

**THEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM
IN THE FICTION OF TIM WINTON**

by

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Thesis to be submitted by Roie Thomas in May 2007

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Abstract

This survey of Winton's fiction will claim that religious (or theistic) existentialism is the foundational *weltanschuuang* of his work. I intend to investigate the extent to which the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard shadow characters in their move towards an ideal; that is, a personal connectedness with their concept of God. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that Winton's fiction reflects aspects of Kierkegaard's existential continuum, his *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), in its call to existential 'authenticity'. Both authors reject the conventional rigidity practised by much institutionalised religion and endorse a personalised connectedness between individuals and God.

Theistic existentialism is defined in the Foundational Chapter, including a distinction between this worldview, atheistic existentialism and traditional theism. Tim Winton's work is justified generally in relation to this theistic existentialism.

My methodology is as follows: Kierkegaard's three-tiered continuum *Stages on Life's Way* with my adjustments (sub-categories) will be defined in the Foundational Chapter alongside a brief introduction to other existentialist thinkers whose ideas are consulted within the thesis.

A second chapter will demonstrate the way in which characters in one novel can be categorised according to the three main Kierkegaardian stages: 'The Aesthetic', 'The Ethical' and 'The Religious'. The novel *Shallows* (1984) encapsulates all the stages within its characters and serves as a conceptual introduction to them.

Chapter Three will contain an analysis of three characters who belong to sub-groups of the Aesthetic. Collectively here they are labelled 'Destroyers', including The Demonic and Nihilist manifestations, since they destroy others or themselves respectively (or both). These sub-categories of my own labelling are defined.

Chapter Four, entitled 'Wanderers', foregrounds characters who also belong to the Aesthete's realm of Unconscious Despair, living in the Temporal. They are not so actively injurious as their Destroyer counterparts, however. Their lostness is characterised by a sense of alienation, displacement and ennui. They do not participate or act in any meaningful manner and have not 'chosen' their despair.

In 'Searchers' (Chapter Five) the characters are grounded in 'The Ethical' domain in Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*. They have consciously chosen their despair and try to self-Authenticate within their personal contexts. Often they are acutely aware that something is still missing in their lives, despite their individualised affirmative action. These characters are poised for epiphany, however unlikely they may seem. Grace is manifest in their lives in very personally realised ways and these characters usually accept this, if often after a long resistance.

The 'Homecomers' detailed in Chapter Six are those characters who experience a personal relationship with God. This is an individual relationship which is never replicated in another's context. Each character in this category comes to an inductive connection, not a

deductive, top-down rapport. It is a bond based on mutual love and respect, fashioned for each person, in full recognition that this state, while held aloft by Kierkegaard as 'ideal' and superior to its forerunners, does not presuppose perfection in its subjects.

Dedication

For my dear family: Meg and Robyn, Peter, Gordon and Joan. Heartfelt thanks to you all for unwavering support and love. I couldn't have done this without you.

And for you, Chris Wareham, for all the books (that I absolutely promise to return one of these days, only *slightly* dog-eared) and for your vast philosophical knowledge, happily shared with me over numerous cups of chamomile.

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“It was a tremendous help to me to discover a few years ago Aldous Huxley’s description of the two different ways in which religion can be approached. He speaks first of ‘the religion of immediate experience’ – a religion, in the words of Genesis, of “hearing the voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day”, the religion of direct acquaintance with the divine’ [...] It sends shivers, doesn’t it?

[...]

Then Huxley contrasts this with [that] which he calls ‘the religion of symbols, the religion of the imposition of order and meaning upon the world through [...] systems and their manipulation; the religion of knowledge about the divine, rather than direct acquaintance with it.’”

– John Cleese

Chapter 1

Foundational Chapter

This study will investigate the work of Tim Winton from a foundation of theistic existentialism. Though Winton has publicly professed a Christian belief, the representations of such in his work are unconventional. This thesis will demonstrate a correlation between the lives of Winton's characters and characteristics of people at Soren Kierkegaard's three realms of existence: The Aesthetic, The Ethical and the Religious, otherwise known as *Stages on Life's Way* (1845). For literary purposes, reflecting the personal journeys of Winton's characters, these 'stages' have been relabeled 'Destroyers', 'Wanderers' (both categories of the Aesthetic realm), 'Searchers' (Ethical) and 'Homecomers' (Religious). This Foundational Chapter will first define the philosophical framework, then proceed to demonstrate the way in which the framework extends and deepens a reading of Winton's fiction.

Winton's work, if investigated chronologically, shows a progression from a fairly orthodox approach to the problem of despair, with the implied 'solution' lying within a recognisably Protestant doctrine, as in *An Open Swimmer* (1982) and *That Eye the Sky* (1986). As Ort Flack recounts in *That Eye the Sky*, "At the end of breakfast we did the Lord's supper like Henry Warburton's been doing with us since we got baptized last week [...] 'Drink all of it', [Mum] said, pouring some sherry in my tea mug. There were tea leaves floating. 'It's for forgiving sins' " (98). Later, the reader can note the inclusion of realistic mysticism in *The Riders* (1994) as in sensory experiencing of super-sensory beings: "Scully smelled them, the riders and their horses. He recognized the blood and shit and sweat and fear of

them” (377). Aboriginal spirituality sits alongside Protestantism in *Cloudstreet* (1991): “As part of the spiritual realm, the Aboriginal man communicates with Fish – maybe through conversations, telepathy or old-fashioned writing, [he] in a sense, is an angel” (Rutherford 73). More recently *Dirt Music* (2000) depicts its characters’ more secular search for enlightenment and redemption. As Luther Fox recognises, “He’d always wanted to be found, even if he didn’t know it. [Georgie] had found him once. And that was in the dark. She’d just have to find him a second time” (416). This signposts the theme of redemption that takes on greater significance further into the novel.

While remaining faithful to a Christian ethic (for example, *Dirt Music* unquestionably explores the Exodus tenet of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons), the narrative voice is influenced by other spiritual possibilities alongside, it appears, a recognition that the possibilities may not need to be mutually exclusive. As Winton observes, “Everything has its place in communicating the grace of God” (Salter 10). Certainly his characters reflect this belief in their erratic and unlikely paths to self-Authentication which are nonetheless legitimate and compelling.

Existentialism in its theistic form was chosen as a fitting basis for this scrutiny of Winton’s fiction, since it is characterised by manifestations of human despair (conscious and unconscious) and the double bind in which such despair places humanity. The quest to overthrow theological nihilism and bland orthodoxy by the theistic existentialists was concerned with showing that faith involved making a personal commitment, having little to do with empirical rationality or logic. The intensity of one’s personal choice defines faith. This is central to the new Protestant credo and reflects the earlier Lutheran position in which Danish

creative writer and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1811-1855) was raised. And Winton, in his dealings with the spiritual in his texts, seeks to undermine “that pompousness that comes with the church becoming a multinational firm” (qtd. in Hawley 15).

I have chosen to base the study of Winton’s fiction specifically and substantively on the *theistic* form of existentialism as distinct from the *atheistic*, because the premise upon which despair can be transcended is the need for a personal relationship between an individual human and God, whereas atheist existentialist writers such as Dostoevsky, Camus and Sartre, while having much to offer in terms of self-Authentication through positive action (positions which Winton, as an active conservationist, would certainly applaud), nevertheless assume a godless universe.

First, a brief word about the author himself. Winton is fundamentally a radical and a skeptic, well aware of the limits of reason, “To go beyond expecting in that childlike way that there is an answer, that there are reasons, that these things will be revealed” (McGirr 118). Nonetheless he grounds this celebration of the real possibility of transcendence within the reality and inescapable tragedy of life, that which Kierkegaard called the “dialectical tension of existence” (Kierkegaard *The Sickness Unto Death* 30).

Winton also appears to have a fascination with a wide range of binaries. He is aware of the necessity for integration - “we all join up somewhere in the end” (*Cloudstreet* 402) - for an acknowledgement that, indeed, this is the natural state

of humanity which lives in the Temporal and desires Infinity (Malantschuk 46). Dualisms occur with regularity within Winton's work, the most common being that between the rational and the non-rational; the integration of these being evidently Winton's creative mission, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. An acceptance of the inter-relationship between the material (Temporal) and the supernatural (Eternal) worlds poses less of a problem for the characters who are most 'sympathetic' or endorsed by the narrative, namely Sam Pickles, Quick Lamb, Fish, Ort Flack and so on.

So to define the theistic branch of existentialism: Theistic existentialism accepts several of the traditional presuppositions of theism, including the omnipotence and innate goodness of God, and is characterised, according to James W. Sire (1997) by four main premises. First, that human beings are personal beings who, when they come to full consciousness, find themselves in an alien universe; whether God exists is a tough question to be solved not by reason but by faith. Secondly, "knowledge is subjectivity; the whole truth is often paradoxical". In the third place, "history as a record of events is uncertain and unimportant, but history as a model or type or myth to be made present and lived is of supreme importance" and finally, "the personal is valuable" (107-116).

Such principles are difficult to use as completely discrete tools for analysis, since they overlap and inter-relate. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that these four fundamental conditions of theistic existentialism underscore Winton's fiction, since his protagonists generally move towards something greater than themselves (albeit often haltingly or unwittingly) by way of an increasing personal understanding and appropriation of these concepts. There are certainly characters who could be categorised as atheistic existentialists/ humanists and some definite

nihilists, yet the sympathetic characters (those afforded a voice in the narrative) are invariably in a state of flux. They appear to seek that which could be labeled God, in whichever guise that is manifest for them.

Theologian Harold Englund's graphic representation of the distinction illustrates orthodox theism's depersonalised interpretation of concepts such as sin and repentance set against a personalised version for the religious existentialists. I paraphrase it as follows: Sin is seen as "breaking a rule" by the theists, but as "betraying a relationship" by the existentialists. Repentance to the theist is "admitting guilt" while to the existentialist it is "sorrowing over personal betrayal." Forgiveness is "canceling a penalty" for the theist where for the existentialist it is "renewing fellowship". Faith is considered simply "[belief] in a set of propositions", yet to the existentialist it is "committing oneself to a person". For the theist, Christian life is characterised by "obeying rules", but for the existentialist it is "pleasing the Lord, a Person" (qtd. in Sire 110).

German existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) will be consulted to a lesser extent than Kierkegaard to illuminate the worldview. Tillich considered personhood to be inextricably entwined with theology, describing his philosophical method as 'correlation'; that is, a correlation between the questions naturally implied within the situation of existence and the answers implied in the message (of Christ). The question of God arises out of an individual's awareness of his own finitude, and some awareness of the infinite, otherwise called the ultimate or the absolute, is necessary for a personal appropriation to occur. Of course, 'false' ultimates present themselves in everyday life as alternatives to the real ultimate

(God) in the form of success, affluence, status, nationalism, and this, Tillich asserts, is a form of idolatry. The measure of the validity of the ultimate is whether or not it can be seen as an object, since the genuine article naturally transcends any subject/object relationship (15).

Terminology from several theistic existentialist philosophers will be deployed here to describe the states of being and understanding of the various characters in Winton's fiction. Terminology and an explanation of the concepts the terms embody will be explored alongside Winton's fiction as the case arises. These include Kierkegaard's notion of the *Aesthetic*, *Ethical* and *Religious* states or stages; the *Temporal*, *the Eternal*; *Finite* and *Infinite*; *Conscious-* and *Unconscious Despair*; Tillich's '*Ultimate*' (concern) and *False Ultimate* (concern). As well, the term *Authentic* will be deployed from this point only in a (theistic) existentialist sense, meaning the Kierkegaardian concept of choosing one's despair and living proactively in order to reach the ideal of personal concord with the Creator. (All these terms, including the pivotal concept of *Grace*, will be capitalised from this point so as to distinguish their existentialist contexts from other disciplines or interpretations).

An extrapolation of the three-tiered doctrine that provides the framework for this study follows.

The Aesthetic is defined by Kierkegaard as that state wherein an individual lives a life purely for its acquisitive purposes with no aspiration towards a spiritual dimension. Necessarily in this state, a person is in the grip of Unconscious Despair, unaware of the void in which he/she exists. Many individuals (and, as

literary representations, characters in both Kierkegaard's and Winton's fiction) never graduate from this state of being and live in Temporality (that is, for the moment or for the life of the physical body), and can actually appear to live satisfactorily within this Finite framework, making few conscious choices, rather being swept along by life in an attitude of detachment (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 29). These are both the Destroyers and Wanderers in Winton's fiction, as labeled and categorised by myself.

The Ethical for Kierkegaard is a natural progression out of the Aesthetic for people/characters who have (usually) experienced a turning point or epiphany of sorts, becoming aware of the Finitude of earthly life and the ultimate meaninglessness of same, and who thus enter a state of Conscious Despair. That is, they are cognisant of an instinct that there is something missing and of the necessity of rectifying this in some way. The key is choice here, a recognition of individual responsibility and of participating in one's own life. At this point there are still many *a*-theistic existentialists along for the ride since they would authenticate (or make meaning through positive action) somehow within the limits of ultimate absurdity (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 55). Such characters constitute (my so-called) Searchers in Winton's work.

It is by way of a leap of faith (presupposing a conscious choice) that individuals and their literary representations can transcend despair and enter that which Kierkegaard labels the Religious state, wherein an individual comes into a personal relationship with God through a completely individual faith. Here, of course, the atheistic and theistic existentialists part company completely. God is

that which Tillich labels the ‘Ultimate’, that to which humanity (if it is not bound up with Temporality and distracted by ‘False Ultimates’⁶⁵) aspires, and that which gives meaning to the universe and the possibility of Infinity, that is, life beyond the confines of earthly existence. These are the characters in Winton’s fiction I have classified as the Homecomers.

Underpinning the existentialist credo is Despair. A biblical term for this sense is Vanity, that is, *Ecclesiastes*’ vanity of knowledge, of pleasure, of work and riches: “for all is vanity and vexation of the spirit” (*The New English Bible*, Ecc. 2.17). At the moment of despair when one effectively *chooses* one’s despair, the self is validated for the first time; the self is made transparent to itself. But with it appears a recognition that the self is bound to a Finitude within the Aesthetic.

Overwhelming beauty is one feature of Winton’s work (lyrical observations about the natural world and inclusions of the numinous) that lift it from any possibility of being nihilistic and which provide a backdrop for his characters’ shift from the Aesthetic to the Ethical and, in some cases, to the Religious. One of many such examples appears in *Cloudstreet*,

they came to a place called Bullfinch, which looks beyond the means or will of any bird at all [...]

That’s the Southern Cross there, said Rose [...]

You feel like it’s hanging over you like the top of a cathedral, Quick said with Fish’s arms around him. (*Cloudstreet* 416-418)

This is the *Sehnsucht* or the “drippings of grace” as writer C.S. Lewis (Yancey 19) described the moments of transcendence that humans experience in various ways

throughout life, and which, according to critic Yvonne Miels, “resonates with a prophetic echo” (29).

Logic, rationality and hedonistic pursuits without any faith or seeking are sure roads to despair, reflected in spiritually lost characters experiencing difficulty climbing from the abyss like Maurice in *In The Winter Dark* (1988) where, as Winton says, there is “no visionary moment” (McGirr 66). “Choosing oneself” is apparently the *leitmotif* of Soren Kierkegaard’s thought (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 513), rising above a consideration of the person/character as a purely social being subject to the whim of an omnipotent God, by raising the religious and ontic dimensions of what it is to be a self.

To address a further tenet of theistic existentialism: the concept of history’s significance deriving from its role in the present in individual lives is dealt with fictionally by Winton in a variety of ways. These range from a youthful understanding of history as a predestined continuum over which characters have no control, evident in his early work, to a more settled approach wherein the characters appear to have more impact upon their individual destinies. Critic Ffion Murphy recognises that

the dominant linear progression of Winton’s texts is [...] complicated by his characters’ tendency towards intense introspection and reminiscence [and] by ‘alternate narratives’ – diaries, letters and journals [along with] formalised versions of the past and contemporary ‘newsworthy events’ (78).

Winton's fiction follows the journeys of characters to discover (or not) their fundamental free-will in a meaningful (read: God-ordained) universe. Winton tackles this in his work, acknowledging the cyclical historical continuum of humanity's destructive choices. For instance, Fleurier, the French anti-whaling activist in *Shallows*, searches for answers about Man in "wrecks and salvage and mystery" (*Shallows* 39). Fleurier eventually comes to realise the futility of constantly living retrospectively, conceding that " 'Our future lies in communication between the species, co-existence with the environment. Not in the follies of the past' " (39). History, in short, is being "made present and lived" as set down by Sire (110).

Winton's characters are almost invariably bound within the states of both Unconscious and Conscious Despair, and the narrative purpose appears to be to work towards the next transition in characters' lives.

The first obligation, according to Kierkegaard, is to "choose one's despair" (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 513) for the very reason that it validates the self, albeit in the negative sense of Finitude. One becomes transparent to oneself: one realises one's status as a sinner, in the conventional (theistic) sense. And one learns to be who one is; not lose oneself by attempting to be what one is not. This approach would distinguish Winton's narrative from that of an orthodox theist's, where the solution to characters' despair would presumably be to simply subscribe to the doctrine and to live accordingly. The narrative perspective that sets Winton's work apart from this is the *personalised* approach each character takes to his/her own redemption from despair. It is a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' response.

Despair is recognised as being a universal condition. In *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) Kierkegaard writes:

This despair is a characteristic of the self's failure to acknowledge its dependence upon God in the sense that in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. (14)

Transcendence necessarily involves some epiphany - a turning point in the action where the despair is overwhelming and something must be done. Winton's work introduces characters who are undoubtedly caught in the Aesthetic and while some remain in this state apparently irretrievably, such as Des Pustling (*Shallows*) others rise above their despair through a conscious awareness of their despair and a subsequent choice to supersede the Aesthetic and move towards a state akin to Kierkegaard's notion of the Ethical as with, for example, Dolly Pickles (*Cloudstreet*) and Jerra Nilsam (*An Open Swimmer*).

Many of Winton's characters have achieved an Ethical level of transcendence by way of that which their 'creator' labels Grace. But they are still flawed and vulnerable to Aesthetic or Temporal influences, as with Henry Warburton, the chaotically prophetic figure in *That Eye the Sky*. It is simply that these influences no longer constitute the characters' Absolute.

Winton, in common with the theistic existentialists, cannot agree with the atheist counterparts or devotees of the New Age movement, who view the process of self-creation as an end and a value *per se*. As one of his long-running characters, Rachel Nilsam, scoffs "What's this New Age stuff? I rub your back and I'm a

bloody crystal gazer. Mate, the only sign I associate with the New Age is the dollar sign” (*Dirt Music* 346). But the only way for transcendence to be possible is through the recognition of an absence. This requires some renunciation, a moving apart from the world and its Temporal determinants, since God is that absent factor in a person’s giving over.

Another justification for using theistic existentialism as a theoretical foundation for the study of Winton’s work is that the strategy of indirect communication is employed and this serves as a human reflection of the God-man relationship.

