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Last Whales: Eschatology, Extinction and the Cetacean Imaginary in Winton and Pash

Abstract
Few of the Earth's creatures capture the popular imagination quite like the whale, which has come to serve as an ambivalent figure for both salvation and perdition, whether the moral dramas that unfold around it are seen in religious (eschatological**)** or scientific (ecological) terms. Whales are at once signifiers for extinction, pointing to the threat of planetary destruction, and signifiers for redemption, in which the ongoing environmentalist campaign for protection doubles as a human struggle to save us from ourselves. This article looks at two contemporary Australian literary texts, Tim Winton's Shallows (1985) and Tim Pash's The Last Whale (2008), both of which explore competing extinction scenarios: the extinction of whales; the extinction of the whaling industry; and the extinction of whaling as a way of life. Given the further possibility of human self-extinction, the article argues that a new cetacean imaginary is needed in which whales are seen as complex manifestations of a life that co-exists with humanity, but is neither reducible to human understandings of history nor to the various futures—or non-futures—that human beings might imagine for themselves.

Keywords
Australian literature; Australian whaling industry; cetacean imaginary; ecology; environmentalism; eschatology; extinction; time.

Epigraphs

Ah the world, oh the whale.
Philip Hoare

The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it.
Frank Kermode

Introduction: Soundings

Early in 2015, the management team of the Natural History Museum in London made a momentous decision. A hugely popular diplodocus cast ('Dippy') would be replaced in the museum's central hall by the full-size skeleton of a blue whale, which had

previously been on display in the animals' gallery, having first been acquired as one of the museum's earliest specimens in 1891. The decision to give pride of place to a whale was justified on conservationist grounds; as Sir Michael Dixon, the museum director, explained: 'The very resources on which modern society relies are under threat. Species and ecosystems are being destroyed faster than we can describe them or even understand their significance. The blue whale serves as a poignant reminder that while abundance is no guarantee of survival, through our choices we can make a real difference. There is hope' (quoted in Kennedy, 2015: 23).

This latest instance of the whale as conservationist icon—as outsize standard-bearer for marine and other environmental issues—serves as further confirmation of whales' immediate emotional appeal as well as their enduring symbolic power (Burnett, 2012; Hoare, 2009). As the British writer Philip Hoare puts it, no other creature has the capacity to 'represent life on such a [grand] scale or to act as an antidote to our own constricted [existences]'; while no other seems able to capture the popular imagination quite like the whale, which is both like us and profoundly unlike us, which straddles myth and reality, and which has latterly been mobilised as a symbol of lost innocence in an age of global environmental decline (Hoare, 2009: 29-30, 32-33).

Listed as endangered today, the blue whale also serves as a graphic warning that whales and other cetaceans, though only some species among them are currently considered as being at serious threat, have historically operated under the sign of extinction—and not just the partly realised possibility of their own disappearance, but also that of humanity and even the planet itself. A hallucinatory vocabulary of termination surrounds the whale—a quickly spreading 'ecology of fear' (Davis, 1999) that is at times expressed in broad religious terms, at others refracted through more

specific environmentalist anxieties. For whales are not only worlds unto themselves, but also ways of thinking about the world and human beings' increasingly precarious place within it (Burnett, 2012: 329). Today, whales are at once powerful symbols of the fight to halt the continuing destruction of the planet and all-too-material reminders of the legacies of that destruction. Once routinely viewed as harbingers of apocalypse (Hoare, 2009: 60; see also Roman, 2006), they are now more likely to be allegorised as promissory vessels of human redemption whose protection is urgently needed in order to save us from ourselves (Burnett, 2012: 329).

There seems no end to the ways in which whales can be turned, whether literally or metaphorically, into something else even as they are now increasingly acknowledged as enjoying special status among the Earth's creatures, as being ecological subjects in their own right (Kalland, 2012). It is not so much that whales are allegorised, rather that they are obsessively allegorised; not so much that they are anthropomorphised, but relentlessly anthropomorphised, e.g. in terms of demonstrating the qualities—kindness, caring, compassion—we humans would like, but usually fail, to see in ourselves (Kalland, 2012: 41). Much of the hyperbole has to do with time. Whales straddle markedly different versions of the past, bringing together the longue durée of capitalist modernity (the all-too-human basis for whaling history) with the still longer stretch of an age that both predates and quite literally dwarfs human presence (the other-than-human reaches of prehistoric time). The hyperbole also has to do with the lack of time: with the perception that time is fast running out, and that whales consequently represent a kind of planetary last chance in the face of impending catastrophe. As Sir Peter Scott, the then chairman of WWF, would say in 1972 in the early days of what would go on to become the global 'Save the Whales' movement: 'The feeling is now abroad that if we can't save the largest

animals we know we have little chance of saving the biosphere itself and therefore of saving our own species' (quoted in Simmonds and Hutchinson, 1996: 465).

