



Inspire, Expire: Masculinity, Mortality and Meaning in Tim Winton's *Breath*

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Tim Winton's latest novel and winner of the Miles Franklin award Breath (2009) is investigated here within a framework of theistic existentialism alongside a critique of masculinities in the Australian context. This novel presents a particular take on hegemonic masculinity and this dovetails neatly, I argue, with a continuum of spiritual consciousness and responsiveness drawn up by Danish creative writer and theological maverick, Søren Kierkegaard (1811-1855).

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Representations of the spiritual in Winton's body of work have become increasingly eclectic and existentialist as he seeks to undermine "that pompousness that comes with the church becoming a multinational firm" (quoted in Hawley, 1991, p. 15). Here I will demonstrate a correlation between the lives of the characters in *Breath* and characteristics of people at Kierkegaard's three realms of existence: The Aesthetic, The Ethical and the Religious, otherwise known as *Stages on Life's Way* (1845). Kierkegaard's model seems fitting for Winton's work, in its inherent hope and possibility that characters will move along the continuum away from the Aesthetic realm.

The characters in *Breath* are, as with all Winton's characters, difficult to define in any one category of *Stages on Life's Way*. But they are, at any point, capable of transcendence, and a graduation from one stage to the next, or even of the incremental *stages within stages* that give all people the opportunity to be slightly better than they were yesterday. As this article will assert, the novel draws (some facets of) traditional masculine frameworks as (possible) impediments to transcendence, and more 'enlightened' masculine paradigms as being (possibly) conducive to it. Inevitably, some people/characters are lost along the way, never able to reconcile their sense of personhood and perceived imperatives of their gender with their spiritual potential.

Existentialism in its theistic form is characterized by manifestations of human despair (both conscious and unconscious) and the double bind in which such despair places humanity. Sitting comfortably alongside the Kierkegaardian personalized

man–God relational is the claim of existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) that the question of God arises out of an individual’s awareness of his own finitude; some awareness of the infinite, otherwise called the ultimate or the absolute, is necessary for a personal appropriation to occur. Of course, ‘false’ ultimates present themselves in everyday life as alternatives to the true ultimate (read: God) in the form of success, affluence, status, nationalism, and so on, and this, Tillich asserts, is a form of idolatry.

Framework for Analysis

An extrapolation of the Kierkegaardian three-tiered (and hierarchical) doctrine follows.

The Aesthetic is the furthest stage from Kierkegaard’s ideal and is that state wherein an individual lives a life purely for its acquisitive purposes with no aspiration towards a spiritual dimension. Necessarily in this state, a person is in the grip of “unconscious despair,” unaware of the void in which he/she exists. Many individuals (and, as literary representations, characters in both Kierkegaard’s and Winton’s fiction) never graduate out of this state of being and live in temporality (that is, for the moment or for the life of the physical body), and can actually appear to live satisfactorily within this finite framework, making few conscious choices, rather being swept along by life in an attitude of detachment (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 29).

The Ethical for Kierkegaard is a natural progression out of the Aesthetic for people/characters who have (usually) experienced a turning point or epiphany of sorts, becoming aware of the finitude of earthly life and the ultimate meaninglessness of same, and who thus enter a state of “conscious despair.” That is, they are cognisant of an instinct that there is something missing and of the necessity of rectifying this in some way. The key is choice here, a recognition of individual responsibility and of participating in one’s own life. At this point there are still many *a*-theistic existentialists along for the ride since they would authenticate (or make meaning through positive action) somehow within the limits of ultimate absurdity (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 55). Often they are acutely aware that something is still missing in their lives, despite their individualized affirmative action. These characters are poised for epiphany, even if at first they do not recognize it. Grace is manifest in their lives in very personally realized ways and these characters usually accept this, if often after a long resistance.

