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The Eternal Recurrence of (Hi)Story: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

Abstract

This article analyses the structural and thematic repetitions in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Similar motifs and character types are re-used in the novel's circular rather than linear structure. It is argued that, while staging a dialectic of sameness and difference, *Cloud Atlas* eschews the Platonic hierarchy of a model and its copy and blurs the distinction between the real and the fictional. All the six interlocked narratives that build the novel may be regarded as artefacts, remediated and encased in other artefacts. The same material is reconfigured in an endless cycle, which, as the article argues, harks back to the second, Nietzschean model of repetition distinguished by J. Hillis Miller in *Fiction and Repetition*.

Keywords: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, repetition, historical cycle, eternal recurrence.

In *Fiction and Repetition* J. Hillis Miller observes: "A long work like the novel is interpreted, by whatever sort of reader, in part through the identification of recurrences and of meanings generated through recurrences". Miller stresses the ubiquity and variety of repetition in fiction, pointing out that repetitions tend to occur at different levels, ranging from the recurrence of verbal elements (words, figures of speech) through, on a larger scale, repetition of scenes and events, to characters re-enacting other characters' lives, repeating the lot of previous generations, or embodying mythological figures. Yet another level is constituted by authorial self-repetitions, when a writer employs "motifs, themes, characters, or events" from his other books.¹

¹ J.H. Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, p. 1–2. Self-repetitions are a hallmark of David Mitchell's fiction. *Ghostwritten* (1999), *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014) are structured in a similar way, as sets of interlocking narratives. There are also numerous instances of cross-references, thematic repetitions (e.g. dystopian elements in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*), and characters migrating between his novels.

Miller's assertion that "[a]ny novel is a complex tissue of repetitions"² is especially pertinent with regard to David Mitchell's fiction. Any reading of *Cloud Atlas* (2004), his "most highly regarded, widely read novel to date",³ must take account of repetition as both its thematic and structural principle. *Cloud Atlas* comprises six narratives, with the first five divided in half and located symmetrically on either side of the sixth narrative, which forms the centrepiece of the entire text. Organisationally, then, the second part of the novel is a mirror image of the first. This structural duality causes the same stories and characters to recur in the second half, only in reverse order. Far more interesting than this technical ploy, however, are the instances of repetition which cut across the stories. Indeed, it is the persistent and conspicuous recurrences that hold the novel together since not only the particular stories, but also each half may be read as a stand-alone narrative, with its own logic of development; moreover, the numerous cross-references between the stories do not constitute causal links.⁴ Viewed collectively, the stories are snapshots of human history, chosen at random but illustrative of certain general tendencies. The impression of randomness and fragmentariness is intensified by the novel's generic heterogeneity.

Despite its richness of detail as well as widely diverse temporal and geographic settings, the same basic narrative pattern is re-enacted: individuals and groups exploit and prey on one another. The people of Moriori in the Pacific Islands are conquered, enslaved and even cannibalised by their neighbours, and both are colonised by Europeans ("The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing"); an older composer takes advantage of the talent of his young colleague ("Letters from Zedelghem"); a corporation accumulates power and wealth by developing a hazardous nuclear project and eliminating those who try to warn the public of the danger ("Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery"); a technologically advanced society depends on genetically engineered androids for slave labour ("An Orison of Sonmi-451"); the savage Kona tribe kill or enslave their neighbours ("Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After"), etc. As one character sums it up in the final pages of the novel, "the world *is* wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori, Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin-boys, Death on the Living. 'The weak are meat, the strong do eat'".⁵ In parallel to the theme of ubiquitous metaphorical and literal cannibalism, the novel charts an opposing tendency: each narrative features a protagonist who refuses to take part in the universal predacity⁶ and tries to counteract it. Casey Shoop and Dermot Ryan comment on the repetitiveness of the particular plots: "each section

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ P. O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell*, New York–London 2015, p. 69.

⁴ Writing *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell aimed to modify Italo Calvino's conceit of a series of interrupted narratives in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by writing continuations for his own truncated stories ("David Mitchell", *Interview by A. Begley, The Art of Fiction No. 204*, "The Paris Review" 2010, no. 193, p. 184).