While much has been done since then to protect the whale, fears surrounding it persist, many of them bound up with apocalyptic forebodings of different kinds that, together, amount to a full-blown 'planetary dysphoria' in which new and inventive ways are currently being imagined of how terminal ecological catastrophe might be visited upon a sentient earth (Apter, 2013: 335). One of the many ironies of planetary dysphoria is that it has given a new lease of life to death, which can now be seen in the large and growing body of contemporary thanatological writings that either seek to think through the consequences of planetary destruction or, going beyond it, to contemplate the hypothetical extinction of thought itself (Apter, 2013; Brassier, 2007; Colebrook, 2014a and b; Morton, 2013).[1]

In some of these writings, a working distinction is posited between eschatology, which anticipates the inexorable termination but also the eventual revitalisation of life, and extinction, in which such renewal is no longer possible (Brassier, 2007). The distinction is specious, however, in so far as eschatology and extinction, despite the aura of finality hovering over both, are temporally complex. Certainly, eschatology—understood here as the Christian doctrine of last things—can be seen in teleological terms, as the linear process by which 'things reach their end when they fulfil the purpose for which God created them' (Walls, 2008: 4). But theologians are not necessarily agreed on this point, with some interpreting eschatological time as linear and singular and others as cyclical and periodic, while still others argue over whether the foreseen end is imminent or might be indefinitely deferred (Schwarz, 2000: 27).[2]

Nor is extinction unequivocal. Thus, while extinction is sometimes popularly framed as an abrupt end event, it is more often than not subject to longer processes that involve the gradual foreshortening of not just a single life form, but multiple and multiply interrelated forms of life (Van Dooren, 2014: 5; see also Kolbert, 2014). Extinction, argues the Australian environmental scholar Thom van Dooren, can happen in any number of different ways that yield any number of different meanings, but one constant is that it is not just the death of the last representative individual of a given species, but is part of a patterned process in which one loss involves others—often many others—over an extended period of time. Van Dooren duly points to what he calls 'the dull edge of extinction' (12), in which there is 'a slow unravelling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways' (12).

This article is a preliminary attempt to gauge the different temporalities that attend the ambivalent figure of the whale as an index of both salvation and perdition in the dual context of eschatological readings of planetary destruction and environmentalist readings of ecological collapse. In many such readings, whales are spectral figures moving almost imperceptibly between alternate temporal registers: now representing humanity's hopes for its own future, now burdened with the collective deadweight of humanity's destructive past (Lippit, 2000).[3] Extinction throws up another possibility, however: that of thinking beyond the human social relations for which the figure of the whale is often metaphorically substituted, and beyond the natural world for which it often metonymically stands (Kalland, 2012: 3). Such steadfastly anthropocentric projections raise the question, not so much as to whether humanity is worth saving in the first place, rather to what extent 'the human'

has outlived its usefulness as an ontological category and needs to make way for alternative modes of conceiving planetary co-existence that are not necessarily dependent on the survival of human beings in their own meticulously manufactured world (Colebrook, 2014a).

The two perhaps unlikely texts I want to turn to in order to explore these different extinction scenarios are Tim Winton's 1985 novel Shallows and Chris Pash's 2008 journalistic account The Last Whale, both written by conservation-conscious Australians for whom the environmentalist stand-offs that led to the late twentieth-century abandonment of commercial whaling in Australia—their ostensible subject—are explicitly or implicitly measured against a plurality of time scales in which human history either destructively repeats itself or is contained within a much longer natural history that ultimately proves beyond human capacity to comprehend. Against these broader metaphysical backgrounds, which are framed by Winton in eschatological terms, competing micro-histories of extinction are played out involving a wide variety of both human and non-human actors. In both texts, as will be seen below, whales are more than just symbols, registering a substantial material presence. But in both texts, whales are also reversible signs within a symbolic economy in which 'religious' as well as 'scientific' interpretations founder (Winton); and where regional, national and international gesture politics—with all the familiar human failings that accompany them—risk hijacking the broader moral imperative to protect non-human life (Pash).

Sightings (I): The Maw of History

The 1985 novel Shallows is one of several of Winton's fictional works to be set in Angelus, a thinly disguised if still densely mythologised version of Albany, the small

but symbolically significant Western Australian fishing port one of whose claims to fame derives from being both a first and a last place, doubling as a remote colonial outpost and as the region's earliest settled town (Winton, 1985: xi). As is axiomatic for Winton's work, Angelus is ironically named within a tragicomic eschatological context. Deriving from the Latin for angel, 'angelus' is the first word of a Catholic recitative to the Virgin Mary in praise of the Incarnation, an incarnation that is also transfiguratively embodied in the seasonal humpbacks which, Christ-like, are ritually slaughtered then symbolically resurrected through their annual return to the bay (Thomas, 2008: 18).

