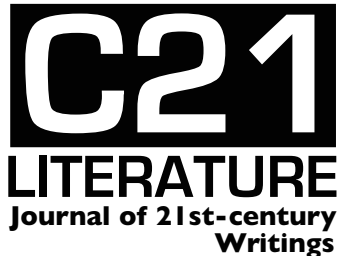




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## Article

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ARTICLE

## The Iterable Messiah: Postmodernist Mythopoeia in *Cloud Atlas*

Gautama Polanki

Shiv Nadar University, Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, IN

[gautama@gmail.com](mailto:gautama@gmail.com)

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This article explores the interplay between two seemingly contrary impulses in David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*: the mythopoeic and the postmodernist. Specifically, the article focuses on the novel's postmodernist refiguration of the biblical myth of deliverance. Merging its biblical messianism with Nietzsche's trope of Eternal Recurrence, the novel arrives at the figure of the eternally recurrent messiah. This article argues that the novel's enigmatic leitmotif—the comet birthmark—serves as a symbol not only for *Cloud Atlas*'s recurrent messiah, but also for its interpretation of the biblical messiah as iterable, in the poststructuralist sense. The article concludes by identifying the novel's postmodernist mythopoeia as an instance of metamodernism.

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**Keywords:** *Cloud Atlas*; Postmodernism; Mythopoeia; Radical Typology; Messianism; Nietzsche; Eternal Recurrence; Iterability; Metamodernism

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The very idea of postmodernist mythopoeia seems paradoxical. Presumably, mythical narratives presuppose an attitude of belief in their auditors, while postmodernist narratives typically go out of their way to foreground their fictionality and "demythologize" themselves. In this article, I shall demonstrate that David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004) effects a reconciliation of the mythic with the postmodern through the narrative device of "radical typology." *Cloud Atlas* adopts, primarily, radical typologies of myths of deliverance—Judeo-Christian myths such as those of the Exodus and the Apocalypse—which are messianic, and which make profane historical time coterminous with the mythic. The novel skillfully merges its biblical messianism with the profane messianism of the Nietzschean Overman, where the destiny of the exemplary individual is made coincident with the destiny of humanity. A secular cosmology apposite to the profane messiah is adopted: Nietzsche's Eternal

Recurrence. The six stories of *Cloud Atlas* repeat, at different points in history, the eternally recurrent themes of enslavement and exploitation. Correspondingly, each of the novel's protagonists is a redeemer roused by his or her historical moment, a messiah just as recurrent as the recidivism of human history. I shall conclude by demonstrating the extraordinary semiotic richness of the "comet birthmark" that *Cloud Atlas* uses to signify its protagonists (Mitchell 2003, 85, 122, 204, 319, 373). Using Jacques Derrida's notion of "iterability" I will show that the comet birthmark serves as a meta-figure for the novel's content as well as for its form—that is to say, as a symbol of the eternally recurrent messiah as well as of the typology through which the trope of the messiah is articulated.

There are formal as well as thematic reasons to classify *Cloud Atlas* as a postmodernist novel. Common to these reasons is a structural feature identified by the literary theorist Brian McHale. According to McHale, what fundamentally distinguishes postmodernist fiction from its realist and modernist forebears is that its "dominant" is ontological (1989, 10).<sup>1</sup> Postmodernist fiction throws into question the ontological basis of the fictional world. For example, a postmodernist novel might insert fantastic elements into a historical narrative; or it may stage logical contradictions within its fictional world; or it may narrate the authorial act by which the fiction was created. The effect of these various tropes and devices, ultimately, is to unsettle the ontological stability of the fictional world. In *Cloud Atlas*, we discover that each fictional world resurfaces as a text in the subsequent fictional world. Adam's journal is discovered by Frobisher, whose letters are discovered by Luisa, whose story is read as a manuscript by Cavendish, whose film narrative is watched by Sonmi, whose holographic "Orison," finally, is watched by Zachry. Five times, the reader of the novel is implicitly told that a world she has already experienced is now being "read" as a text in the current diegetic world. Each time this occurs, the prior fictional world undergoes an

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<sup>1</sup> McHale derives the term from the Russian Formalists. Roman Jakobson defines the dominant as: "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components." The dominant, in other words, serves as kind of principle that governs every aspect of the art work. The idea of the dominant can be extended from a single work of art to refer to "the art of a given epoch, viewed as a particular whole" (Jakobson 1987, 41–42). Here, McHale is using the term in the latter sense of the term, to refer to the entire genre of postmodernist fiction.