⁵ D. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, London 2014, p. 523–524. Later in the text as *CA*.

⁶ Cf. Mitchell in an interview: "... the book's theme is predacity – the way individuals prey on individuals, groups on groups, nations on nations, tribes on tribes" (qtd. in S. Dimovitz, *The Sound of*

seems to be translating or playing out in another context a scenario from another time period".⁷

Not only is this narrative pattern repeated from one story to the next; the novel intimates that the entire sequence which makes up a semblance of world history in the novel repeats itself. Chronologically, the narratives proceed from the nineteenth century, when the first protagonist encounters forms of tribal life in the Chatham Islands ("The Pacific Journal"), to a dystopian future and, finally, a post-apocalyptic age, when humanity has regressed to a condition of savagery; however, vague memories of civilised life prompt the last humans to rebuild civilisation. In conformity with the dual structure of the novel, the nineteenth-century part frames the book by functioning as its first and last chapter. Lynda Ng claims that in relation to the middle chapter the first and last ones "constitute the past and the future, confounding linear time by positing an interrelationship of past and future configurations of human society".⁸ Geographically, the novel circumnavigates the globe: the ship on which Adam Ewing in "The Pacific Journal" sails is headed towards Hawaii, where the post-apocalyptic part is set as well. This temporal and spatial loop implies that "the behavior of mankind does not change across time".⁹ The novel's exuberance and the uniqueness of particular stories co-exist with multiple repetitions functioning at different levels, which accounts for the tension between separateness and connectedness in the novel.¹⁰ Patrick O'Donnell suggests that the contradictory effect the novel creates is: "everything is always the same; nothing is ever the same".¹¹ But the contradiction may be resolved if *Cloud Atlas* is read as reconfigurations of the same patterns.

Miller distinguishes between two forms of repetition, which he calls, after Gilles Deleuze,¹² Platonic and Nietzschean, respectively. The first, Platonic type is predicated on a "solid archetypal model" which in its essence remains unchanged in the act of repetition. The repeated forms are imitations of the model. Hence, the relation between the model and its copy(ies) is based on "genuine participative similarity or even on identity" since copying aims at imitating the model. The copy is legitimised by "its truth correspondence to what it copies".¹³ Rather than a world of copies, the other, Nietzschean type posits a world of simulacra, unrelated to and unauthorised by any paradigm or archetype. Whereas the first type of repetition is associated with imitation, the alternative mode is characterised by

Silence: Eschatology and the Limits of the Word in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas, "SubStance" 2015, #136, vol. 44, no. 1 (David Mitchell Special Issue), p. 80).

⁷ C. Shoop, D. Ryan, "Gravid with the Ancient Future": *Cloud Atlas and the Politics of Big History*, "SubStance" 2015, #136, vol. 44, no. 1 (David Mitchell Special Issue), p. 97.

⁸ L. Ng, *Cannibalism, Colonialism and Apocalypse in Mitchell's Global Future*, "SubStance" 2015, #136, vol. 44, no. 1 (David Mitchell Special Issue), p. 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ Cf. W. McMorran, *Cloud Atlas and If on a Winter's Night a Traveller: Fragmentation and Integrity in the Postmodern Novel* [in:] *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. S. Dillon, Canterbury 2011, p. 169.

¹¹ P. O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹² Miller draws on Deleuze's *Logique du sens* (*op. cit.*, p. 5–6).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

a lack of clear hierarchy: the affinity between two elements entails, as its integral component, dissimilarity, alteration, ironic reversal, subversion or distortion.¹⁴ Repetition of the second type “is not grounded. It arises out of the interplay of the opaquely similar things”.¹⁵ Miller, however, refrains from suggesting that the two modes are binary opposites since repetition is based on a relation of simultaneous similitude and difference. His subsequent analyses of seven chosen novels demonstrate the co-presence of the two types while arguing that in a given writer one type or the other will be dominant.¹⁶ The “everything is always the same; nothing is ever the same” effect of *Cloud Atlas* stems from the intertwining of similarity and dissimilarity. Yet this article argues that the second, Nietzschean type of repetition prevails in Mitchell’s novel.

Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence presupposes an infinity of time and a finite number of events which “repeat themselves in the same sequence through an eternal series of cycles”.¹⁷ This notion, central to Nietzsche’s thought, is “both explicitly mentioned and structurally evoked” in *Cloud Atlas*.¹⁸ In “Letters from Zedelghem” the protagonist Robert Frobisher rephrases a passage from *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence* when he writes to his friend:

Rome’ll decline and fall again, Cortazar’ll sail again and, later, Ewing will too, Adrian [Robert’s brother, killed in the Great War]’ll be blown to pieces again, you and I’ll sleep under Corsican stars again, I’ll come to Bruges again, fall in and out of love with Eva again, you’ll read this letter again, the Sun’ll grow cold again. Nietzsche’s gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities (CA 490).

In that same story, a famous composer and a devotee of Nietzsche, Vyvyan Ayrs attempts but never finishes a composition named *Eternal Recurrence*, in honour of the philosopher (CA 84). Frobisher, his more talented colleague, produces his own work called *Cloud Atlas* whose design is described as “a sextet for overlapping soloists [...] In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order” (CA 463), making it a metonymy of the entire novel. Taking his cue from the book’s autoreferential categorisation, Berthold Schoene-Harwood has compared it to a musical composition “played in different modes on a variety of instruments, yet invariably chiming as one”.¹⁹

Although the sequence of arbitrarily selected episodes from human history begins with an account of a visit to an island which initially reminds the narrator of Eden, these biblical connotations with primal innocence are soon exposed as inaccurate: the place has been corrupted and its inhabitants have a history of vio-

¹⁴ Cf. Miller’s examples in op. cit., p. 6–12.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 8. Miller’s discussion draws here on Walter Benjamin’s analysis of repetitions in Marcel Proust’s fiction.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 16–17.

¹⁷ R.L. Anderson, *Friedrich Nietzsche* [in:] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Ed.), ed. E.N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/> (access: 10.02.2018).

¹⁸ G. Bayer, *Perpetual Apocalypses: David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas and the Absence of Time*, “Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction”, 2015, vol. 56, no. 4, p. 346.

¹⁹ B. Schoene-Harwood, *The World Begins Its Turn with You, or How David Mitchell’s Novels Think* [in:] B. Schoene-Harwood, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, Edinburgh 2009, p. 114.

lence and cruelty, reminiscent of – and at the same time anticipatory of – the tribal savagery in the post-apocalyptic part.²⁰ Accordingly, the journal which technically represents the beginning and the end of the novel itself has no beginning and no end. That being the case, the novel does not contain any “primordial mythical moment”²¹ which could be taken to initiate the series of repetitions. Already the opening paragraphs, in which the narrator describes finding footprints on a forlorn strand, echo another canonical narrative – *Robinson Crusoe*. As Scott Dimovitz aptly notes, *Cloud Atlas* suggests that “in the beginning was not the Word, but rather the Trace”.²²

Indeed, each story in the novel can be traced back to the preceding one(s). With the exception of Luisa Rey (“Half-Lives”), each protagonist is a first-person narrator making a record of his or her experience, either in the form of a journal (“The Pacific Journal”), letters (“Letters from Zedelghem”), a film script (“The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish”), a recorded testimony (“An Orison”), or an oral tale delivered to an audience (“Sloosha’s Crossin”). In what may be described as a series of “transgressions of diegetic levels”,²³ in each story the previous one becomes an artefact and, additionally, is transmitted to a different medium. Therefore, in the words of Courtney Hopf, “Each step in this process is an act of mediation, but it is also an act of remediation, because each medium is encapsulated in another”.²⁴ Robert Frobisher in “Letters” reads an incomplete manuscript of Adam Ewing’s journal, his own letters are read by Luisa Rey, in the following narrative the story of Luisa turns out to be the manuscript of a novel which Timothy Cavendish intends to publish, he in turn plans to convert his autobiographical notes into a script for a film, which is subsequently watched by Sonmi (“An Orison”); the egg-shaped electronic device containing Sonmi’s interview is revered as an oracle by the tribe in “Sloosha’s Crossin”. In the pivotal middle section of the novel, the “silver egg” is switched on and the tribe watch Sonmi’s testimony which ends with her watching the second part of the film, “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish”, Timothy reads the second part of the manuscript of Luisa Rey and so on, as the novel curves back upon itself, while the characters unconsciously pass their stories to each other. According to Peter Childs and James Green, this structure suggests that “narratives (and lives) do not so much end as ceaselessly recycle themselves in new contexts, transposed into different but related forms”.²⁵ By featuring multiple, embedded artefacts, the novel blurs further any distinction that may exist between reality and its imitation. Heather J.