For Angelus is also a historic whaling town, one of the key sites for colonial Australia's first major industry (Turner, 1993: 79). Appropriately enough, the first whale to be seen in the novel is stone dead, a rotting humpback 'jettisoned by the sea [and] left alone by even the sharp-beaked gulls that hunt the lonely shallows for smelt and mullet' (Winton, 1985: xii). The year is 1831, and nearby lies another 'wasted hulk' (xii), this time in human form, namely the half-starved American whaler Nathaniel Coupar—a now largely forgotten founding figure whose Australianised ancestors are the unlikely heroes of Winton's novel, most of which is set in the late 1970s at the time Australia's last land-based whaling station (at Cheynes Beach near Albany) was forced, in the wake of a seemingly unstoppable wave of local and international environmentalist protest, to shut down (Turner, 1993: 79-80).

The novel plays fast and loose with these and other historical facts, operating in the spirit of a fashionable sub-genre at the time, 'historiographic metafiction', in which history is energetically retold as fiction and legend, the uneven power relations underlying such twice-told tales are critically examined, and both history and fiction are enjoined to reflect recursively on themselves (Hutcheon, 1989). (In this and other

respects, Shallows is very much a novel of its day, readily connected to late twentieth-century debates around the aesthetics and politics of postmodernism; but as I seek to argue in this article, it moves between different temporal registers and is just as easily assimilated to early twenty-first-century ecocritical discussions of distributed agency in a more-than-human world [see final section below; also Note 7].) Also in the spirit of historiographic metafiction, Shallows pieces together its accounts from the self-duplicating fragments of different narratives, with the Bible—pre-eminent but by no means definitive among these—proving no more reliable than Nathaniel Coupar's conscience-stricken diaries, and no more foundational than their mid nineteenth-century counterpart, that legendary Great Whale of a novel, itself a loose compendium of founding narratives, Moby-Dick. One effect of this plethora of uncanny re-doublings is to restage authoritative accounts as entertaining yarns, which itself has the dual consequence of dismantling local whaling history and of upsetting the supposedly universal narratives that underlie it, with History, Science, Religion and other grand narratives all being downsized into so many boastfully embellished fishermen's tall tales.

One prime example is the story of Jonah and the Whale, which is retold several times during the course of the novel (88, 124, 197). Jonah and the Whale is usually interpreted as a classic Old Testament parable of repentance and redemption, with Jonah eventually being spared after praying for forgiveness, and the whale releasing him to complete his God-given task of rescuing the world from its fallen state (Roman, 2006: 10-12). But as another of the novel's stalwarts, Protestant minister William Pell, says in recalling some of the old tales he used to exchange with Nathaniel's grandson, Daniel Coupar:

> I remember that one about Jonah – oh, there were a dozen variants – where Jonah is swallowed by the whale and in the whale he meets the Devil himself and the fight is on. It's the violence of the fighting that makes the creature spew Jonah back up on the beach. A neat little ending with the Evil One dragged off into the deep, still a captive. And the language of the fight! I never heard such filth in all my life – the things Satan said to Jonah and the words Jonah chucked back – and I've never heard them used so well since. I can't think what the masters would have done to him [Coupar] if they'd heard. Ah, he was a wonderful liar … Always used the truth when it suited him though. And I s'pose the truth always used him when it suited itself. (197)

Here, the whale becomes a carrier of truths of which it (and possibly Jonah himself) is unaware, as well as a vehicle of falsehood; it doubles as God's messenger and as Satan's agent, bearing both of these identities hidden within rather than inscribed upon its body, as if to show the fundamental uncertainty of God's Grace (13, 16).

The whale is a reversible sign, then, the interpretation of which is always liable to shift between linked extremes, just as the angelic always risks sliding into the demonic (123). And at another, still more general level it is condemned to be nothing but a sign, to always be something other than itself. In this last sense, Shallows can be seen as relating an epic struggle over the different meanings, both spiritual and not, that have historically attached to the cetacean imaginary: meanings that pose considerable difficulties of navigation, just as the 'real' whales of the text seem unable to decipher the consequences of their own movements, and eventually strand themselves (see section 4 below). How are whales to be 'seen' in the text, and what happens when they are 'sighted'? What happens when they are heard but not seen, or

when they are not seen clearly? What happens when they are seen clearly, but are still taken to be signs of other, absent presences, summoning up spectral visions from the past? And what happens when, Jonah-style, they are seen as little more than gaping mouths, laid traps for the foolish and unwary, or as gargantuan embodiments of the maw of History, into which the virtuous and the vicious alike are inexorably absorbed?

