

ZEN NOTIONS OF LANDSCAPE AND SELF
REFLECTED IN TIM WINTON'S *CLOUDSTREET*

George Watt

Nine-year-old Samson "Fish" Lamb drowns when on a family fishing expedition. Seemingly through her concrete will, his mother brings him back to life; but what seems miraculous turns out otherwise, for Fish is alive but abnormal. The Lambs' *quid pro quo* kind of Christianity cannot withstand the assault. As newly converted atheists they head for Perth, where they rent half of the Pickles' decaying mansion, where for the next twenty years they swim in their own sea of incompleteness. And for the next twenty years whenever he is near water, Fish must be tied to a tree or the seat of a boat to stop him plunging himself into eternity. Inevitably at the end of the novel he escapes, Winton describing his death in this manner:

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, marvellous call...

... 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 recognise myself whole and human, know my story for just that long, long enough to see how 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.¹

How to read this death? It is neither the pathetic death of a half-wit, nor a tragic or ironic end; it bears no horror of suicide for the tone is exultant, perhaps even Romantic.

And in it there is something perplexing and intriguing about Winton's view of Fish's Self as something fluid and changing. At first he is the half wit in the mirror surface of the sea. Then the whole man who speaks briefly. And after that a third Self which "bursts into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am" – an Everyplace Me that has much in common





with the elusive Buddhist notion of nirvana as Fish describes its coming on. Winton uses the complex moment of Fish's death to reveal Self as process rather than as a fixed entity, at the same time blurring boundaries between person and place, subject and object, life and death – in fact the very dualities which we use to define our selves and our place in the world. In Fish Lamb's final self ("who I really am") we discover what might be called a state of undifferentiation, where One is All and All is One.

Zen philosophy always begins with place – either through a disarmingly simple description of something in the landscape ("mountains are mountains; waters are waters"²) or through a seemingly nonsensical statement about it ("all the rivers run backwards"³). Cryptic or straightforward, these statements actually contain the essences of traditional Buddhist thinking, and as such they are the springboards from which all Zen argument will proceed. Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin (Zen Master from the T'ang Dynasty) even presents his life history through place:

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

After I got an 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'.⁴

At the beginning of this Zen journey we seemingly live in a world governed by dualities which begin with me looking at the mountain, subject and object. But we are not really involved in a simple look at scenery, for Wei-hsin is obliquely inviting us into the cornerstone of all Buddhist teaching, the four Noble Truths. One – all existence includes suffering; two – the cause of suffering can be understood; three – suffering can be overcome. (In this lies the primary aim of Buddhism.) Suffering can be relieved because much of its primal cause is to be found within the psyche, not without. The cause of much human suffering is the trenchant desire of the ego-self for possessions, for gratification, but above all for permanence or glorification. Bishop Stephen Neill describes the radically startling Buddhist solution to

this kind of egocentric suffering: "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..."⁵ This seems to call for nothing less than the banishment of the notion of subject and object. So Wei-hsin's first stage in establishing a subject-object duality initially seems to run contrary to the central intention of the Buddhist way.

Which takes us to his second-stage discovery that "mountains are not mountains". Remove the subject and the object disappears, even something as big as a mountain – a different kind of faith for removing mountains. What Wei-hsin discovers is quite similar in spirit to Fish's momentary perception: I have trouble distinguishing between myself and other things in the universe. They are in the Buddhist realm of *Mu*, a Japanese word that has been unwisely translated into "Nothingness". Even allowing for difficulties in translation, the rational Western mind, disciplined in notions of duality, has great trouble understanding Wei-hsin's second stage, where Everything meets in Nothingness – where Fish finds who he really is. Our Hebraic and Greek inheritances are ardently dualistic, the former separating spirit and flesh, God and creature, etc., and the latter separating the world of intellect from the world of the senses. Furthermore, reason has not only been accepted by many as our most valued function, it has often been posited as the very centre of our being. So how can there be no self when common sense and corporeal reality insist otherwise: I see that mountain, therefore I am.

After a lecture by Kyoto School philosopher Masao Abe, a puzzled Father de Weirdt speaks for the Western mind:

... what ... puzzles me is the concept of Nothingness. As you said in your lecture, "The realisation of one's Nothingness is the realisation 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?⁶

Wei-hsin's second stage of undifferentiation when "mountains are not mountains" is founded on the Buddhist view of the interconnectedness of

all things. I have said the two aims of Buddhism are to relieve suffering, and to remove the power of the ego. The third is to connect us to a greater reality that exists beyond language, beyond definition, beyond doctrine, beyond argument, even or especially beyond religion – a place of absolute fullness where we can name no-thing. *Mu* is better translated as a place where no single thing can be named, since it is beyond the capacity of the intellect to do so. We could be working here with Tillich's theonomous reasoning – I need to do more reading on that – or we could be close to Wittgenstein's "mystery", which has been defined as the "immediate experience of unsayable qualities illuminating the face of the world."⁷ In Zen terminology, undifferentiation is something to do with the discovery in meditation that the "isness" of the mountain and the "isness" of the self are deeply and mysteriously and for that thoughtless moment interconnected. Of course this kind of intuition cannot define, for in the very act of definition is the danger of creating the inert, of reducing instead of enriching. The Eastern notion that defining 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 characterised by a natural inability to comprehend life."⁸ In Buddhism we come close to these philosophers mentioned above who refuse to be part of Whitehead's footnote to Plato. They argue that philosophy must try to deal with the unthought and the unthinkable, the ever changing and the dynamic. You cannot, Heraclitus and Wei-sing and others insist, step into the same river twice, even though every sense and intellect will convince you that you are. Nor indeed does the same self do the stepping.

