
Essays

Shadows Without Light: Zen and Blackfellas in *Cloudstreet*

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For three years I participated in a Sydney conference called Religion, Literature and the Arts (1997-1999). Though only one formal paper was presented on Winton, in general discussions an enthusiastic and sizeable Christian contingent talked dearly of Winton as one of their own. While there is much in his work to support the idea that he is a Christian writer of sorts, Winton's existential view is far more eclectic and varied than expressive of allegiance to one faith or one tradition. There is much in Cloudstreet that is redolent with aspects of Zen Buddhism, ones which also find expression in the Australian Aboriginal world view which he includes in the novel. This paper recognizes that it is reductive both in its treatment of Buddhist philosophy and Aboriginal spirituality, only scratching the surface of both. It also does not seek to denigrate a Christian interpretation of the work, or argue that other traditions being described herein are some how "better". What it attempts to do in its explication de texte is to explore aspects of the characters' lives as Winton describes them which do not sit comfortably with mainstream Christian thought. Winton, probably unconsciously, includes both Buddhist and Aboriginal perspectives in Cloudstreet in a vigorous and poetic attempt to describe the complex lot of each of his characters and the mysterious universe they perforce inhabit.

Hegel suggests that everything involves its own negation. The word *Cloudstreet* is no exception, its contradiction inherent in its two syllables; while *street* is solid, matter-of-fact, corporeal and here and now, *cloud* connotes weightlessness, distance, and illusion—perhaps even spirituality. What kind of heaven and earth does Winton create in his novel where both spheres of existence play a part in the working out of the lives of his characters? In one sense this title seems locked into a dualism between real life and otherworldliness, while at the same time combining the two seemingly mutually exclusive concepts into one interrelated mode of being. The novel itself moves from a catalogue of dualities towards an acceptance of non duality and the interrelatedness of existence.

Zen

Western philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant included various theories of dualism in their work, while those who followed them such as Aristotle, Spinoza and Whitehead tried to either ignore or work around those theories of a dualism described by or problematic to their elders.¹ In one sense Buddhism was also a reaction against the earlier Hindu notion of the inevitability of dualism of mind and matter which Zen Buddhism, in particular, claims to have overcome. Christianity ultimately rests on the duality of self and other, the ultimate other being the Godhead. Christian salvation is the salvation or apotheosis of the self. Buddhism being non-theist is more able to rationalize the distinction between the self and other, between mind and matter. In

most schools of Buddhist thought, *nirvana* (in Sanskrit being “blown out”) captures the essence of the end of self, of the desires which make it up; it is the overcoming of the duality which self demands. It is not that we don’t exist at all in this view, it is that our sense of personal existence belongs to a lower truth, whereas such elusive concepts as non-duality and *nirvana* belong to a higher truth. Truth is relative, and Buddhists are much happier with that notion than are members of fundamental wings of the Christian world. This is articulated by Chinese Master Chi-tsang’s (594-623) theory of Double Truth which in turn represents a restating of Nagarjuna’s (100-200) Middle Way. At its simplest level “common people take all things are really *yu* (having being, existent) and know nothing about *wu* (having no being, non-existent). Therefore the Buddhas have told them that all things are *yu* is the common sense truth, and to say that all things are *wu* is the higher sense of truth.” He goes on to argue that both exist at the same time on a multiplicity of levels, and that what is “*yu* is simultaneously what is *wu*.”² Dualism and non-Dualism can only be understood to exist by the negation of one by the other, which takes us back the Hegelian notion that opens this paper. Much of this Buddhist manner of thinking is close to the heart of *Cloudstreet*.

In the novel nine-year-old Samson “Fish” Lamb drowns when on a family fishing expedition. Olive Lamb, his doughty, implacable mother, brings him back to life through sheer force of concrete will, although what at first seems to be miraculous turns out to be otherwise, for the resurrected Fish is alive but not quite normal, seemingly arrested in a permanent infantile impasse. After initially proclaiming the modern Christian miracle to their Western Australian country town Church of Christ congregation, the Lambs must face the embarrassing reality of the horrible joke God seems to have played on them. Fish is there and not there, the same but different. Their *quid-pro-quo* kind of Christianity cannot withstand this shameful assault, so the walls of their life-long held beliefs tumble. How could God save Fish but not save him at the same time? As newly converted agnostics they head for the nearest big city, Perth, where they rent half of a huge decaying mansion recently inherited by the broke and ne’er-do-well Pickles family.