Individuals (and their literary representations) can transcend despair and enter that which Kierkegaard calls the Religious state, wherein an individual comes into a personal relationship with God through a completely individual faith. This is achieved by way of a leap of faith, presupposing a conscious choice. Here, of course, the atheistic and theistic existentialists part company completely. God is that which Tillich (1957) labels the “Ultimate,” that to which humanity (if it is not bound up with temporality and distracted by “false ultimates” (p. 65)) aspires, and that which gives meaning to the universe and the possibility of infinity; that is, life beyond the confines of earthly existence.

Each character in this category comes to an inductive connection, not a deductive, top-down rapport. It is a bond based on mutual love and respect, fashioned for each person, in full recognition that this state, while held aloft by

Kierkegaard as 'ideal' and superior to its forerunners, does not presuppose perfection in its subjects.

Underpinning the existentialist credo is despair. A biblical term for this sense is Vanity, that is, *Ecclesiastes'* vanity of knowledge, of pleasure, of work and riches: "for all is vanity and vexation of the spirit" (*The New English Bible*, Ecc. 2.17). At the moment when one effectively *chooses* one's despair, the self is validated for the first time; the self is made transparent to itself.

Breath's Characters Along Kierkegaard's Continuum

In the novel *Breath*, paramedic Bruce Pike is the narrator-protagonist and the novel opens with him responding to an emergency call-out that we later learn is a dead teenage boy who had been experimenting with auto-asphyxiation. The experience on this night sends him hurtling back forty years to his youth in the mill-town of Sawyer which he describes thus, "Like my parents, it was so drab and fixed that it became embarrassing" (p. 45). The town, a fictionalized replica of many such towns in south-west Western Australia (now mostly morphed into the trendy bed-and-breakfast gimmick for tourists with a penchant for the rustic) represents history and for Bruce Pike, flashing back to his turbulent adolescence, the reader sees that his past has haunted him for years. But, as Bruce comes to recognize, history must be "made present and lived" (Sire, 1997, p. 113) not repeated with all its destructive patterns, rather selectively appropriated for a greater purpose.

The story proper opens with Bruce Pike (known as Pikelet) and Ivan Loon (Loonie), both pre-adolescent boys at a loose end in the tiny, uninspiring hamlet until they hit upon the daredevil game of holding their breath under river water so long that it scares onlookers as well as themselves. They become so adept at this pastime that they seek out new adrenalin rushes and it is at this point Bill Sanderson steps into their lives. Sando is thirty-six, "a big, woolly-headed bloke" (p. 45), godlike to the boys, with international surfing credentials. He and his wife have escaped to a bush block on the south-west coast to get away from a frenetic life on the circuit. He still surfs the wildest waves around and, on meeting the boys on the beach, encourages them to stash their boards under his house, teaches them to *really* surf, egging them on to bigger and bigger waves, and revels in their worship of him, personifying the hegemonic model of the "iron-man surf-sports champion" identified by Connell (1990, cited in Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838) with little "masculine substance" (Donaldson, 1993, cited in Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838). Bruce Pike, in later years, acknowledges the political incorrectness and irresponsibility-verging-on-the-illegal relationship between Sando and the two boys, but counters this with some disdain at the 'cotton-balling' of children today, placing it within another anti-establishment—and decidedly *anti-traditional masculine*—perspective:

the sorts of activities that schools and governments sanctioned [made] Sando's excursions look like small beer. We could have been ... army cadets, learning to fire mortars and machine guns, to lay booby traps and to kill strangers in hand-to-hand combat. (p. 106)

Loonie's dysfunctional family life means he needs to prove himself, to have someone

think he's worthwhile. He becomes more and more reckless out on the water, facing down twenty-foot waves with contemptuous defiance. Sandó takes on a guru status for Loonie, much to the contempt of Sandó's wife, Eva, who screams at her husband, "Don't they get to touch your holy relics, read your scriptures? Deep down, didn't you secretly *want* me to reveal you to your disciples?" (p. 79). Certainly one wonders why the magazines glorifying Sandó's past exploits were not discarded long ago if he is so adamant that they are meaningless to him. This implies a predominantly masculine tendency to self-deification, where men's perceived command over nature and control of the elements is considered integral to being a real man. Clifton Evers expresses this psychology thus,

