

LOOKING INTO THE LIGHT: TIM WINTON'S INTERLEAVED CONTINUING PLACE

Veronica Brady
University of Western Australia

"Magical realism" is a modish term. But it is not usually applied to many contemporary Australian writers, with the possible exception of Peter Carey, Murray Bail or the less well-known Gerald Murnane. This is not surprising, of course. Its epistemological questioning, its sense of multiple, often contradictory levels of reality is not a characteristic of Australian culture today, whatever may be said of classics like *Such Is Life* in the past. But Tim Winton's ninth book, *Cloudstreet*, recently awarded the British Deo Gloria prize for religious writing, is a work with all the theatricality, the surprising inventiveness, historical awareness and spiritual inventiveness of a Gabriel Marquez or a Salman Rushdie.

Set in rural Western Australia and Perth from the last years of World War II up to the middle 60s it gives a robustly accurate account of the lives of two ordinary families, the Pickles and the Lambs. But it also generates a sense of something magical, some secret and overmastering influence, which produces surprising, even amazing, results in their lives. In contrast with the ghostly quality of much contemporary writing, the somewhat sinister loneliness the sense of being adrift in a void devoid of purpose, ruled by chance and necessity, to be found in the work of writers as different as Elizabeth Jolley or Robert Drewe, in *Cloudstreet* Winton's imagination is married to the world, fusing the two so that one seems incomplete without the other. Writers like Marquez or Rushdie strike a pessimistic note, creating worlds overshadowed if not overwhelmed by the terror of history, but his vision is optimistic, his mode is romance rather than irony, and his scope cosmological, not just historical.

For that reason *Cloudstreet* has a naive, even to some a childlike quality which makes many Australian critics uneasy. Accustomed to irony, they find innocence difficult to deal with. But I suspect that Spanish readers, reading within a tradition which includes Cervantes, Calderon and St John of the Cross will probably be more attuned to the complex resonances which I would like to discuss here. But first a brief outline of the novel's content.

Its characters are simple, unsophisticated people, the Australian equivalent, if you like, of peasants like Sancho Pancho, earthy and shrewd though not without ideals and longings. As Northrop Frye points out, there is a "proletarian" element in romance. As well as being poor, both families are shadowed by bad luck. The rough and tumble Pickles family are driven from Geraldton to Perth when Sam, the father, loses the fingers of his right hand in an accident at work mining guano on the islands off the coast towards the end of World War II. Similarly the God-fearing Lambs, small farmers in the south west, are also forced by poverty and bad luck to leave their farm

and come to Perth. There the two families share a large old ramshackle house which has been left to the luckless Sam by his only rich relation.

The novel then chronicles what happens to them there. But the interest however, falls on the people rather than events. We get to know Sam Pickles with his perennial bad luck, and dogged cheerfulness and equally dogged care for the battered and blowsy Dolly, his wife, and learn the secret of her long if rebellious unhappiness and watch their children Rose, Ted and Chub as they grow up, struggling to make something of themselves within the confines of their narrow society. The Lambs are equally vividly described; Lester "honest as filth", striving to provide for his family, his wife, Oriel, hard-working, sternly upright but no longer able to believe in anything but "eight hours' sleep and a big breakfast", and their children, Fish, once the brightest and liveliest of them, left brain damaged by near death from drowning, Quick, solid and reliable, the brother who is closest to him, carrying with him the pain of them all, and Hattie and Tom, minor characters.

After the initial disasters, Sam's loss of his fingers and Fish's accident, nothing sensational happens. It is just a story of money worries, quarrels and misunderstandings, occasional infidelities, family outings and children going to school, growing up, moving out and getting married. In the background World War II grinds to an end, we move into the era of the Cold War, talk of Korea and the Cuban crisis and the "Communist threat". Locally, there is the series of "Nedlands murders", all committed by one man roaming the suburbs at night, killing and raping women in their own homes.

It is this history rather than people which serves as the antagonist which romance demands and characters to prove themselves by struggling against its force as they go on their quest for happiness. Perth in the fifties and sixties, "the most isolated country town in the world trying to be the most cut-off city in the world" (289) is arcadian, a place of nostalgia, friendly, innocent, somehow outside history. Yet is also threatened by it, or by the evil history seems to represent and they must keep searching for happiness. Rose, in particular, senses the threat of history, sensing "something resting here, something horrible waiting" (289) even as she drives with her boyfriend, Toby, away from the city along the river. This evil, of course, surfaces later in the Nedlands murders.