The novel explores all of these possibilities and more, connecting each to an eschatological frame of reference that works according to the principle of anterior prefiguration, i.e. it is not just that the world the novel presents is foretold as dying, but retold as if it were already dead. Angelus, to put this differently, is in a state of terminal decay, less a place of refuge than refuse, unwanted residue from the shiftless present as well as the convict past (6). It is a place of accumulated 'last things', increasingly derelict home to a motley crew of drifters and deserters, wrecks and reprobates; even the drought-plagued land itself, pinched coastal territory caught between a huge sea and an arid inland, is described as 'putrefied and pussed up [sic] like a dried scab' (14). Perhaps more to the point, it is a place of remnants, men in their last days, surviving but with death already marked upon them; and a place of corpses, stinking bodies alternately human and non-human, each superimposed onto the other like so many 'wasted hulks' (xii; see also above).

In this and several other ways, Shallows, like so much of Winton's work, exercises a fascination for the macabre, which is not the same thing of course as a weakness for the morbid; rather the macabre demonstrates a heightened consciousness of the morbid that deliberately exploits it for comic effect. Much of Shallows in fact, despite its hauntingly melancholic tone, reads as mischievous black comedy; and much of it functions as a kind of mock-eschatology that implicitly

ridicules the same endings it foreshadows, playfully riffing on the rhetoric of extinction (significantly, Angelus's two warring family figureheads, Daniel Coupar and Des Pustling, are both presented as being the 'last of their line' [74, 159]). Few of Winton's critics seem to want to acknowledge this, which is a particular problem for those religious-minded commentators who see his fictional work as a more or less transparent attempt to articulate the numinous with the ordinary and to communicate, albeit unconventionally, the mysterious workings of God's Grace. (For a range of not necessarily compatible readings see Miels, 1993; Thomas, 2008; Turner, 1993.)

Whether Winton is a 'religious' writer or not is hardly the point; rather what interests him is the extent to which alternative explanations of existence tend to be betrayed by the very language they seek to manipulate in their cause. A case in point is Shallows' lively parody of the 1970s' language of radical environmentalism, which is repeatedly exposed in the text as either self-serving—'SUPPORT SALLY MILES/REDEEM YOURSELF: SAVE THE WHALES' reads one protestor's placard (145)—or marked by New Age clichés which frame the cetacean imaginary in terms of its opposite, the failure to conceive of whales in other than the most familiar and achingly sentimental terms. ('The whales have become my life. They are the most amazing creatures alive. They have intelligence, wit, compassion. There is much that is mystical about the whale. One day, if we keep them alive long enough, we will discover it, and perhaps learn something about ourselves. They are almost magic, the friendly giants of our childhood dreams. Think of the things the whale has seen, the civilizations coming and going […] They harbour secrets. I want Man to know them one day' [156].)

This last quote is from Georges Fleurier, one of the founder members of Cachalot & Company, the ramshackle activist group that comes to Angelus with the

explicit aim of closing down the Paris Bay Company and thereby ending commercial whaling in Australia—next stop the world. Loosely based on the flamboyant French Algerian entrepreneur Jean-Paul Fortom-Gouin, aptly described by Chris Pash as an 'activist in a business suit' (Pash, 2008: 21; see also section 3 below), Fleurier succeeds in alienating half of Angelus with his exhibitionist antics, some of which are likened to those of Ted Baer, the celebrity American 'shark hunter' who has come to Angelus in search of the huge white pointers its coastal waters are famed for–-and in order to attract further attention to himself. To his credit, Baer makes little attempt to be other than shallow; Fleurier manages almost effortlessly to be shallow while pretending to be deep.[4] Slightly better, though still unprepossessing, is another American, Marks, whose main role for Cachalot & Company is to expatiate on whales as marvels of science while claiming the need for their protection irrespective of the scientific theories that surround them: 'A thing doesn't need to be intelligent', he says, 'to need a reason to be' (152-153).

