'The obscure machinery of management'

Secret Orbit by Ken Edwards

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Dystopian novels often revolve around ideas of social control being wielded in a merciless fashion by powerful entities that have taken control of human behaviour. From Zamyatin to Huxley, from Orwell to Attwood, dystopian fiction has centred upon helplessness and its pervading image has often been that of confinement. When writing his biography of Charles Dickens in the 1950s Edgar Johnson had noted that the English novelist's lifelong preoccupation had been with imprisonment and he singled out *Little Dorrit* as a masterpiece of the human consequences of being trapped:

> The narrow, sordid old Marshalsea dominates the entire book; jailyard walls loom mistily about the golden opulence of the Merdle banquets in Cavendish Square, and their spiked shadows stretch into the painted salons of Venice and pierce the heart of gorgeous palazzos in Rome. The prison bars darken every scene…Everyone – the poor debtor, the hard-working London artisan, the bored cosmopolitan traveller fluctuating over the Continent – is immured within the impalpable barriers of a system no less confining than if it were constructed of blocks of masonry and bars of iron.

The focus of the great dystopian novels has of course been political, bringing the eye sharply to bear upon how language can be used in terms of control, and in *Little Dorrit* the mantra of the Circumlocution Office, the central office of control which obstructs movement, is presented to us in a chapter titled 'Containing the Whole Science of Government'. The bureaucratic procedures of this Office, echoed in the satirical nightmare of *Secret Orbit,* involve governing a country and its people with a labyrinth of simplicity:

> Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving – HOW NOT TO DO IT.

However, contrasting with the satirical landscape that spreads out over the pages of dystopian fiction, perhaps the more enduring quality of the finest of them rests in an understanding of the emotional nightmares of trapped humanity and this is one of the central qualities of *Secret Orbit*.

Ken Edwards's novel was published last year by Grand Iota Press during the Covid pandemic and it presents the reader with a convincingly disturbing and witty understanding of the way in which human beings are trapped within language. The book is divided into thirty-three sections, a conscious echo of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and its main character, unnamed, is already dead. By using the word 'unnamed' I deliberately call to mind Samuel Beckett's 1952 novel *L'Innommable* in which the helplessness of the narrator is evident from the outset:

> You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again.

Secret Orbit opens in a flat in a dismal part of London overlooking a park and a man known only as "[FORENAME] [SURNAME]" lies dead, slowly decomposing. Unable of course to speak for himself, his story is told by a narrator.

In Day 1 we are immediately made aware of the inescapable dictatorial world of Big Brother from Orwell's *1984* as the narrator

reminds the corpse that he 'used to always be aware of the Management watching you' following this by a reference to the TV that can never be turned off. Within the semi-comic nightmare of this particular fiction it *could* never be turned off for the simple reason that [FORENAME] [SURNAME] is already dead: the unnameable is immovable! And so of course when the narrator asks if there is 'any way to turn off that great bright gaudy-colour TV, or at least turn the damn sound down' he replies to his own question:

> No, of course not.

The framework of this novel is the relentless decomposition of the horizontal figure on the bed and the vertical figures of print which constitute the book are the 'utterance', the voice of the dead, offered to us through the script of the narrator. It is almost as if this recent novel by Edwards offers a visible example of what he had referred to as 'Portrait, Landscape, Narrative' in an article for the first issue of *fragmente*, an oxford magazine edited by Andrew Lawson and Anthony Mellors, in Spring 1990:

> Let the vertical, the figure, be utterance. Then the horizontal is landscape, the language within which the utterance takes place, and is given credence and context. It is also the echo, what comes back from the utterance, plural if not yet social. It's the mountains, the city, the sea, the weather resounding; it's landscape.

The haunting and deceptive nature of language which surrounds us is presented to the decomposing body in Day 12 where the television 'blares out in your bedroom' and the narrator offers one of the powerful images of social alienation, social dysfunction:

> We are living in a divided country, they say, we are living in times when presently all knowledge will be dead and the seas will be dead, and the good offices of nature will be fatally compromised, but on the other hand there is new entertainment to be had this spring season, coming very soon.

Any serious engagement with overwhelming issues facing humanity such as global warming, pandemics or the terminally enormous scale of international war is safely moved out of focus with the word 'new' and the immediacy of the prospect of 'entertainment'. To readers of Ken Edwards's close concern with the flexibilities of language it will come of course as no surprise to read an article he had published in the second issue of *fragmente* from Autumn 1990 concerning the 'remake' of language:

> Given the panoply of rhetorical devices with which we are bombarded these days in an attempt to induce us to purchase commodities and values, any critique of language-naturalisation soon heads in the direction of politics, and it was as much the excitement of political as of literary debate that enlivened the pages of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

And here we touch one of the most moving aspects of this novel: a sense of distance and confusion offered by language, an eerie awareness of life going on somewhere but one being unable to relate to it with any real sense of focus. In this Dantesque world of the conscious dead there are 'Voices eternally answering each other through a tangled forest of part-awareness' and the sound seems to be a 'discourse of nonsense and grief, of secrets unlocked ever so softly and allowed to roam from room to room, trying to find a way out and failing again.' In this landscape of the dead one is compelled to ask 'Do I exist?' and the novel offers a bewildering answer that echoes both Dickens's Circumlocution Office on the one hand and Kafka's world of what faced Joseph K on the other:

> yes, you exist, but only in the form of a vast array of numbers stored on the computer, numbers that change from day to day and this state of flux represents, no, *is* your existence.

As words such as 'Interim Detention Facility' are swiftly qualified by the reassurance that the State is 'passionate about your security' and being a person 'At Risk' leads one to 'The Holding Pen' one can do little but rage against the 'obscure machinery of management that has conspired to thieve your life.' One is left disintegrating amidst the 'talking fire that is humanity' that scours the

world 'from end to end' and which leaves 'nothing but ashes.'

What opened the novel seemed to be a tracing of the process of dying in which 'A claustrophobic labyrinth of personal memory' leads 'to a dismal locked door behind which you can hear a doleful singing.' That labyrinthine winding (down) of memory, an awareness of who we have been, becomes lost in the cunning corridors of dementia and the 'doleful singing' echoes the sound of mourning only heard from beyond the other side of the door.

In the first British Lockdown of 2020 Moyra Tourlamain and Simon Everett of Muscaliet Press started an informal online weekly magazine to while away the hours of internment. It ran for eleven issues and was a welcome way of avoiding some of the worst aspects of confinement. Issue 4, written and published in April 2020, contained a poem by Simon Smith which echoes with a lyrical intensity the type of otherness and distance which is both central and deeply moving in Ken Edwards's novel:

> I hear you murmur from the other side of the wall inaudible
>
> from the source code from the foundations
>
> from the pipes behind the sink
>
> from the wind northerly & veering into the northeast quarter
>
> the moaning pivotal through the horseless carriage through the quarter-light
>
> I hear you

What lies on the other side of the door can only be imagined by a window cleaner in *Secret Orbit* who had mistaken the voices of the ever-transmitting television 'for those of others who might be helping the inmate' [FORENAME] [SURNAME], before realising at the end of the day that 'there was nobody to help me:

> But hey, it's just one of those things. He wouldn't have been in time to intervene anyway, so it scarcely matters.

And the young Amy Dorrit who has spent her life behind bars devoted to her imprisoned father thinks of 'sunrise on rolling rivers, of the sunrise on wide seas…of the sunrise on great forests where the birds were waking and the trees were rustling' before she peers down 'into the living grave on which the sun had risen, with her father in it, three and twenty years, and said, in a burst of sorrow and compassion, "No, no, I have never seen him in my life!"'