Winton’s characters are almost without exception caught in the Aesthetic, seemingly unable to rise above their situation, at least initially. Choice is very much at the heart of his characters’ move towards the Ethical, in keeping with the free will offered by the Judeo-Christian doctrine (Erasmus 37). So Winton’s protagonists are given the gift of life, as it were, the commonly employed interior monologue providing readers insight into the metaphoric progress of the soul, despite the technical predominance of the third person point-of-view. Speech, according to Kierkegaard, is the most concrete and *human* medium. Kierkegaard’s way of being faithful to the self, to the individual spirit, is by allowing his own characters’ voices to be heard in their own voice. Kierkegaard scholar George Pattison identifies a necessity for Christian writers to sympathetically enter into and portray

the very position from which in the long term [they] are seeking to liberate [their] readers. Kierkegaard, therefore begins by presenting in some detail the ‘Aesthetic’ attitude which he regards the typical attitude of

modern bourgeois society in order to expose its inner contradictions and so lure the reader on to a confrontation with Christianity as an alternative stance towards life that is worth taking seriously. (4-5)

At this point it is expedient to define Grace as it is interpreted in this context.

Grace is not a 'thing'; rather, it is a characteristic of the way in which God relates to individuals. Of necessity, Grace involves love, compassion, generosity, the giving of the spirit, forgiveness and more. Essentially Scripture's teaching on Grace indicates that God is for those who in themselves are against him (*The New English Bible*, Romans 4.23-24).

In Winton's work there is a predominance of Grace in a myriad of manifestations and Grace acts as a kind of catalyst for choice; it is as though his characters cannot move from the Aesthetic to the Ethical state if left to their own devices. Despite the characters being so deeply entrenched in the Aesthetic (and, as such, in unconscious despair) they are eminently redeemable through Grace. There is no one form; epiphanies are personally and individually contextualised. Critic Yvonne Miels describes Winton's characters as

ordinary people [who] celebrate the tough realities of life whilst recognising other immanences; for some of them it is a world where God's presence is sensed instinctively as the divine within the ordinary. This is a mystical, not a religious, view, and Winton's expression is based on a spontaneous childlike innocence and acceptance. (31)

In the same publication, Anne Day notes, “Being surprised by grace is something that happens to [Winton’s] characters and his readers [...] trying to keep alive the rumour of God and the rumour that there is hope and meaning to be found” (30).

Winton elaborates on this:

In bone simple terms, what is grace but the force of life itself? Some characters instinctively say yes to life and others learn or re-learn to, despite the damage of experience [...] when you affirm life, you give yourself the chance to be fully human. Empathy, connectedness, responsiveness, seriousness, humility – are they the fruits of grace or the tools for the building of it? I don’t know.” (Winton Letter 10/6/2004).

Winton uses biblical excerpts and fragments, some direct quotations, some fleeting references which evoke the visionary. In this, Veronica Brady sees his purpose as being similar to Patrick White’s (with whom Winton has often been compared), claiming that Winton appears to be writing “a kind of Wisdom literature [...] to demonstrate the rule of powers beyond human comprehension and to lead the individual to worshipful submission to them” (36).

Linked to the idea of indirect communication in Winton’s work is the fact that many of Winton’s characters are thwarted to some extent by their inarticulateness. Winton is all too aware of the (particularly masculine and Australian) incapacity for giving word to intense emotion:

People have terrible yearnings and feelings. They know what they think and they know what they want to say, but they just don’t have

the words. It's not so much the vocabulary; the words are in their throat, but they're not on their tongue [...] Also my narrators never say anything; there's very little in my stories [...] of a narrator commenting on the action, or judging the action. (Willbanks 195)

Paradoxically, Fish Lamb, expressively thwarted more than any other character due to his brain injury, is a narrator in *Cloudstreet*. He is, along with the old black man who fades in and out of the narrative, the one who draws the other characters' attention to the spiritual realm. His heightened sensibility is manifest in the miraculous and in quiet observations, when the world and all its hopelessness and ugliness intrudes. As Fish's creator observes, "His is the controlling intelligence of the narration, yet intelligence is, presumably what he lacks" (McGirr 56). Fish resembles the "blessed idiot" to be found in Patrick White's fiction and also in biblical narratives wherein those intellectually handicapped are 'touched' by God. As such the personal is certainly the valuable, endorsing one of the seminal tenets of theistic existentialism.

The truth as a paradoxical phenomenon (Sire 111) is evident in the portrayals of the metaphysical in Winton's work, and in the intricacies of narrative voice. The fact that Winton is a fairly orthodox Christian in Australia is, as he notes bemusedly, "a real aberration that in the literary culture people will, at best, kind of put up with" (Willbanks 196) and "an oddity" in an "anti-Christian culture" (Watzke 7). His writing contains apparent contradictions that reflect this such as

faith arising out of despair or the numinous appearing in a setting of great degradation.

Winton's characters are not wholly sympathetic. Many of them are hopeless or even repulsive and the social and physical landscapes within which they operate are often oppressive and demoralising. There are thematic and metaphysical challenges for the reader, and in the Temporal world, Winton is reluctant to interpret them. He does, however, offer a concession (albeit trapped in the existential 'moment') that

the world is a bigger, weirder, more elastic place than we sometimes like to think. The only miracle is that things aren't worse, that people aren't twice as rotten, that we're still plugging away. For the moment. (McGirr 99)

Chapter 2

Shallows

Tim Winton [...] creates a depth dimension in a society that constantly pushes us to the surface (David Tacey 86-87).

In a study of the work of Tim Winton from a foundation of theistic existentialism, the novel *Shallows* (1984) is exemplary in that the narrative contains embodiments of the three major categories of Kierkegaard's *Stages of Life's Way*: The Aesthetic, The Ethical and The Religious. As mentioned previously, for literary purposes, I have relabelled these philosophical stages Destroyers and Wanderers; Searchers, and Homecomers respectively. The relabelling, in order to describe features of Winton's characters, provides an additional physical aspect to Kierkegaard's categories, an aspect linked to the concepts of belonging and place.

This chapter identifies the characters Des Pustling and Nathaniel Coupar as Destroyers (personifying the Demonic and nihilism respectively), Cleve Cookson as a Wanderer, Daniel and Queenie Coupar as Searchers and William Pell as a Homecomer. There is scope for the characters to move between categories or transcend boundaries, as in the case of Daniel Coupar who eventually reaches the Homecomer (or Religious) stage at the close of his life at the end of the novel. The characters' connection with place and history is shown to be inextricably linked to their individual *weltanschuuang*.

First, then to the setting in which characters find themselves, for the characters in *Shallows* are elemental; they live, as the title implies, in uneasy

accord with their historical, social and physical landscapes, all of which provide the backdrop for and inform their spiritual profiles. The physical setting (the old penal colony and whaling town of Angelus, a thinly disguised Albany, Western Australia) is, from a fictional perspective, ideally suited to a story of lostness from self and from God. Angelus, in its essential isolation and the sense of its being brutally antipodean, is located at “the southernmost tip of the newest and oldest continent, the bottom of the world” (Prologue *ix*).

Temporally, the novel alternates between the nineteenth century and the 1970s, both turbulent times politically. Consequently history provides a backdrop for the spiritual upheavals of the characters.

The spiritual tempests are signalled in the christening of Albany as “Angelus”. *The Angelus* is a Catholic recitative, heralding the incarnation of Christ and the meaning of this for humanity. The whales are “God’s appointed” (81) messengers, representing a Christlike crucifixion and resurrection, through their slaughter and eventual return to the bay (the character Queenie draws a direct comparison between God and the whales when, as a child, she notes, “ ‘I heard the voice of God calling from down in the bay...in the moonlight I saw this glistening black...whale inching up towards the house’ ”(3), suggesting the hope manifest in a childlike faith. Her return to the bay and subsequent visits in later stories implies an unwavering hope. This reader is reminded of Jonah, a story Queenie would almost certainly have heard in her days at Sunday School and referred to in the novel. Jonah, the Old Testament fisherman, operated in the shallows, rejecting the signs from God that are overtly manifest (*The New English Bible*, Jonah, 1.1-12) until jolted out of the Aesthetic. The whale in that biblical story acts as God’s vehicle, transporting Jonah to the depths, then depositing him back in the physical

world where he can be of use in his newfound Ethical enlightenment. The whales in Winton's work, writes critic John P. Turner, serve as annunciators of the change of seasons and the passage of time.

An existentialist reading, then, would render the symbolism of the whales as the potential within humanity; their stranding in shallow water signifies the dangers of floundering in the Aesthetic (the 'shallows') rather than in the relative profundity of the Ethical realm. The right direction, though, is difficult to course. Meaning is distorted within complex communication systems, perhaps to be read as the myriad of possibilities available within the Aesthetic or Temporal realm of existence. Superficial structures, represented by the hollowness of the human characters, are shown to be potentially life-threatening. Fleurier, the French conservationist campaigning in Angelus, having studied leviathan behaviour, explains to Queenie,

'Whales don't operate their best in shallow water. Very flat, long, shelving beaches are traps. The water is warm in the shallows – they like it – but their sonar gets hazy in that kind of uniform terrain. They can't identify it properly, make mistakes, get frantic, they're stuck. And all this complicated loyalty. If one goes all go...Being a whale in shallow water is a godawful business. Navigation is ultra-complex.' (136)

Allegorically, then, it is complex for humans to navigate the signs; it is complex also for the readers of the text to decipher them on literal or shallow levels, or for the characters within the text to recognise signs (as opportunities for transcendence) if they operate on superficial or Aesthetic life courses. In both cases, "sonar gets hazy". Interestingly, characters such as Fleurier and his Cachalot company see the saving of whales as the means *and* the end, never actually

authenticating themselves through their first-hand experience of them. They always exist in the shallows, despite seemingly noble intentions. Research and understanding of the whale's situation does not seem to transfer to the company members' own lives. As the name of their company might seem to indicate (cachalot being the sperm whale) Cachalot members serve another god.

From setting we move onto character. In this chapter, the philosophical concepts and character categories will themselves be 'shallow' or simplified in order to navigate a kind of "uniform terrain" and prepare for the deeper investigation into the separate categories in the following chapters. Two characters in *Shallows* can be categorised according to the definition of Destroyers: Nathaniel Coupar (representing a nihilist stance) and Des Pustling (personifying the Demonic).

The novel has historical verisimilitude through the inclusion of Nathaniel Coupar's journals, covering the period 1831 to 1875. The nineteenth century Nathaniel Coupar is deserted by the American whaler, *Family of Man*, in 1831, and a deserter from life itself. His ship was hunting sperm whales (the killing of sperm an image connoting the breaking of lineage) and humpbacks in waters off Angelus on the southern tip of Western Australia, when Nathaniel went ashore. The colonial texts substantiate the existentialist take on history by highlighting the recurring damage that can be done if history is replicated rather than "made present and lived". Yet they also suggest existential choice by drawing attention to the town's continuing and changing identity juxtaposed with the modern narrative set in the 1970s. These diaries chronicle the tortured metaphoric journey of a soul to its ultimate purgatory of delusion and alienation, representing, asserts critic Rodney Smith, "a kind of negative foundation myth that helps explain the later

failings of Angelus and its people” (8). Coupar’s descendents live on in the shadow of Nathaniel’s legacy of despair and destruction. The descendents attempt in their individual ways to overcome the Exodus concept of the sins of the fathers. They move towards Authenticating their own lives; in short, they move to transcend nihilism and/or self-serving Aestheticism. Indeed, overall the novel has an Old Testament reflexivity, with numerous references to God’s wrath and indignation informing the action.

Long-running nihilism (nihilism being an extreme sub-group of the Aesthetic, within the Destroyer category identified and extrapolated in the next chapter), is seldom tolerated within the lives of Winton’s characters. Winton regards such negation as an excuse for apathy and inaction (McGirr 34). He would, I think, subscribe to Sire’s assertion that nihilists, by staying alive, are constantly “[cheating] on their philosophy, [since] putting one foot in front of the other [is] affirming a goal [...] affirming the value of a course of action, even if to no one other than ourselves” (90-91).

Winton’s work highlights the innate need within humanity for connectedness, for there to be meaning, a need to transcend nihilism. According to Winton, those who deny this are short-changing themselves, their families and their community.

From my perspective it’s about a surrender to despair, a killing, cynical sort of passivity that withdraws from life and the opportunities available to be touched or changed by others...someone shut off from nature and/or the lives around them is crippled. (Winton, Letter 10/6/2004)

Winton’s texts, then, become allegories for living meaningfully.

Nathanial Coupar maintains, “I have ceased to live, continued merely to exist” (151). He seeks solace throughout his eventual employment with the whaling company by way of his diaries, a source of ridicule for the other mostly illiterate men who jeeringly call Nathanial “High and Holy” (126). The class-based connection between the written word and a higher social status during colonial times is evident here, as well as the age-old link between the church and literacy. On both levels, the whalers obviously feel abandoned by God and by society, and the consequent undermining of Nathanial as embodying both spheres to some extent is typically anti-authority. Nathaniel arrogantly believes himself to be morally and socially superior to the others and stations himself physically above and apart from them at the lookout, as recorded in his diary: “*June 2 1831* In the past days I have all but lived in this lonely lookout with my eyes fixed upon the ocean...*June 3 1831* It rains perpetually as though God weeps over this strange, grey coast” (22). Water as a metaphor for life means that it is at once representative of a salvation and a redemption, depending upon the characters’ approach. This bottom-up methodology epitomises religious existentialism in that the redemptive attributes of water (read: life) are available to those who seek it openly. Both qualities of the image are at work in this novel. Nathaniel has a conviction that God has deserted him and only him; **that he, considering himself as he does above the other men**, should have been rescued from the isolated promontory by the whaling company, despite his having deserted it at the promontory later to be named Angelus. Such an outcome would have confirmed, in his mind, his deserved status as one of God’s favoured. Eventually he abandons all hope of salvation, from either the whaling ship (with its significantly redemptive and inclusive name) or from God.

The journals are also to be used as colonial texts in that they situate this part of the novel in a social and historical setting wherein certain attitudes and worldviews prevail. The time in which his diary is set presupposes at least a nominal belief in God, and religious concepts are capitalised within Nathaniel's text (Creator, Salvation, Evil One, God). Yet, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner's* monologue, the journal chronicles an awakening of profound despair and desolation. Unlike that old seafarer, though, Nathaniel is not consumed with guilt at the end; the telling of his tale provides no salve to his conscience as he had hoped it would. The journals are testament to the increasing depravity of the men who become bestial in the whalers' camp. Nathaniel's delusional depiction of his own position in this context suggests he sees himself on a par with Jesus, abandoned by God in the wilderness (in the Gospel of Matthew), or on a par with Job, the good man tested by God (in the Old Testament).

At every turn within the journals he justifies his inaction in, for example preventing the rape of Aboriginal women and of Churling by his fellow whalers : "I did not participate" (158) he consoles himself, and concludes he has "no need of forgiveness" (159). Yet this statement damns him also, since his inaction means he did not intervene to help these people as he could have.

In his delirium, he assumes the persona of Jesus abandoned at Gethsemane, echoing Jesus' dying words "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (*Shallows* 254). Yet he eventually decides that a conscience is, in any case, a nonsense since it assumes an admonishing agent in whom he has lost faith. He is the only judge of his soul: "Life has disappointed me" (151) he says, as though he were a passive onlooker in his own story. Indeed, all he really does is record a linear series of events, as a traditional historian might, and is so detached from his fellow men he doesn't

express any feeling for Churling's rape. His non-intervention in this case shows in that he refuses to acknowledge the rape as such (which his grandson Daniel later calls "sins of inaction"), nor does he demonstrate any remorse for that tormented man's subsequent suicide. Through his pages, by default, his text warns Cleve Cookson a century and a half later against such a life. But Nathaniel considers himself above that, claiming emphatically "I am innocent" (158).

Nathaniel's journals provide the necessary link between the old story and the modern via their reappearance in the hands of Cleve Cookson. The narrator's heavily ironic statement, "Men are not so barbarous as that; we are American" (27) catapults readers into present day political hypocrisies irretrievably. The nineteenth century slaughter of whales in which Americans, British and French participated, was undertaken upon the premise that there was no physical or metaphysical case against the practice. Such a premise upholds the existentialist notion of history as being necessary to "[make] present", that is, to appropriate in terms of current understandings. The reading of Nathaniel's journals simultaneous with the town's sesquicentenary enhances the concept of recurring destruction, where the lessons of history are clearly ignored. History is hardly "made present and lived" at this point, rather fabricated for economic advancement, just as in Nathaniel's day.

The epitome of the Demonic (a sub-category of Destroyers) in this novel is observable in the character of Des Pustling. Existentialist theologian Paul Tillich does not relate the demonic to 'demons' in the medieval sense (that is, external beings as represented in art and literature) which occupied the cracks between the layers of the divine order. Tillich derives his existential Possession in a modern sense, as extensions of the sense of self. The demonic arises in self-estrangement:

It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life. This experience is expressed in the arts and in literature, conceptualised in existential philosophy, actualised in political cleavages of all kinds, and analysed in the philosophy of the unconscious.

(Tillich 55)

Demonic possession, therefore, relates to the structures which appropriate the mind through the fragmentation of being, destroying the rational structures of the mind and the ethical and logical principles of reason. As Tillich writes, “The demonic blinds, it does not reveal” (126). A discourse of power lies at the heart of Possession. The demonic, the apotheosis of power, is constituted first by claiming Ultimacy for itself when its Finitude is concealed rather than exposed. When possession is truly demonic, being is significantly fractured, repressing much of an individual’s ontology through its appropriation by an externality which denies true personhood. The possessed person then is solely an agent for that particular power or externality. Therefore no autonomous response is possible in the face of such power.

A constant throughout the novel’s modern narrative, Des Pustling is a reprehensible character whose creator says about him: “He’s the Chamber of Commerce mentality that I can’t bear...the spirit that really came of age in the 1980s, the scamming corporate cowboy culture [...] like a toxin we can’t shake off” (McGirr 38). Pustling is the novel’s anti-hero, a moral barometer of sorts, against whom the valued positions are endorsed and devalued positions explored. He justifies himself by way of power-lust. He acquires property unscrupulously and regards life merely as a game to be won, establishing community members in

positions in the community to unwittingly launder funds for him. This is shown at its most obscene when he manoeuvres positions within the local church. In reference to his foil, the altruistic and genuinely good minister, William Pell,

he gloats to Marion, his mistress, “I think we’ll have some fun with Pell in the next month or so. I don’t like men who play with my money” (54).

Pustling’s relationship to Angelus parallels the early colonialists’ exploitation of the land and its people. He has no thought for the consequences of his actions, either on a human or environmental level. Critic Andrew Taylor identifies Pustling’s goal as that of “[pushing] the town further and further from the edge of the sea. To obliterate the old, defining connection with the world of the sea” (82).

Pustling is incapable of loving or of being loved; he is largely indifferent to Marion’s needs, barely acknowledging her as a human being: “ ‘How’s that jewfish, fine? ’” (53)

‘I was eating rainbow trout, you bastard’ she whispers’ ” (55).

He operates solely on brute instinct and for individual survival. He represents the depths of depravity to which humanity can descend under the guise of civilisation, in keeping with the alienation of post-colonial peoples and desecration of environment which are the legacy of eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialism. Much is made of Pustling’s sterility: during sex Marion Lowell feels herself to be “invaded by a viscous but sterile torrent” (54), which is set against the significance afforded the notion of family line throughout the novel. Bloodline was a colonial obsession but, in existentialist terms, it is also of great consequence. In

its affirmation of life and a sense of belonging and obligation, appropriate bloodline ensures individual place in history and personal contextualisation of it. As Daniel Coupar recognises that his grand-daughter is the end of the Coupar lineage, he muses, “ ‘You have to inherit lots, Queenie. You’re the last real Coupar’ ” (88). Critic John Turner claims that part of the “problem of Angelus (as well as much of modern society itself) stems from the uncertainty and spiritual malaise of its leaders” (83).

