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Life Outside “the Garden”: Review of Writing in Virginia’s Shadow by Mary Pomfret

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Part 1 – Genesis Re-visioned

Mary Pomfret’s work is gaining much-deserved wider currency of late. Her first publishing credits came after she reworked several chapters of a novel draft into a series of compelling short stories. More recently, examples of her work have appeared in noted Australian and international anthologies, and, in 2014, *Cleaning out the Closet*, her second collection of shorter fiction, was published.

Pomfret’s fiction and creative non-fiction has always been intense, complex and multi-layered – though the emotional drama is often offset by occasional flashes of humour (often arising out of the absurdly tragic situations her characters find themselves in). She is skilled at heightening everyday inter-relational conflicts via expert use of sub-text and irony, and, like all good fiction writers, she loves the revealing detail

that symbolises a character’s entire world-view. One also encounters fearless explorations of memory (especially memories of childhood) and the labyrinth that is ‘identity’. All this is to say that Pomfret never flinches from exploring the dark places – both in herself and in others. Typically, her point of view (as expressed through her various narrators) mixes personal vulnerability with unwavering honesty (tempered, it is true, by empathy and even love).

Not surprisingly such writing is emotionally moving, for the dramas, disappointments and joys that fascinate her are known to us all – are part of the unconscious *carnivalia* of all our ‘subjectivities’. Her work mines the tragedies, joys and inevitable misunderstandings that arise from our need to relate meaningfully to others. In thinking of her work – and perhaps her developing ‘poetic’ – the term ‘self in relation’ comes to mind.

These defining characteristics of her writing are also evident throughout *Writing in Virginia’s Shadow* – though in many ways this fascinating collection of writings breaks new ground.

Part 2 – And So He Drove them out... “I Cast Thee Out”

One of the pieces in this collection, ‘The Exile – A Family Saga’, represents, I believe, both a continuation and (perhaps) a culmination of earlier thematic explorations. Part of a series of inter-connected vignettes it reads as a prose poem that begins in the dark soil of complex primary relationships (mother/daughter/family) before launching the unique themes and pre-occupations that I would like to suggest are fundamental to this collection.

*My good mother arrived with a bag full of absences and
reasons why I wasn’t invited to the family Christmas.*

*“You weren’t excluded silly. No one else received
invitations either.”*

In the prose stanza that follows the repercussions of this apparently ‘domestic’ yet strangely Mythological/Biblical, ‘casting out’ are

contemplated further: 'What do you do when they cast you out of the garden?' After suggesting 'suicide' and 'being committed', the narrator ends with 'or like so many others in this situation have done, you could become a writer.'

'You could become a writer' ... thus does the Virginia of the collection's title begin to cast her 'shadow/light'. The break is not definitive, it's tentative, her characters begin their new life tentatively – recall those Medieval images we have of Adam and Eve departing Eden. To reinforce this mood the text seems to circle back repeatedly on the many and varied events that have led to the state of exile – especially by way of the character Margot's meditations. We note also, that the interconnected 'trauma' and 'sense of liberation' often associated with psychological exile is never definitively resolved. Nevertheless, as readers, we sense that we are present at a birth – or perhaps a tentative rebirth.

Part 3 – A Room of One's Own

In *Writing in Virginia's Shadow*, we bear witness as readers to the travails of the female artist-writer (dispersed among several characters) as she seeks to will, to spin perhaps, a new identity. She is, like Woolf and many others before her, in search of 'A Room of Her Own.' This theme gradually announces itself in the complex – both technically and thematically – imaginative field that is Pomfret's book.

This meditation on creative self-making announces a new dimension to Pomfret's writing. It is a creative break with the past informed by the new 'languages' (I prefer this word to 'theories' since languages are active, suggesting lived inter-relational exchanges) of female subjectivity that Woolf helped birth and that have since permeated both academia and general culture.

'Homage to Eveline' (p29-36) I think makes conscious the depth of the identity challenges faced by the book's two main characters – Louise and Margot. Louise begins the section staring out the window whilst cooking – contemplating leaving her husband Norm. Norm is dead to the world of the imagination.

'Imagination was something that Norm did not understand unless it was imagining a woman without her clothes like he sometimes did when he was watching television: 'She's all right. Big around the rump, but she'd do me on a dark night.'

Norm is not an overly complex fellow! But the full extent of Louise's identity crisis is best summarised by the statement: 'Louise had all but given up discussing her imaginings with him.' Clearly, Norm's perspective on life closes down relational zest and impedes any hope of authentic communication.

Can one be a creative person, an artist, a writer etc. – more specifically for the themes of this book: can one be a female writer – if significant 'others' are indifferent to, even dismissive of, one's creative dreams? Asserting a creative identity in the face of indifference, economic sacrifice and occasionally outright dismissiveness is at the heart of *Writing in Virginia's Shadow*. Pomfret, through her female characters, thus ponders the kinds of questions Virginia Woolf pondered so many years ago.

Part 4 – At Home in the World (Provisionally)

Late in the narrative, a new level of confidence announces itself in Margot through her letters. She even disputes points with 'Virginia' in a wonderful exchange of letters between herself and Virginia as mentor. She also asserts her own opinion about a piece of her work in the face of an editor's criticisms.

"I have taken aboard what you have said about my book Heart Jottings ... but I will not be changing the title. I like it."

'I like it'... With that assertion perhaps the exile has come home – home to herself – and thus the book concludes something; works through some sort of challenge. The victory, however, is not decisive. Pomfret seems to suggest that life is rarely definitive when it comes to the nuances of the human heart. We are left with the vaguely melancholy sense that the liberation and self-confidence associated with

'life outside the garden' comes at a cost - a cost absorbed consciously or unconsciously by many artist-writers, both male and female. This state of affairs is succinctly acknowledged in the last piece of the collection 'Peripheral Vision' where the narrator speaks of living a 'satellite existence'.

Asserting one's identity as a writer is still a courageous act, even today - life-long commitment to creativity exacts a toll. One endures a measure of alienation - 'life on the borders', 'the periphery', etc. Pomfret acknowledges the toll and continues on regardless - and this takes a special kind of courage. Her writing is courageous and moving and funny and perceptive and I heartily recommend *Writing in Virginia's Shadow* to readers interested in contemporary Australian literary fiction.

Title: Writing in Virginia's Shadow

Author: Mary Pomfret

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