Given Winton's own activist credentials, it is difficult to know what to make of this. Clearly he is poking fun at fledgling environmentalist groups that have been more witheringly described by D. Graham Burnett as 'a community of grandstanding saboteurs and dope-addled visionaries' (2012: 528). With Winton as with whales, it can be hard to navigate the signs, to gauge the text's continual slippage between the literal and the metaphorical in order to recognise which of these registers one is in (it is often both). Certainly, Shallows is a text that resists its own moralising tendencies, but it would be unwise to conclude from this that Winton is breezily dismissive of all kinds of environmentalist protest or necessarily opposed to the more theatrical forms of activism practised by radical environmentalist organizations (see section 3 below). In its characteristically side-on way, Shallows memorialises the people it mocks, just

as it commemorates the history from which it seeks to deliver itself. But equally characteristic is the darkness in the text, which fixates, Ahab-like, on the very subject that is most likely to destroy it. In rejecting the sentimentalism of the 'friendly' whale, Shallows casts a shadow over one of the Earth's most consistently exploited creatures, which still has the capacity to inhabit our worst nightmares—take Nathaniel Coupar's diaries, which conclude with their author's suicide in a desolate coastal landscape in which there is little hope of rescue or redemption, and 'rotting caverns of bone lay in the still shallows near the shore' (171).[5]

Sightings (II): The Last of Its Kind

Chris Pash's The Last Whale (2008) can be read in some respects as a non-fictional version of Shallows, drawing on previous material collected at the time for the Albany Advertiser on the breathless sequence of regional, national and international events that would eventually lead to the closure of the Cheynes Beach whaling station in 1977. The book is endorsed by Winton (see back-cover blurb) but dedicated to Greenpeace, whose involvement in the 1977 protests were its first Australia-based direct action campaign. A fairly standard journalist's account, The Last Whale is short on artistic flair but technically accurate and even-handed, showing awareness of the skills involved in hunting whales as well as campaigning against the hunt, and—though clearly conservation-oriented—taking care to see the relevant issues from all sides.

The text also captures the complexities involved in conservation, including the tactical battles fought out not just over the body but, even more crucially, the image of whales. 'The whale was a symbol and yet they were killing the whales', complains one of the main activists involved, the spirited but less-than-sophisticated American

Aline Cheney, about the whaling industry in Albany: 'They loved the image [evident in Albany's branding as a 'whale town'] but were killing the real thing' (87). The campaign to close Cheynes Beach duly emerges as a heady combination of business savvy and media glitz, explicitly designed to create a 'domino effect' (27) that might eventually extinguish global whaling, though the theory isn't necessarily matched by the practice, which often relies on gimmickry (Willy the life-size blow-up whale) and thuggery (the Japanese are easy targets), and which just as frequently betrays the amateurism of its assorted international players, who are simultaneously presented as naïve and calculating, clueless and clued-up (117).

The 'whale war' (141) is thus waged on several different fronts, with grassroots environmentalism, federal politics, and local livelihoods all being caught up in the tangle (184). Another way of putting this is that there are multiple extinctions at play organised around the symbolic figure of the whale: the extinction of the whales themselves (92), the extinction of the whaling industry (27), and the extinction of whaling as a local way of life (188). Looming over all of these is a further possibility, the eventual extinction of human beings. As another of the activists, local Australian Tom Barber (who will eventually marry Aline Cheney), speculates, drawing on the ideas of the American systems theorist Buckminster Fuller:

> [W]hat could an individual do to change the world and benefit humanity? The big question was whether humanity would survive in the long term. What the world needed was continual great leaps to counter the degradation of the planet. Tom thought that energy from the wind -- a gift from the sun's gravity was the way to go. (124)

As so often in the text, this isn't really thought through, and it is left to the more experienced Canadian activists, Greenpeace co-founders Bob and Bobbi Hunter, to work more closely with the media to 'beam [consciousness-changing] stories and images [of] dead and dying whales into the homes of the people of the world' (112). Pash, too, participates in this media blitz, and while his account is for the most part understated, he is certainly not averse to ventriloquising the emotive vocabulary of extinction, as when Bobbi Hunter encounters the Cheynes Beach whaling station for the first time:

> The […] station was a place of grisly horrors for her, the flesh-stripped bones of the whales a monument to genocide. Images of how they died flooded her mind and she cried. But she looked across at Bob, who sent a thumbs-up, and she knew it was okay to cry on national television. (92)

Later in the text, the threat of extinction is used as a basis for the national conservation effort, led by the newly re-elected prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, one of whose first actions in office is to announce an independent judicial inquiry into the whaling industry in Australia. Pash reproduces Fraser's words, which in turn are given in full here:

> 'Many thousands of Australians – and men, women and children throughout the world – have long felt deep concern about the activities of whalers. There i is a natural community disquiet about any activity that threatens the extinction of any animal species. I abhor such activity – particularly when it is directed

against a species as special and as intelligent as the whale.

