Tim Winton: Critical Essays

Edited by Lyn McCradden & Nathanael O'Reilly
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction: Tim Winton, literature and the field of literary criticism 1

Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly

1 Water 16

Bill Ashcroft

2 'Bursting with voice and doubleness': vernacular presence and visions of inclusiveness in Tim Winton's Cloudstreet 49

Fiona Morrison

3 Winton's spectralities or What haunts Cloudstreet? 75

Michael R. Griffiths

4 'Over the cliff and into the water': love, death and confession in Tim Winton's fiction 96

Hannah Schünholz

5 The editing and publishing of Tim Winton in the United States 122

Per Henningsgaard

6 From father to son: fatherhood and father–son relationships in Scission 161

Nathanael O'Reilly

7 Writing childhood in Tim Winton's fiction 183

Tanya Dalziell

8 The cycle of love and loss: melancholic masculinity in The Turning 199

Bridget Grogan
9  Transcultural Winton: mnemonic landscapes of Australia  221
   Sissy Helff

10 From the sublime to the uncanny in Tim Winton’s Breath 241
   Brigid Rooney

11 A not completely pointless beauty: Breath, exceptionality and neoliberalism 263
   Nicholas Birns

12 Extreme games, hegemony and narration: an interpretation of Tim Winton’s Breath 283
   Hou Fei

13 ‘Intolerable significance’: Tim Winton’s Eyrie 306
   Lyn McCredden

Appendix: The works of Tim Winton  330
Notes on contributors  332
Index  336
Nathanael O’Reilly
I extend my sincere thanks to all of the contributors for supporting this project and writing excellent chapters that are important additions to Winton scholarship. Massive thanks to my co-editor, Lyn McCredden – from the moment we conceived the project while riding a bus in Hyderabad in 2012 through to the completion of the book, working with Lyn has been a smooth, rewarding and enjoyable experience. University of Western Australia Publishing believed in this project from the outset; many thanks to all the staff at UWAP, but especially Terri-ann White. I would also like to thank my partner, Tricia Jenkins, for her support and patience while I worked on this project, and my daughter, Celeste, with whom I spent many wonderful hours reading Tim Winton’s The Deep while she was learning to read and swim.

Lyn McCredden
Thanks, Nathanael, for your eagle eye and can-do attitude. It has been a pleasure working with you. Thank you also to our intrepid and very hardworking research assistant, Chloe Chandler. You
have made this a better, richer book. Many, many thanks to our contributors from around the world for your scholarly and professional approach to your work. Literary criticism is certainly the better for your contributions. To Terri-ann White at UWAP, so many thanks for your enabling attitude to this book. And finally, thank you to my partner, Terry McCredden, for your unending patience while I have been swallowed up, day and night, in this wonderful project.
Introduction

TIM WINTON, LITERATURE AND THE FIELD OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly

The title of this essay refers to three capacious, continuously evolving and contentious subjects. It also initiates an inquiry: why is it that Tim Winton, one of Australia’s most popular and literary (let the debates begin) novelists, has received little sustained critical attention? We hope that the existence of this volume, the first collection of critical essays since Reading Tim Winton (1993), will begin to redress the relative dearth of critical debate about the literature of Tim Winton. But this is to pre-empt the inquiry into what might be meant by ‘the literary’ and by ‘literary criticism’ (let alone ‘Tim Winton’). The title and the subject of this introductory essay are, therefore, genuinely seeking debate.

Let’s start with the question of literary critics and literary criticism. Literary critics – of whom thirteen diverse exemplars are collected in these pages – are not monsters, as is sometimes suggested by those who distrust or dislike or refuse to see the worth of literary criticism. Most literary critics do not set out simply to be ‘critical’ in the reductive sense of that word. At best, they are readers seeking to explore, question and debate texts, authors and contexts publicly – to understand more fully what is appealing, or unconsciously submerged, or worthy of celebration or interrogation in texts of all kinds. Critics are, like all other
Tim Winton: Critical Essays

readers, affected by the works they read – ‘loving’ or ‘detesting’ or ‘being intrigued by’ them – but they take it further, and their professional training gives them the opportunity and frameworks within which to engage with literary creations in multiple ways.

Critics need to be alive to the richness, nuance and complexity of literary language. They examine why and how a work signifies – how it uses, and is used by, language; how literary texts seek to make meaning or to test the limits of meaning-making. They ask where a work comes from in the fullest sense. Should it be understood as arising from the author’s individual genius? Or does the work bear the imprint of particular historical, political, geographical or ideological contexts? In what ways is the creative text a product of the author’s psychological or ideological blind-nesses? Critics often want to ask why audiences respond as they do to particular works. They ask this as part of the process of better understanding the cultures that have produced, and that in turn are influenced by, such creative works. In these ways, criticism at its best contributes to communal, ongoing and passionate cultural conversations. The community of readers is sometimes one of literary specialists; at other times it embraces the wider culture. These audiences intersect, and play a role in discerning and debating literary effect and worth.

While these kinds of critical questions are pressed upon a literary work by readers and professional critics alike, they can also be seen to emerge from that work as a critical reader enters into a dialogue with it. In literary criticism, additional players may then enter into this dialogue – other literary critics, reviewers, theorists, ideological critics – so that literary criticism often becomes more than dialogue, it becomes multi-vocal. This is the broader, fuller purpose of criticism: to contribute to cultural debates, to reflect on both the individual work and on the state of the culture in
Tim Winton, literature and the field of literary criticism

which that literary work participates. Students, different kinds of readers and fellow critics have to decide, then, what to ‘make’ of such criticism.

At one level, literary criticism today is a business: students are required to read and cite it in their school or university essays; teachers refer to it; fellow critics need to be aware of critical work and decide how to respond to it. But more than this, critical debates are an indication of the contested value of the literary. A literary text has the capacity to sustain vigorous and ongoing – sometimes combative – discussions, asking what matters about the text, and how the novel, poem or play under examination relates historically, aesthetically or ontologically to the larger culture. Attempting to explore and construct self-understandings (national, communal or private, authorial or readerly) can be a tumultuous process where difference jostles with unknowing, blindness and hope.

