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Carmel Bird *Family Skeleton*
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Carmel Bird's new novel is a fractal satire on the dynastic family novel – replete with the customary tropes of the genre: secrets repressed and confessed in the stratigraphy of a garish baroque of class signifiers. *Family Skeleton* relates the travails and intrigues of an inbred clan of parvenu undertakers, episodically followed over several generations through a pastiche of anecdote and gossip.

The dynastic genre is inherently preoccupied with lineage, procreation, survival and continuity, and the O'Day family trade is one of the plethora of mordant whimsies that figure the mortal anxiety of its members. Translated into the lush bluestone manors of Toorak the form accretes and lacquers the shallow pretensions and competitive respectabilities of the colonial bourgeoisie, like a particularly insipid pearl. The icons of class signifiers liberally scatter the text: Tasmanian pinot, majolica porcelain, Waterford crystal. The generations of the O'Day family live lives of listless ease occupied with little more than gossip, vengery, and occasional ostentatious virtue. Parsed ethically or intellectually, this species of false consciousness is tedious and superficial. Bird assumes a fairly critical stance towards her subjects, particularly the callous sexual indifferences of the O'Day men. However, from a dialectical point of view the text's lack of alternative – with the possible exception of the housekeeper Lilian, whose goodness may read as saccharine – risks complicity with the moral and intellectual poverty of its milieu.

If it took itself seriously a book like this would be nigh unreadable, but the author crafts her characters with a satirical edge, none more so than the restrained family matriarch Margaret O'Day, whose unwittingly wry memoir 'The Book of Revelation' is subverted and ironised by the parallel narrative nominally penned by the eponymous cadaver. This recursive pattern weaves helically throughout the text, which from its incipience positions both the narrative and the narrator as the proverbial family shame, moving through a screen-structure of venial, or merely suspected, sins, towards darkness. Thus the form is structured by revelation or the illusion of it, and a gossamer structure of leitmotif leads the reader through a catalogue of predictable morbid implications of incest and injury towards overt violence.

It's an incisively metafictional text: the excerpts of Margaret's journal are transposed into a fractured and posthumous literary present situated after the death of its primary actors. Symbols of concealment and optic distortion abound, and the narrator at one point endorses a theory by another of the text's author figures, a historian, that subverts and fractures the linear and lineal concept of an 'old growth' history neatly divisible into distinct 'trees', and so

metonymous of genetic ontology. Furthermore this eugenic fantasy is continually offset by a profusion of Hamletic doubling; O'Day progeny are christened Orson, Oriane, Orlando, and for good measure Ophelia – more than meriting the daft moniker “Oops O'Daisies”, which, like much in the novel, scans as a signifier of illegitimation, registering the liberal error of the O'Day patriarch's philandering.

The epistemological quandaries and paranoias of procreation – commented upon saliently in this novel through a reverie on ‘ivyeff’ have likely always inflected dynastic narratives, and their underpinning structures of volatile identity. It was their palpable, lurking presence in Greek tragedy, and through them *Hamlet* that so influenced Freud's theories of consciousness, and Bird here engages this legacy in a dark pantomime. For most of the novel Margaret persists in a roseate idyll of her father Killian, the good doctor, his profession another hypostasis of patriarchal law, and it is history's threat to this image, and her brittle sense of self, that precipitates the darker, more Jacobean aspects of the novel's plot. But, as in *Hamlet*, the obsessive maintenance of insubstantial distinctions is a neurotic signifier of its opposite, which in worrying the boundaries of knowable forms of identity lurches towards the doubling function of incest, which underlies all the O'Days' lace-curtain pieties.

Metafiction is a volatile form, traversing a narrow dialectic between irony and vacuity. The mis-en-abyme of discord which opens between the perceptual axiom and the immanent structure of the real can allow a text to access a vertiginous, singular power of conceptual relativism – what Jameson termed the ‘libidinal charge’ of modernity. This force is famously achieved by the more reflexive parts of *Hamlet*, and essentialised by Velasquez' definitive 1656 painting *Las Meninas*. Nearer to home Jonathan Nolan's and Lisa Joy's Deconstructive epic *Westworld*, and Justin Roylan's animated series *Rick and Morty* exploit the fluidities of textual architecture in comparable ways. In the metrics of what one might call philosophical aesthetics, the classical forms of metafiction may require a degree of justification. Their dramatic structure requires a degree of textual investment or subsumption, to achieve its relativizing force. This novel's deployment of metafictional structure rests upon a degree of investment in the canards of class that I lacked. But if this an aesthetic fault in the text, it's also a moral virtue.

This novel's voice and structure are to be admired and commended for their innovation, but at times this text's irony seems to eclipse its substance too dramatically, producing the occasional sensations of reading a lengthy, and recursive obituary.