality existed and nurtured a handful of Australian writers since the 1950s. Scully is somehow intimidated by the expats, "a nation unto themselves", feeling in their presence "the complete farmboy":

They were Oxford graduates, poor aristocrats, American bohemians, artists and faded lower-order celebrities whose hopes had somehow fallen away. There was a mercenary from Adelaide who he quite liked, and a defrocked priest from Montana who came down from his hilltop eyrie now and

then, but the ones who worried him were the ones you saw every day without fail, the ones who staggered down to the waterfront morning after morning and stayed till the wee hours, drinking, sniping, recalling better days. They lived for the youthful influx of summer when they could mingle with the fresh and the novel, when they could whine entertainingly and fall in love, strike poses, relieve each other of the burden of old gossip (131).

The author's descriptions of the Greek landscape are very subtly Impressionistic, with the landscape always being ominous, an objective correlative representing his fears and anticipating a negative outcome in his private life: the half-deserted streets of the labyrinth-like coastal town stand for his life. It is, however, from an artistic point of view less effective that Billie's presence is for a great part of the novel, in two initial thirds of it, limited to her "physical presence", she is voiceless and only comes to speak out towards the end of the novel, when she, in fact, turns into a very active character that gives meaning and coherence to Scully's shattered life. Scully frequently sentimentally indulges in looking back to the past, which cannot be repeated, when they were happy together in the very same place on Hydra. And now things have gone astray. He feels he is a loser, they do not find Jennifer. When Billie gets sick, Scully is prepared to do everything to get her to the best hospital around, although there are no ferries to the mainland in the bad weather. He realizes he really loves his daughter who means a lot to him.

From Greece they travel by ferry across the Adriatic Sea to Brindisi in Italy, to eventually get to Paris, where Jennifer could be, via Rome and Florence. But they were not happy in Paris, Scully recalls, "where no one liked them and the sun would never go down at night" (207). During the train journey to Rome Billie is homesick for the first time: "She thought of wide, eye-aching spaces of brown

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grass with wind running rashes through it and big puddles of sheep as big as the shadows of clouds creeping along toward lonely gum trees” (235). In Florence, where people live up to the myth, Scully had about them and look “like magazine covers”, he finds some peace until a telegram from Jennifer upsets him. He is to meet her in Paris. Paris it is, then, and this time he is not just passing through, he is no illegal worker, “no looks down the Gallic nose that he’d once had to take humbly, thinking of payday” (252).

Paris is the nextstop on their search through Europe and the (anti)myth of France is presented from the perspective of his own experiences there, in the past and at present. Only now, in the last third of the book Billie gets a literary voice and the reader can easily follow her consciousness. Scully finds Paris, symbolically, with its “frigid sky” still beautiful, “but not crushingly beautiful”. To him it is “just a place, a town whose traffic noise and street fumes reached him at a faint remove” (260). He takes Billie on the tour of the city and she is especially enthusiastic about the underneath of Paris, its Metro tunnels, sewer shafts, catacombs, mines and cemeteries. In the “dull glow” of the city she prefers the belly of the city and sees it as a “sanctuary”, while her father Scully appears to her as the hunchback of Notre Dame:

The Hunchback knew. Up here in the tower of Notre Dame he saw how it was. Now and then, with the bells rattling his bones, he saw it like God saw it - inside, outside, above and under - just for a moment. The rest of the time he went back to hurting and waiting like Scully out there crying in the wind.

The tour lady yelled from the archway.  
Yes, you could see clearly up here. Sanctuary, sanctuary,  
sanctuary.

She never wanted to leave (261).