Winton’s fiction is literary and popular, and therefore a remarkable barometer of Australian culture. His work is vernacular and lyrical, optimistic and dark, asking in nuanced ways what it means to be alive in contemporary Australia. In all of Winton’s novels and short stories (and now increasingly in his dramatic pieces) there is contestation of what it is to be Australian, to be human and to make and question meaning.

While other kinds of discourse – political, historical or scientific – offer equally multi-vocal perspectives about how meaning is made, it is pre-eminently in literature that temporality, identity, relationships, language use, and the borders between the conscious and unconscious, are probed deeply and imaginatively. These, of course, are fighting words. More often in public discourse the literary or aesthetic is disparaged or occluded in favour of the economic or the political. But Winton’s poetic and narrative language
Tim Winton: Critical Essays

has impact, courageously taking on the weight of bringing to birth characters, voices and textual presences that come to matter to the reader. In the literary characters and narratives Winton writes there is often high anxiety or violence between people, and within individuals struggling against themselves. These texts hold up a strange, vernacular, peculiarly Wintonesque mirror through which Australians – and international readers, differently – can see themselves refracted.

This mirror does not create a straightforward, realist reflection. The contradictoriness of the human condition is everywhere in Winton’s texts: tensions between the human ability to make meaning and the obliterating power of accident or temporality; between palpable, joyful intimacy and the ravages of violence in relationships; between the demands and pleasures of material existence and the intimations of a sacred, transcendent world sensed in the palpable and everyday. Literature is pre-eminently the form in which such contradictions can be evoked and explored. Literature (and its practitioners) is capable, as Keats wrote two centuries ago, ‘of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. These, too, are fighting words. They stress the non-instrumental: literature doesn’t simply get things done. So let’s go deeper, asking in what ways literature – Tim Winton being our exemplar – is at the deepest levels valuable.

North American critic Michael Bérubé, writing in response to the supposedly ailing world of literature and literary critical work, asked in 1996:

[Is there a deep connection between the category of civil society and the category of the aesthetic as it has been understood since Kant? Did the social forces of
Tim Winton, literature and the field of literary criticism

the eighteenth century, which bequeathed us various forms of nonauthoritarian government and plural public spheres, also create the conditions for a noninstrumental understanding...Are the autonomies of the aesthetic and of civil society mutually defining and interdependent?³

Bérubé is writing from within the cabal of literary criticism, so his questions regarding the relationship between the aesthetic and the civil are rhetorical, the result of his desire to defend the value of literature and literary criticism in the academy and in broader culture. His defence of ‘non-instrumental understanding’ will be dear to many writers, readers and literary critics, but his argument goes further, not merely setting up the dichotomy ‘instrumental–non-instrumental’. It argues for the relationship between, even the interdependence of ‘civil society’ and ‘the aesthetic’, and by implication queries the harsh lines between use value and the aesthetic. In order to test the implications of Bérubé’s questions we might ask if this set of relations applies to the work of Tim Winton.

Winton’s popularity nationally, and increasingly internationally, indicates that he strikes a chord of sympathy, or recognition, a sense of the real for many readers. His work is realistic, but whose ‘real’ is it? Winton’s novel Cloudstreet was described acerbically in a 2005 Westerly essay by critic Robert Dixon as constructing a nostalgic and conservative vision of an older, disappearing Australia, not a real present. Dixon situated Cloudstreet in ‘the field of Australian literature’, and in a

[N]ostalgia for lost places, for an Australian accent and culture that are pre-American, pre-modern, pre-1960s. These qualities find expression in the novel’s
rich registration of Australian idioms of the 1940s and 1950s, and its superbly lyrical descriptions of places and landscapes in and around Perth. This goes a long way toward explaining the popularity of the novel, at least for a certain generation of readers, the baby boomers, who were the major cultural force in the 1990s, when the novel was published. But nostalgia is by its very nature conservative: it prefers the past to the future; it is at best ambivalent about modernity; it prefers the local and the traditional to the global.  

Dixon’s essay captures, from global satellite height, ‘the field of Australian literature’ as a marketplace, as part of national and global patterns of readership and distribution. His essay praises the literary effects of Winton’s texts but goes on to pit the seemingly tangential literary felicities of the writing (‘rich registrations of Australian idioms’, ‘superbly lyrical descriptions of places and landscapes’) against what the critic sees as _Cloudstreet_’s nostalgia and conservatism (not to mention the implied conservatism of the considerable number of baby boomers who read the work). This conservatism, so Dixon argues, ‘prefers the past to the future’, is ‘ambivalent about modernity’ and ‘prefers the local and the traditional to the global’. Baby boomers join Winton as conservative in Dixon’s argument, with their nostalgia for a dying Australia. But how reductive is it to see Australian baby boomers as the main readers of _Cloudstreet_, and of Winton’s works more generally? Are school and university students who read and write on Winton only doing so at the behest of their teachers, teachers who are largely not baby boomers any more?

We might also ask how widely Dixon’s argument about _Cloudstreet_ can be applied in relation to Winton’s oeuvre and his
other representations of past and present. How, for example, does it sit with the popularity of Winton’s writing for children, and about children, which both precedes and continues after *Cloudstreet*? The roles of children and their representation in Winton’s writing are the focus of this current volume’s essay by Tanya Dalziell, who is interested less in suggesting that Winton’s works register some recognisable national or temporal ‘trend’ or ‘taxonomy’ of childhood, or applying categories of childhood a priori to Winton’s fictions, than in taking seriously the ways childhood is debated and narrated within the worlds of these texts.