On the narrative level *Cloudstreet* is a heartwarming description of the rumbustious saga of the lives of the two families which share little in common but the central corridor dividing the house. The action moves from the closing years of World War II to the early sixties, when the inevitable happens and Fish Lamb drowns for a second time; the novel begins and ends with Fish’s drowning.

The second drowning is no surprise for the reader, for throughout the long novel whenever he is near water, Fish must be tied to a tree or the seat of a boat to stop him plunging himself into the kind of eternity he narrowly escaped in the first place. At the end of the novel he finally has his wish:

The water.

And the mirror it makes.

Ah, the water, the water, the water....

Fish leans out and the water is beautiful. All that country below, the soft winy country with its shifts of colour, its dark, marvelous call.

Fish goes out sighing, slow, slow, to the water that smacks him kisses when he hits. Down he slopes into the long spiral, drinking, drinking his way into the tumble past the dim panic of muscle and nerve into a queer bursting fullness. And a hesitation, a pause for a few moments. I’m a man for that long. I feel my manhood, I recognize myself whole and human, know my story just that long, long enough to see how far we’ve come, how we’ve all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us, and I’m Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this, and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me.³

How to read this death? It is neither the pathetic death of a half-wit, nor a tragic or ironic end to the novel; it bears none of the conventional horror of suicide, the tone exultant and even Romantic. There is no hint of the kind of salvation Christianity expects (it is not an apotheosis of self). *Cloudstreet* has all the verve and vivacity of a comic novel, but it ends in a problematically positive death instead of the marriage which conventions expect.

In the passage above there is something perplexing and intriguing about Winton's views of Fish's self as something fluid, constantly changing, insignificant—he is a man for a “few moments”. These few moments of death encapsulate seconds while at the same time they incorporate a whole universe. Several commonplace Buddhist notions find themselves expressed in this, the novel's conclusion. Against the magnificence of time and space, the individual is insignificant. Life is presented as a moment of suffering, what Winton calls “the dim panic of muscle and nerve”. There is, in the passage, an unresolved interplay between *wu* and *yu*. On one level of perception, Fish can feel his manhood, his subjectivity, his personal existence. Yet paradoxically, this is not ultimately who he is. His *wu* Self is the half-wit who can't initially see beyond the mirror surface of the water or the fleeting sense of himself. But these moments of subjectivity are challenged by the third *yu* self which “bursts into the moon, stars of who I really am”—an “Everyplace” Me that has much more in common with the elusive concept of Nirvana, which relies on the non-dual and the interrelatedness of existence, than it does with a Christian view of salvation. In the Platonic-Augustinian tradition the greatest aim for the soul and the self is Heavenly apotheosis: Nolan Pliny Jacobson feels this view exalts “static being over becoming and change...”⁴. The Christian transposition of soul from earth to heaven is rebirth in the simple sense of the word. And although the Buddhist notion of Nirvana is as ineffable as attempts to know the Christian God, it is commonly accepted by most Buddhist creeds that Nirvana witnesses not the passage of someone going to Heaven but rather the incorporation of individuality into it. Not the apotheosis of self, but its universal ingestion; not rebirth but re-becoming.

In Winton's description, what actually happens to Fish? Does he exist or, in merging with something universal, cease to exist? Does he become part of an all encompassing One? If he still exists after death is the novel ending with the promise of a kind of eternalism, or if he is totally annihilated as Fish does the novel close with a promise of nihilism? Winton's description of Fish's death incorporates both possibilities but confirms neither. What it does do for the reader is to suggest a middle way—Fish does not entirely disappear, but he does not stay the same. We witness an almost explosive moment of change which concurs with the original literal Sanskrit Nirvana which means “blown out”. Sangharakshita's view of Nirvana as seen from the Middle Path mirrors Winton's position:

Transcending both affirmative and negative predictions, Nirvana may be thought of as occupying a middle position ‘between’ or better still ‘above’ the two extreme conceptions of existence and non-existence. Metaphysically this amounts to a repudiation of eternalism and nihilism....⁵

