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David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*: A History of the World as a (Re)Cycle

Abstract: This article demonstrates that David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* is based on a view of history as a cycle. This old concept, discussed, amongst others, by Mircea Eliade, is not only explicitly evoked but also reflected in the structure of the novel, which is determined by repetition and which refuses to be bound by linearity, causality or the indication of beginning and end. The same motifs and character types are repeated and recycled in the six component narratives. The notion of predatory consumption and a constant re-use of resources serves as a corresponding representation of the historical process.

Keywords: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, historical cycle, eternal return, repetition in literature

In his seminal study *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* Mircea Eliade distinguishes between two basic frames within which history may be conceived. The older concept, upheld by primitive cultures, is that of "cyclical time, periodically regenerating itself *ad infinitum*"; the other, the modern notion envisages time as finite, or as "a fragment […] between two atemporal eternities" (112). Eliade subsequently modifies his attribution of the two concepts to archaic and modern man, respectively, by acknowledging the reappearance of the idea of periodicity in modern thought – the myth of the eternal return was revived by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century, and thinkers such as Spengler or Toynbee in the twentieth (Eliade 146).[1]

As Eliade demonstrates, across different cultures the idea of cyclicality involves a conception of the periodic disappearance and reappearance of humanity, which is accompanied by repeated catastrophes followed by a reconstitution of the world (87–88). A man of an archaic society, he argues, has a sense of being connected with the Cosmos and its rhythms (xiii–xiv); within this perspective, empirical reality is thought to imitate celestial archetypes (5). The vision of a recurrent regeneration of time is found together with a devaluation of temporality itself: humanity is supposed to exist in an atemporal present (85–86), with the past being "but a prefiguration of the future," and with no event being irreversible and no transformation final (89).

David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004)[2] is predicated on the erosion of clear

1 Other contemporary theorists who have addressed the concept of historical repetition include Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, or Jacques Derrida.

2 *Cloud Atlas*, shortlisted for the 2004 Booker Prize, is Mitchell's most widely read novel to date. One of the most original English writers of the 21st century, Mitchell is known for novels which, like *Cloud Atlas*, are composed of several intersecting and interrelated narratives projecting multiple temporal and spatial settings: *Ghostwritten* (1999), *number9dream* (2001), *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and *Slade House* (2015). He is also the author of a historical novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010).

distinctions between the present, the past and the future while projecting a vision of history as a cycle of civilisational growth and decline. In what may be taken as one of the numerous "overt metafictional winks" (Dimovitz 71) in the novel, a matrioshka doll serves as a model for its temporal dimension. As one character writes: "each 'shell' (the present) encased inside a nest of 'shells' (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of 'now' likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be" (409). Indeed, the structure of the book itself deconstructs the past-present-future sequence.[3]

In his anthropological overview of the concept of cyclicality, Eliade stresses the vital importance of the originating moment, or the primal act which subsequently validates and legitimises its repetitions. The meaning and value of human acts, in Eliade's formulation, "are not connected with their crude physical datum but with their property of reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythical example" (4). Mitchell's set of interlocking and, matrioshka-style, mutually inbuilt narratives which replicate one another deliberately eschews any such point of origin, instead conveying a view of history as a fragmentary set of stories endlessly reshaping basically the same material, in which the difference between actuality and virtuality, past and present is obliterated. The character's reflection quoted above is itself "encased" within another narrative – a structure which the matrioshka doll mimics. One character's story becomes an artefact in the subsequent part of the novel (e.g. in three successive narratives the story of Luisa Rey turns out to be the manuscript of a novel which Timothy Cavendish, the protagonist of the next story, plans to publish; his own story becomes a film, which, in turn, is watched by Sonmi, the central character in the next story). Hence Peter Childs and James Green comment that "narratives (and lives) do not so much end as ceaselessly recycle themselves in new contexts, transposed into different but related forms" (44).

The playfulness which the doll model also connotes may be linked to the exuberant, gimmicky effect of *Cloud Atlas*. The prominent motif of multiplication, re-use and recycling corresponds to the idea of history as a sequential repetition. *Cloud Atlas* is not so much a historical novel but a novel *about* history, concerned with detecting patterns and recurring configurations in the story of mankind. While it certainly does not aim at a comprehensive account, it proffers a meaningful arrangement of chosen fragments.