Dalziell finds a rich and complex set of approaches to childhood in Winton, approaches that can be nostalgic in the characters’ responses but also restlessly pushing towards the future in Winton’s narrative. Nathanael O’Reilly’s individual essay in this volume, ‘From father to son: fatherhood and father–son relationships in *Scission*’, also complicates Dixon’s description of Winton’s purported conservatism or backward-looking fiction: ‘Through his early works of short fiction, Winton challenges cultural norms, highlights dysfunction, celebrates intimacy and encourages new ways of being for both fathers and sons’.

Movement into the future is identifiable as both theme and source of poetic intensity in Winton. In her treatment of *The Turning* in this volume, Bridget Grogan concludes:

Like the narrator of ‘Big World’, at their most complete and tender Winton’s men embrace transience and the inevitable loss this entails while acknowledging the wide beauty of the temporal world and the love of and
for others that is both impermanent and yet eternal: ‘I don’t care what happens beyond this moment. In the hot northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch.’

Grogan’s essay is alive to the poetic nuances of Winton’s prose. Is such a turning to the bigness and beauty of the world, so different in its poetic expression from Dixon’s big world, simply confirming a nostalgia in Winton, a poetic refusal or obfuscation of the real or material world? Is a focus on the contradictory and lyrically evoked ‘impermanent and yet eternal’ merely reducible to Dixon’s claims that Cloudstreet’s ‘twin themes of social consensus and spiritual transcendence are strongly supported by Winton’s public references to his Christian, family-centred values’?25

This latter aspect, Winton’s publicly declared religious values, has complicated critical debates. Brigid Rooney takes up questions of sublimity – and the literary limits of representing it – in her essay for this volume, ‘From the sublime to the uncanny in Tim Winton’s Breath’. She writes of the ending of that novel:

Returning Pike to the scene of white men dancing in the surf, the narrative seeks to retrieve for him, and for readers, that modicum of grace and equanimity won through hard work and humble service to what is left of family. Qualities of grace, endurance and survival are, in the end, what remain. These limited consolations express Winton’s literary vision in its maturity. Even so, they cannot contain a troubling sense of fatalism…

Family – its material, moral and spiritual dimensions – does indeed loom large in Winton’s oeuvre, but it is hardly summarised
adequately by Dixon’s description of Winton’s ‘Christian, family-centred values’. It becomes increasingly obvious that the charge of conservatism reaches its limits, and is indeed contested by, many essays in this current volume. In the decades since 1991, the year of *Cloudstreet*’s publication, relations between the local and the global, between family and nation, have continued to evolve, as indeed has Winton’s oeuvre, and it may not be fair to extrapolate Dixon’s placement of *Cloudstreet* to Winton’s later works. Lyn McCredden’s individual essay, ‘“Intolerable significance”: Tim Winton’s *Eyrie*,’ focuses on his most recent novel, charting a much darker, less redemptive narrative – the psychic disintegration of an individual and a family – than we have so far seen in Winton’s work. The essay argues further that *Eyrie* is a novel about language and the limits of the linguistic to carry the full burden of meaning with which humans often seek to imbue it.

The tensions, blindnesses and contradictions in Winton’s writing – conscious or unconscious – challenge readers and literary critics to think beyond such flat denominators as ‘nostalgic’ or ‘conservative’, ‘religious’ or ‘masculinist’, beyond the essentialising polarities of masculine–feminine, sacred–material, poetic–pragmatic. For example, Michael R. Griffiths’ essay is concerned specifically with the ambivalently postcolonial implications of hauntedness in *Cloudstreet*. His essay, ‘Winton’s spectralities, or What haunts *Cloudstreet*?’, raises some prickly questions about white and Indigenous Australia:

We may gain much if Australians inherit Winton’s novel as a ‘modern Australian classic’. But we also lose much in not recognising that the novel is nonetheless marked by the effacement of indigeneity…
Like many of the writers in this volume, Griffiths has a keen eye for both the literal and the hidden or unconscious in Winton’s writing. Indeed, Griffiths’ own literary-critical even-handedness does not shy away from seeing that ‘[i]n this way, perhaps, the novel’s greatest success – addressing Indigenous presence as constitutive of settler-colonial habitation – is also the source of its most profound failure: the reproduction of an ideology of settler-colonial innocence through the apparent naivety of the settler-inheritor’.

In another ideological reading, feminist critic Hannah Schürholz addresses a question to Winton’s oeuvre, asking why ‘Tim Winton’s female characters show a strong affinity with self-threatening behaviour, transience and ferocity’. Around this question, Schürholz builds a critically suspicious reading of Winton’s gender politics:

The literal inscription or destruction of the female body functions as a form of lieu de mémoire in Tim Winton’s work. It speaks. But this agency is a double-edged sword. It can be an objectification or an appropriation in disguise…

This legitimate argument rises from a deep vein of feminist questioning of Winton’s work.

Fiona Morrison’s essay, ““Bursting with voice and doublingness”: vernacular presence and visions of inclusiveness in Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet”, is equally alive to both the ideological and poetic effects of the novel. While clear-sightedly discussing the limits of the pull to ‘authenticity’ in notions of presence and voice in Winton’s writing, Morrison also perceives that ‘[i]t does seem impossible…to ignore the carnivalesque energies of Cloudstreet…
and the tendency of these unruly energies to both install and overthrow...neo-romantic investments'.

Concerns about Australia as nation, about belonging in place, and about gendered and racial identity inform Winton’s works, and are sometimes partly occluded in them. But so, too, are concerns that resonate with wider global, and indeed more than global, sometimes sacred, expansiveness. There is no easy dismissal of ‘Christian’ or ‘religious’ motivations in the essay by North American critic Nicholas Birns. Rather, in ‘A not completely pointless beauty: Breath, exceptionality and neoliberalism’, Birns perceives the ways Winton’s 2008 novel draws together Australian and American concerns, neoliberal economics and spiritual hunger:

If one is to read the book under the aegis of neoliberalism, one can see the vulgarisation of the divine into a narcissistic market-god as no longer a national trait but an anthropology – what all men and women are like, are supposed to be like, under the mantle of neoliberal ideology: bearers of risk, liquid exceptions, self-motivated gods.