Surfers have complex codes and rules to determine their place in the hierarchy and to police localism. The infamous Bra Boys claim Maroubra Beach as theirs. They police the surf and the car parks with violence, and the threat of it. Famous Maroubra surfer Koby Abberton went so far as to say recently that his beach is the safest in Australia because they look after it ... our familiarity with the ocean gives us a sense of superiority. We feel like we "naturally" belong at the beach, while others detest it because they feel alien in it. (Evers, 2005, p. 1)

Individual surfers and surfing cultures, asserts Bron Taylor, "often reflect broader patterns of the society in which they are situated." Taylor cites Collen McGloin who collected empirical evidence to characterize Australian surf cultures as nationalistic, sexist if not misogynistic, and violent. Although McGloin acknowledges that not all surfers are this way, she asserts "sexism and misogyny are commonplace in surf culture" (quoted in Taylor, 2007, p. 925).

Bruce Pike loves surfing in a more aesthetic way than Sandó and Loonie (I use the word *aesthetic* here in a general, not Kierkegaardian sense) and quickly loses interest in gratuitous risk. Even so, having only really known men who work at the mill, Bruce comments "how strange it was to see men doing something beautiful, something pointless and elegant" (p. 28).

Sandó and his lifestyle become for the boys embodiments of Tillich's escapist "false ultimates." They bask in the older man's approval and in reflected glory at the beach, where other surfers bow to Sandó's "hellman" status and the boys are respected by association, embodying, as Connell and Messerschmidt describe the phenomenon, "the currently most honoured way of being a man, [requiring] all other men to position themselves in relation to it" (2005, p. 832). They are living inauthentic lives for the most part—chopping the couple's wood and overstaying their welcome simply to be in the 'presence'—yet at their age this kind of hero worship is hardly uncommon. The competitive nature of men in such contexts is shown to become increasingly destructive and—as Bruce comes to realize out on the surf—anathema to the very point of the exercise.

Such "egotism ... near-autistic narrowness" (p. 210) that Bruce identifies is expressed gloriously by Australian activist and gardening guru Peter Cundall who notes that some men, even when *flowers* are their obsession, will forfeit simple enjoyment for the need to win,

The chrysanthemum men ... they're deadly. And they all kind of loathe each other ... at shows, if you see a beautiful chrysanthemum or a dahlia and you say to one of them, 'That's not bad', he says, 'Just a minute', and he whips out this bloody instrument and starts measuring the petals. (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2005, p. 177)

Female Sentiments on the Archetypal Male

It is important to offer the female character in contrast here, since she is, in an almost perverse sense, a foil to the traditionally masculine in this novel. Sando's wife Eva, an American former champion freestyle skier with an irreversibly ruined knee from her last jump, feels herself to be nothing without the extreme thrill of her sport. "I miss being afraid ... That's the honest truth" (p. 220). She lives, since her accident, a bitter and unfulfilled life, experiencing some small, albeit resentful, gratification vicariously through Sando's – and later the two boys' – surfing exploits. Sando takes his "disciple" Loonie off to Indonesia and Thailand surfing. Loonie necessarily despises Eva as she gets in the way of his relationship with Sando, a misogynistic element characteristic of such masculinity. Eva knows this, "They have a way of looking at you ... Like you're some kind of ... abomination ... because I'm female" (p. 163). Eva, in her ennui, lures fifteen year-old Bruce into a sexual relationship to which he becomes addicted. At the same time he is consumed with self-loathing, convinced Eva holds him in contempt too, but he later concedes, "The disgust might have been reserved for herself" (p. 211). This further endorses the narrative sympathy for flawed people, and by extension, characters, even those with more than your average human failings.