Jean-Jacques Chardin explains that "Recycling texts, documents, or ideas is a way of modifying, transforming, even bowdlerizing, or impoverishing them" (1). It is in this sense that Rubén Valdés claims that the work of historians consists in recycling the debris of the past (204). A.J.P. Taylor once averred, "History does not repeat itself; historians repeat each other." Rephrasing Taylor, Valdés further observes that historians not only recycle the past, they also "recycle each other" (206). In Mitchell's novel, history does repeat itself; ideas, characters and motifs are re-used from one narrative to another. As

3 Mitchell said in an interview: "I read about an Egyptian Goddess who gave birth to a pregnant daughter, whose embryo in turn was already pregnant, and so on to infinity. That's just beautiful. It seems to be a beautiful model for time as well. Every possible moment is contained in this moment, regressing on to infinity" (qtd. in Ng 118). On one occasion in the novel a parallel is drawn between an Egyptian goddess and a matrioshka doll (353).

this article argues, the novel is not only grounded in the notion of the cyclicality of history, but also self-consciously presents itself as a recycled version of this concept.

Recycling the Structure

Cloud Atlas is composed of six narratives, five of which are divided in half and placed symmetrically on either side of the middle narrative, which is undivided and which, accordingly, occupies the middle pages within the space of the book. Hence the first story has its continuation in the last chapter of the novel, the second in the penultimate chapter, etc. In other words, after reaching the middle, the novel proceeds in the opposite direction, curving back on itself. In an interview, Mitchell described his attempt at this technique as textual mirroring: "What would it actually look like if a mirror were placed at the end of the book, and you continued into a second half that took you back to the beginning?" (Mitchell, "David Mitchell" 184).[4]

The sequence in the novel is "both progressive and regressive" (O'Donnell 89). The impression of the world's motion being reversed is achieved in the book thanks to the symmetrical arrangement of characters and motifs. In the second halves of the narratives, that is in the converse sequence, long-dead characters are alive again; in a parallel transformation, what was a memory or a trace of the past becomes the present. Accordingly, *Cloud Atlas* deliberately shuns the categories of beginnings and endings. In a *pars pro toto* of the novel, the narrative which technically frames it has no beginning and no end. "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" begins *in medias res*, is interrupted in mid-sentence and continues in the second half of the novel without moving beyond its first volume. In the subsequent narrative the journal is revealed to be an old frayed edition, with its first and last pages missing. However, it is the middle, pivotal chapter of *Cloud Atlas* that might more appropriately be designated as its ending, or, even more perplexingly, as both its ending and its beginning. In "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" Zachry and his tribe are living in the aftermath of a global catastrophe, relying on misremembered and misinterpreted fragments of the old civilisation. It is in this chapter, half way through the novel, that time momentarily stops and starts flowing again for the main character (295–96). The very few survivors of the catastrophe have regressed to a state of savagery but are likely to become the progenitors of mankind since human history is about to embark on a new cycle. A link is forged between the middle chapter as well as the first and the last one when the history of the aboriginals whom Adam Ewing meets on the Chatham Islands reveals a close correspondence with the post-apocalyptic condition of Zachry's tribe on Hawaii.[5] Adam's ship sails from the Chatham Islands towards Hawaii; in

4 The writer acknowledges the structure of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as one of his inspirations for the writing of *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, "David Mitchell" 184).

5 Arguing that Mitchell's vision is not wholly bleak since he stresses the role of the community and the survival of virtuous individuals, Berthold Schoene-Harwood points out the significance of names in the – chronologically – first and last narratives: "Together, Autua – the last of the Moriori, stowaway, and saviour of Adam Ewing – and post-apocalyptic everyman Zachry, who lives to beget children after the genocide of his people, quite literally become the foundational A to Z of Mitchell's worlding, the be-all-in-common and never-end-all of his ethical vision" (117). It should be added that the A could also, or perhaps primarily, refer to Adam Ewing, the first man in the novel.

an analogous movement, the novel proceeds from the first and last chapters towards the middle one. Just as history comes full circle in the novel, so the novel itself circumvents linearity in favour of a repetitive, interlinked, circular structure.

