

The Sacred and the Social Extreme: Tim Winton's *Breath*

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Let me begin with a caveat. My argument is based on the evidence of fiction, on a discussion Tim Winton's most recent novel, *Breath*. Social scientists may suspect this kind of evidence and see 'fact' as more trustworthy than 'fiction'. But even though it is true that the evidence I will be presenting is not based on people and situations in 'real life' — whatever that may be — I would suggest that fiction may take us to the sources of social awareness and action, to the extent that, as Levinas¹ suggests that awareness and action may originate in 'gropings to which one does not even know how to give a verbal form...initial shocks [which] become questions and problems' and thus takes us into the dimension of 'the archaic, the oneiric, the nocturnal'² which (as Levinas goes on to argue) has 'ontological reference' because in it we are able to live 'the true life which is absent', a life, moreover, which is not necessarily 'utopian' though it refuses 'the normative idealism of what "must be"'.³

I want to argue that Tim Winton's recent novel, *Breath*,³ provides this kind of understanding and that it is one which may be particularly useful in our reflections on the relationship between family, society and the sacred — at least if we take Levinas' further point that 'the social does not reduce to the sum of individual psychologies' but represents 'the very order of the spiritual, a new plot in being above the human and the animal'.⁴

First of all, then, let us look at the society in which the novel is situated, a small mill town not far from the ocean in south Western Australia. For the two adolescents, 'Pikelet' and 'Loonie', the central characters, it is a place of sheer boredom, what Levinas calls 'the there is', an impersonal emptiness which is 'neither nothingness nor being'⁵ but may well be the state which Lyotard calls 'post-modern', a state of 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'⁶ in which there is nothing beyond the self which longs for immediate and intense experience. For Pikelet and Loonie, however, this longing leads to an encounter with the sacred, some *mysterium tremendum et facinans* at the heart of existence, as Rudolph Otto famously defined it.

For the two boys this encounter begins not at the centre but at the edges of social experience, in 'a rebellion against the monotony of taking breath'(p. 41), a gamble with death in which, diving into the local swimming hole, they stay underwater holding as long as possible and then surfacing to delight in the alarm they have provoked, the watching them, the tourists from the city especially. As time goes on, the boys' contempt not only for ordinary folk but also for the town they live in as they come realise 'how small and static and insignificant [it] really was'(p. 36), a prison from which escape is impossible, a form of fate, inhabited by the kind of people A D Hope described in his poem, 'Australia',

Whose boast is not: 'we live' but 'we survive,
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.'⁷

Loonie's family has fallen apart: his mother has walked out on his father, the local publican, who consoled himself with other women. So he is more or less free to do as he likes. But for Pikelet finds it is more difficult to break out. His parents, affectionate but ineffectual, English migrants and thus outsiders, are different from the rough and ready locals, fearful not only of the surrounding bush but also of the nearby ocean — having seen a fisherman swept off the rocks by a huge wave and smashed against the cliffs, his father has

forbidden his son even to go near the coast. The terrors and splendours of the sacred are not for them.

The world the boys inhabit, then, is governed by what Charles Taylor calls the kind of non-negotiable secularity in which ‘time and meaning have hardened into a kind of leaden meaninglessness’⁸ since it offers no hope of anything different, no sense of “the gathered time” of the sacred. Nor, humdrum as it is, does it even offer the excitements of the fabled ‘America’ which Pikelets reads about with its ‘mighty canyons and mile-wide rivers’. Here, there are no ‘soaring peaks and snow, angels seemed unlikely and God seemed scarcely possible’ (p. 137). Instead his life seems to be regulated in advance, a life of dull conformity in an isolated and insignificant town.

Though it may be an extreme version, this may well be the experience of many young people in our society today who feel themselves somehow confined in a ‘closed circle around sameness’⁹ which enforce conformity on them and destroys difference — as, to take the outstanding example, in the past it tried to destroy Aboriginal culture in the name of social and ideological conformity, to create ‘One Land, One Law, One People.’ According to Brazilian sociologist Luiz Carlos Susin¹⁰ this kind of identity, typical of settler societies like ours, is the story of Ulysses who left home and travelled through strange places, but always with the intention of returning home or at least of turning those strange places into replica of home, thus locates the self within a ‘closed circle around sameness’. Susin argues, however, that another model is possible, based on the story of Abraham who was called out of this circle, ‘a pilgrim to what is beyond any horizon, a traveller to the absolute’, responding to a promise of something more, beyond commonsense.