Eva is an enigma, a woman who seduces a teenage boy and asks him to perform potentially lethal acts with and on her,

From the bottom of the wardrobe she brought out a strap and a pink cellophane bag. The strap had a collar and a sliding brass ring ... Eva handled these props with a reverence that brought a falling sensation to the pit of my stomach. (p. 222)

She uses her age and aggressive sexuality to exploit Bruce in vengeance for Sando's neglectful "guru shit and bad manners" (p. 160). She acts out a pseudo-masculine power play over one more vulnerable, a replication of the traditional man-woman dynamic. It is fitting that Eva is not the epitome of a feminine woman, but rather heavy, solid, all muscle. Yet for all this, she appears to possess some wisdom, an awareness of the hypocrisy of her wealthy Mormon upbringing. She is astute enough to see both institutional and individual deception and has zero tolerance for it. "[Sando had] taken another tack, a mystical path she now said was bullshit" (p. 210), redolent of Rachel Nilsam (again, significantly a *woman*) scoffing about the New Age movement and its charlatans in Winton's earlier *Dirt Music* (2002).

Bruce later wonders if, in fact, Eva ruined his life, acknowledging that she had no right to do what she did. This is redolent of the traditional theism that scapegoated Eve (and by extension, all women) for succumbing to the temptations in the Garden of Eden and for the godless chaos of the world since. Refreshingly, Bruce quickly rejects the idea that she is responsible, in keeping with the existentialist ideal that

we are accountable for our own choices, which also gives the truth to Bruce's later recognition that "People are fools, not monsters" (p. 211). This is characteristic of Winton's empathy for the moral dilemmas and struggles of ordinary people.

Honest Nihilism

Unlikely as it may seem, Eva's nihilism and bleak, cynical candor are shown to be morally superior to Sando's "bullshit" lack of self-awareness and pursuit of the meaningless. This implies the relativity of women's and men's worldviews generally, as she appears to act as Sando's moral foil, acutely ironic given her 'corruption' of Bruce *and* her being American, a (paternalistic) nation for which the narrative voice hardly bothers disguise its disdain.

The way Eva told it her countrymen were restless, nomadic, clogging freeways and airports in their fevered search for action ... driven by ambition in a way that no Australian could possibly understand ... She made her own people sound vicious. Yet God was in everything—all the talk, all the music, even on their money. Ambition ... Aspiration and mortal anxiety. (p. 168)

Eva tells the teenage Bruce that Sando is "scared of growing old. That's what this shit's about" (p. 207), characteristic of the denial of our own mortality that pervades modern culture, the quest for eternal youth and increased longevity: to be superhuman. Sando acknowledges the proximity of his sport to a *kind* of transcendence, "When you make it, when you're still alive and standin at the end, you get this tingly-electric rush. You feel *alive*, completely awake and in your body. *Man*, it's like you've felt the hand of God" (p. 94). The placement of "Man" and "God" in the same sentence and the emphasis on "Man" semantically underscores Sando's self-perception.

Eva straddles both a 'destroyer' as well as a nihilist facet of Kierkegaard's Aesthetic stage as she is injurious of herself and of Bruce, having to an extent caused him psychological trauma and an inability to sustain long-term relationships. Yet her capacity to create life and the fact that she ends the relationship with Bruce when she discovers she is pregnant, saying "I can't do this shit with a baby coming" (p. 236) is an acknowledgement of some meaning. Her nihilism is at least honest and "the form of consolation she preferred" (p. 211), no doubt indulged in the knowledge that death would eventually win, attests to this sincerity, since a nihilist's only genuinely sincere recourse is to suicide.

But Eva, too, has experienced revelation of a kind on the ski slopes, her freestyling accomplished with "more fuckoff elegance than anyone else in the world" (p. 210). Her awareness of her own despair further confirms Eva as an enigma (or maybe just an ordinary person), fluctuating back and forth on Kierkegaard's continuum. The "conscious despair" she articulates to Bruce places her at times on the cusp of the Ethical domain, where at any point transcendence over despair could occur if only she would be open to the opportunity. She is obviously aware of this potential in her past, as articulated in this metaphorical suggestion, "She wanted me to understand. Being airborne. Sky and snow the same colour. Her skis a defiant cross against the milky blur" (p. 220) but is hostile to it. Eva appears to associate God

with the hypocrisy of American culture, including its 'spiritualities', hence the "defiant cross"—so refuses to *choose* her despair, and remains in the Aesthetic realm until her premature death. This correlation is commonly articulated by people who cannot reconcile a benevolent God with society's prevailing duplicity. Again, though, such active antagonism as Eva's is dealt with more sympathetically by the narrative than Sando's avaricious self-interest.

