

**TIM WINTON**  
**DARK RUBBLED PLACES**  
**(WHERE THERE IS ONLY CRUCIFIXION)**

Elizabeth Guy

I am caught in the dark rubbled places of Tim Winton's writing. Held by the magic of his imagination, lulled by the lyricism of his prose, I read of the ordinary, the inarticulate and the powerless within an Australian landscape. Winton,<sup>1</sup> the author of 13 books,<sup>2</sup> is an enigmatic contemporary writer, who tackles questions of spirituality, God and meaning. For many he is a writer of families, growing up, and fairly nondescript events in domestic life. Winton recreates the Australian idiom for children, gamblers, fishermen, bushmen, pub-crawlers and so on, making his characters and their ordinary familiar lives accessible to the reader. Winton's writing is observational and images the traditionally unrepresented, that is, people who are trapped in the breaking and the destroying of life. For according to Winton, to exist demands creation and destruction. This is the central energy which explodes/implodes readerly assumptions.

For a long time I have suspected that there is far more than meets the eye when reading a Winton text. In response to this observation he told me, 'rupture is all part of the possibility of meaning'.<sup>3</sup> And I find the dichotomous and heterogeneous erection/destruction of various perspectives in his fiction both technically compelling and contextually subversive. The ruptures contained in these perspectives disorientate and relocate the reader. Ruptures endlessly defer closure and leave meaning contested. Winton works cracks into his fiction making the reader look at her/his assumptions afresh. So, representations of the 'ordinary punter' are written in terms of how a working class character is, not how he/she should be. And slipping between these heady realist pages (of bodies, relationships, hungers and crippled dialogue) is the supernatural and numinous which 'make up all the reality I know'.<sup>4</sup> Love, hope and the veneration of childhood innocence get sloshed up with violence, abuse and despair. Basically, Winton is interested in capturing life - life that cannot be captured, the feral that cannot be domesticated. The river, water and sea, flow like an undercurrent beneath all of Winton's fiction, suggesting the powerful undertows of life/death, heaven/hell, silence/roar, love/violence, abuse/care and so forth. Characters in Winton's fiction hunt and quest for

the pearl of knowledge and inner wisdom, only to find in its elusiveness that there will be no catch. Winton is observing a place where there is no resurrection, no transcendence, no fulfilment to the hunt for meaning in the space of a novel or life.

His novels suggest that within all of us is the potential to break the surface, to rupture the situation as it is; 'there were things once uttered that can never be reined back' (*The Riders* 107). Paradoxically, it is the inarticulate characters in Winton's novels who express the struggle to find themselves, while the articulate use language to remove themselves from the mystery and chaos of life. Indeed these inarticulate and ordinary characters, who struggle without mobility or power, say a great deal. His writing explores the search for meaning in quests which attempt to explore the boundaries of time and place. But these quests rupture into a trap when the discovery is made that all energies contain their opposite; so that dreams are nightmares, heaven is hell, love is death and sin, salvation. Indeed, it is in these dark rubble places of rupture that other languages and places of belonging are found. Winton radically overturns the readerly expectations of family, Australian life, reality, Christianity, sexuality, belonging, God, spirituality, masculinity and femininity. He is playing with the reader's appetite, subverting our hunger.

Winton's work tumbles, pulls and crashes with aqueous beauty. His is a poetry in the possibility of prose. Moreover one is caught up in his writerly purpose, which is to disturb, comfort, affirm and question. In Winton there is hope for the hopeless, in that at last here is a representation of the cave most wait within. A secret and sacred place for the ordinary, for those who do not read books or hold language as a powerful currency, or whose lives mean anything more than the muck they have created. At last, here is a celebration of the ordinary.

This paper will now focus on one of the perspectives presented in Winton's writing, which he creates and destroys simultaneously.

#### WESTERN CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS - 1: WRITERLY SEDUCTION

Winton's writing is aglow with Western Christian symbols (fish, water, oil, light), Christian calendar rites (Easter and Christmas), Biblical characters (Jacob, Jonah and Jesus), liturgical codes of remembering and cleansing, Judaic-Christian requirements of abandonment and relinquishment, moments of prayer and belief, transfigurations, eschatological waiting, miracles and crucifixions. Life is seen as a gift and Winton celebrates the

bounty of life with his powerful evocations of the material and the divine in the ordinary person's life.