In this surprising and deft essay, Birns draws us back to why literature (and good literary criticism) is valuable. Literature refuses the linguistically flat, unresonant and purely categorising. It sees links – in the characters and the poetics of language – to what is lost, to what the divine in the human might be if only the ‘narcissistic market-god’ could be transcended. Birn’s reading of Breath’s Australian and American characters and the increasingly shared modern, capitalist world they inhabit is written from the perspective of a North American critic. The essay by Chinese scholar
Hou Fei, entitled ‘Extreme games, hegemony and narration: an interpretation of Tim Winton’s *Breath*’, forms an interesting juxtaposition to Birns’ essay. This is not, of course, because Hou writes with a ‘Chinese voice’ (as if such a pure entity exists), but because her ideological and contextual reading of the novel is quite different from Birns’ in distinctively ideological ways. Hou reads the retrospective time of the novel, which is set during the years of the Vietnam War and American and Australian involvement there, as a subtext crucial to understanding the dynamics between the main characters – the Americanised Australian Sando and the two young Australian boys:

The relationship between Sando and the novel’s two young protagonists is more like that of a guru/hegemon to disciple/follower. Analogously, it resembles the relationship between the United States and Australia during their involvement in the Vietnam War.

A distinctive ideological perspective certainly emerges from Hou’s essay.

Per Henningsgaard, also based in North America, presents us with a detailed analysis of ‘The editing and publishing of Tim Winton in the United States’, and more broadly of the work of cultural translation. Henningsgaard’s essay is a fascinating excursion for readers of Winton into the pragmatic details of difference and similarity in national vocabularies and in modes of perception between the purportedly symbiotic North America and Australia. We also gain an appreciation of what the material production of literature entails for authors, editors, publishers and readers globally. We are given the chance to contemplate how ‘the literary’
Tim Winton, literature and the field of literary criticism

exists not beyond the marketplace, but certainly not simply as reducible to it.

Writing from within a German context, Sissy Helff also argues strongly that ‘Winton’s memory-work has a transnational or even transcultural quality’. Informed by Paul Ricoeur’s important and influential critical work on memory, Helff reads Winton’s *Shallows* and *The Turning* as creating ‘rich mnemonic narrative landscapes…[that] imagine a multicultural Australia by applying diegetic modes of exchanging memories as well as using reciprocal interactions between the reader and the texts…’ Memory can be double: it can be the net that draws us downwards, dangerous and suffocating; or it can release us across generations, calling us to forgiveness and rebirth.

It is with the first essay of this volume, Bill Ashcroft’s ‘Water’, that this introductory essay concludes. More so than any essay in this volume, ‘Water’ is written in the spirit of Winton, energised by his lyricism, and in agreement with his major ideological effects. Ashcroft writes:

Water, death and renewal are tightly bound in Winton’s novels. Whether launching off the water’s edge, surfacing from dream or from the freedom of water, or emerging from the flirtation with death in free diving, water is the medium of rebirth.

While some Winton reviewers have simply pointed to the recurrent themes of surfing, water and the beach in Winton’s work, they have missed the fact that the transformative power of the natural world drives so much of Winton’s writing.

Ashcroft’s essay takes the form of an empathetic meditation
Tim Winton: Critical Essays

but is also polemical and will not meet with universal agreement. For one thing, it writes in close accord with Winton, that

Water is the medium of transformation, of rebirth to new life. For those who spend their lives in and on the water the experience is one of constant renewal, the renewal of beauty and grace, the renewal of the miracle of life. It is the continual renewal of the revelation that the world is holy.

Ashcroft’s meditation on the holiness of the world finds in Winton’s writings an active, earthed making of meaning, a convincing sense of belonging, what Ashcroft calls ‘this vision of Heimat’. His essay sets up a strong and poetically persuasive first contribution to this volume, which might be read in dialogue with the more ideological or contestatory readings of Winton’s work.

Wherever readers come to abide in their critical evaluation of Winton's writings, we as editors wish you an enjoyable and challenging journey. We are proud to be involved in the tumultuous and rewarding profession of literary criticism. Tim Winton remains for us one of Australia’s most idiosyncratic, poetic and beguiling writers. While we do not always ‘agree’ with his political or aesthetic effects, we hail his courageous literary exploration of human, Australian, contemporary limitations and aspirations.

Notes
Tim Winton, literature and the field of literary criticism


5 Ibid.

Bibliography


In *Dirt Music*, remembering the time before a car crash took the lives of his brother Darkie, Darkie’s wife Sal, and their two children, Bird and Bullet, Luther Fox recalls Bird’s question: ‘Lu, how come water lets you through it?’ Bird is the one who saw God, and ‘if anyone saw God it would likely be her. Bird’s the nearest thing to an angelic being’. Bird’s question suggests the function of water in Winton’s novels. Water is everywhere in his writing, as people sail on it, dive into it, live on the edge of it. Clearly the sea and the river are vital aspects of the writer’s own experience. But water is more than an omnipresent feature of his writing and his life, the oceanscape of his stories. It is something that ‘lets you through’. It lets you through because it is the passage to a different state of being, sometimes in dream, sometimes in physical extremity, but it always offers itself as the medium of transformation. When it lets you through – whether to escape to a different life, as a rite of passage to adulthood, to see the world in a new way or to discover the holiness of the earth or the wonder of the world, whether it is the baptismal water of redemption or an opening to a world of silence – and it is all these things – you become different.
Water

A common myth about Australia’s coast-hugging habits is that since early settlement we have looked to the sea as we look to the signs of ‘Home’ 12,000 miles away, like the early colonists. Whether or not this has been true in the past for generations on the south-eastern seaboard, it is certainly not true of modern-day Western Australia. As Col says in Rising Water, ‘some afternoons I can smell peri-peri blowin across the water from South Africa’. The Indian Ocean is a very different proposition from the Pacific. Looking 2,000 miles across to Africa, this sea laps the edge of a continent the Dutch rejected because it looked so uninhabitable. But for Winton in Land’s Edge,

At first glimpse of the Indian Ocean I stop running and feel the relief unwinding in my chest, in my neck and shoulders. Dinghies twist against their moorings. Gulls scatter before the blur of my insane kelpie. Two days off the plane, I am finally home.

