Michelle Cahill. *Letter to Pessoa*. Giramondo Publishing, 2016. 256 pages.
AU$24.95
ISBN 9781925336146

> *The truly wise man could enjoy the whole spectacle of the world from his armchair, he wouldn't need to talk to anyone or to know how to read, just how to make use of his five senses and a soul innocent of sadness.*
>
> —Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

Michelle Cahill's *Letter to Pessoa* consists of a series of twenty-four pieces, some possibly described as short stories, others the informal 'letters' addressed to various more or less well-known authors. In addition to Fernando Pessoa, the modernist Portuguese poet, there are missives to Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, Jean Genet, Philip Larkin, John Coetzee (J.M. Coetzee), Tadeusz Rózewicz, Jacques Derrida, and to the musician and activist Neil Young. The dialogues these pieces engender with literary figures whom Cahill admires is an important dimension of the book, as she has acknowledged.[1] They reflect on the encounter between text, author, narrator, character and reader, and in turn on how these concerns inflect Cahill's own writing and thinking.

A published poet, this is Cahill's first work of prose fiction. It is, as its title suggests, both impelled by her admiration for Pessoa and resonating with his writings. Pessoa himself is best-known for his short pieces, about 25,000 fragments famously discovered after his death, and which he had kept in suitcases. They are difficult to explain and frequently require repeated reading as their meaning is not immediately clear. Slow and curious reading will summon some of the life of the mind Pessoa evokes with such intensity and ambiguity, certainty, and doubt. Cahill states that the book reflects her own preoccupation 'with the aesthetics of the fragment,' though in her case this would appears to relate to the content of the stories rather than to their form. There are however successful examples of the fragment in *Letter to Pessoa*. In 'Borges and I,' we read: 'Meanwhile my thought experiments were shaping an answer to their harrowing existence' (124), an eerily apt echo of Pessoa's own aperçus. Elsewhere, in 'Wall of Water,' a description of Sydney streets again recalls Pessoa's own perambulations in the tiny corner of Lisbon he so relished:

> By now the temperature has dropped a few degrees. Outside agapanthus and gardenias flourish, their scent more pronounced at night in the cooler, leafy shadows. The jacarandas bleed, their velveteen carpets layer memories of the past and the indignities of whatever crisis the present moment inhabits. The trees mutilate themselves uniquely and exquisitely. Their dismemberment continues for weeks until they are completely stripped of flowers. (72)

In 'Letter to Jean Genet,' Cahill writes: 'You've shown me how it is possible to exult in defiance, to suffer betrayal, living among the stumps and the wounds, with fishnet scarves and blackened corpses. But how does one leave, if not in writing? And where is the exit?' (165).

But while Pessoa, despite the sentiments expressed in the above epigraph, remained in his writings essentially constrained by his beloved city, Lisboa, Cahill's work opens itself up to the world in a very different way. Indeed, together the pieces convey a kind of 'chutnified' world, in the sense Salman Rushdie plays with in *Midnight's Children* (1981): a world made richer—more delectable—by travel to far corners of the globe, by chance encounters, risk-

taking, cultivated transfiguration, and by the celebration of cultural, social and ethnic differences. The last point is especially noticeable because many of the speakers in Cahill's stories are of mixed race and inhabit or are drawn to ambiguous cultural milieux. Cahill herself introduces the motif of the mongrel in the book's second piece, 'Biscuit,' where Crust, the speaker, is both 'pure bred Sokoke' and descended from 'the street cats of Mombasa, the Lamu island cats who feed on fish heads in coral-stone homes and know Swahili' (7). Later, after emigrating to the Imperial Motherland to escape the growing instability in pre-independence Kenya, Crust writes:

> There are two great-aunts with elaborate hair-dos and regal hats cooking a feast: trays of roast meat and Yorkshire pudding. There is spinach curry and rice, turmeric and vindaloo. (15)

This confluence of selves and cultures, of present and past, of here and elsewhere provides the setting and the background for a rich meditation on identity, on life and meaning.