Historical (Re)Cycles

Despite the arbitrariness of beginnings and endings as well as its overt tampering with chronology and sequentiality, *Cloud Atlas* does effect a degree of historical linearity. The half-narratives of the first half of the novel are arranged in chronological order, proceeding to a dystopian future. Allusions to well-known myths of origin inform the first of the narratives, whose protagonist, named Adam, delves into the history of the Pacific islands he is visiting with a view to inscribing it into the grand narrative of a lost paradise: the Moriori of the Chatham Islands were perceived by Europeans as "noble savages," who, thanks to their isolation, had lived in Edenic peace until the arrival of the Europeans. However, at the time of Adam Ewing's visit, the Moriori have nearly been wiped out by more advanced but aggressive and predatory peoples. Hence, the supposedly paradisal place described in the journal is "an Eden that already has its Fall built within it" (Dimovitz 72); it is a place marked by violence, enslavement and exploitation of the weak.

These circumstances consistently reappear, in different guises, in the following narratives. The worlds Mitchell conjures up are "versions of one another" (Shanahan 125). Rapidly shifting its locations across the globe and moving from the nineteenth century, through twentieth-century episodes, to a dreary futuristic setting in "An Orison of Sonmi ~451" (reminiscent of Huxleyan and Orwellian dystopias),[6] the novel charts the history of the world as a ceaseless movement towards near self-destruction. In fact, it implies that an apocalypse is already taking place in the present (Bayer 345). Nor is there a clear-cut distinction between civilisation and savagery; each narrative illustrates Walter Benjamin's dictum that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). In the final, post-lapsarian stage all civilised life has disappeared, with the exception of the Nine Valleys in Hawaii. The cause of the apocalyptic disaster is expounded in the novel as an inevitable outcome of civilisational progress. As one of the characters explains – and as the entire novel demonstrates – civilisational advancement and civilisational self-destruction are driven by the very same forces: "a hunger for more […], more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lifes, easier lifes, more power" (286). The story hints at "the Fall" as a nuclear disaster, a fatal contamination of the natural world as well as the resultant diseases and genetic malformation in humans. Meronym concludes that "human hunger birthed the Civ'lize, but human hunger killed it too" (286). In the words of Patrick O'Donnell, the novel stages "a continuous conversation between the utopic desire of civilizations and the dystopic counternarratives that necessarily subtend those desires" (92).

The middle chapter records what appears to be the ultimate act of annihilation, when the violent tribe of Kona exterminate their peaceful and less savage neighbours. However, the fact that the narrator survived to tell his story, which additionally turns out

6 The name also alludes to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

to have been conveyed by his son, indicates that life has been rebuilt after all. The small tribal group to which mankind has shrunk has lost all the achievements of civilisation, except for a vague belief that civilisation itself is of value and should be reconstructed. The single working clock saved from the Fall ensures a tenuous continuity and encourages the project of rebuilding the human world: "Civ'lize needs time, an' if we let this clock die, time'll die too, an' then how can we bring back the Civ'lized Days as it was b'fore the Fall?" (257). Lynda Ng argues that in relation to the middle part, the first and last sections "constitute the past and the future, confounding linear time by positing an interrelationship of past and future configurations of human society" (107). What the novel envisions then is a recycling of history, rather than a one-way drive towards finality.

In the middle of *Cloud Atlas*, the history of the world has reached its zenith and subsequent decline, and has embarked on the process of gradual regeneration; this sequence is likely to be repeated. The ambiguous status of beginnings and endings reinforces the implication of historical cyclicality: in the course of the six narratives, the fall is not quite final whereas the chronological beginning is already contaminated by evidence of widespread corruption and marked by ubiquitous (progressive-destructive) voracity. This legitimises the view that, from a broader perspective, the events in the novel are linked at both "ends" to similar, repeated (fragmentary) sequences. "[A]ny possible distinction between pre- and post-lapsarian humanity, or the past and the future […] becomes virtually impossible," claims Berthold Schoene-Harwood (114).