In this way the narrative reaches out polyphonically beyond people and place to evoke some larger sense of reality, playing with a series of melodies, different levels of reality and possibility. Its *cantus firmus*, the base melody, is laid down in the prologue. The perspective is vast. We see the two families picnicing by the river, but see them "from the broad vaults and spaces" from some vantage point outside time from which "you can see it all again because it never ceases to be." (3) This explains why the novel's action is circular, why this point at which it begins is also where it ends with Fish breaking free at last, returning to the water from which he was once rescued, escaping at last from his disablement into fullness of existence. The rest of them must "go on down the close, foetid galleries of time and space" (3), but he has fulfilled his quest here. The romance is concluded by the hero's power of action.

The confidence which underlies this happy ending is unusual today, of course. But that is not to condemn it as mere wish fulfilment. Winton grew up amongst simple

people in the south-west of Western Australia and now lives in a small fishing village north of Perth. The people who interest him, he told an interviewer, are those “who are not empowered by language”:

People round here are like that — people in cities are bursting with information and language and opinions and noise. I’m interested to hear them but not to write about them. I guess it’s because deep down I’m one of those people who’s not particularly articulate.¹

What makes them and their story articulate is the framework of belief in which, lacking the social order which gives significance to people like Cervantes’ Sancho Panza, Winton places them, the framework he makes explicit in the prologue.

Evidently, this is the frame of Christian belief, of Eliot’s “infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing” intent upon human beings and their world. The prologue points us in the presence of something which it, “can’t help but love for them, want for them — those who go on down the close, foetid galleries of space and time without you”. (3) Just as evidently, however, this explicitness may be troubling to the sophisticated reader since it is very different from the wary irony, the scepticism which informs the magical realm of writers like Borges, Marquez, Fuentes, Rushdie or Kundera.

Admittedly, this prologue is a little portentous. Winton is anxious to guide the readers’ perception. But this, I suggest is because what he wants to show is unsupportable but rather because it is culturally unfamiliar. Implicitly drawing on Wittgenstein’s proposition that when we think we are tracing an outline of “reality” we are often only tracing around the frame through which we look at it,² he draws attention here to the frame, not for its own sake and not to the detriment of his characters and their word but to allow for their enlargement and enrichment. He does not impose a metaphysical system on them. Rather, their lives flesh it out.

There is nothing sentimental about the presentation, however, no working off in words feelings which the situation does not really support. From “the broad vaults and spaces” the sublime and the ridiculous jostle one another and speech is silenced not by mystic vision but “by a melodious belch which gets big applause” (2). Similarly, Fish may be moving at last towards the consummation of his life, but he does so with “shirt buttons askew, his black shoes filling with sand” (2). The metaphysical does not exist in despite of but rather arises out of the physical.

How it arises, of course, is the question. Essentially it is a matter of symbolic reference. People and events may be commonplace but are set within a framework of Christian archetypes, water, the house, journey and return, and so on. The epigram,

1.-*The Weekend Australian*, 25-26 August, 1990.

2.- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1974, 114, 115, 48°

from a popular hymn, makes this explicit, linking the family picnic by the river with which the story begins and ends to the archetype of the journey is not the promised land:

Shall we gather at the river
where bright angel-feet have trod.

Water, archetype of purification and of rebirth and fertility, is one of the key symbols of Christianity. The Bible begins with the image of the waters of chaos from which God draws creation forth and it ends in the *Book of Revelation* with the image of the city of God watered by the river of life. On their journey to the promised land, the Israelites had to pass through the waters of the Red Sea, and Jesus began his public career by being baptised in the river Jordan.

This passage through the water to a more intense and more intensely free existence, is the goal of Fish's life and indeed of the story as a whole and Quick, his brother, reflects that "everything important that happened to him, it seemed, had to do with a river. It was insistent, quietly forceful like the force of his own blood" (300). The river works, as an archetype does, to display a more universal mode of experience, revealing patterns of meaning which already exist in the psyche as well as in the physical world. But at the same time, it is recognisably the river Swan which runs through Perth and its suburbs, "a broad, muttering, living thing" (300) on the way to the sea at Fremantle. Similarly, the bend in the other river in the story, the bend just before it reaches the sea where Quick catches his "miraculous draught of fishes" is an accurate description of the lagoon at the mouth of the Blackwood river.