The reader feeds upon this rich, fat symbolic world that seems to promise hope and more to the 'ordinary punter'. Winton uses the young visionary (Ort and Fish) to convey his fictitious worlds where anything is possible.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the ordinary seems extraordinary. The powerless and inarticulate, who seem trapped in their meaningless worlds, are bent on quests to uncover a purpose and sense of life. And the readers' need to believe in all this is woven into Winton's writing.

The reader is not only seduced by the rich mesmeric Christian symbolic world Winton creates but by the fact that he dares to write it. In this post-Christian age and vehemently anti-Christian culture there is something radically unfashionable in writing about the meanings of life and the sources of enlightenment. Winton is writing against the current. He is an oddity,<sup>6</sup> and is being highly provocative when he asks the Australian public why 100,000 years of Aboriginal wisdom have been lost on us; and (in recognising that faith is not a respectable thing) in asking what our contemporary society has. For Winton what really matters is often in the questions children ask (not necessarily in the answers) and in the mystical experiences apprehended instinctively. He is transgressive in not only using Christian symbols but in representing a Christianity which is perhaps left of centre. His own austere religious upbringing<sup>7</sup> feared bigness and beauty, and this has become something his writing plays with. Winton's novels flow with biblical quotes,<sup>8</sup> the cadence of the King James Bible and strands of Southern American religiosity. The reader can almost hear the impact of Flannery O'Connor<sup>9</sup> in Winton's writing, with his uncompromising use of Christian symbols and understanding of the soul.

When Winton says he was baptised in an iron tank (and grew up in the Church of Christ) he is playing into the reader's desire to find some place of belonging in an Australian context. Winton's realist writing is asking questions about life and death, evil and good because 'true realism accepts the supernatural and the natural as the whole thing - inclusive'.<sup>10</sup> In his exploration of life, rich Christian symbols thread in and out of place and identity. Seduced by the illumination of symbols, the curiosity of an oddity, the radicalism of a writerly position, a left of centre expose of Christianity, an Australian context - the reader reads on in his/her own vortex of hunger, desiring enlightenment, wanting more.

## 2: RUPTURE

From the outset of his writing career, Winton was concerned with 'quests.' However, the outcome is never as one would expect. When Jerra (*An Open Swimmer*) hunts the Samson Fish (its bone structure grows like jewels) for the 'pearl'(wisdom and courage), he finds, after slashing and mutilating it, nothing: 'only the gray little brain and the black lining behind the eyes' (146). The quest has been illusory and now seems irrelevant and pointless. Jerra abandons the slaughtered fish to the scavenging sea-gulls because he discovers something 'other' than what he expected.<sup>11</sup> Winton suggests that the quest to seize the symbolisation of the fish brings destruction and loss, and there is no closure, no ultimate goal gained.

Despite the light refracted across rivers and water (mirrored in the Christian symbols of enlightenment, visions, miracles and hope) Winton is interested in darkness. Loss of innocence (loss of light) is a typical Winton theme. This darkness is explored in the world of the spirit, mind and personal sexuality. While his stories portray life (people and nature), he is equally interested in death.<sup>12</sup> The light sought in the wisdom of the 'older man' by Jerra,<sup>13</sup> Cleve<sup>14</sup> and Ort<sup>15</sup> cannot be delivered. Nor are the enlightenments of the visionaries enough to solve the mysteries which erupt across the pages of each story.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the experience of these young visionaries begins to take on the classic elements of poltergeist phenomena (that is, young pubescent boy/girl, disaffected sibling, marriage in trouble, light pouring through the house, coloured lights flashing and structures dismantling). Thus the power and manifestations of darkness pervade these stories which begin as journeys to enlightenment.

Coming up against mystery results in huge dislocations and personal rupture. Winton is suggesting that the symbols which convey some of the mystery of life and death are ultimately precarious. Western Christian symbols are most definitely other than they appear. Characters replace faith in God with confrontations with spirits, as they struggle to define their place and identity.<sup>17</sup> A particular scene in *The Riders* succinctly contains this construction and deconstruction of Western Christian symbols. Billie (the child/the light) has the wisdom of innocence and is connected to her roots (as she quotes her Grandma's command to attend church). She is both progeny and mentor, and Scully 'cannot resist her' as she pulls him 'like a big stupid animal' into the Notre Dame Cathedral on Christmas Eve. Billie illuminates and guides the way despite Scully's dark obdurate reluctance. To