From a short-term perspective, the novel is partly grounded in a linear concept of history, but the notion of cyclicality prevails as the overarching frame within which the other is embedded. Although, when viewed chronologically, the narratives of the first part collectively trace an easily discernible line of progress (together with its concomitant underside) understood as increasing human control over the natural environment, the novel as a whole foregrounds pattern, typicality and repetition. Situations that occur in each narrative both echo several previous ones and foreshadow a number of similar incidents in the next ones, just as particular characters appear to be reincarnated versions of other characters (while none may be regarded as the originating model). However, given the circular structure of the novel, it could be said that what is repeated is not only what has already happened but, paradoxically, also what is about to happen.[7]

Not only do the interlocked narratives loosely form a sequence which appears to be a part of a larger, self-replicating cycle, but also the links between successive stories are based on repetition rather than causality. The rejection of "the more direct forms of cause and effect," argues Heather J. Hicks, amounts to a questioning of linear history. Due to the widely varied geographical distribution of the settings and the arrantly arbitrary choice of episodes, no single story has any direct influence on the next; nor does the array of narratives aspire to any overall effect of completion or inclusiveness.

7 It has been pointed out that "the uncanny interconnectedness" in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* may be analysed through the lens of quantum physics (which is even overtly evoked in *Ghostwritten*) (Edwards 188). Sonia Front argues that the concept of eternal recurrence is employed in *Cloud Atlas* "to illustrate the notion of a quantum field, of the underlying reality in which everything is connected" (77) and where "the boundaries between the particles appear only provisional," which invalidates the divisions of space and time (92).

It could be argued then that repetition in *Cloud Atlas* operates on two levels at once. Each of the component narratives is constructed around a cluster of recurrent motifs, and, taken together, the narratives form a loose repetitive sequence.

History as an Alimentary Cycle

Eliade observes that all cultures recognise temporal periods related to natural rhythms; consequently, essential beliefs and rites correspond to stages in the agricultural year: "the divisions of time are determined by the rituals that govern the renewal of alimentary reserves; that is, the rituals that guarantee the continuity of the life of the community in its entirety" (51). Eliade's account, however, refers to primitive societies, living in accordance with the rhythms of nature and satisfied with the mere renewal of resources.

In Mitchell's view of history, human beings hunger "for more" (286) rather than periodic helpings of the same size. One of the most conspicuous patterns around which the plots of the six narratives revolve is ruthless competition and expansion at the cost of others. The Moriori on the Chatham Islands are enslaved by their neighbours, with the islands eventually being colonised by Europeans ("The Pacific Journal"); a doctor robs his gullible patient of money and nearly kills him while pretending to treat him ("The Pacific Journal"); an older composer preys on the superior talent of his young acolyte ("Letters from Zedelghem"), etc. As the doctor explains to Adam ("The Pacific Journal"), "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'" (523–24).

Lynda Ng has described the structure of *Cloud Atlas* in terms of "narrative self-cannibalization" (118) by evoking the image of the ouroboros – a snake or dragon eating its own tail is "an archetypal symbol of destruction and renewal" (Ng 107). The writer himself described the design of his novel by drawing an analogy with the process of digestion: "each narrative is 'eaten' by its successor and later 'regurgitated' by the same" (Mitchell, "Genesis"). The structure of *Cloud Atlas* mimics its theme – the image of the ouroboros is also a symbol of mankind constantly feeding upon itself; indeed, Casey Shoop and Dermot Ryan suggest that in *Cloud Atlas* "History is a kind of metabolic system" (98).

The idea that the movement of history – both progress and regression – is propelled by hunger is often treated quite literally in the novel. In the dystopian world of "An Orison" Thomas Malthus is venerated as a prophet (344). Malthus famously argued that progress had in-built mechanisms antithetical to it. In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) he set out to demonstrate that an increase in food production led to improvement in living conditions and subsequent population growth, which in turn used up the extra resources and thus restricted further increase. In his more pessimistic calculations, Malthus contended that when population growth outpaced food supply, the discrepancy was inevitably removed by catastrophic incidents: "The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation" (Malthus 44).