In contrast to the towns on its edge, the sea in Winton’s writing ‘lets you through’ to Home, but it is a home with far more resonance than our usual image of a place, a homestead set down in a more or less hospitable location. ‘There is nowhere else I’d rather be’, says Winton,

[N]othing else I would prefer to be doing. I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings.

The home offered by or through water is a version of that infinite vista of sea suggested by the Indian Ocean. It is a home
that has form rather than location, more promise than foundation, it is the home Ernst Bloch calls *Heimat*—the home we have all sensed but never experienced or known. Water is significant because as *Heimat* it cannot be tied to location, tied to our normal sense of home. Like Aboriginal country, it cannot be owned, divided or fenced, but instead is quite capable of possessing you. The oceanic vastness of *Heimat* in Winton offers a utopian sense of home in many ways: it is a medium of escape, of freedom and grace; it is the space of dream and the constant reality of the porous border between life and death. By ‘letting you through it’, water is the ultimate medium of change and transformation and, in Winton’s imaginary, that transformation, that path to *Heimat*, is the path of rebirth.

But perhaps an even more powerfully utopian dimension of water is its timelessness, its capacity to fuse past and present. In ‘Aquifer’ the young narrator claims:

> I was right to doubt the 1194 man on the telephone. Time doesn’t click on and on at the stroke. It comes and goes in waves and folds like water; it flutters and sifts like dust, rises, billows, falls back on itself. When a wave breaks, the water is not moving. The swell has travelled great distances but only the energy is moving, not the water. Perhaps time moves through us and not us through it […] the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over.7

This disruption of the linear myth of time makes water the perfect location of the utopian. We think of time as either flowing or enduring, and the dismantling of this apparent dichotomy between succession and duration has profound consequences. Although
the present may be seen as a continuous stream of prospections becoming retrospections, the sense that the past has gone and the future is coming separates what may be called the three phases of time. Friedrich Kummel proposes that the apparent conflict between time as succession and time as duration comes about because we forget that time has no reality apart from the medium of human experience and thought.8 “No single and final definition of time is possible…since such a concept is always conditioned by man’s understanding of it.”9

Water is utopian because the energy of wave motion flowing through it perfectly corresponds to the cyclic continuity between the past and the future in the present. The polarity between past and future often seems insurmountable in European philosophy. Bloch asserts that for Plato ‘Beingness’ is ‘Beenness’,10 and he admonishes Hegel ‘who ventured out furthest’, because ‘What Has Been overwhelms what is approaching…the categories Future, Front, Novum’.11 The problem with Being or the concept of Being in Hegel was that it overwhelmed Becoming – obstructing the category of the future. It is only when the static concept of being is dispensed with that the real dimension of hope opens.12 The core of Bloch’s ontology is that ‘Beingness’ is ‘Not-Yet-Becomeness’:

Thus the Not-Yet-Conscious in man belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out, Manifested-Out in the world…From the anticipatory, therefore, knowledge is to be gained on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet.13

We can see why Bloch is not interested in utopia as location. Utopianism is fundamental to human consciousness because humans are always striving forward, anticipating, desiring. While
utopias exist in the future, utopianism, anticipatory consciousness, is heavily invested in the present. Water, a very present medium, becomes the promise of *Heimat* because it is the medium of physical and temporal movement, of weightlessness and timelessness. The fluidity of water denies location – the energy flowing through it is the opposite of location. Its flow is the movement of becoming, of ‘fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being’. There is an unexpected connection between Luce Irigaray and Tim Winton in the sacred dimensions of becoming. Irigaray writes,

> Love of God has nothing moral in and of itself. It merely shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming...God forces us to do nothing more except become. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment.

In Winton’s work, water is the perfect medium of becoming, the continual promise of the Not-Yet.

For this reason, Winton’s ‘anticipatory illumination’ is manifested principally through the medium of water in its many forms, and he shares with Bloch a sense of the transcendent, utopian possibilities of literature as avenues to the possible. ‘Literature’ is not limited to fiction. In *Shallows*, Cleve Cookson is mesmerised by the journal of the region’s first whaler Nathaniel Coupar:

> For Cleve, the realness and aliveness of the journal were precious [...] He felt he was there, as though his eyes were Coupar’s eyes. It was an almost supernatural feeling, as it had been in the dinghy on the estuary with
Queenie when he had been filled with wholeness and absence and an exceptional grace which let him feel what it was to be her and himself at once. These were the moments when he suspected there could be a meaning to his existence.\textsuperscript{17}

This is imbued with hope not because it offers a vision of the future, but because it opens the door to a different way of seeing the world, a different way of being. Literature allows you to inhabit a different world. The supernatural feeling it gives – of being oneself and someone else at the same time – is one Cleve tellingly experiences on the water.

The link between reading and the experience of the sea can be found elsewhere in literature. In Michael Cunningham’s \textit{The Hours}, when Laura Brown delays the day to read Virginia Woolf’s \textit{Mrs Dalloway}, the experience is one best described in terms of the sea:

One more page, she decides; just one more […] She is taken by a wave of feeling, a sea-swell, that rises from under her breast and buoys her, floats her gently, as if she were a sea creature thrown back from the sand where it had beached itself – as if she had been returned from a realm of crushing gravity to her true medium, the suck and swell of saltwater, that weightless brilliance.\textsuperscript{18}

Water brings together Bloch’s sense of the utopian potential of literature and Winton’s perception of its capacity to detect the holiness of the world, best encountered in the weightless brilliance of the sea.