The middle way has Fish as “Everyplace” and “Me”. He can hold the tentative subjective sense of himself as “a man for that long... long enough to see how far we've come”—and/or he can become unstuck in space and time well beyond his own subjectivity, to borrow the wording and the predicament of Kurt Vonnegut's hero in *Slaughterhouse 5*. This becoming part of the universe is from one perspective “who I really am.” Jacobsen could be concluding for Winton (or *vice versa*) when he writes that there

is a new Many in every momentary emerging One. What makes it possible to speak for the Buddhist nirvana is that all acquisitive feelings attached to previous moments can be eliminated in the richness of the present

moment. The now is forever, the fleeting instant preserved in the vast interrelatedness of existence.⁶

Winton then uses the complex moment of Fish's death to reveal self as process rather than as fixed entity, while at the same time blurring discrete boundaries between person and place, subject and object, life and death, destruction and exaltation—in fact the very dualities which many in the West use to define a place in the world. In Fish Lamb's final self ("who I really am") Winton presents us with what might be called a state of undifferentiation where One is All and All is One, and in doing so he disallows any notion of simple subject or simple object.

In choosing the title *Cloudstreet* Winton, begins his philosophic journey with place, though I have already suggested that he is using the word obliquely. This is also the case with much Zen thought. It too begins with place—either through a disarmingly simple description of something in the landscape ("mountains are mountains; waters are waters") or through a seemingly nonsensical statement about it ("all the rivers run backwards"). Winton follows this tradition by stating that his street is made from clouds. Cryptic or disarmingly straightforward, these statements actually present a springboard from which Buddhist attitudes about the phenomenal world/non-existent world can be understood. Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin, a Zen scholar from the T'ang Dynasty presents his life's spiritual/philosophic journey through interaction with place. In the following he is alluding to his version of Chi-tsang's Double Truth:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, 'Mountains are mountains; waters are waters.'

After I got the insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.'

But now, having obtained the abode of final rest [that is Awakening], I say, 'Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters'.⁹

I am intrigued by the fact that Abe's translation of this passage chooses the word "really" and that Winton also selects the same adverb to describe Fish's final perception of who he "really" is. In the first part of Ch'ing Yuan's tripartite journey he seemingly existed in a world governed by dualities which begin with subject looking at object. This is unenlightened man in the Buddhist view for it is predicated on demands from the ego—the mountain only makes sense because I see it. The demands and desires of the ego are the cause of the greatest suffering as described in Shakyamuni's Four Noble Truths. Bishop Stephen Neill describes the radically startling Buddhist solution to this kind of self-centered desire: "abolish the entity, and therewith we shall abolish the sufferer; abolish the ego, which believes that it suffers, and there will no longer be anything that can suffer...."¹⁰ In Fish's death he is a man (an ego) for a short time only, only "long enough to see how far we've come, how we've all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us...." The moment of Fish's death is the moment he can observe his own self or ego as being not a suffering subjective certainty, but something temporary, ever changing, and ultimately overcome. Overcoming suffering is central to Winton's presentation of character and action in *Cloudstreet*.

Amongst many other things, this novel is an entertaining catalogue of human inadequacies and limitations, capabilities and strengths, but it is a catalogue which centers on one universal for every character therein—the inevitability of suffering. The first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, that all life is suffering, is adequately born out by the inventory of suffering which is replete in the homely adventures of Winton's characters. Sam Pickles, inveterate gambler and failed father, speaks for all of them when he searches for the words to describe his existential inability to escape from suffering:

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 cruelest bloody joke. (161)

Sam views his lot at any given moment through his perception of an inescapable punitive God, who gives only to take away, a God who is part fate, part Lady Luck. Sam accepts this duality unquestioningly, hoping that on days when this force is out to get him he can stay in bed and avoid the inevitable. While Sam's escape from suffering is to play possum, his blowsy wife, Dolly, resorts to a more active diversion through varied and frequent extra-marital sex and the consumption of liberal quantities of alcohol. She fights desire with desire, thereby multiplying the kind of suffering she must endure. On the other side of the corridor in the house the Lambs, Lester and Oriel, who have tried desperately to banish their God, spend twenty frustrating years of incompleteness because their ultimate object has gone and they have nothing with which to replace it. They are subjects in search of an object who cannot envisage salvation without a replacement for their banished God. And, of course, the collective suffering of the parents is passed on to the many children who inhabit No. 1 Cloudstreet, with the eventual exception of Quick and Fish Lamb, through whom Winton will explore the discovery of an ameliorating non-duality.