Malthus's speculations inspired Darwin's own view of the process of evolution by drawing his attention to the permanent tension between the forces of reproduction and destruction. Darwin realised that "the key was whatever made a difference between those that survive to reproduce and those that do not" (Wyhe 18). The limited accessibility of resources forces living beings to compete against each other, hence the extinction of certain individuals and species is an inescapable corollary of evolutionary change. Darwin's vision of evolution is "fundamentally one of competitive struggle" (Carroll 205) – in *The Origin of Species* the scientist repeatedly uses phrases such as "the great battle of life" (Darwin 129) or "the war of nature" (Darwin 79).

Mitchell's novel echoes the Malthusian view of the dual effects of progress and conveys a decisively bleak view of evolution: periodic local or large-scale catastrophes check population growth, while the entire process of change leads both to advancement and to an eventual apocalypse. There is no purpose to evolution, besides self-repetition. In "Letters from Zedelghem," set in the aftermath of the Great War, the character Morty Dhondt persuades the narrator, Robert Frobisher, that "Another war is *always* coming." Dhondt's views are summed up by Frobisher as: "science devises ever bloodier means of war until humanity's powers of destruction overcome our powers of creation and our civilisation drives itself to extinction".[8]

The characters participate in the cycle of history, but are at the same time elements in the food chain, either by consuming alimentary resources or by being consumed themselves. In the opening scene in the novel Adam Ewing finds footprints on the shore which lead him to an English doctor who explains that "In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak" (3). The doctor endorses this observation by – metaphorically – feeding on others. He persuades Adam that his body is being eaten by a parasite but in fact the true parasite is the doctor himself, who slowly poisons his patient rather than curing him and cheats him of his money. When Adam is about to die, Henry Goose no longer makes any secret of his predatory instincts: "people are joints of meat; diseased, leathery meat, yes, but meat ready for the skewer & the spit. […] 'Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. […] Your turn to be eaten, dear Adam" (523–24).

In *Cloud Atlas*, both the most primitive and the most advanced societies practise cannibalism literally.[9] In "An Orison," during the final stage of civilisation before the Fall, the enigmatic semi-divine figure known as Papa Song is a patron of mass consumerism, including a chain of dineries. These are staffed by mass-produced android creatures, whose bodies, after they have reached the prescribed age, are recycled into other "fabricants," or into Soap, which is the fabricants' standard food, or indeed are also recycled into the food served to human customers ("purebloods") in the numerous Papa Song dineries. Thus, the entire society takes part in acts of cannibalism. This scheme is justified by the need to

8 These are Mitchell's own views as well. In an interview he told Adam Begley: "What made us successful in Darwinian terms – our skill at manipulating our environment – now threatens to wipe us out as a species" (Mitchell, "David Mitchell" 189).

9 See David Mitchell in an interview: "One of my serial-repeating themes is predacity – and cannibalism is an ancient and primal manifestation of predacity" (Mitchell, "David Mitchell" 186).

constantly replenish the resources needed by a technologically advanced society. Sonmi explains in her testimony: "The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter for wombtanks but, most of all, for Soap. What more economic way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives?" (359). Apparently, as "the prophet" Malthus predicted, the population has outgrown its ability to produce food; it has reached a stage when, in order to survive, it has to re-use its resources through auto-cannibalism. That this is indeed the moment when a catastrophic depopulation is due is confirmed by an ironic link between the accounts of the world immediately before and after the Fall. Hawaii features in both narratives; in the former, it is falsely projected to the fabricants as a consumer heaven where supposedly they go after a lifetime of obedience, whereas in the latter the actual place has become a site of savagery.

Conclusion: Ideas in Orbit

The novel not only illustrates Edward Gibbon's view that history is "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind" (Gibbon 98), but also cites the author's aphorism explicitly, albeit with the difference that the character Timothy Cavendish interprets it as an account of his own "time on Earth" (169). Each of the six narratives which constitute *Cloud Atlas* exposes the same human vices, of which predacity may be singled out as a main theme of the novel. In the "corpocratic state" of "An Orison" access to archives which store "human xperience" is strictly regulated while historical discourse is banned (243). Therefore, with little or no historical awareness, humanity is doomed to repeat the same errors. The practice of cloning, as seen in "An Orison," represents, in the words of Heather J. Hicks, "everything that is dangerous about a cyclical view of time." Deprived of memories, forever reproduced and programmed to endlessly perform the same tasks, "the fabricants literalize the notion of eternal return" (Hicks). In a comment which, like the one in Timothy's story, refers to the character's own situation but which may be extended to the version of history shown in the novel, Robert Frobisher dejectedly sums up his affair with the predatory Mrs Ayrs: "the stupid cycle begins all over again" (86).