In the images of Fish's death we can actually see the Self as process, and undifferentiation in process. Fish is himself but not himself; the universe is the universe but he is a part of it. *Cloudstreet* is a novel that allows for two interconnected yet initially separate spheres of existence, separate because the average person tied to the workaday world cannot sense the dynamism and complexities of the other realm. *Cloudstreet* describes the

struggles and sufferings of the Lambs and the Pickles, what happens to them, and their daily problems. This is plot, or linear history if you will. But behind and beyond and around this world, Winton reveals a sphere which looks at the dynamics of place and time in a more complex and intertwined manner.

The Aboriginal presence in the novel helps to establish this non-rational sphere of existence which dynamically refuses to separate history and now, me and you. At its simplest level this suggests that the complete 40,000 year-old Aboriginal world is part of every Australian, whether we live with Aboriginals in the same street or have never met one at all. Mountains are easy to see, but the complex forces that make the past a woven part of our present remain unseen to the normal, rational eye in the novel. As the novel approaches its climax, the interconnection of the two spheres becomes more obvious. Sam Pickles is thinking about selling the house, but he meets a strange black man who talks him out of it. Sam describes him as not quite belonging to the normal world for his "shadow comes out on four sides of him like a footy player under lights at training." Sam is told not to "break a place" because "too many places are busted" (406). He doesn't in the end.

In another extract Quick Lamb, Fish's brother, meets this same Aborigine (or perhaps another one) when he is vaguely pondering the meaning of life. He asks the 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? (386)

Quick also unwittingly attests to the interconnectedness of all things when he leaves his lucrative job culling kangaroos. One night when peering through the sight on his rifle he sees himself running away, desperately

trying to escape with the kangaroos. In the imagination, subject-object undifferentiation is not exactly unheard of.

But it is Fish who has the most comprehensive vision of interconnectedness. He constantly hears the house whispering, and has no trouble seeing two spirits in the walls. The first is an aboriginal girl who eighty years before was driven to suicide by a perverse do-gooder who used the house as a training institution for the domestication of the blacks. The philanthropist dies soon after the girl, and does so while she is playing the piano, her face falling and hitting middle C. Fish can still hear the note reverberating. He inhabits a private world where the living and the dead meet; according to his father he is part alive and part dead himself. Nor can he separate the human and the animal world, loving his pet Pentecostal pig who speaks in tongues that 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. "I have to have string" (305).

I have been talking about that middle phase of undifferentiation in Wei-hsin's tripartite passage as it appears all but obliquely in *Cloudstreet*. But there is also a third phase when he sees "mountains as really mountains". Does he go back to square one? Yes and no. He is actually restating in a simple form the great Nagarjuna's notion of the Middle Way. We have gone from differentiation to undifferentiation, two poles of all self and no self. Too much loyalty to either pole means we get lost. Nagarjuna "severely criticises a oneness of everything without discrimination as a false equality or a false sameness."⁹ Following the Middle Way allows for the here and the now and the body I have to live with, and for the vast unspeakable current that underlies all life and exists beyond definition. But more than that, the Middle Way makes it easy to suspend yourself calmly on top of the tension arc created by the two poles. Winton's description of Fish's process death or process becoming or whatever we might call it, is finally posited in a middle way, and all three of Wei-hsin's stages are included by Winton:

Fish in the sea as mirror object and as whole man; undifferentiated Fish as moon and stars; then finally Fish in the middle of both Everyplace and Me.

In this paper I am not trying to be a missionary for Buddhism. *Cloudstreet* is not a Buddhist novel. What I am suggesting is this: that the novel earnestly explores what it really means *to be* in this world of ours. Winton cannot capture his sense of being in one religious tradition, unconsciously borrowing from several and agreeing with Quick Lamb, at least in part, when he says 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.

REFERENCES

¹ Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1998), 423-4. Hereafter pagination from this edition will be cited in the body of the text.

² Ch'ing Yuan Wei-hsin (T'ang Dynasty) quoted in Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 4.

³ Hsueh-tou (A.D. 980-1052) quoted in Sir Herbert Read & Dr. Daisetz Susuki, *Zen and Art* (Tokyo: Asahi Press, undated), 36.

⁴ Abe, 4.

⁵ Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 107.

⁶ Quoted in *Zen and Western Thought*, 194.

⁷ Nolan Pliny Jacobson, *The Heart of Buddhist Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 156, fn. 69.

⁸ Quoted in Jacobson, 37.

⁹ Abe, 177.