²⁰ If we relate this story to its model, i.e. the biblical story of paradise, then the narrative could be regarded as its ironic reversal, hence an instance of Miller’s second type of repetition.

²¹ Cf. M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, transl. W.R. Trask, Princeton 1974, p. 35.

²² S. Dimovitz, op. cit., p. 77.

²³ C. Hopf, *The Stories We Tell: Discursive Identity Through Narrative Form in Cloud Atlas* [in:] *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. S. Dillon, Canterbury 2011, p. 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁵ P. Childs, J. Green, *The Novels in Nine Parts* [in:] *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. S. Dillon, Canterbury 2011, p. 44.

Hicks notes that “[t]he very authenticity of each section is exploded by its proximity to another equally authentic piece performing another time period”.²⁶

Repetition combined with a lack of originality is especially foregrounded as a theme in the story of Sonmi. Her room is decorated with perfect copies of Rothko canvases: “Molecule-for-molecule copies of the originals [...] though one may argue no originals remain in our world” (CA 227). This comment applies not only to the paintings; it also adequately encapsulates the mechanisms which govern her dystopian society.²⁷ An enigmatic political force imposes the principle of Unanimity; human beings have produced human-like creatures known as “fabricants”. Fabricants of a given category are identical, their days follow the same pattern, they are programmed to perform the same tasks until they are slaughtered and literally recycled into new androids – modified copies of human beings (who unwittingly also consume the recycled bodies of the androids, thus becoming copies of copies), and their own copies. It may be said that “the fabricants literalize the notion of eternal return”²⁸ whereas the entire society is caught in a process of endless biological recirculation. Only “pureblood” human beings are allowed to have “souls”, but, ironically, these make people replicas rather than individuals. The “souls” come in the form of chips, which can be implanted in the body, or detached from it.

The idea of the interchangeability of souls hints at the reappearance of certain character traits in *Cloud Atlas*.²⁹ Recurrent trajectories of story sequences appears to be one of the meanings of the title. Zachry’s tribe believes (“Sloosha’s Cross-in”) that “Souls cross the skies o’ time [...] like clouds crossi’ skies o’ the world” (CA 318). The protagonists of particular stories all seem to be disposable incarnations of circulating “souls”. At the same time, the concept of mapping something as mutable as clouds is self-contradictory,³⁰ and intimates both a pattern and a random variation of repetitions.

The notion of reincarnation is reiterated in the novel, in different guises. Zachry professes a belief in physical reincarnation. Living in a scientific age, Luisa Rey speculates that the author of the letters that have reached her (i.e. “Letters from Zedelghem”) is chemically present in the packet and may be integrated into her own body as she inhales the stale air: “Are molecules [...] of Robert Frobisher’s hand, dormant in this paper for forty-four years, swirling in my lungs, now, in my blood?” (CA 453). Of course, this fanciful speculation foreshadows the practice of reworking molecules into copies (as in Rothko paintings), pursued in the technologically advanced society of “An Orison”. But Timothy Cavendish, the editor of the novel about Luisa Rey, is dissatisfied with the allusions to rein-

²⁶ H.J. Hicks, “This Time Round”: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism, “Postmodern Culture” 2010, vol. 20, no. 3, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1429528899?accountid=47074> (access 30.07.2017).

²⁷ This statement may also be treated as yet another metafictional comment on the repetition-based design of *Cloud Atlas*.

