

On the Edge of Space: 'the song of fission'



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One of the most disconcerting aspects of the worlds created by Ken Edwards is the way in which characters in his novels hang on the edge of a tangible reality. *Futures* (Reality Street, 1998) opens with the main character drifting in and out of a zone of terror and 'it was as though her consciousness oscillated in an increasingly frantic rhythm before tipping over into chaos':

one moment the world was constricting her, she could touch its four cozy corners (the four corners of her room in fact) with her bare outstretched fingers; the next she was in a huge starless void between living and dying; and this sequence repeated itself with increasing rapidity.

(Futures 5)

Squatting in an isolated house, the only survival from a city redevelopment scheme, Eileen's horizon is rimmed by the 'awesomely beached ocean liners of modern slab and tower block estates' with their security lights blazing all night as 'beacons against the grossly imagined unknown'. In this world of vertigo she clutches onto a roof-top trough which is accessed only by a trap-door in

the ceiling of her bedroom. Lying out there on the roof she can feel 'completely shut off from everything' and for her it is a private domain 'secluded from the city's faraway intercourse'. However, the vertigo is a psychological awareness of the fragility with which we hang onto the Here and Now which defines our life's presence and Eileen is afraid, again, 'of the space in which she finds herself' and her body 'can't touch its boundaries' as 'anxiety wells unbidden out of that space':

How often has she lain there, centripetally pinned, terrified/
exhilarated by the blue void beneath her? And then it
subsides, and she is back in her familiar rooftop pair with the
soothing pigeons.

(*Futures* 14-15)

Ken Edwards is interested in Time's fleeting movement and *Country Life* (Unthank Books, 2015) presents the reader with a strange journey into a twilight world of sea and land as we observe two figures moving across a landscape of 'cold, dark matter'. The friendship between two young men, based upon mutual dependence and then betrayal, placed against a socio-political background of unrest, had dominated Flaubert's great novel of 1869, *L'Éducation Sentimentale* and it had prompted its first contemporary literary counterpart in Julian Barnes's *Metroland*. It prompted a second with *Country Life*, a geographical landscape which shifts between the coastal world of Nuclear Power Station based upon both Sizewell in Suffolk and Dungeness in Kent and the different hum of London life. The two main characters in Edwards's novel, Dennis and Tarquin, move towards the aptly-named pub 'The World's End' and there is a finely-tuned moment of humour when Tarquin's abstract ideas are brought to bear upon the Here and Now in terms of sound. Musing upon the reality of the present moment he thinks of his unpublished monograph 'Neo-Marxist Aesthetics and the Marketing of the Moment':

There's a chapter on this in his book, as it happens. How making it up on the spot is the only methodology that can adequately counter the marketing of the present moment, by deprivileging (his word) its potential for reification. And so on.

Come the revolution there will be improvisation workshops on every street corner, that the working classes will flock to avail themselves of.

(*Country Life* 25)

That quiet humour of the sub-clause 'as it happens' contrasts delightfully with the pomposity of the title of the 500-page book and brings to mind the tensions between the immediacy of improvisation and the carefully planned picture of the Future.

Ken Edwards raises a question of some considerable significance towards the end of the novel after the nightmares have all unraveled:

When does night cease to be, and where does dawn start? Where does an event end, and the next one begin? But there are no events or incidents, only endless flux. A thin strip of light cuts the rim of the sea. There's glossy, flat sand at the waves' edge. And the waves continually move in, in corrugated lines, a long shadow at the base of each and white flecks of foam appearing at their peaks; and one after another with a low crash each flings itself at the sand and the packed shingle above it, pauses, then withdraws with a lengthy hiss before the next starts to arrive. The rhythm is slow; it does not vary.

(*Country Life* 193)

As both Dennis and the novel's narrator stare out in Arnoldian resignation at the waves which 'Begin, and cease, and then again begin' we are left with a world of the 'darkling plain' upon which 'ignorant armies clash by night'.

An earlier contemplation of the larger issue of our existence in relation to our inherited historical, genetic or moral growth had led Dennis to raise the simple question of why he and Tarquin didn't 'trash' a helpless old woman who was lost on that bleak Suffolk coastline:

This is just a hypothetical question, you understand. What stopped us taking advantage of her? Trashing her, I mean? What are you saying?

I mean, she's no use to anyone really, is she? She's a waste of space. In the human food chain, wouldn't you say she's pretty low?