The character Cleveland Cookson is categorised as a Wanderer in this chapter in the sense that he has little genuine existential Authenticity within the narrative, living vicariously through his wife Queenie and her ancestor Nathaniel’s journals. Wanderers constitute the second major delineation (for the purpose of this thesis) of the Aesthetic stage acknowledged by Kierkegaard throughout *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life’s Way*. This sub-category is characterised by a lostness, an incapacity to recognise the innate despair of Temporality; it is, in effect, Fleurier’s “hazy sonar”. It is necessary to isolate the Wanderers category from the Destroyers, who, despite experiencing the same spiritual lostness, are by definition, injurious to those they encounter. The Destroyer obliterates the ‘other’ in his/her extreme egoism, while the Wanderer desperately needs the ‘other’ but does not necessarily recognise the fact, however apparent it may be to the reader. A drifter, journalist Cleve Cookson ‘washes up’ in Angelus: this is the end of his line. His apparently chance meeting with, and subsequent marriage to Queenie Coupar initially convinces him that he finally belongs. But the union draws him irretrievably into the Coupar “curse” (of perpetuating destructive relationships) and challenges him to further define what it is he stands for. Coupar hands Cleve the texts and implores him to

‘Read [the journals] properly. Read it for ...’ He hesitated, thinking, the best I can hope for is a disturbance, a stick in the stagnant pool.

‘For what?’ Cleve asked, tantalised.

‘I dunno’, Coupar sighed, ‘Read it for the things that aren’t there.’ (14)

The device of omission is at work here, the voids that exist as signs of that which is significant but so far unnoticed. Daniel’s “stick in a stagnant pool” () is an image of interruption to the perceived absurdity, something to fleetingly give a semblance of meaning in life (water) going nowhere.

Cleve is to a great extent defined by Queenie and, as such, dismissed by Daniel and the townspeople as a bland nobody, colourless, “horribly incomplete” (122), beside the independent and wilful Coupars. “That girl must’ve been a lame one to get caught with the likes of him” (38). His desperate need for Queenie, for a family, for connectedness - “his thumb in her navel” - makes him appear pathetic (15).

He had, a week before, lost his job, the last in a sad string of failures; and he had traversed half the state considering his next move. He had no ideas. She [...] snatched him up in her loneliness [...] Cleveland Cookson still had no ideas, but he had a euphoric sense of flight that shunted from his mind all memory of failure, of cowardice and mundaneness; and flight was enough. (15-16)

As such, Queenie is his rescuer; the significance of this fact is lost on both of them until late in the action. Her restlessness of spirit and her great-grandfather’s journals and even her cynicism towards these texts - “Our family’s a myth” (26), she tells him - spur Cleve into committing to something substantial - something that is not external to his being.

His response to the journals of Nathaniel Coupar is at first one of passive historical interest. Later his own history rises up to haunt him, the message of the journals inadvertently becoming his inheritance:

Cleve sat for an hour in the kitchen as his thoughts jumbled hurriedly. *We need blokes with balls...* He saw a little boy with his penis in the teeth of a metal zipper. He saw an emaciated man hobbling into a searing light. He saw himself in the long shadow cast by Queenie Coupar in the afternoon sun. He saw his naked name on the front page of the *Advocate*. Saw a white-fingered hand. Saw himself shivering in the rain, treading water in circles like a drill-bit. (159)

The image of treading water here is one of a rudderless existence with no clear direction. Eventually, though, Cleve's connection to the journals becomes an intensely personal catalyst for change. Cleve quietly and almost inadvertently moves towards self-Authentication by the novel's close. He welcomes, somewhat with surprise, the prospect of family, of beginning his own line. This is empowering: he must be someone at last, responsible and needed. Masculinity is a text inherent in the novel and, as in almost all Winton's work, it is one to be demythologised away from the assumption of power that traditionally defined it.

Much of Cleve's incapacity to Authenticate appears bound up in masculine confusion. Maleness is depicted often in this novel as synonymous with power. It is a power defined by a 'destroyer' mentality; the merciless pursuit of blood, property, dominance, both in the 'old' story told in Nathaniel's journals and the modern narrative of Pustling. Cleve is bound up with Temporal (essentially masculine), concerns such as the inevitable job losses through the closure of the whaling station. The landscape appears hostile, as though lacking in compassion.

Such a perspective contributes to an endorsement of the bloodlust of the annual shark-hunt and the effluence of whaling facilities. Cleve struggles with his identity as a man, suggesting that he accompany Ted Baer on the shark-hunt as if wanting to prove something. Queenie's fervour against the whaling overturns his newfound sense of belonging; he again finds himself an outsider to himself. Queenie is restless in spirit, aware of her despair, while Cleve "never even knew that [he] was wanting" (243).

The modern Coupar line, set in the 1970s, is peopled by Daniel (Nathaniel's grandson) and Daniel's granddaughter Queenie. Both characters wrestle with their profound disappointment in themselves, recognising that nobody else can make meaning for them, but doubting that they have it in themselves to create their meaning.

Both Daniel and Queenie Coupar personify the Ethical stage (herein labelled Searchers) along Kierkegaard's continuum. According to the flashbacks within the novel recounting both characters' pasts, they have operated within this stage all their lives previous to the narrative's present. This stage is characterised by an awareness of existential despair; an ownership of that despair, and a resolution to find a True Ultimate. This does not presuppose an imminent transcendence, rather the potential for it. The once-glorious Coupar charisma that saw Daniel tackle the town's exploitative entrepreneur in favour of the dispossessed during the Depression has fizzled to nothing and that same entrepreneur's son now effectively owns the town. The land upon which Daniel Coupar lives has lain barren for years. The whales no longer come to the bay. He knows this to be no mere coincidence " 'How long will the land mourn, and the

grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who dwell in it, the beasts and the birds are swept away’, he said in the twilight by the water” (69).

His relationship with God has soured to one of cynicism due to a loss of hope, of purpose, to an overwhelming ennui, burdened by ancestral shame. These weigh heavily on him, as shown in the following imagery of evil and sin illustrates the way “he woke, conscious of reptilian things resting on his chest, near his throat” (87).

The concept of sin still holds for Daniel, but he will not pursue shallow replacements for the void he knows to be a spiritual one, nor will he indulge in the escape from the void offered by alcohol or anything else. This is evident after his confrontational episode in Staats’ bar, which incident is depicted as an aberration in terms of Daniel’s character, and is further confirmation that Daniel could not be considered a Wanderer (according to the definitions in the Foundational Chapter), but rather a Searcher.

Daniel knows innately and profoundly that God is no fool and would see through any substitute for the ‘real thing’. As such, the mere assertion of his existence proves inadequate: “‘I am’, he said to the stack of bottles winking nearby in the unseasonal sun, ‘something. I am’, he laughed, ‘something’. He said this many times before, when he was drunk or close to death or prayer; it gave him something aggressive to do with his mouth” (69). He also knows that he must humble himself before God as his mother’s dying wish had implored him to do: “Be a servant of others, Daniel, and be a fool for God the Father. Remember *Romans 13* and remember I have loved you” (218).

Allowing Cleve to read his ancestor’s journals is a turning point. Daniel perhaps suspects that the journals could be used to effect a positive outcome, and

handing them over in the hope that a person as seemingly rudderless as Cleve will be disgusted by Nathaniel's inaction and pathetic persecution complex, as indeed, Cleve initially is.

A further confirmation of Daniel Coupar's place within the Searchers (or Ethical) category is to be found in his relationship with his foil, William Pell, a friend and intellectual equal who represents Daniel's aspiration for the Homecomer (or Religious) ideal.

Daniel Coupar and William Pell are contemporaries who, in different circumstances, would certainly have become lifelong friends. The early unspoken rivalry over Maureen (a girl they both loved in their youth and whom Daniel married) amounts to nothing and both men envy each other in old age for the missing element in their lives. Pell wishes for a family and some personal charisma, and Coupar for a calling of some kind, for something to believe in without the burden of doubt, yet "[h]e remained dissatisfied with what he observed and understood, suspicious of what evaded him" (68). Both men have a grudging respect for each other; and Pell recognises the God-search in Daniel that that man vehemently denies, at least outwardly.

'Take two aspirins and lie down and the world will go away.'

'What about God?'

'Three aspirins.'

'I'm not sure I –'

'Look, don't start on me about the problem of God right now... We don't get on so well anymore... Get to be an old man an' realise you know bugger-all.

You can't see anything clear.' (103)

The Reverend Pell's plea to hide money and charity at the Coupar farm (lest it be embezzled by Pustling) is scoffed at by the realistic Daniel, who understands the futility of trying to manipulate events. He sees little point in good works on a local level; his suffering is so existential it has become self-obsessed, his "sonar [has become] hazy." As such he is a very flawed, complex character, more three-dimensional than the clergyman, whose personal sense of inadequacy is worked out in simple acts of charity.

Daniel's sale of the land to Pustling appears anathema; Daniel hates the land but to sell it to his nemesis seems unconscionable. Yet maybe this resignation to the inevitability of Pustling's eventual takeover is the first step towards epiphany, towards a giving over to the future by actively turning his back on his past. As he quotes from the Bible, "Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?" (105).

One of the fundamental tenets of theistic existentialism holds that history is to be "made present and lived" (Sire 113) and *Shallows'* characters are defined by their history irredeemably. It is the extent to which this happens that is the focus here. There is some truth in, and evidently some authorial sympathy for, the derisive words of Fleurier, about his father's obsession with finding some answers about Man, "as if Hitler and Hiroshima didn't tell us all we needed" (43).

Thus Daniel's rejection of both his own father and Nathaniel is necessary, both men having been idle 'blamers'. As Daniel says of his grandfather, "He was a stupid bastard. And my father followed. But not me. Not always. Oh, God. Come back, someone" (182). He stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the irritants seemingly placed for his attention: "What day is it? What'm I lying on? / On his

side Coupar dragged the big box shape from under him. It was his Bible, the one his mother had given him” (218). The Bible at this point and its connection with his simple, devout mother, literally and figuratively makes him uncomfortable. But Daniel finally recognises his need for connection with God, for breaking the stranglehold of history and accepts this with humility: “The Father of Lights withholds the rain because of our pride. Our pride must finish. But pride waits until all else has withered” (255).

Once again we witness the use of water as an image of Grace and salvation (here withheld), especially salient given the long-running drought around Angelus up to this point. The image gathers momentum until the novel’s climax and denouement.

The fact of positive action being the key to Authentically defining oneself as human is, as well, a basic underpinning of the existentialist credo. Certainly Daniel’s contempt for himself is expressed in his soliloquised conversation with his grand-daughter: “I could fill a silo with regrets, Queenie [...]There’s sins of inaction, too, you know” (89). Contempt for his forefathers and his hopes for Cleve illustrate this point in the novel. Guilt is endemic in this novel, both felt and unfeelt. Daniel carries the burden of culpability for his forefathers (right back to Adam) and recognises too late that this has dragged him down, that it has been a wasteful indulgence.

The treatment of Daniel in the novel is, however, sympathetic since the guilt is also genuine grief. It is a sincere longing for more time to rectify past wrongs. The knowledge that redeeming the past is impossible is a tragedy Daniel cannot bear, and the recognition of his own capacity for evil carries him, for a time, into the abyss of nihilism (Winton Letter 10/6/04).

He even carries guilt for the ownership of his land, acknowledging its seizure from the Aboriginal custodians. He pours his culpability out to an absent Queenie:

“People were driven off land, shot and beaten, and now we have land, we have Angelus,...In dreams I go back into the past – it’s like a well – and change it all back around, make the past right again, and then I wake up and I don’t exist any more. My father horsewhipped a man for wanting to walk on his old land again. I saw it and what am I to do?” (88)

Theistic existentialism goes a significant step further than its mainstream counterpart. It requires the proverbial leap of faith, with an existentialist twist not found in traditional top-down theism. It requires its proponents to engage with their Creator; to define and to validate themselves through a very personal and individually-fashioned relationship. This necessitates a relinquishment of the assumption of absolute control over their own lives. All the sympathetic characters in *Shallows* - that is, those with whom the reader can relate and empathise - eventually do this. They do not blaze trails; their political activity is shown to be ineffective and ultimately unsatisfying *per se*, however well-intentioned it starts out to be. Daniel’s political passion in the early days had won the heart of his wife, Maureen, but this is shown to be wasted rhetoric in the long term. He lives his married life not appreciating what he has and ends up alienating both Maureen and their daughter (88).

He recognises this tragedy too late to retrieve his family, but attempts to rectify this with his grand-daughter, Queenie. For years he lives vicariously through his grand-daughter, as though not trusting himself to achieve true personhood. But Daniel is seen to come close *in extremis* at the novel’s close,

when he calls upon his God (very much *his* God) in an intensely personal way. This upholds another precept of theistic existentialism: that “the personal is the valuable” (Sire 109).

His hands lay on the rock, washed clean of blood from the sweat and old abrasion of climbing. He would have raised them had they obeyed him. Just an old gesture, he thought to himself ... *Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.* (259-260)

The climb itself, above and away from his dead sheep at the bore is a symbolic reaching upwards, a supplication and worship in one, with the water an absolution in response to his silent prayer for forgiveness.

To this extent Daniel has moved through the stage of the Ethical in Kierkegaard’s continuum, to that of the Religious. This state of being does not assume a perfect union between man and God (this would be bordering on heresy from a traditional theological standpoint) but it does suggest a closeness to the potential for the highest relational level of which mortal humanity is capable. This is a concept poetically encapsulated in Robert Browning’s *Andrea del Sarto*: “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp / or what’s a heaven for?” (68). As such, the Daniel character bridges two of the categories within this thesis; for a substantial part of the novel he exists within the Ethical (a group of characters herein labelled Searchers), and towards the end of his life he exists within The Religious (those called Homecomers within this thesis). And, as William James (1902) would have it, it is the very evil implicit within human beings that is “the best key to life’s significance and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth” (169).

Daniel Coupar appropriates this significance in his final weeks. He effectively cuts the cord from the painful legacies of his past to forge a rebirth, no longer a “Coupar’s Coupar” (82), instead now understanding each individual’s existential obligation to suffer their own existence:

But near the end of the beach and close to his destination he realised the meanness of his offer ... to die for someone now, to suffer a little in the short time left ... No he thought. Queenie will suffer as all of us do. She will suffer herself. And I’m no use to her. (253)

Readers of any theist persuasion would not, I suggest, have any fears for the eventual rest of Daniels’ soul; his peace is not an easy one, yet the expressed intimacy of the relationship between Daniel and his Maker, as portrayed by Winton, is undeniable. Daniel Coupar is haunted by the legacy of his grandfather’s angst, articulated in nineteenth century diaries; he is history-bound until close to death. Divesting himself of the historical burden enables him to connect with his Maker. The redemptive symbolism of water is called upon to illustrate this epiphany after years of spiritual drought on Coupar’s barren farm. This baptismal (biblical) and evolutionary (biological) return to the water recurs in the lyrical prose of *Cloudstreet*, a novel riddled with shameful secrets that wreak havoc across generations until the cathartic upheaval.

Queenie Coupar is also categorised here as a Searcher or a character living in the Ethical. She looks to externals, or to that which existentialist theologian Paul Tillich would label False Ultimates (55) to Authenticate herself. She needs the whaling crusade to provide her with her life’s purpose, chanting “Redeem yourself – save the whales” (*Shallows* 131). She participates in front-line protests with the

Cachalot anti-whaling group, and in doing so she condemns and rejects the feckless Cleve, who at the time needs her desperately.

As opposed to the “sin of inaction”, activism is depicted as having its place both in an environmental context and a personal/spiritual one. Certainly it is not idealised. The narrator represents the charlatans and the hangers-on in the campaign with disdainful realism, labelling Fleurier as a “chardonnay” (139) revolutionary in his ineffectiveness. As Queenie comes to realise

“ ‘some poor sod has donated money, more than one I s’pose – and what for? A first-class holiday and all-week parties. That’s expensive. And bloody wasteful’ ” (140).

Anti-whaling protesters win in the end. The victory is achieved by a combination of dangerously naïve manoeuvres and media sensationalism eventually manipulating the government to end the whaling in Angelus. It becomes a *cause celebre*. The involvement of Queenie in the cause looks, for a time, to foretell the end for her marriage, yet she realises that her activism, while necessary, does not make her the person she is. She no longer formally acknowledges a God as Daniel does, yet the whales themselves represent God’s creation, and her own belonging to that creation as a sentient being. In doing her part for the preservation of the whales she is conceding that she is a part of the oneness, the immensity of creation. Her forgiveness of Cleve for his perceived inaction acknowledges the necessity to move on and to keep living.

As such, Queenie can be categorised as existing within the Ethical stage on Kierkegaard’s *Stages on Life’s Way*. A serious, introspective girl and later woman, she is not, and never was, cut from the cloth of the Aesthete. She recognises a void that has not been satisfied, musing that “somehow the waiting had to stop” (134).

But she knows, by the close of the novel's time-frame, that any solely Temporal or Finite *raison d'être*, however inherently noble, is peripheral to the realisation of the necessity to fill the void existentially.

So, despite the author's own proactive and successful conservationist credentials, such as the campaign against a proposed development at Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef (2002), political action is not held up as an end in itself. It must have a significance, greater than merely feelgood humanist ethics. Indeed, critic Rodney Smith labels *Shallows* an anti-political treatise, depicting protest as largely ineffectual, in the sense that humans cannot overturn or manipulate forces beyond human control. The novel's happy ending is thwarted when the return of the whales to the bay is disappointed by their stranding (260), thus supporting this suggestion of human ineffectiveness. Underpinning this, Smith asserts, is the arrogance born of incomprehension; humankind simply refuses to admit that there are mysteries irreducible to analysis and impervious to human intervention. He notes that "The ending of *Shallows* suggests that humans and whales may be linked only by the possibility of a non-rational and pre-political surrender to life's rhythms" (Smith 8).

This is where the theistic existentialists part company with the atheistic existentialists who see the void as simply there. For the theistic existentialists, affirmative action and rebellion in the face of absurdity are the foundations of existence. They are the means *and* the end.

Winton's inclusion of the characters Queenie, Cleve, and their daughter in a subsequent short story ("*Laps*" 1987) and even in the young adult novel *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* (1996) denotes a story still in progress, and it suggests the potential for the characters' philosophical elevation to the Religious. These stories

have Queenie and Cleve settled in Perth forging a new life. Yet their links to Angelus and their past are ongoing. Their pasts are ever-present but not pre-eminent; the past is part of who they are but not wholly who they will become. As Winton elaborates:

Why do the characters cross borders? I guess I see the work as a whole, the books adding up to an alternate world. No novel is a complete 'statement' only a piece in the puzzle/structure. Therefore it's inevitable that characters will 'travel' in this alternate world. They outlive their original task and live on in this imaginary republic. (Ben-Messahel 242)

This is the existentialist's call to make history "present", to resist the temptation to wallow in it, or to be a slave to it, yet to learn its lessons and define oneself accordingly, or as Ben-Messahel notes, "expressing the present and recalling the past" (133).