this place, aglow with the celebration of birth and hope (constructed in the illusory symbols of visions, candle wax and oils), Scully mixes with the hopeless and miserable. He joins the 'river of figures' at the cathedral's entrance which is signified by 'a kingdom of faces... upraised fingers... scepters and staffs' rising above, 'like an opening of a tunnel'. Symbolisation which gestures towards hope and transcendence, while the people are bound by the smells of earthliness and humanity ('wine and burnt butter and onions'). Rather than moving upwards, towards the warmth of redemption, they are 'slow moving... half-hearted and freezing'. Whatever belief there is, shines 'in the gloom'. The cathedral (symbolising belonging) is both a 'pyre' and a 'cool sepulchre', thus a place to entomb the dead. Scully is in the undercurrent, the undertow that rivers beneath all of Winton's work. Indeed he traverses this apocryphal nightmare on 'sea-legs'.

The Eurocentric tradition of religion portrayed in this scene and in *The Riders* generally holds little promise of new life. The cathedral enshrines numerous Christian symbols, all of which flicker in a smoky veil of illusion - 'a haze of incense and candle-smoke' - and are ultimately overwhelmed by the pungency of humanity ('perfumes of a thousand women... sweat-oiled timber... of an underground city'). The ultimate symbol, the crucified Christ, is itself stuck in the eschatological hermeneutic of crucifixion without resurrection. Indeed, the 'great kite of the crucified Christ' looms above, alienating those below: one of whom is Scully, who cries and stumbles into his own Pentecost when he inflames those within himself ('a candle for the birth of Christ, for... Job in his own shit [and for] Jonah running like a mad bastard from the monster he knew he was. A candle for Jennifer... [my] poor deserted mother, for Alex and Pete and Irma'), acknowledging the people he is and the darkness they have conveyed to his living. In the cathedral, the spire of all Christian symbolisation, where one desires hope, succour and transcendence, one is offered bleak cold misery and alienation. The rupture reveals the presence of the pagan (Scully as Quasimodo) within the sacred and the promise of uplifting hope is nothing but the sensation of 'falling, falling' - the liturgy of what it is to be human.

### 3: THE POSSIBILITY OF MEANING

There are no endings, but the search for meaning isn't pointless... Meaning is obtainable, it's just not obtainable in the space of a bloody novel.<sup>18</sup>

In the spaces of Winton's novels life is celebrated in all its vulgarity, warmth, horror and beauty. The quest for meaning in Winton's novels involves the rupturing of Christian symbols. Decay and decadence, profanity and obscenity are all part of the celebration. Winton does not want to pretend the world is predominantly a happy place.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, his characters are battling to make sense of the world. His writing explores how people live and how they might live, what love is and what love might ultimately mean. 'I'm gloomy about people's inherent nature but hopeful about their potential'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, part of the possibility of meaning is celebrating the mess, the chaos: the ordinary meaninglessness which pervades so many lives.

Winton exposes the restrictions and exclusivity of institutional beliefs and gestures towards a liturgy and symbolism far more grounded in reality. Christianity is posited in terms of a radical political activism and generated close to home. The Eurocentric origins of Christian symbols are exploded; they are no longer the roots for an Australian spirituality. Winton's characters search for symbolisation deep within a Christian Australian context. Christianity is rendered dubious in the context of institutionalised religion:

After the singing, the first man with a blue suit and oily hair gets up and shouts at us. It's like algebra and arithmetic and geography and story time all wrapped into one. There's 666 and dragons and beasts and seven heads and four angels and 144,000 and Babylon and Russia and China and a 1000 years and seven seals and Sodom and Gog and Magog and Mr Arafat and Communism and Blasphemia and Lambs and more blood drinking (*That Eye the Sky*, p. 126).

Interviewer: Do you think there's a connection between people?

Winton: O absolutely.

Interviewer: Is it at the grubbier human weakness level or the transcendental level?

Winton: I think we're connected in the grubby and the not so grubby.<sup>21</sup>

In the collision between the natural and the supernatural, characters' grubby indifference and not-so-grubby potentialities are connected.<sup>22</sup> In his attempt to uncover a radical realist sense of theology within an Australian landscape, Winton suggests supernatural events are no less frightening - and no less comforting - than the real. For example, in *Cloudstreet* stars fill the river; Quick comes face to face with himself on the bush road; pigs speak in tongues; people share dreams; an Aboriginal angel appears patiently conveying the importance of community; a 'Blackfella' flies out of the sun, walks on water and (along with the pig) protects Oriel from the Nedlands Monster/murderer; and ghosts haunting the house are pressed out by love.