Yeah, but – that's a pretty weird, big question –

(*Country Life* 26)

When the poet J.H. Prynne read the earlier novel *Futures* he wrote a substantial criticism of it in the form of a letter to Edwards in March 2000 in which he presented his reflections upon reading the novel for the first time. He suggested that 'Only the thin narrow line of the future itself may perhaps be innocent because unknown and unknowing, like the zero point of birth which tells us nothing'. In the world of a less subtle writer such as Anthony Burgess the answer to Dennis's question might perhaps have been presented in the ultra-violence of Alex and his droogs from *A Clockwork Orange*. The whole of Prynne's letter appeared in *Golden Handcuffs Review* 9.

In *Futures* a seeking for a definition of reality is presented to the reader as Eileen (often referred to as Eye) goes to her daily task at the office the morning after killing the man who had raped her on the roof-top. Her job was to sit all day in front of a VDU screen 'entering text not of her own origination'. What strikes one so immediately about this daily activity is its inbuilt sense of pointlessness:

Although she had never thought about it much before, it now came upon her how strange a way it was to make a living. She fused her consciousness with this small pulse-being that ceased to be and remade itself moment by moment, and created out of this the illusion of permanent reproduction. The reproduction belonged, not to her, but to the company – which, in recompense, paid her so much each month.

(*Futures* 37)

Later in the novel an echoing shadow of this apparent nothingness appears when Eye is confronted by a part of the city that 'teetered on the edge of civilisation'. Cycling away from the dead body on the rooftop she passes through a dark alleyway on the edge of the Thames where she sees 'bodies inert reclining under the bridge'. At once we are faced with what Graham Swift had referred to in his

1983 novel *Waterland* when he suggested that as you turn a corner you arrive at the moment 'where Now and Long Ago are the same and time seems to be going on in some other place'. Living takes one across boundaries which divide the present from the future and in the world of Ken Edwards we seem to inhabit a place where there is no past and certainly no future but 'just the husk that formed around the immediate present' where 'nobody cared.' This sense of immediacy is what also haunts the conclusions that Dennis comes to in *Country Life* as he talks to Alison and tells her that there is no point in worrying about the future because if there isn't one we won't know and so 'we should think of our lives as a succession of present moments'.

Eileen's roof-top sanctuary in *Futures* had been invaded by a confident young business man whose eye was continually on the look-out for a speculative future: the scope for development. Her space above the streets inevitably calls to mind that 'Garden on the Roof' in Dickens's late novel *Our Mutual Friend*. There the invader was the owner of the property and he can only be contemptuous of what has been made of his asset. As Fascination Fledgeby, can only hear the City's roar and be struck by the smoke in the air the hunch-backed Jenny Wren offered a different perspective:

"But it's so high. And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead."

This sense of freedom and distance from which to evaluate the on-going process of the world finds itself transposed into the more clearly autobiographical prose of the recently published *Wild Metrics* (Grand IOTA Press) as the narrator, K, finds himself in his 'eyrie at the top of the house with its commanding view over the rooftops of London'. As with Eileen's roof-garden this elevation becomes 'a refuge from social interaction'. Before the brutal invasion of the NOW, Eileen's roof-top sanctuary had been 'her paradise garden in the sky, secluded from the city's faraway intercourse.' However, later in the novel as she cycles away from having killed the serpent on the roof-top she meets up with a former lover and as they discuss ideas about Time she says that it's not a garden of Eden she wants but 'a

transformation of now'. A similar echo of loss can later be heard in *Country Life* as Dennis walks around the world of the Peninsula and sees the junk piled in 'fields of a ruined Eden'. As an outcast from Paradise Eileen travels through the two days since the expulsion and the style of movement in the writing has become indicative of Ken Edwards's prose:

The question was too difficult; easier to pedal, one push at a time, one leg and then the other, building up a journey from such small blocks of attention; a voyage of discovery? or invention? Each small focusing of attention contributed to the big focusing, the world coming together.