Physical fact and symbolic implication mutually reinforce one another, then, and the evidence in the prologue supports the consistent pressure of a narrative which holds them together so consistently, even affectionately. At the story's conclusion, with Fish's return to the water, the weight of belief fuses with the weight of the physical world to make a triumphant coda. Similarly the image of the rambling old house echoes the words of Jesus about his Father's house to which he will one day bring his disciples (John 14, 1-4), giving significance to the lives lived there. The epilogue which brings Oriel Lamb reconnected with her great enemy, Dolly Pickles, back at last into the house from the tent in which she has been living — echoing the Israelites in the desert — further underlies the confident sense of being at home in the world which, for all the stories of bad luck, misunderstanding and needless suffering runs through the novel.

It is this framework, then, which gives *Cloudstreet* its magical quality, dissolving the division between subject and object, the actual and the possible, visible and invisible into some larger pattern of signification. Trust in this pattern makes the novel so expansive and joyously inventive, able to encompass the whole range of experience, from the sublime to the ridiculous. The pathos of Sam's memory of his dead father, for instance, is enlarged, not diminished by the image of him, with his false teeth half in and half out of his mouth, as if he "had died eating a small piano" (11), and there is a grotesquely comic appropriateness in the story of Ted, the family's "lady killer", catching his "dick" in the tin of a hastily closed tobacco tin, bending over to shut it in panic when he is surprised rolling his first cigarette. Believing in his world and his place

in it, and knowing that in the long run the membrane between fact and fiction is a fragile one, Winton's imagination is thus able for the crazily unexpected and heroically exaggerated, like the description of Oriel Lamb's heroic feats selling home-made icecream which "all but causes riots": «They paid in advance, they fainted on the verandah, they pleaded. Lon sold lemonade to those waiting in the sun, and the Pickles' cocky shrieked Fair Dinkum regular as a time piece.» (171)

This confidence frees Winton from the constraints and evasions of propriety, convention and habit to focus sharply and exactly on the human comedy. For him the significance of people and events is not a static set of points but dynamic, a movement towards further possibility — the possibility expressed in Fish's triumphant realization of himself at the end. So his people are always surprising, never entirely coincide with themselves or with our expectations of them. This is a confidence which is solidly based, however, since for Winton human existence is by definition polyphonic rather than monological. For him as for Bakhtin, it is impossible to apply to human beings "the formula $A = A$... the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non coincidence between a man (sic) and himself."³ That point arises in the encounter with the other and especially therefore in language. The "deadpan" face or person is wordless, but people come to life here with words born of the encounter with others and with the physical world.

Belief which often figures as something negative, as a matter of restraint, in *Cloudstreet* therefore makes for exuberance in providing the firm base for its polyphonies of character and event. The story may begin and end with Fish bursting through the limits of his bodily existence, but it also ends there, does not take us out of time or diminish the importance of the here and now. What matters is what we see and feel, though we see and feel them the more intensely because of the vantage point from which we see them.

Belief therefore becomes the novel's structuring principle. People, places and events are defined by the relations which link them to one another and to the divine Other the narrator believes in and perhaps represents. But these relations make people and places more, not less real. In life, we appraise ourselves from the point of view of others; without this appraisal we cannot see ourselves whole. Thus Bakhtin:

I cannot perceive myself in my external aspect, feel that it encompasses me and gives me expression ... In this sense, one can speak of the absolute aesthetic need of man (sic) for the other, for the other's activity of seeing, holding, putting together and unifying, which alone can bring into being the externally finished personality; if someone else does not do it, this personality will have no existence.⁴

3.- David Patterson, "Bakhtin on Word and Spirit: The Religiosity of Responsibility". *Cross Currents: Religion and Intellectual Life*, 41, 1, 35-6.

4.- Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, Manchester University Press, 1984, 95.