Scully perceives visible signs of some kind of decadence everywhere. For example, when Billie badly needs to go to the toilet, they barge into a café. The proprietor is “a fat man with earrings and peroxidized curls” and Billie cannot find a ladies’ room, since there are men in both rooms... Jennifer does not turn up at the Tuileries as she said she would in her cable. Billie, symbolically again like in Greece, develops a fever. Scully rings up one of his old acquaintances, Marianne, for whom he worked for a while, because she was interested in Jennifer and her writing. Marianne is not very keen to see him and Billie, and Scully suddenly recalls her strange reactions after the paint job he did. He wonders whether it was the size of the bill that made her, back then and also now after a couple of years, so distant, on top of her proverbial “Parisian diffidence”. He thinks she saw him as a loser: not just a tradesman but a cut-rate one at that. Europe - it was hair raising” (278). This is a typical example of Scully’s bold generalizations of Europe, which is seen through the images of his recollections of personal experiences and his current self-projections. His description of Marianne’s friend Jean-Louis only helps to boost the negative image of Europe. The interesting this is that Scully is quick in pronouncing a judgment on “European” decadence and hypocrisy and thus demythologizing it, but he is, on the other hand, also quite ready to perpetrate the myths about Australia and Australians. But despite the fact that he in this way harps on his “exoticism” trying to ensure for himself some sort of “national identity”, the effect eventually wears off and he ends by being reduced to the role of the “Ignoble Savage”, as he notes sarcastically:

Jean-Louis had a romantic European fascination for wild places and people. He defended France’s right to test nuclear bombs in the Pacific and yet turned purple at the thought of roo-tail soup. Scully liked to shock him and his friends with redneck stories told against himself and his country.

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Chlamydia in koalas, the glories of the cane toad. The wonders of the aluminium roo-bar. For a while he felt almost exotic at Marianne's parties, but it wore off in the end, playing the part of the Ignoble Savage (278).

Scully learns from Marianne that Jennifer is pregnant and judging by the bills accumulated on his account she is ahead of them in Amsterdam, where he decides to follow her. Amsterdam, in Scully's eyes, shows even greater signs of European "decadence" than Paris does. Just as in other European locales, Winton's Impressionistic descriptions of the various city sights are always laden with metaphorical transfer. There seems to be a certain graduation in them, from the initial agreeable and relaxed attitudes in Ireland and Greece (where only expatriates are given a more critical treatment), through the relative aloofness of Italy, to the clearly visible signs of mental as well as physical deterioration in France and particularly in Amsterdam. As objective correlatives, these European settings correspond to Scully's state of mind and his decreasing hopes of finding Jennifer and rescuing his marriage. Amsterdam's central station is an extended metaphor of European decline:

Ghetto blasters and guitars reverberated in every corner. Junkies and drunks lay nodding in hallways. Dreadlocked touts hustled limply by the deserted escalators, disheartened by the holiday. A madman in fluorescent tights shrieked at his own reflection in the windows of the closed-up Bureau de Change. Hippies of seventeen and eighteen who looked German to Scully swilled Amstel and laughed theatrically amongst themselves. Scully snarled at them and pushed by. The air was warm and foul with body odour, smoke and urine so that the street air was a sweet blast to be savoured a second or two (326).

Scully and Billie do not find Jennifer in Amsterdam as they hoped, so they decide to return to Ireland, which brings their lives back to some kind of normality. It is significant that on the first night of the year, which represents a fresh start and a new beginning for Scully, he sees the riders for the second time from his cottage. So does Billie, who is already there on the castle grounds when he gets there. Scully goes down among them, no longer afraid of them as during the first sighting, putting his hands up against the horses and talking, saying things she cannot hear. It is then that she realizes he is one of them and that she has to rescue him: "Waiting, battered, disappointed. Except for his pink scrubbed living skin. That and the terry-cloth robe. Scully, too, comes to see them as people who are there "every night seen and unseen, patient, dogged faithful in all weathers and all worlds, waiting for something promised, something that was plainly their due". Billie gradually puts order and coherence to Scully's life in the last part of the novel (*Paris and Amsterdam*); she tries to pull him away from them, trying to make him fight and regain control of his life, so that "he would not be among them and must never be, in life or death" (377). Scully is "saved", brought back to the real world by Billie, back from the identification with the apparition of the riders, the expression of his tormented mind and fear of the future. Wearing nothing else but a bathrobe, he starts to feel physical pain again as his feet begin to hurt. Europe was close to destroying him, an Australian abroad; he projected all of his joys and anguishes into its various locales, sometimes with a reason and more often quite the contrary, thus running counter and deconstructing some of its myths. However, Europe also represents a new beginning, it is a place where he can start his life anew, together with his daughter Billie, who symbolizes vitality, intelligence and resourcefulness.

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