²⁸ H.J. Hicks, op. cit.

²⁹ Mitchell states that the repeatability of characters in his novel reflects “recycled themes of human characteristics” (BBC Book Club interview by J. Naughtie, qtd. in S. Dimovitz, op. cit., p. 80).

³⁰ P. O’Donnell, op. cit., p. 80.

carnation: “One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippie-druggy-new age” (CA 373). Ironically, this dismissal is immediately counterpointed by his acknowledgement that he has a birthmark which, as the reader will know, is shared by the protagonists in the six stories. Given that the novel presents itself as an assemblage of artefacts, those versions of identity must also be regarded as textually encoded. The characters themselves do not attach importance to their mark, but its reappearance emphasises the circulation of textual “molecules” within the entire novel. Will McMorran reads the birthmark as “the author’s signature”, which exposes the artifice of the text.³¹ If the novel refuses to endorse any metaphysical beliefs, it certainly forges a textual form of rebirth. The affinities between these characters are not self-evident, but the mark compels the reader to see them in terms of similitude rather than disparity. Although they are themselves unaware of it, the characters come across as semblances of one another, in a cycle of eternal recurrence.

The six narratives are also enmeshed in the “always somewhat predictable recurrence of circumstances”.³² For all their diversity, these comet-marked characters act as vehicles for the same values: individualism, humane impulses, a refusal to exploit others. Struggling against ubiquitous corruption and predation, they face persecution, ostracism and even death. What they effectively oppose is mankind’s relentless movement towards self-destruction, which is the inescapable underside of progress. The sequence of the stories in *Cloud Atlas* is directed towards an apocalyptic end, as a result of universal ruthless competition, the exhaustion of resources, the destruction of the natural environment and the suppression of human individuality. However, the “[n]aïve, dreaming Adam”, as the narrator of “The Pacific Journal” describes himself (CA 529), is convinced that there is a glimmer of hope “[i]f we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw,³³ if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Ocean shared equitably” (CA 528).

The regular appearance of the comet-shaped birthmark not only ensures a degree of “opaque similarity” between the characters who bear it and thus a form of continuity of their noble endeavour; it also hints at the kind of transcendence Adam Ewing envisions. If there is any hope for mankind, it lies with individuals who look beyond their immediate gratification. It is thanks to the periodic reversals of mankind’s self-annihilating tendencies that life continues on Earth even after a global nuclear disaster, referred to as “the Fall” (and the novel continues beyond its post-apocalyptic chapter). At the critical moment, after “Civ’lize’s last bright light” has been snuffed out (CA 310), Zachry’s tribe is visited by one of the very few survivors of the old civilisation, who intends to “plant more Civ’lize”

³¹ W. McMorran, op. cit., p. 168.

³² B. Schoene-Harwood, op. cit., p. 97.

³³ An allusion to Alfred Tennyson’s well-known formulation: “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (*In Memoriam* 56).

there (CA 310). Meronym, another bearer of the cosmic birthmark, saves Zachry from death and passes on to him some of her knowledge, thus facilitating a transition from the completed historical sequence to the one which is about to begin. Therefore the cycle of human history continues; “Nietzsche’s gramophone record” plays on. Adam and Zachry (A–Z) are the first and last man, or, indeed, both at the same time.

The cosmic provenance of the birthmark may be seen as meaningful; as Shoop and Ryan note, comets are orbital bodies and tend to reappear.³⁴ However, the book’s cosmology ends here; there is no indication of the presence of a divine power who designed and rules over the universe. Nor can any primal or final moment be unequivocally identified in the structure of *Cloud Atlas*. The cosmic cycle continues on its own, in self-perpetuating motion. Even though the first six chapters chart a sequence, driven by an interplay of progressive and self-destructive tendencies in human history, the model of historical linearity, if viewed from a broader perspective, emerges as a component in a cyclical pattern of Nietzschean repetitions. Analysis of the thematic and structural recirculations substantiates the claim that the historical process presented in *Cloud Atlas* has no beginning, no end and no foundation outside itself.

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