In \textit{Dirt Music} Luther Fox has the wide reading of the autodidact but doesn’t know what you’re supposed to make of Wordsworth
and Blake, how you might speak of them if you’d been taught by experts. But he knows he would have tried to explain this sense of the world alive, the way writers articulate their own instinctive feeling that there is indeed some kind of spirit that rolls through all things, some fearsome memory in stones, in wind, in the lives of birds. But like our failure to apprehend the spirit that rolls through all things, our failure to capture in art and literature that instinctive recognition of the sacred, we tend to live on the edge of things, on the edge of water. The embodiment of that failure to apprehend the spirit that runs through all things is the failure represented by the littoral inhabitant.

**Water’s edge**
The overwhelming sense we get of Winton’s observation of humans and water is that they are very often stuck at the edge in a permanent state of moral numbness and unrealised potential. This is paradoxical because Winton regards himself as a ‘littoralist’:

> The littoral, that peculiar zone of overlap and influx, sustains my spirit and fuels my work. I’m still pulled between the sensual assault of the outdoors and the sedentary life of reflection. To go a day or two without seeing, feeling and smelling the ocean would be as disorientating as being without a book or an hour’s privacy.

But there are very different ways of inhabiting the littoral, a difference, perhaps, between ‘water’s edge’ and ‘land’s edge’. For instance, the play *Rising Water* situates itself at a mooring at which three boats lie becalmed, not quite at sea, not quite on land, but in the moral space between the jingoistic revelry of Australia Day and the possibility of flight. None of the boats will make it out to
Water

sea, which represents some distant possibility of self-realisation or discovery. Col, Baxter and Jackie are all outsiders for one reason or another, but their mooring represents the border between a craven xenophobic nationalism playing itself out in Australia Day drunkenness on the land and the possibility of escape. The failure of spirit at the edge of the water takes on a sacramental dimension as Baxter assumes the role of a Christ figure, his boat sunk between the other two boats, called *Goodness* and *Mercy*. Baxter refuses to sink with his scuttled boat, but is resurrected by the ‘Holy Spirit, symbolised by the “Freo Doctor” [and,] using his opened shirt, catches the famous south-westerly breeze to move on, raised up and renewed by the breath of the wind’. 21

Whether or not the play is so overt a Christian allegory, such ‘beached’ characters carry a powerful allegorical weight wherever they appear. As Winton ponders in *Land’s Edge*:

> Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert – a war of mystery on two fronts. What worries us about the sea and the desert? Is it scale or simple silence? Historically we see ourselves as outback types, although we know we are suburbanites. Still, we do go to the desert more and more […] Guiltily we spend the rest of our time living on the water or manoeuvring our way ruthlessly toward it. The desert is a spiritual place, we vaguely understand, and the sea the mere playground of our hedonism. 22

Clearly, the opposite is the case for Winton. There is no guilt in his immersion, but an enthusiastic apprehension of the grace and beauty available to those who move in and on water. Yet the epitome of the society hovering, unsuspectingly, on the edge of
the spiritual and imaginative possibilities of water is, ironically, the fishing village. Whether the whaling town Angelus in *Shallows* or the fishing town White Point in *Dirt Music*, the fishing village is ‘wedged’ between land and sea:

White Point was then just a bunch of tin sheds in the lee of the foredune. A sandy point, a series of fringing reefs and an island a mile offshore created a broad lagoon in which the original jetty stood. The settlement lay wedged between the sea and the majestic white sandhills of the interior.23

‘Wedged’ is an apposite word. The town, although it lives off the sea, is a kind of no-place, a porous, changeable border between two fearsome possibilities. It was ‘a personality junkyard […] where people still washed up to hide or to lick their wounds’.24 Nor will anything get the people of Angelus away from their houses around the harbour with its stinking flats. ‘It’s as though they believe the Second Coming or the Loch Ness Monster will erupt from the harbour itself and they daren’t move an inch.’25 The towns on the edge of the sea are a permanent location of a failure-to-escape, despite the various escapees who inhabit them. They stand as an admission of defeat, the habitation of the homeless.

**Freedom**

Water itself, then, is firstly a medium of escape and freedom, an avenue to the grace so lacking in those tawdry towns stuck on its edge. We sense the attraction of the boundlessness, the receptivity of water in the story ‘Aquifer’:
I grew up in a boxy double brick house with roses and a letterbox, like anyone else. My parents were always struggling to get me inside something, into shirts and shoes, inside the fence, the neighbourhood, the house, out of the sun or the rain, out of the world itself it often seemed to me.26

In a more subtle way this sense of the confinement of boundaries articulates the difference between land and sea. The very solidity of land, its clear and coordinated landmarks, its sense of perspective, can appear as lack. In Shallows, Daniel Coupar, a man descended from the whaler Nathaniel Coupar, looks around him at his property:

From here there had always been for Coupar a sense of perspective: there was order and sense, each landmark, each familiar plane of light or darkness consistent with memory and history, an immemorial constant around which, upon which, all else happened. To the north, the Ranges; to the east the white sides of Jimmy’s Rock; to the west the cloudy tips of Fourpeaks; to the south-west only Bald Island hugging the thin shoulders of Stormy Beach. Ocean. Sky. Dead land.27

Despite its capacity to ground Coupar, the land is dead, or perhaps able to die, unlike the living, formless, fluid reality of the sea. This petrification of the land is not really Winton’s attitude to place. He has an intuitive relationship with the landscape perhaps best indicated by Georgie Jutland’s reaction in Dirt Music: ‘Georgie couldn’t understand this feeling of recognition. It was iconic.
Australian landscape but not even twenty years of nationalist advertising could account for this sensation'. Nevertheless, there is no question that sea and river are the avenues to fluid, joyous life. Yet in its vastness the sea is also fearsome. ‘I love the sea’, says Winton, ‘but it does not love me’. Although brought up beside the sea,

Queenie Cookson had never been in such an expanse of water before, and although she couldn’t properly see it she sensed its vastness and felt the absence of land in every pore, and was afraid.