ontological weakening; a world has been reduced to a text. Furthermore, the diegetic reader, by performing an act identical to that of the real-world reader, momentarily troubles the distinction between the fictional and the real.<sup>2</sup>

Multi-leveled nesting (termed “Chinese box” or “Russian doll” structuring) occurs when narrative worlds are recursively generated within narrative worlds. *Cloud Atlas*, a novel acutely conscious of its form, explicitly alludes to the “Matryoshka doll” motif at least three times (Mitchell 2003, 52, 353, 409).<sup>3</sup> As outlined earlier, the intradiegetic act of reading is nested five levels deep in *Cloud Atlas* in a Russian doll structure. Additionally, the physical layout of the novel is such that each text is enclosed within the outer shell of the previous text. Frobisher’s text, for example, is enclosed within Adam’s bifurcated text, and its own bifurcation, in turn, encloses Luisa’s. This spatial arrangement too mimics the Russian doll structure. McHale identifies the dominant in such nested structures as ontological, since they “have the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological ‘horizon’ of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction” (McHale 1989, 112).

The postmodernist manoeuvre of laying bare the mechanisms of world-construction, known as “metafiction,” is defined by the theorist Patricia Waugh as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 1984, 2). *Cloud Atlas* abounds in instances of metafiction, especially in its fourth narrative. As the story of a publisher, this section aptly lays bare the circumstances of fictional production. Cavendish keeps his reader informed even as he titles his own story: “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish, if you will. Now *that* is a snappy title.” Next, the author tells his reader about the literary preferences that will inform his narrative: “As an experienced editor I disapprove of backflashes, foreshadowings and tricky devices, they belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism

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<sup>2</sup> See Hopf 2011 for a detailed analysis of how the diegetic readers of *Cloud Atlas* mirror the real-world reader’s experience of the text. Hopf contends that devices such as these can be transformative for the literary subject: on the one hand they encourage her to “imagine the self as a discursive construction”; and on the other, they invest her with a privileged sense of “interpretive agency” (Hopf 2011, 111).

<sup>3</sup> Officially, *Cloud Atlas*’s year of publication is 2004. However, the Indian Sceptre edition used for this article has a publication date of 2003.

and Chaos Theory" (Mitchell 2003, 149, 152). The irony of Cavendish's disdain for postmodernist devices is not lost on the reader. In fact, the irony runs quite deep in this case. As it happens, the author of *Cloud Atlas* was himself once enrolled for "an M.A. in the postmodern novel" (Mitchell 2010).

Robert Frobisher's composition, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, most vividly exemplifies the novel's metafictional self-reflexivity. When Luisa Rey hears Frobisher's music within the novel (Mitchell 2003, 425), she, in fact, experiences the structure of the larger novel of which her story is a part. The sextet thus presents a case of *mise-en-abyme*, a nested representation that "*reproduces or duplicates the primary representation as a whole*" (McHale 1989, 124). McHale identifies the *mise-en-abyme* as "one of the most potent devices in the postmodernist repertoire for foregrounding the ontological dimension of recursive structures". By experiencing Frobisher's music, which contains her own story, which, in turn, contains Frobisher's music, Luisa enters an infinitely deep recursive structure: an impossible ontology. Aptly, this infinite ontology is launched by the playing of a gramophone record. Frobisher, as we shall see, uses the metaphor of the gramophone record to talk about yet another infinite ontology: Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence.

Ontological issues are foregrounded not only in the novel's form, but also in its content. Several of *Cloud Atlas's* characters display a preoccupation with the theme of "world-construction." We encounter, through their voices, either a reflection on the contingencies that have shaped past civilizations, or a meditation on the task of bringing into being a better future world. In the sixth narrative, Meronym tells Zachry how the earlier civilizations brought about their own extinction through their various abuses of technology. She identifies "human hunger" as the cause of both the creation and the destruction of civilizations (Mitchell 2003, 286). In Luisa Rey's story, Isaac Sachs contemplates the nature of time and history, and observes that the future exists for us solely as a "virtual future," a discursive construction that nevertheless has the power to influence the actual future "as in a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Mitchell 2003, 409). In Frobisher's narrative, we encounter the idea that world-making is similar to music-making: "Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions, I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any

convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so" (Mitchell 2003, 479). The novel concludes with Adam's impassioned remarks on the difficulty of bringing into being a more livable world: "I am not deceived. [This] is the hardest of worlds to make real" (Mitchell 2003, 528). In sum, we find at the level of form as well as theme, a frenetic preoccupation with ontological issues in *Cloud Atlas*. Taking this idea further, I shall presently explore how the novel's visionary project of world-making is articulated in a mythopoeic, or "myth-making" idiom.