The meanings and possibilities here are endless. Some characters take a lifetime or more to comprehend what these ruptures in their world signify. Yet ultimately, Western Christian symbols are being broken into the Australian landscape with all its pagan and spiritual velocity.

In Winton's writing the symbolic in all its Western Christian iconography is smashed apart in pre-oedipal pleasure (of life/death, expulsion/introjection, light/dark, supernatural/natural, artefact/nature) to create a perpetual state of self/spiritual deferral. Consequently characters come to apprehend that 'there are things that have no finish... no ending to speak of... the only end some things have is the end you give them' (Cloudstreet, p. 68).<sup>23</sup> This is constantly reinforced by the lack of closure in all his texts. This endless deferral is part of the possibility of meaning. And when these symbols are smashed, characters are frightened by the horror of being left with the imaginary/semiotic: 'Once you open the door you can't easily close it' (*The Riders*, p. 147).

#### THE CAVE OF WAITING

Barefoot he went... [to] the light of the riders' torches... Scully went down among them... saying things... Questions, it sounded like... He looked like one of them... with his wild hair and arms, his big eyes streaming in the firelight turned up like theirs to the empty windows of the castle... waiting, battered, disappointed... He recognised the blood and shit and sweat and fear of them... looked with them into the dead heart of the castle keep... whose light did not show and whose answer did not come... waiting for something promised (*The Riders*, p. 377).

Like a pilgrim Scully goes to face the phantom of his own obsession, and realises that he may be eternally waiting - battered and disappointed - for something which will never come. Symbols of warriors, castle strongholds, battles, kingdoms - so prevalent in traditional Christian metaphors and liturgy - invert, and paradoxically suggest a movement to stillness, impotency and waiting. The father (Scully) and the innocent (Billie) are the centre points of Christianity. The Irish soil they cross, full of its own mysticism and history, is part of this Western Christian world. And the riders are the symbolic figures, all of which are waiting: heavy with the weight of stories, stories which preoccupy people<sup>24</sup> and keep them bound forever in that moment of telling.

Indeed, *The Riders* is a journey into the underworld: the mythological dark place beneath the surfaces of civilised and sacred symbols which designate meaning. The father (Pluto/Scully) drags the daughter (Proserpina/Billie) loved and abused into his dark country of obsession and

fears. The mother (Ceres/Jennifer) neglects her duties and retreats to a cave where she mourns and waits. There are no conclusive endings in this Hellenic-Christian/Winton plot.

Winton is suggesting, with stylistic techniques of non-closure and contestable meanings, that perhaps life only ever exists as a combination of beginnings and those moments before the end; 'the worlds are still connected... lives are still related and the Here still feels the pangs of history' (*Cloudstreet*, p. 164). Thus there is no freedom from what has passed; no way of escaping this moment inside the cave of waiting, to which all ruptured possibilities leads. Out of this readerly experience of Winton I have become aware that this eschatological moment is the only one. Like *The Riders*, which conveys a sense that every moment is significant, Winton's writing is only concerned with the living of the Here - and not in a transcendental or redemptive symbolisation which promises that which does not exist beyond the cave of waiting.

#### CONCLUSION

There is a river beneath all of Winton's writing, an undercurrent, a desire for the broken and the whole to merge; and to experience ourselves as complete, if only for a moment before dispersing:

Can you see, Fish, see me close as a whisper... pouring through a tiny crack, we are running to the sea... we came from it and return to it... Soon you'll be a man Fish, but only for a moment, long enough to see, smell, touch, hear, taste the muted glory of wholeness and finish what has begun only a moment ago... The earth slips away, Fish, and soon, soon you'll be yourself, and we'll be us; you and me. Soon! (*Cloudstreet*, p. 420).

It is in these dark rubble places of Tim Winton's writing that I find myself caught in the tidespace of such longings.

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> 1. Tim Winton was born in Perth, West Australia in 1960. He has been a full-time writer since 1982. He is married with three children.
- <sup>2</sup> 2. Winton has published 13 books, including three children's books. His first, *An Open Swimmer*, was joint winner of the 1981 Vogel Award. His second novel *Shallows*, won the Miles Franklin Award in 1984, and his collection of short stories, *Scission*, the 1985 West Australian Council Week Literary Award. Winton's other publications include *Minimum of Two* (1987), *That Eye The Sky* (1986), *In The Winter Dark* (1988), *Cloudstreet* (1991, winner of the Miles Franklin Award) and *The Riders* (1994, nominated for the Booker Prize). His books for children are *Jesse* (1988), *The Bugalugs Bum Thief* (1991), *Lockie*, *Human Torpedo* (1991)

and Lockie Leonard Scumbuster (1993). Also, in conjunction with photographers Trish Ainslie and Roger Garwood, Winton published *Land's Edge* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of Interview, June 1 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in R. Rossiter, 'Speaking to Adults, Speaking to Children', in *Southerly*, Vol. 53 (September 1993), pp. 92-99.