The reaching of the Religious state of being (that is, a personally realised relationship with a creator), is akin, in the theistic existentialist worldview, to coming home. Home, ideally, is defined as that place where individuals are loved and accepted for their Authentic selves. It is where there is the possibility of guidance and hope of a future. It is primarily that which gives life meaning, which grounds and defines. History assumes significance only in terms of its appropriation by individuals in relation to a Creator, since it is that very relationship which helps contextualise history for each person (Malantschuk 66).

A character undeniably established in this category is William Pell, a necessary foil for Daniel and to some extent Daniel's conscience. He is the town's Presbyterian minister, a humble, man, a contemporary of Daniel's, with a

conviction of the presence and innate goodness of his Maker, as evidenced in the following: “A tiny wren alights on a branch before him, turns its head and is gone, the branch not even vibrating under its weight. Pell marvels at the delicacy of it, thanks God for it and moves on” (5). Pell’s vocation is to live as Jesus would. He ministers to the poor and the disenfranchised, particularly the Aboriginals who live no better, it appears, than they had in Nathaniel Coupar’s day (although Pell’s ministrations have none of the tragic impact born of ignorance that those of nineteenth century missionaries had):

A hundred years ago, [Pell] muses, these blankets I’m carrying could have been laced with typhoid, and here I am a century later, still bringing them blankets ... Well, they need blankets now, he thinks, so I bring them, that’s all. (5)

In a fury metaphorically redolent of the throwing of the merchants from the temple (in *The Gospel According to Luke*, 19.45-48), Pell takes on Des Pustling, playing him at his own game. Pell is naïve with money, yet he shows remarkable connivance with the church’s cheque-book, using it in a way in which he hopes Jesus would approve, before Pustling can channel the money for his own purposes. He is a part of and yet not a part of his landscape, his town, devoid of real friends and of family. His activism is solitary, practical and unsung, yet powerful enough to garner support from Pustling’s former secretary/mistress, whose ambitions hitherto have been fearfully mercenary. Pell’s is not the sanitised, genteel and depersonalised “god of the philosophers” (Pascal 309) that existentialist theists such as Kierkegaard so abhorred. Pell’s is a democratic God who reveals Himself to society’s castoffs, all of whom have access to Grace. The contrast between the dignity of the Aboriginal woman on the reserve, reluctantly but graciously

accepting Pell's charity (79), and the thoroughly undignified but powerful Pustling could not be more marked.

The colourful variety of humanity is celebrated and endorsed, as with the old men on the pier: "Some say Dick and Darcy are brothers born Siamese twins, and others say they were fishermen who became lovers, and still others claim they are the same deformed person" (38). The gentleness of Pell's rapport with the men is testament to narrative respect for all humankind through valuing the personal. Symbolically, they are the fishermen and a representative of Jesus as the "fisher of men." Pell greets them on the pier with familiarity and respect:

"Hello Dick, Darc. How's the fish?"

[...]

"Well's can be expected," Dick says. Darcy nods. "They're there."

[...]

"How's God, then?" Darcy asks, a grin awry on his battered and toothless face.

"Oh," Pell laughs, "Well's can be expected. He's there too." (6)

Shallows epitomises the theistic existentialist stance through reader response: there is a natural antipathy towards the Destroyers; those counterparts to Kierkegaard's Aesthetic state who devastate themselves and/or those closest to them. There is a narrative sympathy for and empathy with those characters within the less destructive but still spiritually lost sub-group of the Aesthetic, the Wanderers, and there is narrative sympathy for the range of characters plotted within Kierkegaard's Ethical category, the Searchers. The Destroyers come to represent the theistic antagonists in Winton's continuum of character development.

The Religious stage (that of being at one with the Creator, of coming home) is revealed by way of William Pell. It is also, at the narrative's end, personified by Daniel Coupar, to the point where such epiphany as his (of certainty of God's Grace and belonging to His family) is only to be envied. The symbolism of the water in both men's understanding of their place in the cosmos, is pervasive. In death Daniel "lay shrouded in water" (260) and Pell confirms, "Always the sea we come back to...even a farm boy like me" (216). In the light of such imagery, Queenie's amphibious nature (also alluded to in later stories) seems to assure her an inevitable place in the Religious: "it would take forever, ploughing through those swells with no sense of direction, no clear blue, only the long, long slog, arm after arm after arm...stroke...stroke" (199).

Thus, *Shallows* encapsulates all three Kierkegaardian stages in its depiction of character in context and even contains a distinction between two Aesthetic domains, with Des Pustling's Demonic state and Nathaniel Coupar's nihilist state being situated within the Destroyers category. This chapter also demonstrates that characters are not exclusively tied to one category for the duration of the narrative. Indeed, Daniel's eventual transcendence from the Ethical state wherein he lacked fulfilment, to the Religious position wherein he finds finally a measure of peace, is achieved through a personal resolution. So too is Cleve's movement from the Aesthetic into the Ethical. Even within categories, characters are not static; Queenie certainly seems to have progressed along the Kierkegaardian continuum insofar as her self-awareness is concerned. But despair as a necessary facet of the human condition is acknowledged for all characters, notwithstanding their placement along the *Stages on Life's Way*. Critic John P. Turner poses the question: "Where is the release of suffering and the escape from guilt to be found?"

[*Shallows*] is a book which raises religious questions but does not give easy answers [...] the final climactic moments [...] are ambiguous ones, with all the complexity of Christian eschatology” (85).

The following chapters will deal separately with Kierkegaard’s existentialist categories, analysing a range of Winton’s characters and texts to illustrate each stage.

Chapter 3

Destroyers

In this chapter I will concentrate on Winton's characters that I label Destroyers, due to their propensity for annihilation of themselves, of others, and sometimes of both. I identify two sub-categories of the Destroyers: those who can be categorised as Demonic (a term deployed by existentialist theologian Paul Tillich and defined in the previous chapter) and those in the grip of the most dreadful despair, *viz.* nihilists. This calls up the very specific use of the terms Conscious and Unconscious in this context (as defined in the Foundational Chapter) since nihilists do belong in the Aesthetic realm of Unconscious Despair, yet are, paradoxically, all too acutely aware of their overwhelming desolation, a deep-seated ennui for which no relief can be anticipated.

First to the Demonic, since according to my interpretive use of Kierkegaard's continuum, the Demonic character is furthest away from the Religious ideal. A description of this condition as the lowest rung on the Aesthetic scale is provided by the methodical Judge William in Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*. The narrator Judge William acts as Kierkegaard's font of wisdom and this voice defines the "stages on life's way" with profound insight. The Aesthete's maxim to live according to one's desires can be taken to a destructive extreme, as the judge elucidates: "If this life-stance achieves the external conditions for its unfolding, it ends by making a monster of man." (*Either/Or* 497). Kierkegaard cites the Roman emperors Nero and Caligula, who lived by the Aesthete's rule of life with appalling consistency. This "uninhibited, vitalistic expression which does not leave

room for the spiritual,” comments Malantschuk, hinders “the awakening of the idea of the Eternal” (34-35) and so leads inevitably to crimes against self and humanity. Judge William in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* praises God that “we seldom see it practised” (497). As such, I have identified only one Demonic character in the entire body of Winton’s work. This is perhaps disputable in the light of this modern world with its myriad of human problems brought about by precisely such “hysteria of spirit” (499). Yet perhaps the brevity of this chapter (due, in my opinion, to the small number of characters strictly belonging to the Destroyers category) reflects the hope inherent in Winton’s writing in his creation of characters for whom there is clearly some anticipated transcendence.

The existentialist appropriation of the Demonic must surely be based to some extent on the notion that within individuals lies the potential for self-annihilation. Despair is an awareness of this capacity. The very nature of the Demonic, though, means that this despair lies suppressed; there is no awareness of it; thus, just as daemons are, according to the Ancients, a mesh of human and supernatural, so that the person possessed by the Demonic is unable to achieve full personhood.

As foregrounded in the previous chapter, the character of Des Pustling in *Shallows* is entrenched in the Demonic, since he has no conscience about the misery he bestows upon others. In fact he relishes the processes and results of his abuses of power. Such characters do regard others as pawns in their game and their life’s meaning is to win the game. In a tone of contempt at the extreme of Aesthetic arrogance which characterises all Destroyers in their indifference to others, Pustling is depicted as a pathetic excuse for humanity, directly contrasting the status he would deem his due. He exemplifies the grotesque, a grafting of beast and

man, a device against which other characters are morally contrasted. Pustling's teeth fall out and regrow, a zoomorphic mimicking of a biological fact in the shark, alluding to that animal's metaphorical (cultural) image of the corporate shark. He is malodorous with erratic excretions. Marion, his secretary/mistress ponders, "He is too horrible to hate [...] his toenails are too horny, his breath too foul, his girdle too pathetic" (54).

Winton acknowledges an interest in the point at which the "hardness" necessary to survive becomes "just an excuse to be hard. Just an excuse to be close-minded. Just an excuse not to allow music – of all kinds. By that I mean emotional, I mean art. I mean spiritual ideas. Just a bigger life" (Sibree 3). Pustling surely fits this description.

The characters in Winton's fiction that I categorise as nihilist are accorded a level of disdain and/or intense sympathy by the narrative voice. Either way, the depiction of these characters is such that their hopelessness is palpable; the reader could not desire to emulate them; their personal purgatories (acknowledged or not) are so ghastly they would stir any observer from contemplating the abyss towards some affirmative action. Dolly Pickles (*Cloudstreet*) is, for instance, presented initially as nihilist and eventually transformed by way of Grace. Grace is that which, when embraced, can give hope to the hopeless. In the light of this, Dolly reappears in the Searchers category of this thesis, having risen above her destructive self-image and associated behaviours, to self-Authenticate and break the pattern of abuse.

Dolly Pickles, the faded beauty in *Cloudstreet*, is on a course of destruction that is potentially catastrophic. She is, across most of the story's twenty-year span, a true nihilist. She believes nothing holds meaning beyond the transitory, and she

lives a life of hedonistic self-abuse. Her hatred of her only daughter Rose is setting up a third generation of abuse and despair. However, her eventual transcendence over nihilism through her own will illustrates Winton's disdain for unfettered nihilism. There is a suggestion within the tone of the narrative that if Dolly can decide to save herself from the void of absolute denial, anyone can.

Dolly is undeniably a Destroyer for the major part of the *Cloudstreet* story; she is a home-wrecker in her own home, an observation articulated by Dolly's son Ted:

Reckon it's a friggin house o cards, I do [...] The old girl's the wild card and the old man's the bloody joker.

Sam surprised them, coming up behind. There was blood dripping from his nose. (41)

She is also a wrecker of others' stability. A betrayed wife in the neighbourhood implores Sam to try to harness his wife:

You don't know me and I really don't know you [...] but I think you should really try to control your wife [...] it's my husband I'm talking about. I've got youngens to look after and she's got no right. It's a mortal sin. (158)

As Winton commented with reference to his gothic novella *In the Winter Dark* but equally relevant in this case,

I was fiddling around with the idea of evil [...] Sometimes things are bigger than the sum of their parts. People are capable of evil and some probably are evil. But decent people can create evil together, even if by accident. That's the darkness I was interested in. (McGirr 34)

Dolly's unresolved relationship with her mother/sister is at the base of her self-hatred and the contempt she heaps upon her own daughter. She can "hardly

overcome her inner contradiction...unable to heal the pain, or to love and communicate with those around her” (Ben-Messahel 36). She scapegoats Rose who, in turn, becomes increasingly ashamed of Dolly, and her own despair, manifest in anorexia, looking like a living death, reflects her emotional deprivation. Sam implores his daughter to stop the self-destruction: “Jesus, Rose, you look like a corpse these days. It’s a crime, you know, he says quietly, a bloody crime” (159).

The narrative voice here suggests that life must be embraced, not squandered. Yet it is underwritten by a tone of intense sympathy for Rose’s lack of mother-love, by way of Sam’s unerring understanding and faithfulness.

Dolly’s own history is one of instability. She was uprooted from Geraldton W.A. where she “was somebody, she meant something” (42). Her doll-like looks are fading and although she is not passive as is a doll (Hopkins 52), she is as empty as one. Her heavy despair has reduced her to an escapist from life itself, wanting to go anywhere the train tracks near her home might take her but never having the courage to do so, as though there was a secret to which she would never be privy. Her thoughts impose themselves upon the narrative: “It was like they were electric with all knowledge, all places, all people [...] She never did get to try those rails” (79).

Her experiences with alcohol and sex are simply transitory acts on an empty stage as though she is emulating the sentiments of absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett’s *Breath* (1970). This upholds the “zero-point” of nihilism which is a “denial of the possibility of knowledge, a denial that anything is valuable” (Sire 75). Yet a person in the depths of insurmountable nihilism would necessarily suicide or be committed to an institution as was Nietzsche, since there is ultimately

no reason to be here at all. While Dolly's alcoholism could be perceived as gradual suicide, it does not represent an irrevocable loss of hope and when her favourite child dies, she becomes, as Ben-Messahel asserts, aware of "her own otherness and desperately tries to settle things down." (67) Her desperation allows her to enter the Ethical stage of Kierkegaard's continuum.

Another character in the Destroyer category in the nihilist sub-group for a time is Georgie Jutland, a protagonist in *Dirt Music*. Georgie is certainly a nihilist when the narrative begins but this does not remain her state throughout the narrative and her creator calls her malaise a "flirtation with nihilism" (Winton Letter 10/6/2004). As a result, her nihilist stage deserves only a brief analysis here. Georgie's materially privileged background long since rejected, her calling as a nurse is over and the live-in relationship with a man she respects but does not love, simply stifles her, despite her love for his motherless children. When they, too, reject her, she falters and descends into an abyss of meaninglessness in cyberspace: "When Georgie sat down at the terminal she was gone in her seat, like a pensioner at the pokies, gone for all money [...] She didn't know why she bothered except that it ate time" (*Dirt Music* 4). The terminal doubles as a metaphor for her life at this point. Alcohol and pills also anesthetise her (Jacobson 2) against the fact that she had "[lost] seaway [...] dead in the water [...] that spring she had slipped overboard without a sound" (*Dirt Music* 11).

The water metaphor in Winton's fiction often suggests an existential choice: to drown, to drift, to swim against or with a current, to sail, to founder. Georgie's life is surrounded and defined by water: "She was drifting, had been for years. Even in the job. There's nothing like an institutional organization for

dressing you up in an aura of action and hiding your aimless passivity. She hadn't *made* things happen for years. Things happened *to* her" (324). Luther Fox's appearance (significantly on water), in the tiny crayfishing outpost of White Point, is a timely catalyst for her move towards Authentication. As such, Fox becomes a personification of Grace in her life, despite his own grief, his "project of forgetting." It is fitting that in Georgie's narrative she begins as protagonist on the cusp of transcendence over nihilism.

The Riders features a few peripheral characters who are nihilists in the extreme. Alex Moore and Arthur Lipp are Aesthetes whose hedonism is self-destructive since, as they see no reason for anything, living out their days in pursuit of sensory gratification which lead nowhere, they are killing themselves knowingly and by degrees. Their lives are lodged entirely in Temporality, in the Finite. Essentially they are waiting around for an end to the absurdity. Winton is unequivocal about his attitude to the lifestyle of the deracinated:

I lived among expatriates who were bottle-of-vodka-a-day people. I discovered that I was never going to be an expatriate, that this kind of romance is destructive, soul-destroying, unless the person is strong enough, productive enough to overcome total displacement. I [...] could probably live anywhere, as long as I was connected to my family and my work.

(Willbanks 200)

In *The Riders*, Alex Moore's destructive approach to his own life and that of others is epitomised in his lack of any moral yardstick. His ethical vacuum renders all his actions equally meaningless. Here he speculates about his chances with Scully's wife:

If he'd been up to it, would he have? She was such an eager beaver, and thwarted ambition is so sexy. After all, isn't that what they went for in me all these years, my heroic and erogenous failure, the glory of my tremendously fucked-up life? I should know [...] The also-rans will inherit the earth, the whelps, the meek and the fucking nice, and that's what he can no longer stand. (163)

Arthur Lipp is another such ex-pat character living out his years on the Greek island of Mykos, making cynical observations about life and people, and his very immobility underpins his nihilism and suggests stagnation. There is no action; he is not a participant, merely a commentator and as such, is more like a Greek chorus than an actual character; he exists in the wings of his own life rather than on stage. As critic Sahlia Ben-Messahel notes:

Arthur, a British snob who left the glories of England to settle on the island [...] is a faint reminder or a distorted image of King Arthur; he rules over the island surrounded by his knights at the round table. Far from being brave, both King and knights are idlers, drunks who have created a world of their own away from reality. Greece, the once glorious place of wisdom, is represented as the land of cheats and Eurotrash. It has shifted from being the cradle of civilization to a purgatory. (70)

Ben-Messahel adds "but somehow it cannot be entirely negative since, in Winton's fiction, nothing is ever final" (70). Thus, despite the nihilist depiction of Arthur and Alex in their escapist idyll, the opportunity for transcendence is always there, "Hence, Greece has some good points" (70).

It is necessary to investigate nihilism further, since although it is renounced by Winton he nevertheless understands its roots. He describes nihilism as a cop-

out, as laziness, when we become “hard and skeptical buggers who can’t get on with anything” (McGirr 32). There is hope present in Winton’s body of work so that any nihilistic interpretation is prevented by way of these manifestations of hope which are often revealed during the depths of the characters’ apparent hopelessness. Winton must, however, create characters who espouse this view of the universe and live accordingly, as far as it is possible to do so.

Through these characters the paradox of living in hopelessness is exposed and while the narrative projects this, it also provides settings and opportunities within the plot to persuade characters (and, by extension, readers) into affirming transcendence over nihilism. As the old recluse on the beach in *An Open Swimmer* observes about his vegetable patch in an (apparently) unconscious metaphor, “When you’ve got nothin’ else, there’s still things that grow out’ve shit. Doesn’t taste too bad, if it’s yer own” (134). The fact that there are so few characters in this category (and, in Dolly’s case, one who actually transcends it) implies, I posit, the *weltanschauung* of the author. That is, Winton creates characters that can rise above the “Unconscious Despair” into a proactive (Kierkegaardian) “consciousness” of their own despair; they can go on to experience the irritant that has the potential to spur them to eventual self-authentication *in situ* (*Sickness Unto Death* 42-47).

The choosing of one’s own despair (again a Kierkegaardian concept *Either/Or* 513) necessitates a person becoming vulnerable, which most nihilist characters decidedly dismiss; they exist instead in a state of denial, living out lives with no purpose.

As discussed in detail in the *Shallows* Chapter, Nathaniel Coupar espouses the nihilistic worldview that Winton scorns, especially in the face of the Grace

(physical survival, family) available to Nathaniel and which is fully evident to readers. Any initial sympathy for this character's plight becomes revulsion at his self-pitying disengagement from his fellow man and the legacy of anguish he leaves to his children and grandchildren. His sole recourse in these circumstances is to take his own life, muttering "Life has disappointed me" (*Shallows* 151).