In his *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1974), Mircea Eliade surveys the mythical conceptions of diverse "archaic" cultures and shows how, in Judeo-Christian culture, a "messianic conception" of history first emerged. Eliade observes that "archaic" consciousness makes an implicit distinction between "mythical time" and "profane time." "Essential" activities such as fishing, hunting, agriculture, construction, marriage, and war, are performed strictly in accordance with a primordial prototype, and to that extent, the time of these activities is mythical. The time that intervenes between these essential activities, on the other hand, is profane, for in it the original events of creation are not being rehearsed. Eliade correlates this mythical mentality with "the inability of collective memory to retain historical events and individuals except insofar as it transforms them into archetypes—that is, insofar as it annuls all their historical and personal peculiarities" (Eliade 1974, 46). The reason for such a mode of consciousness, he suggests, is the human anxiety towards finding meaning in suffering and catastrophe. The experience of an unprecedented evil, an "unusual event," is intolerable precisely because it does not derive from any archetype. When suffering is outside the framework of mythical causality, when it cannot be traced to, say, a "religious fault" or to an enemy's sorcery, it becomes *absurd* and morally intolerable (Eliade 1974, 98). Archaic culture's defense against the absurd, unusual event is to simply ignore it; to refuse to record it. Such strategic remembering fosters an experience of reality as unchanging, and of time as cyclical and reversible. Paradigmatic of such thinking is the myth of the eternal return, exemplified in the numerous lunar myths of the world (Eliade 1974, 86). The monthly regeneration of the moon mythically articulates the regeneration of time, and in so doing, expresses the cyclical modality of archaic consciousness.

Mythical consciousness changed when, in Judaism (and later, in Christianity as well), human history was assimilated into religious time. God intervenes and reveals himself *in* history: “Moses receives the Law at a certain place and at a certain date” (Eliade 1974, 104–05). Time now becomes linear and irreversible. The admission of history into religious time implies that the traumatic unusual event can no longer be ignored; on the contrary, it must be seen as necessary, even affirmed, as God’s will. This radical reevaluation of suffering brings *faith* to the fore of religious experience. Eliade sees the story of Abraham’s sacrifice as paradigmatic of this development (Eliade 1974, 108–09). God’s injunction to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22, King James Version) is an “unusual” action set in history, and therefore, potentially absurd. Lacking the reassurance of mythical precedent, the sacrifice can acquire meaning only as an expression of faith in God’s will. Thus, when the meaning of an action is derived not from a sacred past but from a sacred future (the day of Judgment), the performance of that action hinges critically on faith. Always directed towards the future, Judeo-Christian culture paves the way to a “messianic conception” of history.

There are, then, two inflection points in Judeo-Christian time: the first, marked by the myth of the Fall, when Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience to God led to the fall of the human race into profane time; the second, marked by the myth of the apocalypse, when the messiah-to-come will “abolish history” and reinstate the sacred time of God. *Cloud Atlas* is particularly alive to these two biblical myths. In what follows, I shall first discuss Laurence Coupe’s notion of “radical typology” and show that it is the paradigmatic mode of *Cloud Atlas*’s mythopoeia. This will be followed by a demonstration of the novel’s use of the Nietzschean trope of Eternal Recurrence to recast its biblical messianism in exclusively profane time.

