Cristovão Tezza, *The Eternal Son* (Scribe, 2010)

Cristovão Tezza is a prolific Brazilian writer who was recently in Australia to launch the first ever translation of one of his novels into English. The work in question – *The Eternal Son (O filho eterno)* – joins the mere three percent of fiction which comes to the English language in translation. This is the Brazilian writer’s thirteenth book, and it tells the story of an idealistic aspiring writer who is about to become a father for the first time. The protagonist’s transition to fatherhood, however, is not to be an easy one, with the revelation that his first child has been born with Down’s syndrome.

As the account advances, the initial shock of the diagnosis diffuses into every inch of the unrelenting reality of the father’s situation. The brutal revelations of his own frailties as a human being in light of the birth of his son Felipe, who is ironically the only character bearing a name in the story, become the impetus for reflection and provoke the father’s memory of selected historical and political events in Brazil and Portugal in the 1960s and 1970s. These are woven into the story of his son’s growing up and provide a parallel text which is spatially and temporally divergent.

In *The Eternal Son*, Tezza chronicles the effect Felipe’s arrival has on his lead character as a father, a husband, a writer and as a man. This work is autobiographical, but is perhaps better classified as a fictionalised memoir: fictionalised as a means of allowing Tezza and his literary counterpart to be cruelly honest; and a memoir in that the work deals solely with the writer’s contemplation of this singular occurrence in a lifetime full of unique experiences. Nevertheless, at the outset, the father-to-be is introduced as an incomplete character who ‘at the age of 28, still hadn’t begun to live’ (1).

His persona is a complex one. On one hand, the character certainly has the capacity to elicit in the reader a strong reaction of *schadenfreude* in response to the unlikeable narcissist in him: ‘Now he was going to be a father, which always dignified one’s biography. He’d be an excellent father, he was sure: he’d make his child the arena for his view of the world’ (6). On the other however, the character rouses not so much sympathy but reluctant pangs of knowing recognition that the predicament he finds himself in is not one to be envied: ‘This is worse than anything else, he realised. Not even death has this power to destroy me. Death calls for seven days of grieving, and then life goes on. But not now. This will never end’ (25). His underlying and unstated attitude of *what-have-I-done-to-deserve-this* is offset by his *why-can’t-I-come-to-terms-with-this* rhetoric. His gamut of emotions ranges from rejoicing in the scientific truth that children with Down syndrome [sic] die young: ‘See, he told himself, there are no old mongoloids’ (29), to the hope that ‘the diagnosis was wrong and the baby was actually normal’ (41). The language he uses can create a feeling of guilty cringe-worthiness at the almost black comedy which, in some parts, can make *The Eternal Son* unputdownable.

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The cleverness of the writing lies in the story’s perspective. It is as if the reader has a key-hole view directly into the father’s mind. This intimate space allows the reader to conclude that this lead character is far from likeable as he stumbles across the various means of dealing with this trisomic unknown quantity. The father is unable to contain his shock at several of the treatments and therapies available at a time when the term for the genetic mutation itself did not exist: ‘no one in Brazil had heard of ‘Down [sic] syndrome’ in 1980. The polite thing to say was: Yes, he has a small problem. He has mongolism’ (36).

The sole dedication of the novel is to Tezza’s daughter Ana, his second and genetically normal child for whom, he acknowledges, the childhood experience of growing up with Felipe must also have been incredibly difficult. This reference to Ana aside, The Eternal Son does exclude the reactions and contributions of anyone else other than the protagonist: especially from Tezza’s wife and Felipe’s mother, which was a deliberate decision on Tezza’s part in the writing of the book.

Structurally, it is sometimes tricky to connect the shifts in storylines. The transitions between the memories of the past are often tenuous as they are only loosely, but also not always convincingly, connected with the present. This does not detract though from the reading experience as a whole.

The two epigraphs are well chosen. Søren Kierkegaard’s quotation highlights the universal bond between father and son: ‘A son is like a mirror in which the father beholds himself, and for the son the father too is like a mirror in which he beholds himself in the time to come’. This prepares the reader for the father’s profound disappointment and egocentric stream of consciousness as he struggles with the embarrassment of his shame, guilt, and utter selfishness expressed in his annoyance at his wife and son, his situation, Brazil, and his various jobs.

The other epigraph, Thomas Bernhard’s excerpt, is taken from Bernhard’s own memoirs and symbolises the fictionalising of Tezza’s story: ‘We wish to tell the truth but fail to do so. We describe something truthfully, but our description is something other than the truth’. Tezza’s literary product has been assembled in a creatively fictional way and has been done so to liberate the writer from being restricted to the stark facts and the unedited truth.

The title of the novel, The Eternal Son, refers to Felipe’s existence in an eternal present. This is reflected in his few language skills: ‘he had no syntax, verb tenses, plurals, or gender – nothing’ (163). Even as he develops and matures: ‘He still hadn’t acquired the difficult notion of “yesterday”, “today”, or “tomorrow” – life was an unredeemable perpetual present’ (147).

Tezza has gone out of the way to avoid writing literature of self-pity and he has done this admirably. Fortunately, The Eternal Son is not a self-help guide to overcoming the trials of rearing a ‘special needs’ child, nor is it a how-to manual for raising one. It is plain that the child himself is not the problem, but it is the space that he assumes in the writer’s life that is. As the story progresses and the characters mature, Felipe’s personality begins to shine through the pages, making him a star.

The Eternal Son makes for remarkable reading for several reasons. It is unique in that it springs from an extraordinary life event which had become Cristovão Tezza’s own self-imposed literary taboo. The work is a brave piece of writing evidenced by its winning of every major literary award in both Brazil and in Portugal. Exploring the roles of father and son, fusing the lines between biography and fiction,
and bringing to the page the zeitgeist of Portugal and Brazil, the memoir’s discursive style is an attempt to retrace not only the protagonist’s steps, but to understand his decisions and behaviour which have led him to this confrontation with his darker self.

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