But in its simple physical reality, its capacity to allow people to feel the lightness of their being, water is a medium of freedom. For Queenie, ‘[i]n the pool and in the surf she felt strong and quick and graceful, but in class she felt heavy, thought herself dull and plodding’. In Dirt Music, Fox

[B]egins to feel good. It’s what he lives for, this feeling, knowing they’re all still ashore in their beds sleeping off the Emu Export and the bedtime bong while he has the sea to himself.

As a boy he’d thought the place was alive somehow […] Those days you could come down here and stand in the water on the shallow spit and clear your mind. Stare at the sun-torched surface and break it into disparate coins of light.

For the young Pikelet in Breath, the sea brings forth an insouciant beauty and elegance:
[D]eath was hard to imagine when you had these blokes dancing themselves across the bay with smiles on their faces and sun in their hair.

I couldn’t have put words to it as a boy, but later I understood what seized my imagination that day. How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared.\textsuperscript{34}

Even in Winton’s novels for children, such as \textit{Blueback}, water is the medium of effortless suspension, of freedom and wonder:

Abel loved being underwater. He was ten years old and could never remember a time when he could not dive. His mother said he was a diver before he was born; he floated and swam in the warm ocean inside her for nine months, so maybe it came naturally. He liked to watch his mother cruise down into the deep in her patchy wetsuit. She looked like a scarred old seal in that thing. She was a beautiful swimmer, relaxed and strong.\textsuperscript{35}

While Winton perfectly judges the tone of children’s literature, the subtle power of this image is manifest. Water is an image not just of freedom but also of rebirth, an amniotic fluid in which can be found not just escape but the promise of birth and renewal. ‘The ocean is the supreme metaphor for change’, claims Winton. ‘I expect the unexpected but am never fully prepared’.\textsuperscript{36} The sea is never still. It is changeable and surprising, but as water it is also the medium of change, it ‘lets you through it’ – with the promise not just of life but of \textit{Heimat}.
The freedom and grace people experience in water is a form of what Irigaray calls the ‘sensible transcendent’; ‘[w]hy do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realisation – here and now – through the body?’ she asks.\textsuperscript{37} This experience of transcendence in the body is a vital aspect of Winton’s conception of the sacred. The ‘spirit that rolls through all things’ runs through the body, and the freedom offered by water is a way to experience something of the holiness of the world. Luther Fox recalls his mother’s conviction of the holiness of the earth:

Holy? He always wanted to believe it, and felt it instinctively true from a thousand days spent dragging a stick through the dirt while crows cleared their throats benignly at him and those stones whined gently upon the hill.\textsuperscript{38}

But it is in the water that Lu Fox feels the sacred in his own body, when he can float in the embracing oceanic experience of something eternal. For him the sea is life, and diving to the point of blackout leaves him tingling with vitality.

In \textit{Cloudstreet} it is not the sea as in \textit{Dirt Music} but the river that carries water’s promise of life:

The river. Remember, wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be many fish, for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea will become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.\textsuperscript{39}
One of the most evocative visions of the freedom of water occurs on the river, when Lester Lamb buys a boat that is too large to truck home and asks Quick (with Fish as passenger) to row the many miles to Cloud Street’s nearest jetty. The task is huge and, after nightfall, Quick just stops. He lies back to look at the stars and Fish, who has spent the journey listening to the long-desired water, is transformed:

He lies back with his eyes closed. The whole boat is full of their songs – they shout them up at the sky until Fish begins to laugh. Quick stops singing. It’s dead quiet and Fish is laughing like he’s just found a mullet in his shorts. It’s a crazy sound, a mad sound, and Quick opens his eyes to see Fish standing up in the middle of the boat with his arms out like he’s gliding, like he’s a bird sitting in an updraught. The sky, packed with stars, rests just above his head, and when Quick looks over the side he sees the river is full of sky as well […] Are we in the sky, Fish? Yes. It’s the water. What dyou mean? The water. The water. I fly.40

It is not only for Fish that the water reflects the infinity of sky. When Luther Fox embarks on his odyssey,

The sea is so flat and cerulean that clouds seem to founder in it. Planing through their reflections Fox feels more skybound than waterborne as he bears in toward the lagoon.41
The sea and sky reflect each other because they come together at the horizon, the permanent declaration of human possibility.

This feeling of something eternal can be called the ‘oce-anic’. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud has some difficulty providing a psychoanalytic explanation for his friend Romain Rolland’s description of a feeling of eternity:

I had sent him my little book which treats of religion as an illusion and he answered that he agreed entirely with my views on religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the ultimate source of religious sentiments. This consists in a peculiar feeling, which never leaves him personally, which he finds shared by many others, and which he may suppose millions more also experience. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something ‘oceanic’.

In his letter, Rolland describes it as ‘the feeling of the “eternal” (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and oceanic, as it were)’. He goes on to explain that this sensation has never failed him: ‘I have always found in it a source of vital renewal [and experience it] like a sheet of water which I feel flushing under the bark’. Rolland adds that, for him, it has nothing to do with yearning, ‘[b]ut the sentiment I experience is imposed on me as a fact. It is a contact’. This oceanic feeling connects the body to the eternal, which in Winton is both the sea itself and its merging with sky. Fish ‘flies’ because he is drawn to the water as to home, drawn to his cruelly denied death. But the water, while it lets you through it, is like the sky because it is the space in which past, present and future coincide. It is the intimation of
the infinite, of timelessness. Water is the perfect medium in which to feel the ‘oceanic’ – the presence of the eternal – and it is the perfect medium of corporeal transcendence in which the eternal may be felt in the body.