Coupe proposes a mythographical framework that could clarify for us the peculiar modality of *Cloud Atlas*’s mythopoeia. He begins by regarding mythography (reading myth) and mythopoeia (making myth), as complementary activities, for, “they both involve mythic reading” (Coupe 2009, 84). Now, the creative force inherent in “mythic reading” is classified within biblical hermeneutics into “allegory” and “typology.” In the mode of allegory, myth is subservient to concept; that is, the order

of words (*mythos*) is subordinated to the Word (*logos*). Allegory, strictly speaking, is a mode of demythologization. Plato's Cave Allegory,<sup>4</sup> for example, is a mythical narrative that must not be taken literally; it points beyond itself, only to illuminate the grandeur of the world of forms. The myth itself is a mere instrument that must yield to higher truths. If in allegory the imaginative force of a myth is negated, in typology it is extended. In typology, the "types," or elements of an older myth are recast in a new myth as "anti-types." The semantic economy of typology is synergistic; type and anti-type enrich each other's significance: "The type is the prefigurement; the anti-type is the fulfilment" (Coupe 2009, 99). Typology can either be "orthodox" or "radical," depending on whether the mythic reading is closed, or if it admits the incursions of profane time. Examples of orthodox typology include St. Paul's reading of Jesus as the second Adam (Rom. 5.14, 1 Cor. 15.22), and the refiguration in the Revelation of the garden of Eden as the garden-city of Jerusalem (Coupe 2009, 98, 103).

Coupe labels the typology "radical" when the mythopoeic extension "involves a shift of emphasis from the sacred to the profane" (Coupe 2009, 105). The twelfth-century abbot, Joachim of Fiore, refigured Christian time into three ages—that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. This is an example of radical typology. Here, the essential message of the Revelation is virtually repudiated in its reinterpretation: the event of Christ's second coming is replaced by the gentle and contemplative age of the Holy Ghost, when men and women will possess a new "Spiritual Intelligence" (Coupe 2009, 103–04).

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<sup>4</sup> The allegory of the cave is used in Plato's *Republic* to illustrate the difference between those who are philosophically trained, and those who are not. The untutored are akin to people who spend their whole lives in the darkness of a cave, with nothing to occupy them but the play of shadows on the cave wall. The cave dwellers mistake the shadows for real objects and erroneously believe that their understanding of the shadows constitutes genuine knowledge. The tutored one—the philosopher—is one who has come out of the cave and can see real objects in the full clarity of daylight. In this allegory, the philosopher alone has a true grasp of real forms and therefore has true knowledge. In Plato's metaphysics, such true forms, in fact, exist in a perfect world different from ours. However, unless we are philosophically trained to perceive the perfect world of forms, we remain as ignorant as the cave dwellers in his tale. See Plato 2012, 239–44.



As noted earlier, each of *Cloud Atlas's* narratives is generated by a character that happens to have “read” the earlier character’s narrative. In effect, every narrative of *Cloud Atlas* can trace a lineal descent from the first. Adam Ewing, fictional author of the novel’s first fictional world is much more than a protagonist; he is the progenitor of the novel’s fictional universe. It is therefore hardly coincidental that the sound of his name should recall the first man and woman of Christian mythology. The novel loosely follows, as we shall see, a radical typology of the Bible.

Northrop Frye notes that the power of the Bible lies in its central myth, that of the Exodus, which he terms “a myth of deliverance.” The myth of the Exodus, in which Moses leads the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, captivates through the archetype of liberation:

when any group of people feels as strongly about anything as slaves feel about slavery, history as such is dust and ashes: only myth, with its suggestion of an action that can contain the destinies of those who are contemplating it, can provide any hope or support at all [...] myth *redeems* history: assigns it to its real place in the human panorama. (Frye 1982, 50)

The central myth of *Cloud Atlas*, like that of the Bible, is the myth of deliverance. Adam, Cavendish, Sonmi, and Meronym are all liberators in stories of oppression and enslavement. Adam rescues Autua, the enslaved Moriori; Cavendish leads the inmates of Aurora House to freedom; Sonmi is martyred in her attempt to liberate the fabricants; and Meronym saves Zachry’s tribe from extinction. Of these, Cavendish and Sonmi stand out as anti-types of key biblical figures.

Timothy Cavendish, a vanity-publisher, is an unlikely modern-day Moses who leads the oppressed inmates of a retirement home to freedom. Cavendish suggests his biblical archetype only in ripeness of age and in his tendency to invoke biblical Egypt in casual conversation (Mitchell 2003, 160, 162). Yet, this is precisely the point; Mitchell’s typology in this story is not unlike Joyce’s typology in *Ulysses* (1922); it is ironic. Irony, in Frye’s “Theory of Modes,” is the genre closest to myth:

Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it. (Frye 1957, 42)