In most traditional cultures this quest is recognised and valued. But, our culture often seems determinedly secular. As A. G. Stephens wrote in 1904: ‘The Australian environment is unfavourable to the growth of religion...because there is in the developing Australian character a sceptical and utilitarian spirit that values the present hour and refuses to sacrifice the present for any visionary future lacking a rational guarantee’.¹¹ Nevertheless, James Jupp has argued recently that issues which can be called ‘religious’ still remain significant for some, and are likely to do so in the future.¹²

My contention is that as Winton describes them young people like Pikelet and Loonie are among them, though I also want to suggest that their story illustrates the dangers of the sacred when it is not socially or culturally anchored. Let us take these two points one at a time.

First of all, it is clear that from the first time Pikelet, defying his parents, catches a glimpse of the ocean he senses a power beyond the self both fascinating and terrifying. But, watching a group of surfers defying its dangers, he is drawn by the sheer beauty of it:

From the granite headland whose rocks were daubed with warnings about the dangerous current, the beach stretched east for miles. We watched the surfers plunge into a churning rip alongside the rocks and from there they shot out toward the break. Waves ground around the headland, line upon line of them, smooth and turquoise, reeling across the bay to spend themselves in a final mauling rush against the bar at the rivermouth. The air seethed with noise and salt; I was giddy with it. (p. 22)

It is possible, he realises, that ordinary that men could 'do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared' (p. 23), 'as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do' (p. 24) and this realisation sweeps him beyond his narrow world, transfiguring matter-of-fact and offering instead a life which was dangerous and had to be dared and chosen.

But, as things were it could not be squared with everyday living and gradually surfing became the only thing he and Loonie cared for. Loonie had already turned his back on school and family, such as it was. But, suspended between two worlds, that of his parents and their quiet affection and the world opened out by the champion surfer, Sando, masterful in his own dangerous world of power and splendour, the space of Carnival as Taylor¹³ describes it, 'often immensely riveting, but frequently also "wild", up for grabs [and] capable of being taken over by a host of different moral vectors' which nevertheless may also 'crystallize on some deeply felt, commonly cherished good'¹⁴ — as it finally does for Pikelet.

For the time being, however, he turned his back on the common good as he glories in his splendidly and dangerous sense of power, a 'detached and supposedly neutral sovereignty, as if he were 'a prince laying down laws while he hovers above them'¹⁵(11) as he rides the most dangerous waves in the company of Sando and Loonie. It is a supreme experience of self. As Sando tells him exultantly, it is 'not even about us...It's about you. You and the sea. You and the planet' (p. 75), about being beyond reason and restraint, about feeling superhuman: 'It's like you've felt the hand of God. The rest of it's just sport'n recreation, mate. Give me the hand of God any day' (p. 76).

Evidently such people do not make good citizens or family men or women. Sando is not, and Loonie's way becomes even more excessive as he pursues his obsession with terror and danger across the world to die in a bar in Mexico, and is killed as a result of a drug deal gone wrong. Clearly, the transcendence they achieve is fraught with peril to the self and to society — and I suggest that this is evident today in fundamentalist movements of all kinds. As Levinas points out, 'it is only in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty...that we find ethics, the very spirituality of the soul and...the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification'.¹⁶ The point to be made here, however, is that this is what Pikelet finally manages to do, balancing the claims of the self with the claims of the other/Other, and is thus able to negotiate a way between the sacred and society, as neither Sando or Loonie manage to do.