The ouroboros – which the design of the novel resembles – traditionally functions also as a symbol of eternal recurrence (see Anderson 39). Nietzsche hinted at the concept in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's theory (together with those of Gibbon, Malthus and Darwin) is another well-known model which informs the novel's version of history. Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return is "both explicitly mentioned and structurally evoked" (Bayer 346). In a letter to his friend, Robert Frobisher rephrases Nietzsche's account from *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence* while implying that the theory itself has been moving in circles, like a record:

> Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortazar'll sail again and, later, Ewing will too, Adrian'll [Robert's brother, killed in the Great War] 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. (490)

Nietzsche is also the favourite philosopher of Vyvyan Ayrs, the composer for whom Frobisher acts as an amanuensis. Although Ayrs's symphony, named, in honour of Nietzsche, *Eternal Recurrence*, is never completed, Frobisher's own composition supplants the unfinished project. His music, called *Cloud Atlas* and described as a "sextet for overlapping soloists" (463), implicitly functions as the structural *leitmotif* of the novel. The image of an atlas of clouds, which reappears in other contexts in the novel, also provides thematic links between the stories. The writer said in an interview: "the 'cloud' refers to the ever-changing manifestations of the 'atlas,' which is that *fixed human nature*, which was always thus and ever shall be" (qtd. in Dimovitz 80).

If, as Eliade claims, ancient civilisations understood history within the frame of "the great cosmic cycles" (112), the cosmology in Mitchell's novel is expressed by the recurrence of a comet-shaped birthmark which the main characters bear, without realising that they have had "cosmic" predecessors.[10] Zachry's tribe believes in reincarnation and a constant transmigration of souls. The ruined astronomical observatory, in which before the Fall astronomers tried to understand "where ev'rythin' begins an' where ev'rythin' ends," is wrongly assumed to have been a shrine (289) and the dead astronomer is taken for a priest (293). It appears that cosmological ideas have come full circle, or perhaps completed an orbit: ancient beliefs were once transmuted into scientific investigations which have in turn been replaced by a version of the old beliefs. Yet, despite the fact that there are non-rational, almost mystical connections between the comet-marked characters (e.g. Luisa Rey's birthmark throbs when she passes the nineteenth-century ship on which Adam Ewing sailed [448]), the novel does not seriously endorse the notion of reincarnation. In "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" the idea is dismissed as "Far too hippie-druggy-new age" (373).

Rather, *Cloud Atlas* openly presents itself as a textual construct: each story becomes an artefact in the subsequent narrative, in which it is incorporated as a text, a film or a recording, and read, watched or heard, respectively, by the next protagonist. For this reason, claims Hicks, *Cloud Atlas* "becomes caught in an unreal vertigo of literary conventions." In his analysis of the novel, Will McMorran treats the birthmark as "the author's signature," indicative of the artifice of fiction (168). Robert Frobisher asks himself whether his *Cloud Atlas* is "[r]evolutionary or gimmicky" (463), and this is a question that may be asked about the novel *Cloud Atlas* as well. Mitchell's writing has been described as "both highly original and profoundly derivative" (Hicks). Ng comments that the fact that this novel "maps out the very common concept of historical recurrence does not make its structure any less innovative or engaging" (118). The same may be said about the notion of history in *Cloud Atlas* – Mitchell uses worn-out concepts, but recycles them into a new form; the old idea of eternal return makes yet another reappearance in his novel.

10 Scott Dimovitz suggests that the comet in *Cloud Atlas* may herald an apocalypse, and so the protagonists are born "with a mark of the Fall on them already" (82). The image may additionally connote repetition and circularity; as Shoop and Ryan note, as orbital bodies comets will reappear (103).

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