Quick Lamb, a tall, lanky shambling young man, is so named because he is, basically, not quick at all. But he is decent, down-to-earth, sincere and deliberate. That he lacks intellectuality is something Winton will view as something other than as a demerit, for it will leave him open to discoveries that are unreasonable or non-rational (in the way that all rivers run backwards is unreasonable and non-rational). Guilt about Fish's first drowning leaves him with self-hatred and shame, affects which he expresses through the pasting on his bedroom wall of newspaper clippings revealing images of war and suffering around the globe. They act as an objective correlative to his inner disquietude, constantly responding to his "misery radar". At the same time he is also taking upon himself the sins of the world.

Quick feels the pressures of No.1 and those from the negativity of his wall pictures. His natural bent is towards the outdoors so he makes his bid for freedom in the bush, where he can live independently for a while and exploit his most un-Buddhist skill—killing things. His aim is deadly, so he is in high demand on the wheat belt where the kangaroo population eats away at the income of the farmers. The job, however, is going to end prematurely, for Quick cannot escape a dream wherein he is the object of his own fire instead of the hapless animal. Subject becomes object. Quick accepts that this vision belongs to a higher reality than mere economics or profession, and it is through him that Winton again raises the possibility that a non-dual way of observing existence is not only possible, but at times unavoidable. Furthermore this perception carries with it a stringent ethical demand:

Then a strange thing begins. One night by the dam, as he waits for the roos, he hears a familiar bashing in the wheat and raises the rifle with the spotlight ready. He hears the hacking of breath and sees the crop swaying in the dark.... But it's a human, a man running shirtless in the light. His face is tough with fear, there's a sweat on him, and he runs right past and out of the light to the dark margins of bushland. Long after the runner is gone and the light turned out, Quick has the face burnt into his retina because that face is his.... He rolls a smoke and thanks God he didn't shoot. (204-5)

Here Quick Lamb is inhabiting the second sphere found in Ch'ing-yuan's life story where the eye, in this case his "retina", changes perspective. Now "mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters." Quick's version of this is comically antipodean: kangaroos are not kangaroos, and I am not simply me all of the time. In the subversion of subject-object duality, to quote from Suzuki, the "ego shell is broken and the 'other' is taken into its own body" and "we can say that the ego

has denied itself or the ego has taken its first steps towards the infinite.”¹¹

Remove the subject and the isolation of the object disappears, so the mountain disappears when the ego no longer demands it—this is an engaging Buddhist rewording of the koan-like suggestion in Mathew 17:20 that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. Fish’s death, and Quick’s epiphany in the wheat field contain the idea that however much we are individuals there are times when we cannot distinguish between ourselves and aspects of the objective world. This is the realm of *Mu*, a Japanese word which can be translated as “Nothingness” or “Emptiness”. Even allowing for the difficulties of translation, the mind disciplined in the rationality of duality has trouble understanding the point where everything meets in nothing, when Fish finds himself in the sun or when Quick sees himself as an Australian Aboriginal or a kangaroo. Despite the attempts of some in the Western tradition to escape from the rigors of duality, the Judao-Christian and Platonic heritage relies on it, the former separating spirit and flesh, heaven and earth, God and man, and the latter separating the world of the intellect from the world of the senses. Furthermore, reason in (which sits comfortably with dualism on the whole) is not only seen to be a valued asset, it has from time to time been described as the centre of our being. How can there be no self when common sense, empiricism, and the senses insist otherwise—I see that mountain therefore I am.

After a lecture by Zen scholar, Masao Abe, a bewildered Father de Weirdt speaks for those educated in this kind of Western thinking:

...what puzzles me is the concept of Nothingness. As you said in your lecture, ‘The realization of one’s Nothingness is the realization of one’s true Self, and ‘I am nothing whatsoever.’ If that is true, both in the ontological and in the actual sphere of life, what is the use of talking? What are we doing in this life if we are absolutely nothing?’¹²

Ch’ing Yuan’s second stage of undifferentiation when “mountains are not mountain” is founded on the Buddhist view of the interconnectedness of all things. The major aim of Buddhism (whatever the sect or tradition) is to relieve suffering through removing the influence of ego. It aims to connect followers to a greater reality existing beyond language, definition, doctrine, argument—a place of such fullness where nothing can be named. *Mu* implies a sphere where no single thing can be named since it is beyond the capacity of the intellect to do so. In the West, scholars have also tried to approach this state, such as Paul Tillich’s theonomous reasoning or Wittgenstein’s “mystery” which has been defined as the “immediate experience of unsayable qualities illuminating the face of the world.”¹³ In Zen, undifferentiation is something to do with the discovery in meditation that the “isness” of the mountain and the “isness” of self are deeply and thoughtlessly interconnected—or in Quick’s momentary “madness” when the animal world and the world of man are one in the same. Of course this kind of intuition cannot define, for the very act of defining Nothingness leads to the creation of something static which fails to capture it. The Buddhist notion that defining so often takes us away from the truth has had some support in the West since Heraclitus. According to Henri Bergson, the intellect which is “skillful in dealing with the inert is awkward the moment it touches the living; the intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.”¹⁴ For this reason, more than any other, Buddhism has always had a dynamic built-in deconstructive tendency, claiming to help followers through the limitations of illusion to an escape from it.