(*Futures* 111)

By the time we reach the novel's end there is a type of resolution to these questions of immediacy as Eileen takes her child, conceived presumably by her reluctant intimacy with either John 1 or John 2, back to that desolate house in the city. The narrator can only imagine what that moment might have felt like as 'The smell of the child, its soft limbs, its tremendous, sought-after smile, its cry from the heart' holds Eileen more powerfully even than 'the blue space of the sky above the rooftop'. She watches it now, as it plays with a woolen animal, putting it experimentally in its mouth. As the narrator sees the moment he becomes aware that 'Something is always happening: peaking, then falling away, each a unique event that nevertheless sends out ripples of consequence, for the first and last time'. He can no longer describe these events with their uncertain outcomes and can no longer describe them, 'let alone assess their significance beyond the blank page at the end of this', his 'imagining of her surge of love for the child – and the realization that, after all, she can feel such love.'

Perhaps then an answer to Dennis's hypothetical question concerning the lost old woman on the coast-line marshes may be located in what Prynne was to refer to as the 'narrow line of the future' echoes itself in Ken Edwards's 'thin strip of light' which 'cuts the rim of the sea'. This is where we are and after this there is 'the blank page'.

The authorial voice of *Wild Metrics* tells the reader that memories are fractal:

The more you focus in and magnify them, the more self-similar structures appear in their interstices, that is, in the gaps between them.

(*Wild Metrics* 10)

In Mathematical terms a fractal is a shape made of parts similar to the whole in some way and the reference to it in this latest book is a reflection of the day-to-day work/world of Eileen as she contemplates her computer screen with its illusion of permanent reproduction. The world in which Edwards's characters move around is one of process, movement, and yet threading its way through the constant changes is a sense of uniformity, fractals. Perhaps it is this sense that Prynne was referring to when he suggested that 'some analysis could be performed, as has for instance been mounted up in respect of Beckett's *Watt*, to map out the latent fault-lines'. The Beckett referred to by Prynne presented a world where 'nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something' and in Mr Watt's world 'it revisited him in such a way that he was forced to submit to it all over again, to hear the same sounds, see the same lights, touch the same surfaces, and so on, as when they had first involved him in their unintelligible intricacies'. However, what Prynne noted most of all about the style of the writing was what became the most notable feature to his ear: 'the way that your sentence structure so steadily keeps its distance, in cohesional outreach, from the one next about to follow it.'

The world of 'fractals' in the geography of Ken Edwards reveals memories embedded between memories and one is confronted by a sense of vertigo as landscapes move:

Every street featured at least one skip by the kerbside, yellow, rusting, continually filled with rubble, bricks, planks, furniture, the remaining legacies of dead residents (battered suitcases spilling memorabilia nobody could find a use for), and also daily household rubbish opportunistically and illegally offloaded. Occasionally a skip would be hitched to a trailer by men in overalls and towed away, but soon another would appear in its place.

(*Wild Metrics* 22)

However, any direct sense of autobiographical writing in this latest work of prose which incidentally is subtitled 'A Poem' must be treated with caution and it is worth recalling that when Edwards was interviewed by Wolfgang Gortzchacher in 1995 he pointed out that one of things bothering him about his writing was the 'single point of view'.

So my current writing does not use the first-person narrative at all and the point of view shifts from character to character. I found that gives me a lot more freedom, but I suppose what I am trying to do is really an extension of what I am trying to do in poetry, in that I do some exploration of consciousness and exploration of realities.

(*Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene* 256)

In *Wild Metrics* the area of North Kensington conjured up by the writer is a world of constant change not dissimilar to that which confronts us in Paul Auster's dystopian novel from the late 1980s, *In the Country of Last Things*. In that world 'A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone' or a street you walked down yesterday 'is no longer there today':

Close your eyes for a moment turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you.

(*In the Country of Last Things* 2)

A similar process of movement which is indissolubly bound up with mystery is caught by Edwards as he brings back into view an early poem 'The Circulation of the Light' from the pamphlet of poems *Eric Satie loved children*:

there is wizardry
in what manner & by what processes
stars become dust

Referring to that early collection Edwards had expressed an affection for what was the 'first showing of what later evolved into my

preferred procedures: cutting and splicing, juxtaposition, language play, composition by rhythm' (*No Public Language, Selected Poems 1975-1995*, Shearsman Books 2006). As this poem appears again above the horizon in *Wild Metrics* it is read to the narrator's friend Bode whose reaction suggests something central about the whole of Ken Edwards's work:

...and Bode responded with great enthusiasm, saying that that was what he meant, that the way the poem had been composed, three lines that had grouped themselves by chance, or chance-enhanced decision, showed its own Process. And there was nothing further to say, because the poem was its own saying.

(*Wild Metrics* 148)