Winton's characters exist, are credible as personalities, for this reason. But so, too, does his fictional world. Its weight and variety depend, paradoxically, on the sense the prologue generates of it as fiction, as the product of consciousness. Bakhtin is also illuminating here:

Man, life, destiny, have a beginning and an end, a birth and a death; but not consciousness, which is infinite by its very nature, since it can reveal itself only from the inside, that is for consciousness itself. Beginning and end take place in an objective (and objectal) universe for other, but not for the consciousness involved ... There exists no death from the inside; it exists for no one, not for the dying, nor for others; it has absolutely no existence.⁵

It is consciousness, the narrative presence which keeps intruding upon the action which binds it all together, holding life and death, past and present, history and myth within the one perspective. Yet this perspective does not do away with the difference between them. The narrative operates on two planes, not just one. Moreover, the one with which we are all familiar usually predominates, forcing itself forward as it does in the prologue's opening, calling us to identify with the "whole restless mob of us spread in the dreamy briny sunshine sky larking and chinking about for one day, one clear, clean, sweet day in a good world in the midst of our living" (1). The longer perspective, knowing where these simple people are unknowing, aware of what is about to happen before it happens does not cancel them out. On the contrary, as we have been arguing, it makes them more vividly significant, making them burn in Bakhtin's words, "from the borrowed light of *alterity*, beginning and end, birth, annihilation, being and becoming, life, etc."⁶

This light falls on most post-modernist works, of course. But what it opens up there is generally the panorama of history. Winton's perspective, however, is closer to that of so-called "primitive" societies. Where we tend to find our significance in history, a significance which is essentially secular, "reality" for in these societies is conferred rather by participation in the mythical archetypes, by living them out in lives which then take on a larger significance, linking them with the cosmos and its rhythms.

As we have seen, history is important in *Cloudstreet*, but only as an antagonist to be overcome. Not that Winton undervalues it. On the contrary, since the story he is telling is about those who suffer from rather than make history, about losers rather than winners, he is profoundly aware of its weight. The Lambs are driven off the farm by the Depression—Fish's accident is just the last straw. So, too, with the Pickles, Sam's accident is an aspect of the larger cruelty of history, symbolized by the foot of the dead Japanese soldier washed up on Geraldton beach. But Earl and May, the struggling farmers Quick briefly works for, best epitomise the weight of history which poor people have to bear:

5.- *ibid.*, 99-100.

6.- *ibid.*, 100.

They had been married twenty years now and had no children ... Earl could feel no pain and he could not imagine it in others. The Depression had made him hard; war had beaten him flat and work had scoured all the fun from him. He was hard beyond belief, beyond admiration. (211)

As we have also seen, this threat is always there, intruding from time to time in talk of Hiroshima, the Korean war and the Cuban crisis and in events like the Nedlands murders. Perth may be remote and may seem to lie outside history. But we are reminded of the violence associated with the beginnings of European settlement, of the wreck of the *Batavia* on the very island where Sam is working at the beginning of the story: «These islands were the sort of place to put the wind up a man ... He knew about all those murders and mutinies ... There'd been madness out on these sea rock since white fellas had first run into them.» (12-13)

Yet this evil force is contained, finally overcome by goodness, by grace. Where most contemporary fiction is ironic, *Cloudstreet* is therefore closer to the mode of romance. The central figures here are the two brothers, Quick and Fish, moving through the book in quest of the fullness of life which Fish has all but lost in his accident and which he finally recovers at the end, becoming “who I really am ... Perfectly — Always — Every place. Me.” (424) But to reach this point, like the heroes of romance, he and his brother have to undergo a series of trials. Quick has to contend with his “misery quotient”, his awareness of others’ pain, and the usual weight of adolescent boredom and restlessness and, when he runs away, with sexual desire as well as the oppression of poverty. Fish’s struggles are more metaphysical. He has to do battle with the dark shadow of the house’s former owner, a rich old woman whose ruthless “piety” drove an Aboriginal girl to suicide.

Significantly, however, the key figure in their quest, and indeed in the lives of the two families, is the mysterious black man, a figure of blessing and abundance, who appears at crucial moments in the story, after Quick’s escape from the sexually voracious daughter of the farmer he works for, for example, and later when he is about to return home.

The Biblical overtones here are obvious. When Quick picks him up in his truck, the Aborigine shares bread and wine with him, and the next time Quick catches a glimpse of him on the shore while he is fishing in the last bend of the river before the sea, as the disciples saw Jesus by the lakeside “Inside himself he felt something travel, the kind of transport he felt at the beginning of sleep when he sensed himself going out to meet its sky colour and the promises it held” (215) and the next minute his boat is filled with fishes, so many that the boat sinks under him.⁷ Even more explicitly perhaps, when asked, the black man says he is on “family business. Always family business” (209). The fact that he is Aboriginal adds to the suggestiveness of the figure, making him even more obviously a figure of redemption as the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* 53, “wounded for our transgressions ... bruised for our iniquities”, in Christian tradition the prototype of Jesus.