The title of the novel, *Breath*, is the key to understanding how this comes about. In the opening scene Pikelet, now a middle-aged ambulance officer, is called to the apparent suicide of a seventeen year old. But, remembering the dangerous games he and Loonie used to play dicing with death underwater, and later, with Sando's disgruntled partner putting a plastic bag over his head and holding his breath as long as possible, he recognises what has happened, that this boy has gambled with death and lost. As Kierkegaard suggested, however, we live our lives forwards but understand them backwards. This understanding is signalled on his return home when reflecting on what he has seen, Pikelet, still in uniform, sits on the balcony of his flat and plays his didjeridu::

Then I blow until it burns. I blow at the brutalist condos that stand between me and the beach. I blow at the gulls eating pizza down in the carpark and the wind goes through me in cycles, hot and droning and defiant. Hot as the pale sky. Hot as the flat, bight world outside. (p. 7)

Blowing the dijeridu, ‘cycling ait through and through, [he realises, he is] doing little more than explaining yourself to yourself while you’re still sane enough to do so. (p. 17)

In their exploits underwater, and later surfing with Sando he had been rebelling ‘against the monotony of drawing breath...breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine’ (p. 41). It was an assertion of power, a defiance of the logic of bodily existence. But ‘blowing the didjeridu, cycling air through and through’ was an act of submission to an other, and ‘doing little more ‘doing little more than explaining yourself to the self while you’re still sane enough to do it’ (p. 17). It was an assertion of what Levinas called the sovereignty of the self in its ‘hateful’ modality’. But here he is submitting to another, to a reality beyond the self and finding the justification of his existence in doing so.

This is not a sudden conversion. From the beginning, even though he chafed against it Pikelet’s family has given him a sense of an order beyond self and of its limits — in contrast with Loonie, who acknowledges no authority beyond the self, is recklessly and defiantly fearless and in the long run does not survive. Faced with the ocean’s power, however, Pikelet is not only frightened but admits it. True, for a time, the splendours outweigh the terrors of his experiences. But gradually he comes to feel that ‘maybe ordinary’s not so bad’(p. 198) and in the long run manages to make a more or less rewarding life for himself, marrying, not very successfully, it is true, but breaking up without acrimony, building up an affectionate relationship with his daughters and finding ‘a purpose in the world’, trying to ‘save lives and...be kind.’ In this way his ‘work and their interest help me to manage myself’. (p. 216)

This may not seem to amount to much. But in a sense he is now able to find the sacred, the ‘Beyond’, as Bonhoeffer calls it, not at the fringes of experience but in the midst of everyday experience so that it becomes ‘a kind of’ *cantus firmu*’ to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. (p. 14) The central moments of his life are those in which he returns to where it all began. His parents are dead and the town has changed, full now ‘all wineries and bed-and-breakfast joints’(p. 216), but the ocean remains and he still responds to its power.

I’m nearly fifty years old. I’ve got arthritis and a dud shoulder. But I can still maintain a bit of style. I slide down the long green walls into the bay to feel what I started out with, what I lost so quickly and for so long: the sweet momentum, the turning force underfoot, and those brief, rare moments of grace. I’m dancing, the way I saw the blokes dancing down the line forty years ago. (pp. 215-6)

It is ‘these brief moment of grace’, his experience of the sacred, of a power beyond the self which transfigure all other relationship and yet is to be found in the midst of the most ordinary of lives and gives meaning and dignity to them. In such moments, out there on the ocean Bruce Pike is free and ‘never ashamed’. Ordinary as his life may seem, he knows he is still ‘a man who dances... does something completely pointless and beautiful and in this at least he should need no explanation’. (p. 216)

Endnotes

- ¹ Emmanuel Levinas, 2003, *Ethics And Infinity: Conversations With Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, pp. 21-2.
- ² Paul Ricoeur, 1969, *The Symbolism Of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 348.
- ³ Tim Winton, 2008, *Breath*, Camberwell: Penguin Hamish Hamilton. All page references will be given in my text.
- ⁴ Ibid., 48.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1984, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. xxiii.
- ⁷ H. P. Heseltine (ed.), 1979, *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Ringwood: Penguin, p. 190.
- ⁸ Charles Taylor, 2007, *A Secular Age*, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 719.
- ⁹ Luiz Carlos Susin, 2000, 'A Critique of the Identity Paradigm', *Concilium*, vol. 2, pp. 78-89.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ In Ian Turner (ed.), 1986, *The Australian Dream*, Melbourne: Sun Books, p. x.
- ¹² James Jupp, 2008, 'A Religious Society? Belief And Disbelief In Australia', *Dialogue*, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 14.
- ¹³ Taylor, op. cit., p. 715.
- ¹⁴ In Turner (ed.), op. cit.
- ¹⁵ Susin, op. cit., p. 80.
- ¹⁶ Sean Hand (ed.), 1993, *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 85.