Buddhism is the only world religion (if indeed it is a religion) which ultimately insists, “Don’t believe a word I am telling you!” It also argues that philosophy must point to the unthinkable and the unthought. You cannot, both Heraclites and Ch’ing Yuan point out, step into

the same river twice, even though every sense will try to convince otherwise. Nor indeed does the same self step.

Blackfellas

In the images of Fish's death Winton reveals self as process, and existence as process. Fish is himself, but not himself: the universe is the universe but it is also part of him. On a lesser level this is so with Quick and his kangaroo interchange. Hajime Nakamura and Suzuki call this the "interrelatedness of existence" which allows for interconnected yet separate modes of being. *Cloudstreet* describes the struggles and suffering of the Lambs and the Pickles providing the plot, or linear history if you will. But behind and beyond this workaday community of everyday events are a set of modes of being which can only be approached through a non-rational view of place and time.

The Aboriginal presence in the novel helps to reinforce Winton's view of existence as fluid, interconnected, where history and now, me and you are somehow not entirely separate. It is a commonplace that most Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are based on synthesis and interconnectedness rather than on separation and individuality. The idea of the Aboriginal Totem Spirit is one that encapsulates the presupposition that things in nature which can give the illusion of being separate are, in fact, not. In *Cloudstreet* an Aboriginal is seen to be as "much a bird as he was a man" (62). Another, who plays the role of watchful guardian over Fish is also given the qualities of bird-man: "A dark man comes flying by the tree, you see the whites of his eyes and tingle with the rumours of glory" (178). Just before Fish dies for the second time this same totem appears almost to presage the rebecoming of the drowning man: "...a black man leaves the trees like a bird and goes laughing into the sun with a great hot breeze that rolls off the roof of the world" (422). It is more likely that some of the Buddhist perspectives Winton unwittingly includes in his existential novel are directly gleaned from his fascination with Aboriginality which contains certain spiritual qualities external to conventional Western thinking. For example, in the West we generally see religion as somehow separate from almost all other aspects of social and political organization. The watch-cry demanding the separation of church and state is merely one example of this. Nature, too, has been seen in the West as something to exploit for economic reasons or poetic sensibility, something we use or look at. For the traditional Aboriginal, religion, social structures, and nature are constantly and irreversibly interconnected.

At a simple level, Winton's inclusion of the Aboriginal ontology through the poetic metaphors he uses suggests the complete 40,000 years of Aboriginal history is part of every Australian whether we live with Aboriginals in the same street or have never met one at all. As the novel approaches its climax the interconnectedness of past and present, white and black becomes more obvious and more important to the outcome of the work. Winton does not allow the reader to think of the house at No. 1 Cloud Street as an inanimate object. It is personified throughout the novel. Because the Lamb side of the dwelling is a hive of activity led by the indefatigable domestic generalissimo, Olive, and the Pickles' side is the scene of passive lethargy and escape, the house resembles "an old stroke survivor paralyzed down one side" (59). The house "sighs at night but no one lets themselves listen. Except Fish" (187). Fish later tells Quick that "the house hurts" (307). Olive permanently retreats to sleep in a tent in the garden to avoid facing the very voices that Fish listens to daily—she isn't "the sort to argue with a living breathing house" (134). One source of the house's animation is the presence of shadows in the walls that have no corporeal reality to cast them. There is one room in the house without a window, the old library. The original

middle-class, bored spinster who owned the house was persuaded by her local clergyman to use her empty home as a residential institution for the domestic training of Aboriginal girls. "Missionary purpose come on her like the flu. Girls were procured and the house filled. She aimed to make ladies of them so they could set a standard for the rest of their sorry race" (36).