So at least Eva rejects such a brutal, acquisitive (and mythically *male*) charade for a more existentialist life. But of course, even this attempt to authenticate is fraudulent, as she lives very comfortably off her father's trust fund which, Bruce incredulously comes to realize, is "just showing up in a bank account. Without work" (p. 200). There is, it seems, a level of astuteness in Eva (her name implying *all women* in its eponymic closeness to the Eve of Genesis), an honesty that seems to be lacking in the men around her. Perhaps she senses the possibility of something more in Bruce.

Inauthentic Life

It is with remorse that Bruce responds to Loonie's and Eva's deaths, both ostensibly through misadventure, but with a suggestion of suicide in both cases. It is as though for Loonie and Eva death *is* life, as though without the precipice, that up-close-and-personal encounter with what Hamlet calls the "undiscover'd country" (III, i) , life is bland and hardly worth bothering with. They actually contribute little of value to the world; Loonie, always "greedy about risk" (p. 38) eventually becoming a destroyer of others as well as himself through his drug trafficking.

Loonie's lostness craves love, stability and a positive male role-model as is evident in his hanging around Bruce's predictable, conservative parents. But although Mr Pike is a loving father, complete anathema to Loonie's, his natural passivity and inertia is shown to be not what either boy really needs. Winton has often commented on the (peculiarly male) Australian incapacity to express emotion, "People have terrible yearnings and feelings. They know what they think and they know what they want to say, but they just don't have the words ... the words are in their throat but they're not on their tongue" (quoted in Willbanks, 1991, p. 195). Bruce's father's Pommie fear of the ocean has him forbidding—in vain—Pikelet to go near it, but he does supply a safer alternative in the form of fishing from a little boat in the river. Mr Pike's gentle guidance in this area, although never touching upon anything beyond the temporal with his son, suggests that Pikelet's future will eventually be somewhat more positive, introspective and useful than Loonie's, as indeed it is. Mr Loon provides a role-model of unfettered despair and neglects every facet of positive fatherhood. His son never learns to break the pattern, or, at least, breaks it by removing himself from the gene-pool altogether. The vastly different but equally pathetic despondency of both men is portrayed as a form of emasculation and it is little wonder the boys are attracted to the image of Sando's machismo. Bruce's capacity for self-reflection recognizes it is *only* an image but it takes some time to sever his bondage to it.

Binaries

The binary of courting death simultaneous with a survival instinct is obvious in both characters. Bruce can see the attraction: even while living in terror of Eva passing out for good, he knows from his hi-jinks underwater what it feels like:

You feel exalted, invincible, angelic because you're totally fucking poisoned. Inside it's great, feels brilliant. But on the outside it's squalid beyond imagining ... each time I let go Eva's throat and ripped the slimy bag off her face I didn't see rapture. What I saw was death ringing her like a bell. (p. 234)

Loonie goes to suicidal lengths to dull his ennui and despair from an early age, and Bruce retrospectively confesses, "On the highway Loonie played chicken with log trucks, while I hid in the bracken ... willing him to desist and urging him on all at once" (p. 20). Such potential for positive or negative action almost at every turn is a distinctive feature of *Breath* and lies at the heart of the existentialist concept of choice and the *theistic* existentialist imperative to *choose one's despair* as a precursor to transcendence. Again, the binary nature of breath causing life or death and of water's potential for redemption or destruction (a pervasive motif in Winton's work) is evident, speaking to the *choice* at the heart of the existentialist credo.