I referred earlier to Cahill's 'speakers,' but they are in fact her heteronyms, perhaps the most explicit overlap with Pessoa's work. As she explains in 'Notes,' in the body of the work: 'Sarita, Jo, Nabina, Hemani, Luke, Logan, Nathan, Viresh can be read as other selves, heteronyms in the Pessoan sense. They each live different lives and inhabit different worlds' (245). In his Introduction to Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, William Boyd asserts that, '[p]ossessing a disguise far more complex than mere pseudonyms, these heteronyms had styles, biographies and personalities of their own, as if they were born, lived and died apart from their creator' (2010, np). Boyd notes that '[t]here are seventy-two distinct heteronyms in the Pessoa oeuvre but four predominate' (ibidem); in *Fernando Pessoa: An Experimental Life* (2021) Richard Zenith proposes that there were 50. *The Book of Disquiet* itself is written by one of these heteronyms, Bernardo Soares, and the other well-known heteronyms are Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis and Alberto Caeiro.

In Pessoa heteronyms serve both as a vessel for varied life experiences and as a speaking voice with distinct insights and limitations. They enable the poet to inhabit the lives of others, and other lives, forever intertwined in the complexity of relational selfhood. Pessoa's principal heteronyms are men not unlike him—they are poets and intellectuals, intelligent, curious, and never the most excitable people. Although his period in South Africa marked him indelibly, Pessoa's lively imagination does not venture far from his hometown. And of course Pessoa's soul was very far from 'innocent of sadness.'

Cahill's heteronyms could not be more different. They are generally young, backpackers, students, spiritual questers. They live for the moment, seeking in the sensory experience of meeting, of loving and leaving other people, of seeing and being in different lands and cultures the reassurance that they are alive, and perhaps that their lives are relevant and meaningful. They live life ravenously and are paradoxically always haunted by more than a dose of *ennui*. Nomadic by disposition, even when not drifting they are elsewhere, and frequently rootless. In the book's opening lines: 'When I open my eyes, Aleandro has left, his bed sheets folded. For a moment I am in Santa Monica' (1). This shift between meticulous description and vague recollection shapes much of the writing, triggering reveries that serve to conjure the complexity of modern selfhood. To this extent the heteronym enables Cahill to convey a multiplicity of selves, layered experiences over time and space.

Yet, with some exceptions, in *Letter to Pessoa* heteronyms frequently come across as individuals for whom travelling the world appears to be both an art and almost a right, at ease in Venice as in Vanuatu. To note that their lives are marked by make-belief and self-delusion is not to deny the seriousness of their suffering or the legitimacy of their dreams and ambitions. But a little less *ennui* might not have gone amiss. As in Pessoa, there is in Cahill's work a desire 'to enjoy the whole spectacle of the world,' and *Letter to Pessoa* roams wondrously across the world. And the voyeuristic viewpoint of Cahill's heteronyms frequently allows for moments of unique insight into the condition of being in place, of a place but also out of place.

There is an earnestness in the writing that can read awkwardly, as when in 'Letter to Derrida' the speaker remarks, 'It may have been in a café where she was taking notes for her modernism essay on Georges Bataille' (17), or, in 'Chasing Nabokov,' the reference to Nabokov's 'perlustrations, his proximity' (235). The weight of its cultivated literariness almost overwhelms readers and heteronyms. In 'Letter to Derrida' the speaker describes herself as 'fragments of coral, each containing a thousand tiny air sacs; half-coloured, half-faded, washed ashore from a reef or swept along by a windy swell' (40). The reference to 'the daughter of an aunt' (43) as a relative comes across rather laboured—would that be a cousin?

This is an ambitious and courageous book, curious and provocative, determined to show a light into the lives of people in a messily globalised, postcolonial world. It is also at times a rabbit warren of dead ends, or cul-de-sacs, given the stories' overt appeal to a cosmopolitan modernism. As noted earlier, each piece exists as a stand-alone story or as a 'letter,' but they converge in the book's cross-cultural sensibility. *Letter to Pessoa* is overtly characterised by a deep intertwining of the personal and the political, the authorial and the fictional, reflected in the two sets of 'notes' that accompany my review copy. Readers who buy the book will still be able to draw on Cahill's comments (244–45).

It is unfortunate that *Letter to Pessoa*, so unequivocally self-aware a cross-cultural narrative, should have so many misspellings of words in languages other than English. Foreign words risk coming across as exotic colouring rather than conveying the disorienting experience of being out of one's own language and culture. Or, indeed, of living always between them.

Tony Simoes da Silva, *UNSW Canberra*

NOTES

[1] Michelle Cahill, 'Author's Note,' *Letter to Pessoa*.