For the girls "procured"—a term usually reserved for staffing another kind of activity—the house was more like a prison than a place of liberation. One of the inmates killed herself in the library by taking rat poison. A few weeks later the philanthropist herself also dies, the victim of a heart attack while playing the piano in the same room, her nose hitting Middle C as her body slumps forward. Only the non-intellectual Fish (the man least affected by common sense and Reason) allows the soaked up spirits a present reality. He still hears Middle C constantly reverberating throughout the dwelling. Other characters see or hear the shadows in the walls but briefly: Rose Pickles, who will go on to marry Quick, hears crying in the walls but assumes the noise comes from one of the many living inhabitants. In a rare sober moment, Dolly Pickles meets the "ghost" of the old woman and falls down the stairs in fright; Sam Pickles also meets her once, immediately assuming she is a malevolent Lady Luck out to get him.

The inclusion of sprits in the wall is Winton's way of making the past part of the present, rendering history as wound up with the here and now. It is also a way of arguing that one Aboriginal death is going to leave an indelible mark on the white Australian community, recognized as such or not. In one of the most positive scenes in the novel, the love that Quick and Rose share in the library is going to assist in the liberation of the sprits to continue their own re-becoming at another level of continuation. Intimate love has multilinear repercussions above and beyond the immediate: "After they're dressed and gone, hurrying out into the daylit house with the news for the world, their sudden love remains in the room, hanging like incense" (314).

Using the symbols of the wall spirits (inhibitors of Winton's *Domestic Dreamland*), and the ultimate liberating effect of love, the writer posits through poetic suggestion not only that the past is part of the present, but the present can affect the past, especially as they meet in an ever present creative now. The "worlds are still connected," he writes, "the lives still related and the Here still feels the pangs of history. Those who have gone before do not lose their feelings, only their bodies" (164).

When characters in the novel open themselves to the spirit of Aboriginal presence, and the modes of being they represent, they experience something approaching enlightenment. Towards the close of the novel, Sam Pickles thinks about selling the house, but he meets a singular black man who talks him out of it. Sam describes him as not quite belonging to the normal sensible world for his "shadow comes out on four sides... like a footy player under light at training". Sam is told not to "break a place" because "too many places are busted" (406). He takes the advice of this emissary and reverses his decision to sell. The submission that White Australia has much to gain from Black Australia is not uncommon in contemporary Australian fiction. Where Winton's view is original is in the way he uses the Aboriginal presence to emphasize themes of non-duality and interconnectedness.

If Sam gains from his contact with the Aboriginal man of shadows, it is Quick who most benefits, for he meets the same man on a number of occasions. Quick is driving away from the wheat belt after his odd vision where kangaroo and self are interchanged. He sees an Aboriginal hitching a ride, but in his preoccupation with his latest discovery he fails to stop as he normally would. Several kilometers down the road he sees the same man again. "Quick who isn't in the mood to think it through" picks him up. In a parody of the Christian sacrament (and an allusion to the parable of the loaves and fishes) they share a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread which seem to

be limitless. The fuel in the car replenishes itself, the gauge remaining on full. It is as if Quick and his new friend have become unstuck in time in a location where spatial orientation also loses conventional borders:

Quick taps the fuel gauge which seems to be on the blink. The wine and bread seem inexhaustible, and he has a good look at his passenger. He's never seen an Aborigine in a pinstripe suit before. The blackfella pulls out a fob watch as big as a plate and consults it.

How we doing fer time? asks Quick.
Aw, as well as can be expected.
Quick feels warm with wine, and emboldened.
Where you from mate?
Aw, all over.
I mean where's your family.
All over.

A second Christian parody comes out of subsequent meeting with this "black angel" when Quick is fishing. In the distance he sees the "figure of a man walking on the water and it made him laugh." And like his moment of atonement with the kangaroo, when he sees the man from time to time he cannot separate himself from the image of him. This too is unusual in contemporary Australian fiction where a white man becomes a black man psychologically and ritualistically. In the following scene there is almost a celebratory tone to the description. As he drives home

Quick kept seeing figures. All along the road every mile or so, some mad bugger would jump out waving from behind a karri tree. Half the time it would be that black bastard and the other half it was him. (218)

In another extract Quick meets the same Aboriginal when he is vaguely musing on the meaning of life. He asks the intimate stranger

Haven't you got a home to go to?
Not this side.
Quick looked across the river. Through the steam he thought he saw moving figures, dark outlines on the far bank.
Are you real?
The black fellow laughed. Are you? (367)