Nihilism has been defined by James W. Sire (1997) as "zero point" (75), a denial of meaning, of philosophy, of anything valuable. As such it is not, he claims, a worldview at all but a feeling, arising out of the abyss of naturalism which reduces the universe to a rationalistic closed system of cause and effect with no guiding principle. Nihilists, I propose, are in the grip of Kierkegaard's Unconscious Despair, but see no escape route, believing in no Absolute. They cannot even enthusiastically embrace the distractions (or False Ultimates) of the Aesthete. They see no point in living an Ethical life since ethics is a meaningless construct within a meaningless framework. A *true* nihilist would have really no option but to suicide, since there is nothing worth living for. Such people are represented by characters like the old Spaniard in Albert Camus' allegorical novel, *The Plague* (1947) who counts peas over and over to pass the time until death. Nihilists understand at a profound level the aimlessness of Douglas Adams' hitchhikers who face the paradox of the Ultimate Question and the utterly absurd answer: the quest is futile, so why bother?

Camus' assertion that "a literature of despair is a contradiction in terms" since the very act of creating assumes a value (3), and German philosopher-poet Friedrich Nietzsche's view that "the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer" (qtd. in Kaufmann 49) describes the essential

difference between existentialism and nihilism respectively. As existentialist theologian Paul Tillich elaborates:

Nihilists see humans as conscious machines, whose consciousness has no meaning; it is an epiphenomenon, that is, the ‘cosmic machinery’ simply regarding itself. Knowledge is a nonsense, ethics impossible. Humans have the illusion (*delusion*) of free will but actually have no real control over their destiny, no possibility of self-determination. So nihilism has metaphysical, epistemological, existential and ethical dimensions and exposes the ultimate human dilemma: that we are constantly making meaning, looking for meaning, needing meaning, yet find ourselves up against a wall of absurdity. (37)

Most characters within the Winton narratives placed in this Destroyers category do not transcend it, despite the potential for them to do so that is evident to astute readers. This potential necessitates a variety of narrative examples, personally fashioned to the individual, to drive home the notion that Grace is available to all, if only characters would see and accept. There is a dramatic irony of sorts wherein the reader has the advantage of seeing novelist C. S. Lewis’ “drippings of grace” (qtd. in Yancey 19) in the stories; Grace seems so obvious. Some are in the realm of the numinous, like Ort’s “gleaming jewels” in kitchen canisters (*That Eye the Sky*) or Fish’s ability to communicate with the pig (*Cloudstreet*), and Scully’s experience with the mystical riders (*The Riders*). These are accessible only to a select few, on the level, I suspect, of the ‘Pauline’ fruits of the spirit, like speaking in tongues and faith-healing, acknowledged originally in Galatians (5.22-23) and still today by some Christians. Most manifestations of Grace exist also in the realm of everyday ‘miracles’ such as the birth of a baby or Wordsworth’s

“unremembered acts of kindness” (*Tintern Abbey*). These are forms of Grace which most of the aforementioned characters cannot or will not acknowledge.

Dolly Pickles’s and Georgie Jutland’s efforts at transcendence stand as examples of the existential choice and potential available in life.

Chapter 4

Wanderers

This chapter will concentrate upon those characters within Winton's fiction who appear to be operating in a state of spiritual and emotional anomie. In Kierkegaardian terms this is 'Unconscious Despair' (38); that is, characters are apparently unaware of their inertia, as though this is the only state of being available in life. The chapter will include a principal focus on Jerra in *An Open Swimmer*, with supporting evidence from the life of *Cloudstreet's* Quick Lamb, and Fred Scully in *The Riders*. Unlike characters in the subsequent Searchers and Homecomers chapters, whose decision and commitment lead them to that which Kierkegaard scholar Anthony Thistelton describes as "a discovery of genuine selfhood" (93), those under scrutiny here will be living in a vacuum, often exhibiting hopeless, hedonistic or self-destructive behaviours. They are "uncommitted bystanders" in their own lives (Thistelton 93).

To some extent this lack of commitment is a post-modern malaise, a belief in everything being of equal merit or demerit, with truth reduced to a linguistic fabrication (Sire 178). In Winton's work, it is identified in its peculiarly Australian context, apathetic, indifferent, unwholesome in its lack of existential Authenticity. Bruce Bennett attests, in *An Australian Compass*, to the myriad of lost persons suffering a "sense of disorientation, and loss of direction and purpose" (). David Ranson, in a recent address to launch a journal about Australian spirituality, posits:

To be a people of intersection may well be to be a people of ambivalence, to entertain ‘a foot in both camps’ with commitment to neither. I wonder if this be at the base of Australians’ ambivalence with the sacred and the secular demonstrated by census figures which still show remarkable identification with religious traditions yet very little participation. It may well be at the service of the bland pragmatism which characterises Australian politics and an electorate’s apathy. (1)

As with all Winton characters allotted to categories in this analysis, there is the possibility of these characters’ progression along the continuum towards Authentication, in keeping with the existentialist ideal and with Winton’s belief in human potential when its inherent spirituality is called up. As such, the characters in this chapter are not initially aware of a spiritual dimension within themselves, yet some, such as Jerra Nilsam (*An Open Swimmer*), Fred Scully (*The Riders*), and Quick Lamb (*Cloudstreet*) gradually recognise and choose their despair towards the end of their narrative (or narratives). As such, they move eventually into ‘Conscious Despair’. As with all “sicknesses” of the mind and soul, Kierkegaard calls the Aesthetic state “The sickness unto death” (3). One characteristic that seems to identify these so-called Wanderers is their inability to communicate at any effective level and, coincidentally, the majority of characters classified as Wanderers in Winton’s work are male. The device of omission enhances the communication within relationships very deliberately. It reflects the characters’ incapacity to relate, to connect, so that much of the dialogue between Wanderers and others is stilted and inadequate. Much of this is acknowledged by Winton as an

essentially Australian male phenomenon, but it is also that which, he claims, lends verisimilitude to his characters:

that's what people usually are like. People can't. They don't have the words; they can't say what they mean [...] That old theory – 'language is meaning'; I believe that. People have terrible yearnings and feelings. They know what they think and they know what they want to say, but they just don't have the words. It's not so much the vocabulary; the words are in their throat, but they're not on their tongue [...] they're not articulate and they battle with it, with their silence. (Willbanks 194)

Jerra Nilsam does not progress out of the Aesthetic state within the confines of *An Open Swimmer*, Winton's first novel (1982). Jerra appears weighed down by listless ennui; he is not at all proactive, as are characters in *Conscious Despair*, instead preferring to lose himself in the wilderness and water of Western Australia's southern coast. The archetypal symbols of fire and water feature in Winton's work in general as possessing redemptive and destructive capacities, and both are at work in this novel. The ennui with which Jerra is burdened is palpable, but his self-indulgence in escaping and in projecting onto others positions Jerra firmly within the category of the Aesthete. He does recognise this when the sensation is articulated by another:

'You just get the feelin of it all comin down around you. Like sinking. Drowning.'
'Yes' Yes! he thought. (45).

An Open Swimmer is a story of youth, however, and although it is bleak, readers anticipate Jerra's eventual transcendence over the Aesthetic. To this end, Winton's body of work effectively follows Jerra's life into middle age and readers

can track him through subsequent works to monitor his development. He progresses in short stories of later anthologies and, most recently, in absentia, in *Dirt Music*.

Within *An Open Swimmer* Jerra is in a transitory stage marred by confusion and immature self-indulgence and wallowing. He is very conscious of his despair, but he has not “chosen” it in Kierkegaard’s sense of ownership and responsibility. His youth implies the probability of transcendence out of despair, despite an intense desolation of spirit. His is a clumsy, half-hearted attempt to find some purpose, all the time suspecting there is none.

He is, temporarily at least, the proverbial lost soul, playing out a prodigal role, including the obligatory rejection of family which had previously upheld him.

‘What are you running from?’ asked his father.

‘Nothing.’

‘Jerra... We don’t know anything.’

‘Then it’s the same.’ (*An Open Swimmer* 127)

Jerra has tried for some time to be something for everyone. He has lived up to expectations, going to university, caring for others, until these become burdensome and he makes a conscious decision to “do and please and forget... He promised to let go. His problems and everyone else’s [...] You gotta live, he told himself lamely” (92).

Jerra knows, however, that such escapism does not suffice and recognises the necessity to live his life, if only he knew how. These ideals lie latent in Jerra but his inability to articulate them means they have no validity for him. The escape

to the beach is a feeble attempt to become primal, just to survive with no necessity for awareness and compassion, no expectations, no yardstick for behaviour. He is living an in-Authentic life at this point, succumbing to the absurdity he profoundly feels. A supporting character in the novel, Jerra's longtime friend Sean, lives completely in Temporality as an Aesthete, having inherited a white-collar career. He is a hedonist; he lives for the moment and he does not question his values. He lives within the grade of Aestheticism that Kierkegaard's Judge William identifies in *Either-Or*: "Enjoy life, or in other words, live according to your desires" (500).

Jerra is contemptuous of this, although he mourns the loss of his childhood blood-brother. Jerra lives, I believe, at the top of the Aesthetic scale where the novel introduces him: he is "one who has seen through the emptiness and despair of pure Aestheticism but will not let it go and intoxicates himself with his own despair" (Kierkegaard *Either/Or* 502).

The main catalyst for such melancholia is the evident mortality of Jerra's grandfather and Jerra's onetime 'Auntie': a family friend, Sean's mother, and subsequent lover, Jewel. This woman, towards her troubled life's end, quotes to Jerra the despairing poetry of Sylvia Plath - "*The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all*". The memory of this jolts Jerra into heavy guilt in Jerra for not having anticipated her subsequent suicide. As his lover, she challenges him to be both personally sincere - "Curious the minds of boys that are men and men that are boys. Why are they never people though?" - and semantically honest - "Your poems, my lovely man, are well-meant, but lacking in truth. I know what it means to have my insides torn and it's not like those words. Replace 'collapse' with 'mutilate'" (83). Jewel holds him accountable for his life's

purpose and for his self-Authentication, conceding that she is not capable of reaching these heights herself. She tells him: “Expectant. Such a word, dear Jerra. Take note of it. One must always be expectant, but one must not be stupid and mess it up. You only have a right to be expectant if you are doing true things” (148).

Jewel’s violent death frightens Jerra, eliciting a response of simultaneous resentment, denial, culpability and fear. (This upheaval is redolent of that experienced by *Cloudstreet’s* Lamb family following Fish’s first drowning.)

Potential for catharsis within Jerra is realised in the form of the old man in the beach shack, a fugitive and an outcast, who shows Jerra the freedom people can have to create value (or not) in the absurdity of Temporality. Physically this is represented in the scrubby coastal landscape by the **NO** etched into the tree at the campsite: “NO said the tree in scars and clots. He agreed, whatever it meant. No sounded fair enough. Until you thought a bit” (31). The “NO” also echoes Jerra’s false witness at the scene of Jewel’s death on the beach: “ ‘Know her?’ [...] ‘Not personally, no,’ said Jerra at the man” (150). The comment is reminiscent of Peter’s denial of a beloved Christ at His crucifixion (*The New English Bible*, John, 17.18). The remorse that ensues from such betrayal is terrible. The fact that the Apostle Peter was a fisherman adds to the literary allusion: fishing is in the past for Jerra; his life’s purpose is not clear.

The act of fishing also provides a connection with his father but it is the fishing that causes a genuine anguish within Jerra. The childlike faith he once held dear, represented by the so-called ‘jewels’ in the kingfish’s head, sees his renewed

quest for the jewels becoming a savagery that frightens him. His misguided attempts at doing some good turn to violence. The faith and the connectedness of his childhood are eroding. His own history, running alongside a largely masculine global history, is proving to be uncertain, tenuous.

The name 'Jewel' evokes that which is unattainable, a childlike or naive yearning for the *El Dorado* that is never to be found in externalities. Both the person and the pearl in the fish's head have become the stuff of myth for Jerra; both are False Ultimates which must take their proper place eventually for the individual to reach Authentic personhood.

Jerra is profoundly affected by the old man hiding from the law in his beach humpy. He recognises a common humanity, a shared culpability and shame, and he is both horrified by it and attracted to the escape it appears to offer. The old man, a wife-murderer, forces himself to confront his crime by living right at the scene of it but his decrepitude and solitude shield him from the world.

The False Ultimates (defined by Tillich as those distractions from the True Ultimate, *viz.* God) offered by the Temporal (or Aesthetic) world, play a part in Jerra's despair as well as the assumptions of masculine expectation inherent within them. From childhood he has had trouble relating to the various definitions of manhood, rejecting the protestant work ethic championed by his grandfather, along with the "bullshit" intellectual domain and the corporate world which had lured the pragmatic Sean. "Just blokes, blokes, blokes. They talk stupid and never do anything. 'Got the pip wiv yearnin' " (75). Jerra rejects the cynical sentiments of that poetry icon of Depression-era Australian working-class, C.J. Dennis's *Sentimental Bloke*, which is read to him as a child by his grandfather. Nonetheless,

a culture of anti-intellectualism has grown out of Jerra's blue-collar roots and informs his attitude towards the written word. These too, he believes, are façades, a smokescreen for reality behind which only cowards retreat. It appears that only the medium of "dirt music", the raw honesty of bluesmen whose music reflects tragedy and loss, strikes him as valid:

In his room, he sat with his head against the marked wall. What a bunch of cripples, he thought. To resort to writing diaries and letters...and bloody books; he looked up at hopeless, drunken Malcolm Lowry whose spine still protruded from the tightly packed shelf (82).

The symbolism of the text as body is revealing: the text is operating on two levels, conceptualising the synthesis of the Temporal and the Eternal that, Kierkegaard claims, makes up a person.

The contempt accorded author Malcolm Lowry by Jerra is interesting, since many of Lowry's characters personify the same interior struggles that Jerra himself is experiencing, confirming the Unconsciousness (in Kierkegaardian terms) of his despair. This extract seems to aptly illustrate the (according to Lowry's wife, Jan Gabriel) destitute Wanderer life that Lowry led:

he had placed the poor ragged cornflowers reverently on a neglected grave . . . That was Oakville. - But Oaxaca or Oakville, what difference? Or between a tavern that opened at four o'clock in the afternoon, and one that opened (save holidays) at four o'clock in the morning? (*Under the Volcano* PAGE).

The mirroring in literature of his own torment is scorned by Jerra. His lack of self-awareness, or at least the non-acknowledgement of his emotional state, is starkly evident. Presumably such literary referencing is deployed to underpin a character's

weltanschuuang by way of their attitude to texts which are apparently mentioned arbitrarily, such as Fox's bemused reflection in *Dirt Music* that he was so lonely he would even read Jean-Paul Sartre.

The text also maintains symbolism of the cave-dwelling fish compared to the "open swimmers". This distinction establishes choice. The Christian ethic would label this free will, the existentialist credo, self-determination, Authentication, or the Ethical. Either way, humanity has the capacity to choose. Jerra must eventually become an open swimmer, no longer trapped and incarcerated by despair and inaction. It takes him a long time.

The old hermit and, to an extent, Sean, are the cavefish, choosing to close themselves off with their secrets and their distress, to be inactive, to be unaware or not responsible, either in a religious sense for their redemption, or in an existentialist/humanist sense for their authentic place in the cosmos.

Yet even the old man, drowning in his guilt over the long-past slaying of his wife, is shown not to be beyond some definition of restoration. Here it takes the form of Winton's not-so-subtle introduction of a Bible, which the hermit uses to roll his cigarettes, into the story. Sean and Jerra wonder if this is sacrilege or whether the fact that he actually reads each page before rolling makes it acceptable. This could be interpreted as an act of contrition, as the old man quotes from his bible: "You shall be blameless before God" (24). Certainly there is an Other to whom the old man feels himself accountable (*not* the law of the state) surfacing in his consciousness when drunk, or in his attempt to be Authentic 'by

proxy' by passing on wisdom and experience to help another person realise their human potential He cautions Jerra, " 'Keep tryin boy. You 'ad the wrong fish. Spear an open swimmer, they're the ones. Cave fish see nothin' " (172).

The hermit does, after all, seek the young men out and eventually confesses to his wife's murder about which he says, " 'I loved, that's somethin' " (62). This confession in turn spurs Jerra on to a kind of action, albeit baseless at this stage. He sees "the limits of a hermit's life" (14) and recognises his destructive obsession with finding the elusive pearl inside the fish when he needs to be finding himself. The old man, living every day with his remorse over past actions, nevertheless tells Jerra: " 'Some people got bad in 'em. More 'n most [...] Some people never do anything at all. Maybe it's better doing something bad than never doing anything all your life. At least it's trying. You make blues. You gotta try' " (134-5).

In this novel, Jerra is still, paradoxically, consciously unconscious, aware of his unawareness, his sharp intelligence brings no comfort for the soul. The apocalyptic style closing, where Jerra effectively sets fire to his material possessions (and therefore, symbolically, to his youth) and moves on unencumbered by possessions, could suggest some hope for eventual transcendence. Fire, especially in an Australian context, can be read as a symbol of regeneration, opening the dormant seeds to effect renewal. Extending the metaphor, there is perhaps a paradoxical link to the renewal offered the hermit by way of his Bible reading, which precede his smoking.

The concept of Grace and its broad scope is celebrated in Winton's fiction; indeed, this author appears to plot multiple opportunities to have Grace operating upon the protagonist unwittingly and in unlikely guises. Jewel is an unlikely manifestation of Grace for Jerra; the seeds of this are sown before narrative begins.

As she implores him: “ ‘Don’t let them make you old before you’re young, Jerra [...] Don’t let them make you give up. You don’t have time to get that way’ ” (158). The old man on the beach acts as an improbable conscience throughout the novel’s confines. The old murderer advises Jerra that “ ‘You can have anything and it’ll likely be no good. It’s how yer get it and what yer do with it, that’s what counts. Havin’ it’s nothing. Everybody’s got things. It’s nothing’ ” (160). Both these manifestations are to be realised within Jerra’s life at a later stage. Water features again as the dominant symbol of the narrative, signifying both inner cleansing (still unrealised by Jerra) as in the obvious biblical association being that of baptism, and of disaster (as in Jewel’s drowning). The duality of the symbol underpins the choice at the heart of human enterprise.

Readers encounter Jerra at the point of his recognition of this capacity and of his impotence in actualising it. He is tormented by the paradoxical nature of reality. Despite an appreciation of the depths, teeming with life (almost forty different kinds of fish) he sees this as a giant practical joke. In a review of this novel, critic Helen Watson-Williams notes the significance of the sympathy between the old man and Jerra:

Jerra literally steps into a dead man’s shoes. He will take on the old man’s way of living just as he puts on the old man’s boots and finds them unexpectedly comfortable: ‘rank but soft inside’ (p. 173) [...] In one way it may be considered to be running away [...] In another way the choice may be seen as freedom, a life as unconstricted as the open sea [...] Evasion or liberation? No judgement is passed on the final action. (81)

Yet, as previously stated, readers do encounter Jerra again in future narratives and as a result, there is necessity for ambiguity at the close of the narrative: “He knew

what he would do (172). For the reader is not told what is to follow two such conclusive events as sea-burial and funeral-pyre” (Watson-Williams 79). As the old man tells him: “It’s how you get it and what yer do with it, that’s what counts” (*An Open Swimmer* 170). Jerra progresses gradually towards the Ethical state in these later stories due to his eventual acceptance of Grace. As Bruce Bennett remarks:

The primary basis of community in Winton’s fiction is the family, where ‘blood and water’ express and sanctify the bodily needs of individuals seeking an extension of themselves [...] Thus in the story “Gravity” for instance [*Minimum of Two*] Winton’s alter-ego, Jerra Nilsam rejects the pretentious ‘Deep and Meaningful’ of partygoers and sinks into melancholy as he grapples with the recent death of his father. The searing loss of the father leaves no room for irony as the young man, now a father himself, reflects on a backyard shed, which his father built for him before he was overtaken by cancer. The son accepts the gift as his ‘Ark’. (69)

This is the ‘ark’ that will carry Jerra over the waters of his despair. Despair in the existentialist sense is a recognition of complete and profound responsibility and also contains one of the classic objections to an omnipotently structured universe. Literary critic James Wood asks the fundamental question: “Why must we move through this unhappy, painful rehearsal for heaven, this desperate antechamber, this foreword written by an anonymous author, this hard prelude in which so few of us can find our way?” (257). However, a doctrine proposing that “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realises himself” (Blackman 13) is, while existentially sound, too limited for a theistic existentialist stance. Jerra wants his world to make moral and ethical sense and he is

preoccupied by the thought that he himself may be an essential part of an amorality he feels is enveloping him. His early visionary encounter with the jewels in the fish (material and organic) is something he needs to regain in an adult frame of reference. In this he approaches Conscious Despair.