There are, however, two distinct views in relation to the activities of whalers. One view put to me strongly is that all whale species under threat of extinction are protected by moratoriums imposed by the International Whaling Commission and that current policy is in line with the best principles of conservation. An alternative view, which has also been strongly argued to me, is that the present practice of killing whales does endanger the whale species. Many other arguments have been put on both sides.' (160)

The second set of arguments eventually wins out, aided and abetted by whalers' unconvincing accounts of 'humane killing' as well as more dispassionate commercial factors such as rapidly falling oil prices and other associated global market trends (170-171; 190). This all leads to the crowning image of the text, which is that of the 'last whale' caught by the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, described as a carnival affair in which, despite impending job losses, the whalers dress up, their vessels fly flags, and all concerned do what they can to enjoy themselves (191). The whales themselves may not be extinct, but the occasion, despite the atmosphere of forced hilarity it creates, melancholically marks the 'dull edge of extinction' (van Dooren, 2014: 12) insofar as only one life is lost, but many others—human as well as non-human—are understood to be involved. Still, Albany's loss is Australia's gain, with the country rapidly evolving into a 'global advocate for an end to whaling' (Pash, 2008: 195)—a good example, this last, of what the Norwegian anthropologist Arne Kalland calls the 'symbol-politics' played out by former whaling nations now jostling with one another to 'appear to be civilized states that care for nature' on the global stage (2012: 193).

The ironies of this are not lost on Pash, whose epilogue to The Last Whale includes a telling entry from Project Jonah financier and Greenpeace Australia co-founder, Richard Jones. The Cheynes Beach campaign, brags Jones, 'should serve as a blueprint on how to win an issue. It not only stopped Australia whaling, but turned Australia from being one of the most fervent pro-whaling countries into the most anti-whaling country' (201). This goes uncommented, but reading between the lines it is possible to detect a tacit criticism of national gesture politics—gestures that are also liberally reproduced at regional and international levels in the text. In each case, the whale serves as a 'totem animal' (209), image rights over which are linked to several different ethical commodities—personal responsibility, national conscience, human survival, etc.—and played out on several different political fronts. The Last Whale thus quietly points to the political game playing that has continued to accompany anti-whaling campaigns in Australia and other western countries, campaigns which have turned from national to global, but with the broad moral imperatives underscoring them hiding a variety of more local—still often national—concerns (DeSombre, 2007; Kalland, 2012).

Central to many of these campaigns is the idea of whales as creatures of 'special significance' (Pash, 2008: 203), a phrase that resonates across a wide variety of late twentieth and early twenty-first century whaling literature, but that serves an equally wide variety of interests involving what might best be described as different philosophical and political repurposings of the whale. In his magisterial 2012 study The Sounding of the Whale, the American historian of science D. Graham Burnett describes the seemingly improbable process by which whales, biologically classified as 'an anomalous order of elusive, air-breathing mammals', came politically to serve as 'nothing less than a way of thinking about our planet', giving rise to a 'new

creature of extraordinary symbolic power' (643) forged from the fragments of old myths as well as more recent scientific discoveries, and marrying misty New Age spiritual aspirations to more clear-headed (if not always clearly articulated) environmental concerns (626).

This, broadly speaking, is the 'new whale' of Winton and Pash, freshly fashioned from the late twentieth-century mesh of postcolonial politics and New Age environmentalism, but this 'new whale' doesn't necessarily have new habits; on the contrary, it simultaneously occupies a number of different time frames, in only some of which it is 'new' and in far more of which it precariously survives as a historical remnant (Winton) or, metaphorically at least, as the last of its kind (Pash). What is more, the nature of this survival is unclear. In both texts—albeit more explicitly in Winton's—whales are transitional creatures of eschatological time, which is itself split between a 'time of salvation' and a 'time of crisis' (Schwarz, 2000: 27); and in which both of these temporalities take on ecological dimensions that, depending on perspective, locate the time of salvation either in an anticipated future or as already past. For most Christian theologians, contemporary environmental concerns belong to the 'time of crisis'. Hans Schwarz, for instance, sees 'the anticipatory power of eschatology [as giving us] gives us the incentive for stopping the exploitation of our environment and for preventing our own self-destruction' (204), although he does not rule out the less attractive possibility that 'through our neglect and wanton destruction we might involuntarily bring the eschaton upon ourselves' (196). For Christopher Partridge, however, the 'eschatological scenarios' conjured up by many contemporary (especially New Age) environmental movements betray despair of 'a political or religious transformation of the world, [envisaging instead] cataclysmic intervention of a divine, otherworldly, or superhuman kind' (Partridge, 2008: 192). In some of these

scenarios, there is a fear that things have been left too late: that the possibility of salvation no longer exists or, if it does, that its time has already effectively passed. Eschatological time, in this apocalyptic mode, gives way to a time of extinction that instantiates the slow but inexorable 'unravelling of intimately entangled forms of life' (van Dooren 2014: 12; see also above). Stranding—the last actions of last whales—is the motif that best captures the ambivalent nature of eschatological time as it applies to cetacean species, and to a cetacean imaginary in which whales are seen as morally freighted portents of an uncertain future as well as 'supernaturally physical' remnants of a destructive past (Hoare, 2009: 30).