Quick finds himself in a rather delightful but challenging world where "nothing computes" any more. The presence of the black man with whom he identifies changes the way Quick thinks and feels about the world around him. He can no longer judge in terms of fixed ideas, rather is obliged to react with the concrete particular of one moment, however rational or non-rational that might be. He becomes an unconscious follower of Heraclitus and Bergson because he celebrates fluidity and change over the permanent placement of things into abstract categories of experience. Bergson feels that doing so is the major stumbling block in mainstream Western philosophy when it tries to "shrink reality into the measure of our ideas."¹⁵

Fish's importance in the novel lies in his inability to do this. He is the most open to perceiving the rich fluidity of the moment; it is he who has the least trouble accepting interconnectedness, though it sometimes causes him pain. He goes into a paroxysm of grief when they burn the guy on Guy Fawkes day since he cannot separate the idea of burning a representational body from the actuality of doing so. He constantly hears the house and its resident voices and sees the shadows without the source of light to reveal them. He has no trouble hearing

the spirits in the walls, the aboriginal girl who commits suicide 80 years before, and the piano playing philanthropist who dies a few days later. Fish inhabits a world where the living and dead meet—according to his father he is part alive and part dead himself. Nor can he separate the animal and human worlds, loving his pet pig who speaks in tongues only he can understand. Fish is so tenuously connected to the matter-of-fact world that he has to be tied to it physically to keep him there. “You know the rules”, Quick reminds Fish when they are out fishing. His reply is calm in this instance: “I have to have string” (305).

Fish is seen to inhabit Ch’ing Yuan’s middle phrase of undifferentiation when he leaves the world of simple object and subject behind. But how does this fit with the third phase when the Master returns to seeing “mountains as really mountains”? When Fish sees himself as he “really” is? In Fish and in the black angels of the novel the reader is encouraged to work in a sphere which relies neither on a pole of self or no self, of differentiation and undifferentiation. Nagarjuna strongly advises against casting our lot with one of the poles, criticizing “a oneness of everything without discrimination” because such will produce a “false equality or false sameness.”¹⁶ Allowing perception to look from the Middle Way allows for the here and the now and the body I have to live with, but also for the vast unspeakable current that underlies all life and exists beyond definition. This the Aboriginal sense of the Dreamtime. Theologians like Paul Tillich’s try to capture this in their “God beyond the God of Theism” or “Being Itself”.¹⁷ The Middle Way makes it possible to live with the fact that human beings must survive in the middle of the tension arc created by the two poles of existence and non-existence. Winton’s description of Fish’s process-death is finally posited through Ch’ing Yuan’s tripartite journey towards enlightenment and can be seen from the Middle Way. Fish in the sea as mirror object—“me” as illusion—and Fish as momentary whole man; undifferentiated Fish as moon and stars; then finally Fish in the middle of both Everyplace and Me, who he “really” is.

Cloudstreet is neither a Christian novel, nor a Buddhist apologia, nor Aboriginal propaganda. Winton does not set out to write a religious or philosophic tract. He writes a funny novel that is a delight to read. It is not a polemic which works from the hypothesis that one religious perspective is better than another. It does contain germs of thought from all three traditions, as it explores what it means to exist and not exist in this universe of ours. In trying to describe that, he comes to the same conclusions that other great traditions of thought provide. And he can’t help but agree, at least in part, with Quick Lamb who feels that “We all turn into the same thing, don’t we? Memories, shadows, worries, dreams. We all join up somewhere in the end” (402). Not a happy thought for fundamentalists of any creed.

1. For a brief summary of the Western treatment of dualism see William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996) 182-3.
2. Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1966) 243.
3. Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1998) 423-4. Hereafter pagination from this edition will appear in the body of the text.
4. Nolan Pliny Jacobson, *The Heart of Buddhist Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) 40.
5. Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Methods Through the Ages* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1997) 160.
6. Jacobson 108.
7. Ch’ing Yuan Wei-hsin (Tang Dynasty) quoted in Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989) 4.

8. Hsueh-tou (Song Dynasty) quoted in Sir Herbert Read & Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Art* (Tokyo: Asahi Press, undated) 36.
9. Quoted in Abe 4.
10. Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 107.
11. D.T. Suzuki, *Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 7.
12. Abe 194.
13. Jacobson fn 69, 156.
14. Quoted in Jacobson 37.
15. Quoted in Jacobson 54.
16. Abe 177.
17. Reese 771-2.