Fred Scully, the protagonist of *The Riders* (1994) straddles the Wanderers and the Searchers categories. Scully's quest is to find his missing wife who has abandoned both him and their daughter with no explanation. As critic Andrew Taylor claims, "The novel is basically picaresque, structured as a search for Jennifer which becomes also a search for meaning and, indeed, for value" (8). Scully spends most of his time desperately looking but his is an aimless, rudderless drifting. Jennifer personifies his life's meaning; he is abrogating the responsibility for his happiness to her, rather than self-Authenticating.

Admit it, Scully, he thought. You followed, you'd follow her anywhere. A few weeks ago you couldn't sleep for dreams of home [...] and then *wham!* you turned on a penny for her sake. On a queer feeling she couldn't explain, just to see her happy (40,41).

His passion is romantically commendable and there is undeniably narrative sympathy for his abandonment, as the reader cannot avoid feeling some compassion for the tumult of his odyssey. Thinking of his daughter, he reflects: "He saw Billie standing by the glass. She waved minutely, face compressed. He felt a kind of remorse he had not felt before, a sense of humiliation that flattened even his relief. They could have taken her. He would have deserved it" (353).

Sahlia Ben-Messahel (67) notes the elusive, mythical manipulation of time in Winton's work, in keeping with the obligation within theistic existentialism that history be "made present and lived" (Sire 113). Winton, she claims, consciously

“breaks canons” yet parodies Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* with the approximate duration of Scully’s search. “Scully sees his reflections in the historical, mythological and fictional mirrors set by the writer [...] Winton seems to be rewriting history, taking hold of the past and reshuffling it in his own way, making a new story from the old” (68). Ben-Messahel notes the significance of the postcard sent to Scully of a convict penitentiary in Fremantle on which Billie has written “Don’t not Fall off the edge Scully” juxtaposed with his metaphorical incarceration in Europe. Ben-Messahel continues: “The reader is constantly made aware of the unfolding of the plot because the narrative deconstructs suspense. Hence, both reader and writer pull the strings of the story” (69). The puppetry image suggests the paradoxical omnipotence of a creator and the free will available to humanity, the obligation within which is to choose, so as to self-Authenticate and to “envisage a future because the past has nothing to offer apart from ‘bits and pieces’ ” (71).

The irresponsibility of his actions in dragging his young daughter around Europe has a direct impact on Billie, and he fails to see clearly the gifts he actually has in her. Billie, being effectively neglected, is exposed to the sordid underbelly of the city which could potentially be disastrous:

‘Ten guilder I be you daddy, uh?’

[...]

Billie smelt antiseptic and sick in the street and this man’s sweat through his black coat [...] She felt his hand cold on hers, pulling it toward him, right where his coat opened and his belt buckle hung like a falling moon. (342)

Billie is the manifestation of Grace in Scully’s life which he finally does recognise. She has the heightened perspicacity that Winton often affords his child characters.

She shows a profound understanding of nihilism when she observes, for example, that “Paris was pretty on top and dirty underneath. Underground everyone was dirty and tired and lost. They weren’t going anywhere. They were just waiting for the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame, the whole town, to fall in on them” (322).

As a Wanderer, Scully follows false leads blindly, as with his frantic running to the elaborately-staged rendezvous that never materialises in Paris, yelling at the retreating figure that could have been Jennifer, “ ‘You’re killing us,’ he screamed, ‘Fucking killing us!’”(267). Dixon and Kelly define this as a “crisis of narcissism” since Scully’s own desires are paramount “transparently framed by a conventional masculinity” (53). They are dissatisfied with the novel’s non-committal denouement:

Scully comes to reject the role available to him – the role of the riders – but the text is unable to imagine new forms of subjectivity, and its narrative remains locked in a relentlessly masculine identity-crisis. [Nigel] Krauth’s title for his [1994] review of *The Riders* is apt for the sense of containment evoked by this novel: as readers we travel not somewhere transgressive, but on a familiar journey, ‘riding to hell on Tim’s back’ (59).

He is certainly embroiled in wanton action, spurred by paranoia. Critic Don Meadows notes that Scully has

joined *The Riders* [...] mysterious figures, a touch of magical realism in an otherwise grimly realistic story [...] united in their pursuit of lost loyalties, their inability to let go grievances, their determination to wait for what will never come. (20)

In this way Scully has been compared to the Wandering Jew, an archetypal character doomed to wander the earth to atone for the killing of the Christ. Critic Gloria Gebhardt contextualises this for Australian history in its

multitude of genuinely antipodean travellers [...] it is this national characteristic that, through mythopoetic processes, has been incorporated into the nation's mythology and from there into its literature [...] Through identification with Wandering Jews in the guise of swaggies and bushrangers, antipodean readers embark on journeys themselves – they become travellers of the mind. (12)

Yet for all this, at Scully's lowest point, standing to lose his daughter to the Dutch welfare system on the assumption that he is unfit, a catharsis occurs: "He was just a raw hole. There was nothing in him, he knew now, nothing to make an explosion, no mad fit of energy to bust him out of here. There just wasn't any juice left" (348). And later, back in Ireland, all his chasing finished with, "Scully held onto the tree wondering how it could happen, how it was that you stop asking yourself, asking friends, asking God the question" (374). Blackham illuminates Kierkegaard's position on this state of anomie:

When the spontaneity of animal impulse falters and reflection supervenes, will is put in question: whether one wills to be oneself or does not will it [...] to come into reflective existence as a self-conscious being is to despair, for it is a break with the finite, a withdrawal into uncertainty, and yet one has to proceed and without guidance: one is brought to the point of choosing to will absolutely (17).

This condition is exactly the point at which Scully arrives towards *The Riders'* denouement. His catharsis justifies his inclusion in both this chapter and the next.

The concept of a person having a duty to him- or herself to become a person within a subjectively assumed aspiration is at the base of Winton's ontology. Such commitment is the only way out of nihilism and Aesthetic despair. Andrew Taylor claims that the "Riders" of the title appear "as a vision of hopeless but noble persistence and determination in the face of defeat, characteristic of a Celtic heroic past, and symbolic of a possible future for Scully which he is determined to avoid" (8). As Kierkegaard has it, in order to doubt we must *will* to doubt, we must also will to stop doubting, for doubt cannot be transcended by knowledge. Indeed, in Ecclesiastes, wisdom (translated as knowledge) is the root of all sorrow (*The New English Bible*, Ecc. 2. 12-17). Room is made for the individual to discover his/her own potential by way of the dialectic of a psychological negation of nihilism (a recognition that there must surely be something more). Possibility appears when the actual is brought into relationship with the ideal; the act of bringing these two together being necessary for achieving an Ethical consciousness.

In the context of the tenet of theistic existentialism concerning an individual's obligation to make history "present and lived" (Sire 113), the riders seem out of place because they belong to an age long gone. "Like Scully they travel through time and space adding coherence to the digressive structure of the text" (Gebhardt 12). On his return to Ireland Scully, needing to fill the void that he realises is essentially within himself, realises that "he would not be among [the riders] and must never be, in life or death" (377).

As with biblical signification, Andrew Taylor claims the riders

signify, they are signs to be read. True, they are static and seem to exist outside the flow of time: while their horses move, 'the riders sat unmoved from their fixed stations of expectation' (80) [...] He will not be mere bone,

as his name implies, so long as [Billie] recognises and needs ‘his pink scrubbed living skin’ (377), and so long as he knows it.” (330)

Naturally one can choose not to act upon this possibility or potentiality but Winton’s narrative tone and the development of characters assert a responsibility of individuals to realise their potentiality. This is an essential dialectical tension between the recognition of possibility and the necessity for free choice, and the following observation by critic Andrew Taylor underscores the narrative endorsement of characters who embrace their entelechy, however falteringly. In this novel, value

comes to be defined through a series of contrasts, of which Scully is the centre: most particularly Scully/Ireland, Scully/Jennifer, Scully/the English expatriates on Hydra, Scully/their French acquaintances, Scully/the educated or artistic, and Scully/Billie (his child). By means of these contrasts, Scully and what he stands for – those qualities and values which go into the construction of his character – are tested, clarified both in his mind and in the reader’s, and found to be adequate [...] two sets of values are constructed in opposition to each other. On the negative side we find sexual transgression, deceit, collusive deception, disdain, pretensions towards that modern cliché “personal development” [...] On the positive side, which is Scully’s, we find fidelity, trust, love of family [...] endurance, understanding. (8-10)

Scully does not recognise these attributes in himself, and it is up to the child and his friend to save him from himself; “he has become perilously close to becoming an eternal wanderer [...] Billie and Pete have prevented him from slipping into

Hades along the way” (Gebhardt 13). Billie realises “[Scully] looked like one of [the riders...] Waiting, battered, disappointed” (377) and this gives him pause to reflect, and therein lies the scope for his eventual transcendence. As Anthony Hassall notes: “Scully thus resolves to end his anguished pursuit of his wife, to turn away from the ghosts of the past, and to embrace the new year and his and Billie’s future” (28).

Another Wanderer is Quick, the eldest son of the Lamb family in *Cloudstreet*, who is burdened for the most part of the novel with misplaced guilt over the ‘drowning’ of his brother Fish when they were fishing off the beach and Fish was accidentally caught in the net. Quick experiences an unbearable sense of “banishment, his quiet punishment for the Fish thing” (60). His inability to even articulate the event refers back to Winton’s comment about inarticulateness (quoted earlier in this chapter). This becomes heightened to the point where he assumes culpability for a “blinded prisoner of war or crying baby or some poor fleeing reffo running with a mattress across his back” (61). As a child he reminds himself “that he is alive, he is lucky, he is still healthy, and his brother is not [...] Fair dinkum, Quick Lamb hates himself” (61). He is old enough to witness the change in his parents, from devout church-goers to apparently Godless fatalists and predicts that faith “wouldn’t come for any of them anymore” (94). In adolescence he is challenged by his (Jewish) History teacher about the human cost of war and is guilty again for his ignorance and his naive enjoyment of the Army cadets. “Between pages were loose photographs of what looked like burnt logs or furniture, but when he looked close he saw the features of people [...] It was called *Belsen: a record*” (139-140). His teacher’s non-appearance at school the next day confirms Quick’s perception of himself as an agent of harm.

This documented record and Quick's horrified response to it again supports one of the central tenets of theistic existentialism: that history must be "made present and lived" (Sire 113) but it is meant in a positive, proactive sense that Quick cannot, at this stage, achieve. As a young man he feels he has to escape the torment, so that he can bring about no more tragedy and he embarks on a lonely and aimless odyssey into the West Australian wheatbelt where he could lose himself in hard work and a landscape with few distractions. As Roberta Buffi observes, Winton's characters

try to escape from an alienating city whose physical and moral decay corrupts the urban environment [...] and retreat into their contemplation of sky and water. (18)

Yet even here Quick is besieged by his guilt; it comes to him in hallucinatory dreamscapes where he still cannot save Fish, yet somehow Fish now seems in charge, on a mission:

"You goin home, Fish?

The Big Country. The box rights itself again [...] He's too damn big for a fruit box. He looks bloody stupid, that's what, a man rowing a crate. Across the wheat" (201).

It is not, writes Buffi, until "sky and water interpenetrate and become one" (in Quick's case, the re-establishment of contact with the sea) that regeneration can occur. Fish, as will be demonstrated in the final chapter, is well on his way home.

As with Jerra in *An Open Swimmer*, Quick Lamb is situated at the top level of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic stage, in the sense that he is not a hedonist, nor is he given to epicurean delights. "This last grade of aestheticism typifies much of Kierkegaard's own situation in that period of his life when he regarded himself as

“the most unhappy man”, before he took the decisive step towards the religious stage” (Malantschuk 35).

Taylor draws attention to the visionary nature of the storyline, which raises it above a merely linear representation of history, the limitations of traditional narrative forms and of language, which “entails a mode of knowing beyond the temporal and the linguistic” (329). Another key precept of theistic existentialism holds that “truth is often paradoxical” (Sire 111) and the binaries embedded in this narrative are very much those of the Temporal and the Eternal, the synthesis of which, according to this worldview, it is the ideal for individuals to achieve. Fish Lamb does experience this consummate state. Quick, however, is for at least half of the novel’s time-frame, a Wanderer, yet his closeness to Fish and sense of responsibility towards him almost guarantee future restoration, perhaps first hinted at through the use of the numinous when he returns to Perth and the family “lit up like a sixty watt globe” (219). Quick’s eventual return to the city is that of the understated prodigal son, the revelations of his potential in the Ethical being finally manifest, justifying his inclusion in the following chapter.

Wanderers, then, are those characters still unaware of their despair, still caught up in Temporality with all the associated turmoil that this unconsciousness necessarily brings. They are Aesthetes who certainly damage but do not annihilate, as do those of the previous chapter. There is potentiality for Wanderers to transcend this state of being to enter into that which, in Kierkegaard’s schema, is the Ethical state of Conscious Despair, realising their individual potential and making contact with Infinitude or the Eternal.

Chapter 5

Searchers

This chapter concentrates on those characters in Winton's fiction who find themselves in a state of being that allows for some progression towards true personhood as defined by a theistic existentialist worldview, that which sees people "sharpened into an I", rather than being "dulled into a third person" (Buber 23).

As a move from the Aesthetic into the Ethical stage, the necessity is to "[choose] seriously and inwardly; [since] the good and evil of action has a truth-value; and [...] it is necessary to choose what one is actually doing" (Stanford 6). A central emphasis at this stage is the need for choice/action on the characters' part. It is based on the premise that the interior worlds of characters are aligned with their (exterior) actions.

These characters, however, still exhibit much of the unease associated with the human search for a spiritual dimension alongside the struggle to be Authentic according to a personally constructed moral/ethical framework. To an extent, the provision of free-will covers this; "we can create our own value by affirming worth [...] Value is inner and the inner is each person's own" (Sire 99). And as Elizabeth Ferrier describes such characters, "However twisted or tortured it is and however incomplete it is they have something they can believe in or they believe that they might be able to believe" (4).

The focus here is primarily on some characters from *Cloudstreet*. This is followed by a brief analysis of Georgie Jutland, Luther Fox and Jim Buckridge in *Dirt Music*, then Jerra for a revised analysis based on his appearance in the short

story collection, *Minimum of Two*. All are bound up with various False Ultimates (or concerns that detract from Tillich's "Ultimate Concern", which is a personal relationship with God) (112). They are nevertheless searching genuinely, if misguidedly for a time, for their True Ultimates. These characters constitute the majority in Winton's work. They are those characters who eventually, sometimes even grudgingly, come to accept Grace offered. They begin to understand that their acceptance and personalisation of these gifts will render Grace active in their lives. There is a responsibility here, an onus upon each character to Authenticate - that is, to transcend his/her despair so as to realise true personhood.

In *Cloudstreet* there are several characters who actively engage in life, unwittingly pursuing False Ultimates until their personal revelations are manifest and accepted.

Lester Lamb, having supposedly dismissed God after "not all of Fish Lamb [came back]" (32) changes his allegiance to the Anzac Club, where he finds a sense of belonging and of fulfilling a patriotic duty following the triumph of the Allies in WW2. Lester does not recognise the irony of this, given that over ten thousand Anzacs did not return from Gallipoli. His wife Oriel throws herself into work at the shop, needing the purpose and power it gives her to be self-sufficient and hard-working. Her purposefulness becomes an obsession when she runs a competitor out of business. The narrative supports an understanding of such people who may have rejected God, perhaps unwillingly, due to tragic circumstances. There are suggestions throughout that the Lambs will never quite rid themselves of God, no matter how vehemently they denounce him. Lester cannot discard a lifelong faith so easily. As he introspectively observes: "Maybe he didn't go along with it anymore, but he sure as shillings couldn't get out of believing in it" (102).

As such, Lester fits within the lowest level of the Ethical stage, as a “Knight of Infinite Resignation” where, as Malantschuk paraphrases Kierkegaard, “one still believes that he is able to fulfil the claims of the Eternal and that it is possible to do so within the bounds of temporality” (40).

The very name Lamb is redolent of the sacrificial (crucified) image of the Christ and perhaps, the near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham, at the behest of God, a Genesis theme which Kierkegaard (through a pseudonym *Johannes de silentio*) explores in *Fear and Trembling* (1843). The Lambs have ‘sacrificed’ their God also for the Temporal substitutes of business and simple survival. Sacrifice, or at least the preparedness for it, is suggested in Kierkegaard’s treatise as being necessary to a relationship between individuals and God. It also establishes God as the dominant partner in the relationship, who must be the final arbiter. The reconciliation of the Lambs to God is inevitable, with Fish (the name redolent of a secret symbol of Christianity in fifth century Rome, based on the New Testament image of Jesus as the “fisher of men”) as a catalyst and a prophet of sorts.

The overarching connectedness of the novel’s features has the Pickles family residing alongside the Lamb (connoting a meal with a common condiment). Significantly, such a combined family meal occurs towards the novel’s end, suggestive of the Last Supper with its ending and new beginning. Sam (the name derived from the Hebrew, meaning ‘God hears’) Pickles has a fatalistic faith in the “Shifty Shadow” or the “Hairy hand of God”, otherwise known as Lady Luck, who deals out arbitrary judgements on humanity. His life is peppered with catastrophe, often self-induced, but his natural optimism rarely wavers, making him a lovable, if feckless character. Sam is passive in the face of this; he takes little responsibility, preferring to take his chances on the “Shadow’s” bounty. Despite his moments of

despair, especially after a run of bad luck for which he has a special talent, Sam has an innate wisdom, loving steadfastly throughout his life, never giving up on his wife Dolly despite her wanton destructiveness. As he implores their embittered daughter

Don't be cruel to her, Rose. She's had her chances, she's nearly finished.

Winnin' out over someone like that isn't much of a victory [...] Whatever

I'm gunna get in this life I've had and damnear all that's been lost [...]

Christ Jesus, when yer family goes after it, it's more than a man can bear.

(348)

He is by nature open to love and accepts his place in the family and his workplace. Sam can easily be dismissed as a weak character, easily led, with addictive tendencies or could be considered more a member of the Wanderers category but for his consistent faithfulness. He never loses conviction that the spiritual realm is very real, however arbitrary he deems it. To this extent, he is close, it would seem, to the Religious stage on Kierkegaard's continuum; his despair is achingly conscious; and he rages against God, instinctively knowing Him to be the only, if unlikely, source of salvation.