7.- A clear reference to the miraculous draught of fishes in *Luke* 5, 1-11 and *John* 21, 1-14.

Read intertextually like this in relation to Christian scripture, Fish's death opens the way to new life, not only for himself but for everyone else. So the story concludes on a note, of reconciliation with the former enemies, Oriel Lamb and Dolly Pickles, reconciled at last and Dolly helping Oriel fold her tent and go back into the house, echoing the passage in *Ephesians* (2, 13-15) in which the death of Jesus is said to have broken down "the dividing wall of hostility" to make all people one and bring peace between them. The tent, too, is clearly an image of mortality, the "earthly tent" of the body (1 *Corinthians*, 5, 1), especially as Oriel is made to think at one stage, sleeping in it, that there is "only fabric between her and death". (370) Similarly, the strange light which suffuses Quick's body after his encounter with the black man refers to the light which suffused the body of Moses after his encounter with God on Mt Sinai.⁸

All this may seem to suggest that *Cloudstreet* has the schematic quality of allegory. But there is nothing stiff about it. The Christian implications here are expansive rather than restrictive, give an otherwise simple story about simple people the sense of risk R.S. Thomas finely describes, of faith

... leaning far out
over an immense depth, letting
your name go and waiting
somewhere between faith and doubt
for the echo of its arrival.⁹

Winton's people, his descriptions of Perth, Geraldton, the south west and the wheat country are very specific, recognisable and rendered with wit and affection. Those readers for whom Christianity is of no great consequence will take pleasure in this. For them the integrity of Winton's characterization will lie in the fact that Quick and the others who meet him, Sam, Lester and Rose for example try to get away from the old black man and think no more about him. For others, of course those who share Winton's world view, its integrity will lie in the fact that they cannot.¹⁰ But in any case, the story concludes not with Fish's death and transfiguration — something which must be taken on faith — but with Oriel and Dolly, "the little boxy woman and the big blowsy woman" (426) finally reconciled and with only a "long gash in the ground where yesterday there'd been a fence" (425) dividing the two families. This conclusion is psychologically as well as theologically credible since Fish's death might well have brought the families together. The balance continues to hold between the common place and the mysterious, belief and matter-of-fact.

Winton delights in his people for their eccentricities, exuberance and courage and in his world for its variety and sharpness, this delight may depend in the first place on his Christian belief but it also arises out of the range of contradictory and incompatible information if every day existence in which people are cruel as well as

8.- This image is taken up in the New Testament in 1 *Corinthians*, 3, 7-11.

9.- Quoted in T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, 162.

10.- See the "Author's Note" to Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, quoted in Wright, 126.

generous, sometimes even cruel because they are generous and wound others because they have been wounded themselves or because, like Oriel, they are trapped within a righteousness which actually masks a loss of faith. Winton's characters here are various as well as vivid, therefore, even if they also have the fixity of romance and do not really develop. They go through very human trials, lack of money, adolescent rebellion, settling into marriage and sometimes out of it even as their significance is enlarged by the Scriptural references. These are real people, not figures from an allegory and theirs is a world which those of us who live here recognise.

In the long run what makes this possible is the novelist's trust in the world and his confidence in its purposes. Yet this is a confidence which makes not for complacency but for wonder, wonder not about why the world is, however, but that, despite everything, it is. The Christian story undergirds this wonder. But we are never allowed to forget that it, too, is a story, that is to say, hypothetical, can only be validated personally. Hence the novel's expansiveness. Penetrating the limits of possibility means going inwards, into one's own freedom, to tell and, just as importantly, also to listen to further stories. This is a world in which miracles may happen. But it is a world in which it is sensible to expect miracles, since it is more varied, complex and risky, painful and joyous than mere rationality can account for. Grounded in experience, *Cloudstreet* also generates new experiences therefore. That is because it is written from the perspective described in the epigram to an earlier novel, *That Eye The Sky*, lines from one of Les Murray's poems:

From the other world of action and media, this
interleaved continuing place is hard to focus;
we are looking into the light —
it makes some grimace
It may also make many of us rejoice.