Dream
But at the same time the feeling of the oceanic comes from the subconscious, and this is where the intimation of infinity re-emerges in dream. For Daniel and Maureen Coupar in *Shallows*, and Pikelet in *Breath*, the dream of water is often a dream of death. For Lu Fox in *Dirt Music*, the dream sea is filled with the dead:

> Swims in a winy sea. All around him, in a mist, the piping breaths of the dead; they surge and swirl and fin beneath, roundabout, alongside him […] The water grows thick with limbs, too tangled to swim through and streams of kelp-like hair snag in his teeth, catch in his throat.

Coming up out of the dream is much like re-emerging from water, like being reborn.

Yet dream is also the apprehension of God, most noticeably in the sublime image of whales, as we find in the story of the final struggle against whaling in Albany, Western Australia, the last whaling station in the country. Canadian Greenpeace co-founder Bob Hunter led a direct action campaign in 1977 against the three whale-chaser ships operating from Albany. This was the first Greenpeace campaign in Australia, and the last whale, a sperm whale, was harpooned on 20 November 1978. The novel situates itself in the political landscape and includes this 1978 date, but
Despite Winton’s own pronounced environmental activism, the success of the anti-whaling expedition is secondary to the motivations of the people and the ways the sea becomes the backdrop for the petty venal corruption of the town, a confirmation of the freedom and vastness of water, the site of the powerfully theistic presence of whales in the consciousness of humans.

The whales are the epitome of the oceanic, and with strong links to both *Moby Dick* and the biblical story of Jonah, they become, in Queenie’s dreams, the intimation of God. While the text is littered with biblical quotes, the water seems to offer a medium of the transcendent beyond narrative, beyond history, and this is particularly invested in the image of the whales in a way that lies at a tangent to the historical events. It emerges on the first page:

I was only a little girl. I heard the voice of God calling from down in the bay. I got up to the window to look. He was calling Poppa. Quite a patient voice. Daniel… Daniel. Poppa didn’t come out. After a while He stopped calling and from down in the bay came this thunderous splash and the whole farm shook and in the moonlight I saw this glistening black…whale inching up towards the house […] Poppa would be there by my bed with the lamp and a glass of milk. It was God, I’d say. And he’d smile and say, ‘Yes, I know.’

As well as the dream of God as a whale, Queenie has a dream of being inside the whale:

Her body propelled itself, willed her on, informed itself, wanted, needed, burrowed onward to that space in the
light where she felt the beginnings of a vortex, farther, closer, then the long fence of ivory, and she tipped forward into the cavity, tumbling, then dark [...] The belly of a whale, she thought: this is the belly of the whale.51

Queenie on an impulse joins the anti-whaling protesters, pitting herself immediately against the town. But her investment in the whales goes much deeper than Georges Fleurier’s desire to save them:

She had listened to Fleurier with a forced scepticism, wanting to sneer, but remembering all the time those dreams of the whale lurching up across the paddocks, spiracle whistling like wind in the eaves, to take her Poppa from his bed, to bring a sign from God, to crush their fences and roll through the swamp.52

Whales are much more than threatened mammals to Queenie, they are the voice of God. While the novel does not draw back from the political events – the brazenness of the Greenpeace boats and the squalor of the town’s resentment – the symbolism of the whales crowns the work, although in a deeply ambivalent way. At the end of the novel Cleve and Queenie rejoice at the return of the whales, which reappear at the same time Daniel Coupar dies. But this is no fairy-tale ending. The survival of the whales is paradoxically the reassertion of the rhythm of nature: the whales strand themselves on the beach,

Queenie screamed. Surf thundered and the night was images in torch beams. Masses of flesh and barnacles covered the sand, creeping up, floundering, suffocating
under their own weight. A pink vapour from spiracles descended upon Cleve and Queenie Cookson as they moved between the heaving monuments.\textsuperscript{53}

Death

While the beaching of the whales might seem to undermine the efforts of the activists to save them, death is part of the natural cycle and inhabits water as an ambivalent confirmation of the business of living. ‘When I think of sleep or coma or fever or death’, writes Winton, ‘the ocean comes to mind’.\textsuperscript{54} But death is not simply part of the natural cycle. It is a horizon rather than a boundary, something deeply embedded in the utopian vision of Winton’s writing, the horizon one constantly approaches through water. Death cannot be separated from the oceanic. When Lu Fox finds himself trapped in a car with Bess and Horrie while traveling across the red vastness of the Western Australian landscape, Bess (who is dying) quotes from James Dickey’s wrenching poem about a lifeguard at a children’s camp who searches the depths for a drowned boy,

\begin{quote}
I wash the black mud from my hands. \\
On a light given off by the grave \\
I kneel in the quick of the moon \\
At the heart of a distant forest \\
And hold in my arms a child \\
Of water, water, water.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

The child of water is the image of one who failed to return. But one attraction of water in Winton’s work is that it allows even
the most foolhardy to return renewed, reinvigorated. One of the paradoxical features of Winton’s characters is their desire to get to the very edge of life by holding their breath beyond the limits of their bodies’ capacity. ‘It’s funny’, thinks Pikelet in *Breath*, ‘but you never really think much about breathing. Until it’s all you ever think about’. We do not need water to see how long we can hold our breath, but water seems to draw Winton’s characters to the very edge. Although water ‘lets us through’ to a different state, free diving – diving without apparatus, holding one’s breath to the very limit – takes us to the outer limit of water’s acceptance. This is at one level a demonstration of control:

[A]s a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back to it, breath upon breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others.

*Breath* is a story about asserting this power in various ways, of confirming existence itself by going to the edge of one’s ability in what feels like a religious experience. ‘For all the mess I made, I still judge every joyous moment, every victory and revelation against those few seconds of living’, says Pikelet as Sando enthuses about surfing impossible waves:

When you make it, when you’re still alive and standin at the end, you get this tingly-electric rush. You feel *alive*, completely awake and in your body. Man, it’s like you’ve felt the hand of God.