The intensely personal and heartfelt connection between Sam and his creator lies at the heart of theistic existentialism's credo. Referring back to the theistic existentialist summary of a man-God relationship in the Foundational Chapter, Sam's faith is epitomised in an ongoing bond. The "Hairy Hand" is the name Sam attributes 'Lady Luck', that entity which usually lets him down and connotes an animalistic image, perhaps an evolutionary or ape/man-like creature. By contrast, the nickname Sam accords God - "Shifty Shadow" - appears somewhat intimate in tone, yet still spectral, ethereal, suggesting the transcendent

nature of God. This again endorses the concept of a relational yet omnipotent being, the God-become-man of the New Testament gospels, simultaneously animate and inanimate. This God is an entity whose conduct he does not understand, yet in whom he believes unwaveringly and respects in the manner of the biblical requirement for humans to “fear God” (*The New English Bible*, Genesis 22.11-13).

Well the shadow was on him, the Hairy Hand of God, and he knew that being a man was the saddest, most useless thing that could happen to someone. To be alive, to be feeling, to be conscious. It was the cruellest bloody joke. In the dark, night after night, he raised his mangled fist to the sky and said things that frightened him. (161-162)

To a degree, Sam’s love may have helped bring about Dolly’s healing, yet a more powerful and profound catalyst was to make this imminent. Dolly’s entrance to the Ethical domain wherein she finally chooses her despair and takes responsibility for it, occurs when she is almost beaten by her despair, where she must now choose between the nihilist’s ultimately honest solution (active suicide) and the Ethical. The catharsis here is Dolly’s acceptance of the facticity of history as a *fait accompli* that need not define or incarcerate her any more. History now, in its retelling, can be redefined into something “made present and lived” (Sire 113), by way of an embodied narrative. Dolly confesses to Rose why she has hated her all these years and this provides the necessary turning point in the action. Rose can now forgive her, carry a pregnancy successfully, and metaphorically, as her name suggests, bloom.

My mother was my grandmother. My father was my grandfather.

What?

The second-oldest sister the one who made me feel like rubbish all me life.

That one was my mother. There we were. There we were.

Rose felt things falling within her a terrible shifting of weights.

My God. My God. Mum.

[...]

Outside it was a summer's day. The house twisted its joists, hugging inwards, sucking in air, and the two women wept together on the sagging bed. (357)

Michael Goonan in a treatise on Australian spirituality notes that “while *Cloudstreet* triumphs being over doing it is not totally negative on human activity” and that “transcendence over despair is reflected in articulateness” (77-79). This is evident when Rose and Quick learn how to talk and catch up on their lives once forgiveness has occurred, as well as with Dolly's newfound capacity to unburden herself.

The humanising habitas makes the house a character in itself. The house-as-body asserts life, as it responds to the pain of its inhabitants. It has biblical associations too. The narrative's driving necessity is for the house to be set in order, redolent of the Old Testament notion of setting God's house (read: His world) in order.

Dolly is able to rise above her nihilism and her Destroyer status to become an Authentic and proactive individual. When Rose and Quick's baby is born, Dolly resolves to be a good grandmother, effectively breaking the pattern of destruction.

She's even able to see the irony of her recent enlightenment, seeing her past self reflected in the marauding magpies on the back step: “ ‘Garn, she says, you'd

tear me bloody eyes out if I didn't come with a feed, wouldn't you?...Well, you gutless wonders! You'd eat ya children!' ” (373)

There is seemingly a heightened authorial sympathy for these characters in their quest to self-Authenticate within usually difficult social and physical contexts, so that some regard must be accorded the narrative voice and stance, reflecting personal subjectivity as it does. There is genuine narrative sympathy for the Lamb family's crisis of faith after Fish's drowning since, unlike the privileged reader, it has little insight into the significance of Fish's heightened state of awareness.

Sam's ultimate sacrifice, or the choosing of his own despair, would be a rising above the cowardice that has underpinned his life to this point. He has been an onlooker in his own life for years, impotent and tremulous, unable to narrate. He is gullibly lured by the delicious prospect of a quick buck. The requisite twenty years of ownership of the house being up, Sam sees his hope manifest in the offloading of his only asset. Even when he tries to be the author of his own narrative, he is always at the mercy of bookies and union men, since he cannot conceive that his life has a predetermined plot or that he himself has any capacity for influence over it.

Veronica Brady's 1991 review of *Cloudstreet* summarises the *Searchers* category of this thesis succinctly:

This sense, that our lives are somehow part of a bigger story and that what is seen is energised and made lovable by some further intensity [...] We live in hard times [...] Winton's people know about this, of course, and at times they can be as lost as we are. But he takes us across the boundaries of experience where mere 'facts' refuse to go. Here what matters is the human

being, infinitely valuable and open to infinite possibility, above all to the possibilities of love [...] by somebody with a robust belief in people, the world and in a God who loves, cares for and lives in it, in the midst of all the muddle and confusion. (McGirr 43)

The inclusion of the “Nedlands monster” (an actual serial killer in Perth at the time) as a character in *Cloudstreet* (“just a frustrated man with a hare lip who’s gone back to his lifetime of losing, and the pathetic sight of him robs the detectives of the feeling they’d expected” 381), is more than simply a device for locating the novel historically; he is a symbol of forgiveness by way of Quick Lamb. Quick recognises humanity’s universal fall from Grace, “it’s not us and them anymore [...] It’s just us and us and us” (402). The fact that the murderer is not granted his dying wish to be buried alongside his dead son evokes ambivalent responses, such as sympathy and compassion for a murderer, within the reader.

Winton avoids creating his characters as pious ascetics. In Kierkegaard’s system, a person must be turned back towards one’s society even when one has transcended despair; the biblical notion, perhaps, of living *in* the world but not *of* the world (*The Living Bible*, John 17.14). Thus, the full development of the person acts to release the social from its despair by bringing forth the Ethical and the socially valid. One draws upon and fulfils in one’s person the prevailing good.

Quick Lamb, also, can be considered a member of the Searchers, or Ethical category. He has freely chosen his despair and the responsibility for transcendence. He recognises the necessity for choice and eventually becomes the “good man” (304) he instinctively knows himself to be. The commonality of all humanity is at the heart of this; the fact that, as Quick recognises “we all join up somewhere in

the end” (402), yet there is an onus of individual accountability. Speaking to his wife in a tone of confession, Quick relates

I’ve pulled a kid out of the river before, Rose. When I was eleven years old. My own brother. I know how it feels. I know how that poor bastard feels. And I got thinking about my childhood, my life. I did a lot of feelin sorry for myself, those years. I used to see the saddest things, think about the saddest, saddest things. And those things put dents in me, you know. I could’ve turned out angry and cold like *him*. I can see how that evil little bugger might’ve just ...turned, like a pot of milk. (402)

The milk image carries a subtext of the binary nature of all things with its capacity for nurture and for turning sour, representing the choice available to humans. This again upholds the duality of the Temporal and the Eternal, both of which operate in synthesis in individuals’ lives. The eventual ascendancy of the Eternal in Quick’s life is recognised by him with a humble acknowledgement that it could so easily have been the opposite, but for the manifestations of Grace he finally embraced. The suggestion of the maternal embedded in the milk image extends the embodied narrative by according inherent significance to primary, organic relationships.

A catalyst for Quick’s epiphany is the love and messianic acuity of Fish himself; the Aboriginal man who appears at critical points to dispense wisdom, and the memory of the omnipresent river. As Quick reflects on the confluence of his narrative and the river, “Every important thing that happened to him, it seemed, had to do with a river. It was insistent, quietly forceful like the force of his own blood” (300). Also, the gentle wisdom of his father, Lester, who, when Quick said he had no ambition other than to be a “good man” (304) reminds his son that it is easy enough to be so when there is little to challenge him: “Easy to be a good man

out here – there’s no one else to think of.” (304). This is accepted by Quick who soon after becomes a compassionate and useful member of society. This is existentially an Ethical stance.

Michael Goonan claims that the initial estrangement between the *Cloudstreet* characters is typical of people in “exile” as he believes European Australians to be. But, he writes,

the characters gain awareness in an instinctive way rather than through understanding. They do not know what will happen next and the story meanders like a river [...] if people can stay together as community and keep battling they will eventually come to believe and belong. (97)

Michael McGirr notes a complementation occurring between two of Winton’s novels. Characters in both *Cloudstreet* and *The Riders*, he says, “ache for something absent or missing” which fact surely is at the crux of the God-search:

Both elaborate the important role a culture has in housing the human mind, in making somebody feel psychologically and emotionally at home ... the empty room at the core of the house performs some of the narrative functions which Jennifer does in *The Riders* [...] Both are concerned with the balance between passivity and action. In some ways, Oriel Lamb’s belief that she can achieve by the sweat of her own brow finds a darker expression in Scully’s inability to remain still. (McPhee 35)

Jerra Nilsam too has made a transition out of the Aesthetic into the Ethical in *Minimum of Two* (1987), a short story anthology set several years after his previous introduction in *An Open Swimmer*. Jerra now has a wife and young child and must Authenticate for their sakes as well as his own. It is not easy, and Jerra still teeters on the cusp of the Aesthetic. There is a real sense that his wife Rachel

will save him from himself with her wisdom and practical good sense. She is Jerra's foil; a person who acts rather than contemplates. Their baby, Sam, lifts him out of his ennui to an extent and is undoubtedly a Grace-offering which Jerra does not always recognise as such. He is still relatively aimless and undefined, until a critical event brings about reconciliation with his dying father (undoubtedly a symbolic man-God ideal) and some measure of peace. His guilty upheaval (a brief affair) and subsequent self-awareness are almost biblical in tone, shaking him from his apathy. Subjective enlightenment is not for the passive. " 'I s'pose it sounds kind of weird, but in there tonight I felt kind of...unworthy'...Any moment now he was going to blurt it all out like a child. He ached to confess every kind of betrayal... 'I haven't measured up, have I?' " (128-129).

Kierkegaard writes of the better self, the vocation with which is the Eternal. Here is the ever-present [Christian] religious undertone in this filial-paternal reconciliation which suggests a move towards the Religious stage in the future. "The point is that one cannot opt out of it without inviting a moral judgement on one's life; one cannot deny it without suffering as an individual – whatever one may think or feel" (Kierkegaard 8).

It is this connectedness or intersection that Winton's work celebrates and advocates and which is at the very foundation of theistic existentialist thought.

Searching is evident in the life of Jim Buckridge in *Dirt Music* (2001) who has arrived at a crossroads as significant as that of his nemesis Luther Fox and his de facto wife Georgie. Buckridge has lived in the Aesthetic state for much of his privileged life, his concrete standard being to make vast amounts of money from crayfishing and to bask in the legacy of his father's powerful influence. Following

his first wife's death, a series of events causes him to become aware of his despair and to subsequently choose it, elevating him to the Ethical.

Here, by breaking with his pattern of very effective standover tactics, much admired in the Aesthetic, he tries to transcend his despair. This is mostly in vain, since he obviously thinks that positive in/action would suffice, rather than an unconditional giving over. He chooses *not* to torch the cray-poacher Fox's house, to kill his dog or to evict Georgie for infidelity, and resists the disdain of those who thought he'd gone soft, and insisting instead on finding Fox in the far north.

So, Buckridge experiences existentialist author/philosopher Martin Buber's *sterile* heart-searching which "leads to nothing but self-torture, despair and still deeper enmeshment" (13). Despite Jim's despair, there is hope for his redemption. His is definitely Conscious Despair. The very fact of his "infinite resignation", that is, surrendering that which he had, until the climax of the action, had been his "Ultimate Concern." This suggests he is still resisting (and obviously suffering) but that he is eminently transformable; that an epiphany is inevitable. This conjures up the literary image of the tragic hero, who, despite fatal flaws, is able to function ethically on a universal level only at this stage. Such a character is the Ethical counterpart to Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith". As such Jim is a "Knight of the Infinite" as described by Kierkegaard's pseudonymic author in *Fear and Trembling*, Chapter 2:

Most people live dejectedly in worldly sorrow and joy; they are the ones who sit along the wall and do not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation. They make the movements upward, and fall down again; and this too is no mean pastime, nor ungraceful to behold. But whenever they fall down they are not able at once to assume the posture,

they vacillate an instant, and this vacillation shows that after all they are strangers in the world. This is more or less strikingly evident in proportion to the art they possess, but even the most artistic knights cannot altogether conceal this vacillation.

Georgie's humanity and Jim's desperate need for redemption in *Dirt Music* are personal issues within the characters. There does not appear to be a transcendent yardstick for their morality; despite the quasi-biblical "sins of the fathers" (*The Living Bible*, Exodus 20.5) angst that develops into a dark night of the soul for Jim: "Jesus, sometimes I can feel it in me like some kind of poison. You can feel it's passed on." (399). Both Georgie and Jim have been running from their respective pasts and their shame, and now are driven irretrievably forwards, however falteringly. For all three protagonists in this novel, "the hole that grief leaves is a God-shaped one, not to be eradicated but rather filled up [...] and transformed" (Jacobson 3).

Again, confession is at the heart of the matter. Jim is desperate to confess his guilt over the infidelity in his first marriage, and Fox being related by marriage to his lover is a link that provides the catalyst for Jim to unload the burden of his culpability. Rachel (Jerra Nilsam's wife, who also appears in previous short stories and, in *Dirt Music* lives in White Point) asks Georgie:

And you believe that stuff. You know, God and revenge?

I think Jim believes it. But I don't think the world is like that. Without some mercy, a bit of forgiveness, I reckon I'd prefer it to be completely random – meaningless. In a sick way I envy the fact that he believes in something.

(429)

Georgie implores Jim to not “[become] the family story”, so that his sons are not part of the recurring generational damage: “Cut them out of the pattern” (436), and in doing so she is alerting him to the danger of “clinging to the family history and re-enacting past events” (Ben-Messahel 42). Jim tries to overturn this by leaving White Point into a literal and metaphorical wilderness to confront himself. He is no longer a White Pointer “a savage unruly lot” (*Dirt Music* 17); symbolically a personification of the aggressive shark that he had become, and to which the entire town aspires to emulate. “I’ve tried to make myself over and here’s the situation. Prove to myself that I’m different – and get free. At least in my head. In White Point, no matter what I do, I’m still my father’s son [...] You need a moment, something that defines you” (401).

Luther Fox, the quasi-prophet becomes an obsession for both Georgie and Jim. His given name (bestowed upon him by devout parents) suggests a personal, non-conformist, searching and a re-appropriation of history. He makes his way north, meeting some extreme and enigmatic characters along the way, including the Aboriginal boy Axle, who, as Jacobson notes,

has a mistrust of maps made by white men who lacked a connection with the land. But in Axle, Fox also sense a deep faith, the ‘hot conviction that he means something, that he’s central to something [...] Even as a delusion it’s attractive. He envies him’ (309). When Axle destroys Fox’s map, the boy tells him, “Go on the country [...] Not on the map, Lu.” And with this Winton presents the very paradox of faith: that the leap must come first, the understanding second, and not the reverse.

This demonstrates anew the essential paradox of the truth.

Eventually Fox “reaches Coronation Gulf [...] the movement from Bay to Gulf is not simply geographical; it is also spiritual”. Fox’s interior musings contemplate his place in the schema and his own choices. His yearning for something to read (*even* Jean-Paul Sartre!) suggests an openness to something beyond pure egoism and survival. Again, Winton gratuitously includes a reference to a writer he apparently regards with mild disdain: “all is forgiven” (355), to effect a recognition of the existential limitations in Sartre’s text that, in other lives, can be transcended.

In this novel, Luther Fox is a character device that necessitates a quest; the subject of a yearning for Georgie and a fixation for Jim. Fox is enigmatic; simultaneously loved, despised, feared, misrepresented. When Jim and Georgie arrive in Kakadu, having followed a lead on Fox, he is depicted as looking down upon the action when Jim and Georgie arrive, and unwittingly manipulates events such that the plane crashes. This deifies him almost to Jesus-like dimensions, and the effect is enhanced when he saves Georgie’s life after her plane has plunged into the sea. And he, too, must be saved at the end which appears to humanise him and to redeem the others, as does the crucified Christ. On the deck of the boat his body shows the “martyred jut of his hipbones, the twigs in his hair, the livid ulcers all down his legs” (460). As Jacobson claims,

It is in the presence of Georgie that his project of forgetting (which has afforded him a small measure of grace) unravels [...] There is salve for his mourning [...] And the name of this salve is grace, which Tim Costello proposes is a meta-story, grown “thicker in the retelling.” (7)

There is seemingly less differentiation between antipathetic and sympathetic characters than in earlier fiction, suggesting growing authorial complexity. While

the flaws of Jim, Fox and Georgie are evident, they are accorded an empathy that is almost Sophoclean in the sense that even with fatal flaws, humans have their redeeming attributes, realisable through choice. There is less of the judgement levelled at those antipathetic characters that readers are, it is assumed, meant to despise in earlier work, as readers do with the seemingly irredeemable Des Pustling in *Shallows*, for example. To an extent, of course, there is the fact of the three characters' contrition (a quality Pustling never exhibited) effecting narrative forgiveness. Winton is gentler about their shortcomings; choosing apparently to depict characters as products of flawed pasts, trying flailingly to survive. Even Georgie's mercenary and shallow father has some redeeming features and is acknowledged to feel some measure of love, however selfishly it manifests. This propensity towards confession (articulated in Kierkegaardian terms as "choosing of one's despair") and acceptance of Grace provide the necessary conditions for transcendence.

Dirt Music's central characters are desperate to overturn the 'sins of the fathers' through their own efforts. Fox's wandering in the wilderness to effect redemption mirrors textual biblical history (the Old Testament), yet it is ultimately ineffectual. Nevertheless a different desert experience is realised through the geographical text of Kakadu which recontextualises such searching with wisdom for life in the present.

As such, fiction must accurately reflect this revised view of the world. To retain authorial stance which is apparently all-powerful and overly manipulative, as though the plot as a microcosm of life itself, is predetermined and malleable by someone other than those directly involved in it, is by definition, outdated and presumptuous. Winton's language is frequently scatological yet, paradoxically,

also sublime. Sibree claims, “[it is] a new language for spiritual experience, a language for a kind of cosmic order just beyond human reach (6). It also, however, represents that which Bonheoffer has called a “religiousless Christianity” (Jacobson 6), or, as Jacobson herself has it, “a faith swept clean of iconic paraphernalia” (6). This is where a catalyst of some kind is necessary; a conduit between God and man, to effect a person’s full potential. Winton seascapes are often used to this purpose:

Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert – a war of mystery on two fronts. Of the two mysteries, the sea is more forthcoming; its miracles and wonders are occasionally more palpable, however inexplicable they may be. There is more bounty, more possibility for us in a vista that moves, rolls, surges, twists, rears up and changes from minute to minute [...] The sea is the supreme metaphor for change.
(Vittorin-Vangerud 2)

Given that a cornerstone of existentialist thinking is that of humanity’s essential aloneness (the vastness of landscape and seascape in Winton’s writing exacerbating this sensation for his characters), the crux for these characters is choice; the choice being to accept or reject that which is freely offered by God. Kierkegaard’s narrator, Judge William (*Either-Or*) describes the crucial moment of transition from the Aesthetic to the Ethical stage:

When all has become silent around one, solemn as a starlit night, when the soul becomes alone in the whole world – the before one appears not a remarkable man – but the eternal Power himself. Then heaven will seem to open, and the I chooses itself, or, more correctly, receives itself. Then the soul has seen the ultimate – that which no mortal eye can see – and which

can never be forgotten. Then the individual receives the salutation which elevates him forever. (Malantschuk 46)

The next task for the newly Ethical person is to seek actively to make a synthesis of the Temporal (or Aesthetic) and the Eternal (Ethical/Religious) in real life.