Conclusion: Strandings

It still remains unknown what causes mass whale strandings, though the scientific literature lists a number of possible contributing factors that range from 'a Malthusian instinct for the preservation of the species' to navigational difficulties to the workings of genetic memory in relation to the evolutionary past (Hoare, 2009: 304). Strandings are in turn baffling and disturbing for those who witness them. Beached whales have historically been taken for gifts from the gods, but also interpreted as evil omens (Hoare, 2009: 305); depending on which of these interpretations is favoured, some indigenous cultures have lured whales into the shallows in a kind of welcome ceremony (Roman, 2006: 38), while others now weep at the sight, doing all they can to free its victims, which operate as they once did in medieval Europe as 'signs that all is not right with the world' (Roman, 2006: 179).

The motif of stranding in Shallows is similarly Janus-faced, interpreted by some (e.g. Queenie Cookson) as a kind of suicide without redemption, a futile act of

self-extinction, and by others (e.g. Georges Fleurier) as a complex sacrificial ritual: 'Death is a testament', he says in conversation with Queenie, 'One can learn a great deal about the life and mind of something from the manner in which it dies' (Winton, 1985: 47). While Fleurier appears—for once—to be right, it is moot how much if anything is learned, either more generally from Winton's cetacean fable or more specifically from the nocturnal scene of mass stranding, which is as appalling as it is predictable, with which it ends. The circumstances are worth recounting. Queenie and her estranged husband Cleve, who have recently been reconciled, are woken by the familiar sounds of humpback whales, joyfully interpreting these as the sign of a return to normality; for Angelus has been anything but normal for a good while now, and earlier whale sightings, while still occasionally touched with foreboding, had held out the promise of a return to seasonal rhythms as well as a reabsorption into the older—ancient—histories connected to ancestral memory and deep time (13, 79). But this latest return has nothing reassuring about it:

> Rapid scalar movements, changes of tone, sounds of unmistakable emotion came to them, and the Cooksons dressed and rushed outside with a torch and ran down the wet sand in the rain and shone the torch and saw the huge, stricken bodies lurching in the shallows. Queenie screamed. Surf thundered and the night was images in torch beams. Masses of flesh and barnacles covered the sand, creeping up, floundering, suffocating under their own weight. A pink vapour from spiracles descended upon Cleve and Queenie as they moved between the heaving monuments. (290)

This disastrous failure of navigation—if that is what it is—is thrown upon the reader, who struggles as Queenie and Cleve do to make sense of self-destructive actions that seem, at one and the same time, so dense with meaning yet so incomprehensible to those who witness them and are seemingly as powerless to stop them as they are to intuit their cause. Winton's critics have struggled too, with John P Turner, who initially seems to favour a 'religious' reading based on the apocalyptic return of the Leviathan, eventually precipitated back into a series of empty rhetorical questions: 'Where is the release from suffering and the escape from guilt to be found?' (1993: 85). As Turner lamely concludes, 'the final, climactic moments of the book are ambiguous ones, with all the complexity of Christian eschatology' (85). This is true, but misses the point that 'religion' no more provides an adequate explanation than does 'science' for some of the things that happen in Winton's novel. Compare the following, detailed explanation of stranding from Marks, the novel's self-designated 'strandings expert':

> There's a heap of theories, you know [Marks explains to Queenie]. The echo-location faults are the most popular at the moment, like the whaletrap theory. You see, when a pod of whales is moving north along a complex coast with inlets and coves and deep bays they sometimes come into a bay which is so deep and big with a sweeping headland that in order to get out again they might have to swim south for a distance. You know, exactly in the opposite direction their migratory senses tell them to. Their whole beings compel them to move north – to escape they must move south. They get distressed, hesitate long enough in the swell which is often heavy – or the tide – and they can get caught in the shallows […] Whales don't operate their best in shallow water.

> Very flat, long, shelving beaches are their 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. (150-151)

This is fine as far as it goes, but like much of the rest of the text it leaves the reader wondering how much of its language should be treated metaphorically; for it seems clear that one of the fundamental problems both in the novel and for a reader of the novel is how to go about interpreting signs (Thomas, 2008). The whale is itself a sign, and an arbitrary one at that, which makes for all kinds of interpretative difficulties; as Daniel Coupar recalls from Angelus's wartime years, soldiers on the look-out for submarines would sometimes breathlessly claim to have confirmed a sighting, only to have it reconfirmed as a whale (Winton, 1985: 78). If, on another level, the whale is much more than a sign, the problem is that it has continued to be interpreted allegorically, even as its massive body has itself been turned into an allegorical ruin, raw material for something else (Hoare, 2009).[6]