I was interested in the limits of things ... that strange male thing in adolescence ...to test yourself and frighten yourself ... when you're in middle age, the kinds of things you're dealing with are almost mutated versions of the same things you were dealing with when you were a teenager ... And it comes back to you in a scary way. (Winton quoted in Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2005, p. 23)

Sando, just as Eva suspected he would, becomes an even more profound fraud, subscribing entirely to the Aesthetic life through his business interests, replacing one "false ultimate" for another. His rhetoric about being real and true to himself, of which he had once convinced the boys with statements such as, "All [the publicity's] just horseshit ... It's wallpaper" (p. 93) is shown as bogus in Sando's life. Bruce discovers later that "[Sando had] come to preside over quite an empire. Snowboards, alpine apparel—all dripping rebel chic ...There was much talk of risk in the financial sense" (p. 253). As such, he is the quintessential Aesthete, apparently existing in "unconscious despair," unaware of his own contradiction. This, I assert, is a post-modern malaise, depicted in several male characters in Winton's work, profoundly so in *Breath*: that hedonistic, obsessive pursuit of "false ultimates" that preclude any interface with an eternal dimension, even with the *possibility* of one. This is in keeping with Connell and Messerschmidt's assertion that hegemony means "ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion" (2005, p. 832).

Bruce, at this point, still operates within Kierkegaard's Aesthetic stage, aimlessly seeking out Tillich's "false ultimates" in his ill-advised marriage, his self-imposed respite in a psychiatric ward and his "flirting with melancholy" (p. 262), experiencing, I suggest, Connell's (1990) notion of "gender vertigo" (p. 471) brought on by the

“loss of structure in demasculinization” (p. 472). But Bruce Pike comes to realize the innate vacuousness of all these pursuits and is thus poised for epiphany.

Traditional Masculinity's Foil

Late in the novel's time-frame, a defrocked priest living in a humpy near a salt-lake hides Bruce's car keys until he “climbed back into [his] own skin” (p. 258). This man personifies one of those devices of Winton's that seems so inconsequential the reader could almost miss it. Bruce comes across this man apparently by chance and stays with him for six months after he has got himself relatively together. In this, the ex-priest is a typically unlikely manifestation of grace in Bruce's life, a catalyst for his choice to become a better man and realize personal entelechy. The fact that the priest is “defrocked” (supposedly due to his being an alcoholic) is also characteristically anti-establishment, driving home the point that enlightenment and grace often materialize outside of the orthodox and the institutional. He is probably as close to a personification of the Religious stage on the Kierkegaardian continuum as this narrative will concede.

The defrocking concept also serves figuratively to *re-emasculate* the priest, as though he has thrown off the restraints of the ‘mother’ church to become truly personified. It is after Bruce's prolonged stay with this man (who brings to mind Henry Warburton in Winton's (1981) *That Eye the Sky*, a character Winton labeled “just another flawed messenger”) that Bruce is able to move into the Ethical level of Kierkegaard's continuum, where, as is suggested by his attacks of conscience throughout his younger years, he actually belongs. The two co-habit for the sake of healing, without too many words, endorsing a male bonding of more substance than superficial modern definitions imply. The priest's gentle, non-didactic *living example* to Bruce acts as a conduit for transformation—and stands as a metaphor for grace generally,

During the day we sat in the ragged shade of his verandah while things rose up off the salt before us. We laughed at every shimmering mirage in shared disbelief. The priest said he hadn't touched a drop in fifteen years, that he'd gotten beyond magical thinking. But the salt lake kept him on his toes. And I saw what he meant. It was full of surprises.” (p. 259)

An Authentic Life

Bruce still yearns for the intensity and adrenalin rush of the extreme, but wants to channel it constructively rather than destructively, discovering his niche in becoming “hell's own paramedic” (p. 259). His celibacy by the novel's close is a proactive decision, along with his perspicacity with regard to his daughters, as he expresses, “For them it's been important to know I'm not useless” (p. 265). He concedes that he must not be the subject of anyone else's sorrow, harm or disappointment. It is gratifying to him that people *in extremis* relax and feel relieved when they see his uniform, “When punters see the tunic and the resus bag they calm down a little and find faith and while I work, my faith meets theirs” (p. 262). Bruce understands the uniform is a façade, that the job is a role he plays to his own ends, but consoles

himself that at least it is helping others and it fulfils the existentialist imperative for positive action, for living the authentic life.