<sup>5</sup> In *Cloudstreet* alone, pigs speak in tongues, old style religious hymns are sung, exorcism occurs, people merge into their personal symbolism, angels come and go and primitivism is venerated.

<sup>6</sup> Winton is an oddity in that he is interested not so much in the non-academic, educated audience but in the common person, the average Australian 'punter'. He writes from an unorthodox Christian perspective with a passion for the non-homogenised as he writes against the current (Rossiter, p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> His religious upbringing with its plainness and austerity was not just a discipline but a blindness to mystery. The Church of Christ emphasised a great divide between the spiritual and the physical. Winton explains that his own instincts won out in the end with his experiences of grace happening in the natural world.

<sup>8</sup> The biblical quotes in Winton's work are mostly from the Psalms and Proverbs. The original title for *That Eye The Sky* was 'Sighs Too Deep' from the letter of Paul to the Romans (8: 25-26), referring to the spirit which intercedes. Other references are made to the New Testament, including the story of the man possessed by a legion of demons, 'In The Winter Dark'.

<sup>9</sup> Flannery O'Connor, (1925-1964) was a US short story writer and novelist, born a Catholic in Georgia, who suffered from a rare incurable blood disease, disseminated lupus. Her work focused on false piety and moral blindness, centring around prophetic figures who expose humanity's hypocrisies and limitations. Her writing is characterised by violence, stressing the need for redemption. 'Flannery O'Connor is my literary hero... I read the first pages of *The Violent Bear It Away* and I was signed up for life' (Winton quoted in Watzke, p. 97). An example of the O'Connor impact on Winton's work could be in *Shallows* where the whales, God's appointed messengers, beach themselves as a final metaphor of the great sin of pride the people of Angelus commit in never knowing the fulfilment of God's law. The exploration of this sin, fall of pride, has always been a central O'Connor concern.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in B. Watzke, 'Where Pigs Speak and Angels Come and Go', *Westerly* Vol. 37, No. 2 (December 1991), p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Fish symbolises the Christian rite and phallic obviousness (National Library, Winton Manuscript Box 1). Moreover, Fish represents the hermeneutics of suspicion (as it appears in every adult fiction) and is a sign of something other. The water and river motifs flow as an undercurrent throughout Winton's novels suggesting an undertow of life/death; heaven/hell. But the fish, the occupant within the river, embodies inner knowledge and thus becomes the source for the quest.

<sup>12</sup> For Example, *Scission* has a death of some sort in every tale.

<sup>13</sup> Jerra turns to 'the old man on the beach' for insight and knowledge in *An Open Swimmer*.

<sup>14</sup> Cleve turns to the diaries of Nathaniel Coupar in *Shallows*.

<sup>15</sup> Ort turns to the insights of Warburton in *That Eye The Sky*.

<sup>16</sup> The scene in *That Eye the Sky* (pp. 111-113) where Ort is at the beach is an epiphanic and climatic one. Ort is struck, dumped, stripped and cleansed at the surf's edge and yet he is still left confused and bewildered; just as he is as a receiver of visions throughout the entire novel, and yet by the end of the story he is still unable to apprehend what it is that he has experienced.

<sup>17</sup> In *Cloudstreet* prayer has been replaced with superstitious consultations with the knife.

<sup>18</sup> Transcript of interview, June 1 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Watzke, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of interview, June 1 1995.

22 A. Mitchell, review of *That Eye the Sky*, in *The Australian*, April 4, 1986, p. 10.

23 In response to a question at the launching of *The Riders* at Gleebooks, July 1994, where Winton was asked 'how do you come to write a novel?', he said, 'I always know the first image. For example with *An Open Swimmer* it was a fish in the boat, with *Cloudstreet* it was a retarded kid running down a jetty. I work from there - and I never have an idea what the last image will be.'

24 When talking about his time in Ireland, Winton speaks of people's need to tell stories. He is passionate about the stories that come out of a landscape, and believes that the telling of these stories is a sign of wellbeing in the community, ('Letter from Ireland', *Overland*, October 1988, p. 113).