Times of crisis usually have the effect of multiplying signs: hence the hyperactive semiosis of Shallows, which draws to some extent, as Winton himself acknowledges, on the even richer semiotic resources of Moby-Dick. The more-than-human[7] corpses and carcasses that litter Winton's text function as both remains and reminders, as temporal signs—deictic markers—whose meanings shift from one location to another, depending on each new temporal context in which they are found. Eschatology cannot solve this semantic problem; it can only demonstrate it, shifting as eschatological thought does between alternative temporal registers in which finality is always over the horizon, either situated in some yet-to-be-decided future or

embedded in some yet-to-be-acknowledged past. Even extinction cannot solve the problem insofar as it draws attention to the multiple futures it forecloses, each subtended by an evolving species that, by definition, is 'always becoming different from, other than, itself' (Van Dooren, 2014: 38). This is not fatalism any more than even the most melancholic strands of contemporary extinction theory imply a meek abandonment to the various ends and endings they imagine—to the accumulated 'tomorrows of non-existence', to borrow Claire Colebrook's felicitous phrase (2014a: 43). Rather, as Colebrook suggests (2014b: 148), it is a way of conceiving of a world that is no longer defined by the human will to survive, a world in which whale strandings—whales themselves —are not deathly portents, but complex manifestations of a life that co-exists with humanity, but is not reducible to human understandings of history, still less to the possible futures or non-futures that human beings might imagine for themselves.

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[1] As Claire Colebrook argues, there are three senses of extinction: the sixth great extinction event, the extinction by humans of other species, and self-extinction, which Colebrook defines in terms of 'the capacity for us to destroy what makes us human' (2014a: 9). Like several other contemporary theorists of extinction, Colebrook links self-extinction to the category of the posthuman, which in its most extreme—some might say abstruse—philosophical form invites the extinction of thought itself. Ray Brassier's challenging work, e.g. Nihil Unbound (2007), is probably the best example of this latter, detaching philosophical thinking from the life of the planet to speculate on the possibility of 'thinking a world without thought' (2007: 227; see also Apter, 2013: 337).

[2] Christian theologians and philosophers generally distinguish eschatology, the doctrine of last things, from apocalypticism, which primarily concerns itself with revelation and uncovering, though both tend to be interchangeably associated in the popular imagination with lurid visions of the 'end times' and/or 'the end of the world'. Apocalypticism, despite the various fundamentalisms with which it is linked, is rife with ambiguity, not least over how to interpret biblical literature, with the Book of Revelation sometimes being read as a means of making sense of worldly suffering, but at other times as a true and detailed prediction of either past or future events (Walls, 2008: 13; see also Skrimshire, 2010).

[3] Akira Lippit's Electric Animal (2000) presents an interesting case for the 'spectrality' of the animal under the conditions of modernity, following Derrida's argument that 'the presence of the animal must first be extinguished for the human being to appear' (Lippit, 2000: 8). For Lippit, the 'spectral animal' is at once a symbol and a symptom of modernity, but as Nicole Shukin convincingly counter-argues, animals have not 'disappeared'; rather they continue—consider the whale—to be substantial material presences, and to be exploited as such (Shukin, 2009). It is one thing to say that the idea of the animal disappears, but another to say that animals physically disappear. As Shukin points out, Lippit is more interested in animals as philosophical figures than physical beings—which risks turning his own argument on its head.

[4] Wry wordplay is a feature of Winton's work. As most of its commentators have pointed out, Shallows plays on several different connotations of the title word, which is associated with both the frivolous (shallow thinking) and the hazardous (shallow water) in the text.

[5] This grisly conclusion is withheld from the truncated version of the diaries that finds it way to Cleve Cookson, while Daniel Coupar—the withholder—arguably prevents himself from meeting the same fate (Turner, 1993). However, at the end of the novel it remains unclear what has actually happened to Daniel Coupar, and the possibility remains that a history of self-destruction has repeated itself, a pattern throughout the novel that is apparently reinforced by its final image of the stranded whales.

[6] While I have not followed up on this here, it is difficult to resist the temptation to read Shallows against the work of the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose famous analogy between allegories and ruins is certainly relevant to Winton's text. Also relevant are Benjamin's equally well-known theses on the philosophy of

history: for instance, Angelus and its inhabitants bear more than passing resemblance to Benjamin's most celebrated figure, the 'angel of history', who is driven irresistibly into a possibly catastrophic future while piled before him is the wreckage of the past (see Benjamin, 1969).

[7] The 'more-than-human' has become a key concept for contemporary ecological philosophy, confirming the view that human beings share the world with many other species, but also challenging the view that humans have a special dispensation within it. For different applications of the concept, see the work of David Abrams (1997) and Donna Haraway (2007).