It is interesting to note that there are, apart from perhaps the self-exiled priest, no definitive members of Kierkegaard's Religious category in this novel, at least according to my reading. In fact, they are few and far between in Winton's entire body of work, perhaps reflecting the move away from the spiritual in today's world in favor of "false ultimates," the God-substitutes of sport, drugs and rampant consumerism—or, as Hugh MacKay (2008) deliciously puts it, "the endless quest for the perfect bathroom tile" (p. 3). But the opportunity to embrace the grace offered and the possibilities for transcendence out of despair are never closed off to characters, suggesting the bigger narrative of our own potential in the real world.

Bruce Pike, as the narrative voice and thus, it could be assumed, the indirect voice of authorial sympathy, comes as close as can perhaps be realistically depicted in the timeframe, having achieved, as he says, "my own share of happiness, for all the mess I've made" (p. 40) and some rejoicing of the potential inherent in subsequent generations: "Every time I see a kid pop to her feet, arms flailing, all milkteeth and shining skin, I'm there: I know her, and some spark of early promise returns to me like a moment of grace" (p. 30). Bruce has, by the novel's conclusion, come close to the heart of the matter, aligned with Winton's pared-back expression of his own spirituality, "No love, no friggin point" (quoted in Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2005, p. 26). It is, posits Veronica Brady,

"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'. (Brady, 2008, p. 216)

It is part of the human situation to be suspended between two worlds, to be subject to the binaries inherent in all things, and Bruce Pike's life is no exception. Brady cites the metaphorical concept of the Carnival—that "utopian longing of the anti-structure" regarded as synonymous with "the ultimate good of man" where the "primal energy in man [resists] integration into the symbolic order" (Whitley, 2009, p. 4) leading inevitably to the decline of religion and the advent of totalitarianism—which is "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—as it finally does for Pikelet" (Brady, 2008, p. 3).

So, masculinity defined as abuse of power, self-aggrandizement and a lack of introspection (substituted by Tillich's "false ultimates") is depicted as a negative force by Winton, perhaps in his most confronting manifestations to date within the pages of *Breath*. The life offered by Sando, who Brady describes as "masterful in his own dangerous world of power and splendour" (2008, p. 3) is a metaphor for the malaise of the world generally, reflected by the literary fact of Winton creating fewer characters reaching (Kierkegaard's) Religious stage and more settling into the Aesthetic, presumably for longer. As well, it serves to pick away at the essentializing

that occurs when masculinity is considered a fixed entity. Rather, as Connell and Messerschmidt posit (and as protagonist Bruce Pike illustrates) "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (2005, p. 836).

The imperative for personal choice central to the existentialist credo is replicated in some empirical masculinities research undertaken by Robert Connell (1990) which is optimistic about a move in Australia towards more self-aware, personally fashioned—and less limiting—masculinities. Connell found that a cross-section of Australian men active in environmental causes had discarded hegemonic masculinity after having spent much of their lives in pursuit of (or at least complicit in) the "project of ... the reproduction of patriarchy. The life histories showed such familiar features as competitiveness, career orientation, suppression of emotions, homophobia" (p. 459), but the men interviewed were now "committed to a real and far-reaching politics of personality" (p. 471).

Conclusion

Superficially, *Breath* could be considered a bleak novel since three of the four protagonists are situated within Kierkegaard's Aesthetic realm of existence, seemingly inextricable with a limiting masculinity lacking in introspection and heavy with hedonism. Yet, there are certainly states of grace even within this realm that render most characters redeemable, even if they choose to reject the opportunity for transcendence. The narrative treats with sympathy those characters such as Bruce Pike who come to consciously choose their despair and try to live authentically in the world, while deferential *at least to the possibility* of a dimension beyond themselves and a revised, more liberating take on what it means to be a man.

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