It is this elevation and the subsequent labouring to maintain (and even transcend) the stage that epitomises the characters labelled Searchers herein and which locates them further along the *Stages on Life's Way* than their Wandering cousins.

The following chapter will expound upon those Winton characters who have achieved the highest of Kierkegaard's stages: The Religious, herein named Homecomers.

Chapter 6

Homecomers

I acknowledge Walker Percy's definition as a basis for the naming of this category: "human alienation is first and last the homelessness of a man who is not in fact at home" (qtd. in Yancey 18). It is from here that I extrapolate the notion that a Homecomer is a person who has made the proverbial leap of faith, so to experience the reciprocity of a relationship with their Creator. Homecomers, then, have reached Kierkegaard's Religious stage. They have become his Knights of Faith (*Fear and Trembling* 1843). As is evident through the inclusion of Ort Flack (*That Eye the Sky*) and Fish Lamb (*Cloudstreet*) in this chapter, it is not necessarily an age-related classification: "[Considering vision] as a spiritual phenomenon, it is worth noting that two children have the ability to see what is 'real [...] there but only [they] see it' " (Taylor 331), nor does it presuppose heightened experience or sophistication in the Temporal domain. Like the boy in Winton's short-story 'A Blow, A Kiss' the faith of a child is treated with profound respect through the use of interior perspective: "the boy often prayed to his father in his absence. God, he decided, was just like Dad only bigger. It was easier to pray to him and hope God got the message on relay" (*Scission* 9). As will be evident in the inclusion of Henry Warburton of *That Eye the Sky*, perfection is not a pre-requisite either!

An individual arrives at the Religious domain of the *Stages on Life's Way* through "unsuccessful attempts to accomplish on his own the ethical demands upon him" (Malantschuk 53). Kierkegaard classifies this stage into two domains: Religion A and

Religion B. In the former an individual has not entirely relinquished the conviction of his own goodness. He relates himself to Christ, explains Malantschuk, only as a prototype, “trying to relate himself absolutely to the Eternal and relatively to the temporal” (56). It is a difficult step to achieve Religion B, as Kierkegaard concedes, for it involves a complete ‘giving over’ as Abraham was prepared to do in sacrificing Isaac (in Genesis 22:12 and in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*) if God so willed, “So I love many things, in different ways, in different degrees; but if He, in whom I believe, demands it of me – I will relinquish all this love for love of Him [...] for without Him it is a matter of indifference whether I live or whether I die” (*Christian Discourses* 246-247). Indeed, Kierkegaard opined that only Abraham and the Virgin Mary achieved the Religion B stage in their earthly lives.

I refer back to the epiphany of Daniel Coupar described in the *Shallows* Chapter of this thesis (20-21), where he finally anticipates the homecoming he had resisted for so long by accepting his place in the I-Thou relation. His Despair is Conscious as it has always been, and has now developed an extra dimension. Critic John P. Turner describes Daniel Coupar as having “very much the personality of an Old Testament prophet[...] His whole life consists of a complex and difficult relationship with God and the Universe. Like Jonah when he refused to carry God’s message to the Gentiles, Daniel seems uncomfortable with his place as leader of Angelus [...] Daniel represents the natural nobility of the whales” (84) and his legacy is the potential for connectedness evident in his grand-daughter.

While the narrative is third-person in the main in *Cloudstreet* Fish’s perspective shows his heightened perspicacity and his stream-of-consciousness

voice acts as a refrain, to ground and gently inspire the reader. The allowing of the brain-damaged, childlike Fish a (pivotal) voice is a confirmation of personhood, also; an affirmation that all life is of value: “called to love against all the other forces which tug against it” (Miels 41). If personhood, according to the tensive model, is constituted in discourse with others, Fish, while still loved and accepted by those around him, is affirmed as a person more through his discourse with the (privileged) reader, despite his efforts to reach his frenetic family, “Wait, Oriel, keep strong, Mum, keep the steel, you’ll see. Oh, how I missed you all my life. You’ll see it’s best this way. Wait” (397).

Through him, and to an extent, through Quick, we are made aware of the Aboriginal prophet. This spirit is perceptible in state other than that of the everyday; the Temporal which can “stifle, blind and smother” (Kierkegaard 45). He serves as a conscience of the people, a “guardian angel” who is rejected [...] the guy is saying: Learn to belong, don’t break community” (Bennett 63). Both Fish and Quick are visionaries of a kind, exhibiting that which Winton calls a “positive naivete” (Miels 41), both having drowned to life at points in the story. By way of their numinous experience on a level not accessible to those, like Oriel, who are too preoccupied and embittered to see, readers can connect with the overarching principle driving all Winton’s fiction: that acceptance of the gift of Grace means “we all join up somewhere in the end” (*Cloudstreet* 402). There exists here an internal focalisation evident in several Winton texts, meaning narrative which accesses what characters think, feel and see, over and above that which is tangible and visible. “I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me” (*Cloudstreet* 424).

Astoundingly, even God has a voice which seems audacious but in this context does not offend as blasphemous, “Soon you’ll be a man, Fish, though only for a moment, long enough to see, smell, touch, hear, taste the muted glory of wholeness and finish what was 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!” (420).

The sky and the sea are fundamental to *Cloudstreet*, as with most other fiction of this author. They are inextricably linked:

and when Quick looks over the side he sees the river full of sky as well”

Are you in the sky, Fish?

Yes. It’s the water.

What do you mean?

The water. The water. I fly. (37)

In keeping with the tenet that “History is a myth to be made present and lived” (Sire 113) and that it is not a linear series of cause and effect, the distinction between light and dark, water and sky appear to

fade into an all-subsuming unity [...] in the Book of Genesis, Creation is accomplished by division: ‘God divided the light from the darkness’ (Genesis 1.4) [...] Fish and Quick [...] have momentarily (and the paradox is obvious) drifted beyond the current of time and the particularities of place. They are in a state in which ‘Heaven’ is not ‘divided’ from earth. It is a state beyond, or prior to, articulation, signification [...] This is the state that Fish glimpsed in his first drowning, and which lures him to his second [...] [it] entails a mode of knowing beyond the temporal and linguistic [...] the mode which, in Winton’s case, I have called vision. (Taylor 329)

Roberta Buffi posits that the physical and moral corruption of Perth is “wiped out by the water; by celebrating the benign presence of the sea, Quick re-establishes contact with the city” (18). Fish is of the water in a primeval sense. Our biological beginnings, it is suggested, are in the water and perhaps we need to re-connect, just as all the earth’s water is connected. An extension of the homecoming connotation is that of baptism; Fish Lamb is the fish out of water, living in the world but not of the world; in essence more Eternal than Temporal. He is, when he drowns a second time, asserts critic Lebbie Hopkins, now fully “integrated” (55). Here Fish explains to his father about the redemption of homecoming, correcting the lineal version of the story:

Yeah. And the water. Yairs. They go in the water. To the big country. Yeah.

Lester loses his breath. Fish leans back with his head against the end of the tub looking dreamy and gone. No, thinks Lester, that’s not what happens.

And people there for em, says Fish. There’s people there.

Oh, God.

Fish looks smiling upon him. (192)

Fish Lamb appears as an embodiment of the trinity. Rutherford (2001) draws attention to the three persons of Fish: narrative, physical and spiritual, each of whom has a voice. Fish as narrator invites readers to “look at us by the river” (*Cloudstreet* 1) and continues to chip away at reader sensibilities and objectivity throughout the epic, perhaps most notably with his ability to talk to the pig in the backyard. Physical Fish is a product of his Finite spaces in Temporality (family, environment, his mental and physical limitations). The spiritual Fish is a conscience, a mouthpiece for the fathomless wisdom and love of God; one who can see beyond “the broad vaults and spaces” (3), such that he is truly a synthesis

of the Temporal and the Eternal (as was Jesus throughout his thirty-three years on earth) until the novel's close, where Fish is taken home (read: resurrected), now wholly Eternal, bringing about reconciliation between the two halves of the house. Winton, asserts Bennett, "reveals his commitment to place, region and community for all which combines everyday ordinariness and an almost mystical sense of *communitas*, a holy place where the spirits of all might rejoice together in a place of communal belonging" (63).

Thus, characters cannot exist in isolation from their contexts. For all Winton's characters, "Space itself becomes a weight to be borne [...] This pressure of place results in "passionate need", a feeling of longing for something missing" (Brady qtd. in Watzke 23). Inter-relatedness, connectedness underpins the entire body of work; again bringing together often unlikely or traditionally rejected associations. Critic Peter Cowan asserts that particularly in Western Australia there is a desire to "erase all trace" of the other (non-urban) landscape; that there is a tension between the sameness of urban modernity and "untamed difference [...] which cannot help but shape a writer's whole vision and experience and mental attitude" (Watzke 24).

The early novel *That Eye the Sky* (1986) has the ostensibly first-person narrative apparently attempting stream-of-consciousness. As Michael McGirr notes,

The principle image for the sky is, of course, 'that eye'. It reminds Ort of his parents' eyes (p 4). The eye is traditionally the source of light in a human being, and the strange light that Ort perceives over the house enriches the sense he has of being seen. It is not so much that he has a vision as that he becomes part of a vision. (49)

McGirr also observes, “*That Eye the Sky* is narrated by a 12-year-old and is set in the summer before he starts high school [...] The [...] book takes place under an opening sky; whatever growth pains he may share with it, the world of Ort Flack is psychologically expanding” (McPhee 31).

The landscape here too plays an integral role. The dark, enclosed valley of *In the Winter Dark* known as The Sink* is contrasted in *That Eye the Sky* by a hill setting, bathed in light. Literally, they are the Darling Ranges on the outskirts of Perth, Western Australia. Symbolically, believes Bruce Bennett, hills represent an archetypal necessity within humans for reaching towards some concept of God, and that they

provide a psychological or spiritual alternative, a place of mental or emotional release...In some cultures, they are the abode of holy men or hermits, providing a place where prayer and contemplation are possible.

Although most exploring, and indeed most living, proceeds on a horizontal plane, the human spirit seems to long for its counterpart, the vertical. (97)

Ort Flack is both witness and co-protagonist. He has been categorised as a Homecomer within the context of this dissertation, for his “primitive religious awareness” (McGirr 55); for the childlike quality of his faith that Jesus himself advocated (*The New English Bible*, Matthew 10.13-16). “Funny when you talk to God. He’s like the sky (well, he is the sky, kind of). Never says anything. But you know he listens. Right down in your belly, even in your bum you know (115).

The concept of the Panopticon, or the all-seeing entity, is an obvious association to make at this point. Jeremy Bentham’s notorious design for British

* The Sink connotes the geographical phenomenon of the erosion of limestone so that topsoil collapses, symbolizing the archetypal, metaphorical downward journey of the soul towards damnation. Yet a sink in another context can be read as a receptacle for washing, literally effecting cleanliness, figuratively, baptism or redemptive washing away of sin.

prisons was a malevolent use of power, conditional on the uncertainty of those surveilled, replicated in modern *virtual* panopticism. The “Eye” of the novel’s title must be interrogated against this connotation.

Henry Warburton appears to wither under the relentless omniscience of his God from whom he had several times attempted to hide in a dark, mud hut. For Ort, the narrator and protagonist, there are questions and confusion about God’s apparent lack of intervention in his family life, yet “that eye” is for him essentially benevolent. Genevieve Laigle (29) describes Ort’s religious notions as

rather vague [but] there is no denying that he has a religious perception of nature and that his need for God’s presence makes it almost tangible to him.

The shining cloud, which he noticed on the roof of their house the day his Dad was brought back home, has come to represent God for him: ‘it’s my vision. I know God’s in it somewhere. He *is* waiting for something.’ (118)

Rudolph Otto’s concept of the numinous (from the Latin, meaning God), refers to God as the “wholly other”; that which, asserts Jacobson, “evokes fear and awe [...] but never dread” (5)

The Flack family, besieged with the tragedy of their father/husband Sam’s accident and subsequent coma, has a brief affiliation with the local church, only to find it hopelessly irrelevant and hypocritical, “The man shouts at us like he’s angry, especially at us up the back. But I don’t know what he means he asks us questions and before we can answer he asks another one” (*That Eye the Sky* 126).

Kierkegaard wanted people to depend more on individual relations than on ritual formality, so that God becomes a “partner in dialogue, someone with whom individuals communicate in an *I-Thou* relation” (Buber 16). Ort understands the profound symbolic significance of the worship and personalises his faith in a way

which would certainly gladden Kierkegaard's heart, "It's not really the blood of Jesus. Any dumbbo can see that. Henry says it's just to remember. It's no use eating Jesus. Hah! He's in you already" (98). Henry's description of his own father, a bishop (representing the artificial hierarchy of institutionalised religion) as cold and unwelcoming endorses this also.

The eventual miracle is something Ort expects and is open to when it happens, "There's my Dad with these tears coming down his cheeks, pinpoints of light that hurt me eyes [...] His eyes are open and they're on me and smiling as I come in shouting 'God! God! God!' " (150). His resignation when, at the end of the novel, Warburton runs off with Ort's teenage sister, is, as Genevieve Laigle posits "counterbalanced [...] by the hope which his father's shining face hints at. The book ends on Easter morning, thus connoting the resurrection of Christ, but also the rebirth of nature and Sam Flack's possible return to conscious life" (32). Henry's mission with this family is complete.

Henry is an angel-prophet, arriving miraculously on cue, ministering selflessly to the comatose Sam Flack, bathing him literally and symbolically with the love of God and evangelising to Sam's family. But his character is necessarily flawed creating verisimilitude; sleeping with, then running off with the angst-ridden, underage Tegwyn. He is called "just another flawed messenger" by Winton, (McGirr 57) who understands the need for the conveyors of the faith to be without sanctimonious pretensions.

Before the novel opens, Henry had tried for some time to transcend the Aesthetic by his own endeavours; a Wanderer drifting listlessly and self-destructively. He lost himself for a while in a Northern Queensland commune, befuddled with drugs and an utterly nihilist woman "She thought nothing, believed

nothing, did nothing. She wasn't nice or decent or restrained. I really couldn't say with any conviction that she was even human. She used to lie in her mud hut in the dark. The smell of her" (74). There is some narrative sympathy for this state, suggested in the gentle pathos of the title of Henry's poetry anthology: *Heavy Dream Jazz from the Tropic of Capricorn - and Other Verse Statements* (73) and in the narrative's treatment of the evident anguish Henry's carnality causes him, as he wonders why God has afflicted him this way. He acknowledges and owns his despair, and recognises that still there is a duality of the Temporal and the Eternal in his life. He has a love-hate relationship with himself and with God, whom he also calls "the Powers" (140) and admits to Ort's mother that his own father used to call him "Esau the see-saw. Up and down. Yes and no. Good and bad" (93).

His sincerity as he ministers to the family, providing spiritual and practical sustenance, is obvious, yet he is tormented by the flesh, and Ort is aware of the paradox. Existential despair exists even within the Religious state, as a natural condition of our humanity. Henry appeals to his God for help, "I want to love. I do love. I want to love purely. I want that kind of love that heals, that soothes. I want to love properly" (141).

Laigle believes this "mysterious evangelist" is very much an example of the duality of human beings. Ort realises that "the man's divided self is a constant source of suffering to him [and] that the behaviour of human beings may be in blatant contradiction with their ideals" (27). This supports the Kierkegaardian notion of Despair within the Religious stage, where even when an individual has achieved a synthesis of the Temporal and the Eternal, an essential tension still exists. Sam Flack, mute in his coma, becomes the confessional for Warburton, who agonises in his duality. Warburton, explains Andrew Taylor, "is one of those

characters whose claim to give salvation to others masks the desperation of his own inchoate search for it himself” (324). Warburton’s creator also confesses to a general sense of unworthiness in his religious life, “meditating in a cranky sort of way [...] well, half-arsed is the word I mean [...] Cranky in the sense of feeling like a bit of a crank (faker, imposter)” (Pryor 19).

To an extent, the Kierkegaardian ideal, or Religious stage, (those having reached it herein named Homecomers), is similar to the concept of Eurhythmy, identified by critic Batchelor within Winton’s characters (qtd. in Rutherford 3). Moments of physical, psychological and spiritual states within the individual unite, effecting intersection and harmony. The point at which the spiritual (or Eternal) outshines the physical/psychological (or Temporal) is a useful description of the Religious stage. For Kierkegaard, Christianity “is not a system or a dogma far removed from life but the Life and the Way itself, and that is why there are so many levels in the growth of inwardness or the flight from inwardness” (Malantschuk 76). Grace and its acceptance is acknowledged by Kierkegaard as the highest of what it means to be Christian, confessing in *Two Discourses at the Communion on Friday* (1851) to being conscious of his guilt and imperfection but that he is a “special kind of poet and thinker who [...] has wished to read the primitive document about individual, human, existential relationships, the old familiar writings transmitted from our fathers, to read them again, if possible, in a more inward manner” (Malantschuk 76). In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard was in concord with Luther’s assertion that Christ is only real when he is real “for us” (354). Faith is central to this, and the passion that gives rise to faith and the pre-eminent majesty of God only has relevance in the light of this subjectivity.

A century and a half later, Winton cannot subscribe to the contrived. His storytelling is “plainspeak” especially, writes his onetime publisher Hilary McPhee, “when his characters played out their lives beneath the gaze of his God.” Winton’s work, she professes, has a “loving regard for the web of it all beneath an overarching sky (22).

CONCLUSION

Tim Winton's *weltanschauung* is reflected through Soren Kierkegaard's three categories of being: the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious. Winton's characters exist across these categories and the more sympathetic characters gravitate towards the 'ideal', that is, the Religious stage to which theistic existentialists (among whom Winton appears to be positioned) aspire.

Within the stages of Kierkegaard's life continuum or "Stages on Life's Way" I have identified subtle distinctions, most notably in the Aesthetic stage where characters may exhibit nihilistic or even demonic traits, discrete states of being, yet apparently both definable within Kierkegaard's Aesthetic boundaries. In order to demarcate such sub-categories I have re-labelled the Kierkegaardian stages as 'Destroyers', 'Wanderers', 'Searchers' and 'Homecomers'. To an extent this re-naming serves to humanise the categories, in that they are adjectives for people or, at least, fictional representations of people. It also helps to show the intended hierarchy of stages, in that the stage covered first in this thesis is deemed furthest from the 'ideal', with the last stage closest to the 'ideal'.

There are certainly characters in Tim Winton's fiction that could be categorised as a-theistic existentialists/ humanists and some definite nihilists, yet the sympathetic characters; those afforded a 'voice', are invariably in a state of flux; seeking that which could be labeled God, in whichever guise that is manifest for them.

Characters that come to an acceptance of Grace, in its various guises; some visionary or numinous, some simple and practical, are well on the way to achieving that stage on their life's way which constitutes Soren Kierkegaard's ideal, through an intimate and individually realised relationship with God.

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