The sacrificial ritual staged in ironic comedy is that of the *pharmakos*, or the scapegoat<sup>5</sup> (Frye 1957, 41). At one level, Cavendish's story is a straightforward picaresque; the protagonist of the story, like Frye's *picaro*, is "clever, likeable, unprincipled" (Frye 1957, 45). Yet, appearances are meant to deceive. Cavendish's cheerful, amoral frivolity serves as a counterpoint to the story's grim theme of youth's insouciance towards the aged. The sixty-five-year-old Cavendish is initially reluctant to identify with the community of the aged at Aurora House. So he adopts a comic tone, ridiculing the difficulties faced by those he terms "the undead." But the plot itself, as it unravels, belies the flippancy of its narrator. The very first incident that Cavendish narrates is of his being violently attacked on the street by three rowdy teenage girls. Cavendish then puzzles over why he began his narration with such a tangential digression (Mitchell 2003, 147–48). Thus, early on, the reader is alerted to a strain of psychological denial that will inform the narrative, and through the device of the unreliable narrator, the protocol of irony is established. By the time the story ends, both reader and narrator identify with the inmates of Aurora House. Nurse Noakes and her cohorts emerge as the *pharmakoi*, and there is exultation when the *pharmakoi* get their just deserts. The moral normativity inherent in the ironic mode must be handled, as Frye points out, with the lightest touch, for the theme of "social revenge" against the *pharmakos* can easily reverse the sympathies of the reader (Frye 1957, 45). The gossipy familiarity of Cavendish's tone, with its peculiar quality of turning the pathetic into the bathetic, manages to achieve the requisite degree of lightness. That the myth of deliverance should be able to withstand the deflationary bathos of postmodernist

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<sup>5</sup> The reference here is to the ancient ritual of slaying a human or animal (often, a goat) upon whom the sins of the community have been ceremonially transferred. See, for example, Lev. 16 in the Bible, and Frazer 2009, 557–676.

irony is proof not only of the author's ingenuity, but also of the myth's resilience. The existential power of this myth is owed to a particular emplotment: where a narrative begins with captivity and oppression; promises a flight to freedom; progresses through the thrill of the escape and the outwitting of the pursuer; and ends, most importantly, with the catharsis of liberation.

*Cloud Atlas's* last story—Zachry's—is an oral narrative set in a post-apocalyptic epoch, when scattered survivors of the human race, crawling back from the brink of extinction, rehearse the bloody skirmishes of prehistory. The tribes that live on the Hawaiian Islands have been among the lucky few that survived, and they now constitute the vanguard of hope for the species. The catastrophic event, whose exact nature has been forgotten, has been figured in the Island mythologies as “the Fall.” The tribes of the Hawaiian Islands are aware that their own ancestors came from a lost world. Fleeing the ravages of the catastrophe, the first generation of Valleysmen arrived on Big Island in a “Flotilla.” Big Island's creation myth, it appears, follows the pattern of flood-myths in general, and of Noah's flight from catastrophe in particular. Mythology subsumes not only collective memory, but also the physical memorabilia of past civilizations. On the summit of Mauna Kea, for example, is a cluster of radio telescopes trained on the skies, long after the civilization that used them has perished. With the human propensity to give stories to objects, such historical detritus is quickly assimilated into the prevailing mythology. The observatories are interpreted as temples inhabited by Old Georgie, an evil spirit that preys on the souls of Valleysmen. The memory of the “historical” Sonmi—the fabricant server of the previous story—has been all but erased. Her name, however, has survived. Zachry's tribe of Valleysmen worship a goddess named Sonmi, of whom Zachry says, “Most times we cudn't see her, times was she was seen, an old crone with a stick, tho' I sumtimes seen her as a shimm'rin' girl” (Mitchell 2003, 255). It would seem that Sonmi is a variation on the Hawaiian goddess Pele, the fierce young goddess of fire who sometimes takes the form of an old woman (Westervelt 1916, 37, 42). When Meronym enters Zachry's world, she brings with her the “Orison” that contains the historical Sonmi's testimony. On being quizzed by Zachry about the “shimm'rin' girl” projected by the Orison, Meronym identifies her as “*Sonmi the freakbirthed human what your ancestors*

*b'liefed was your god,"* adding: "A short'n'judased life Sonmi had, an' only after she'd died did she find say-so over purebloods 'n' freakbirths' thinkin's" (Mitchell 2003, 291). Through these terse utterances, Mitchell signals to the reader the biblical typology at work in Sonmi's story. First, we recall that Sonmi is a "freakbirth" rather than a "pureblood" because she was born not of human parents, but from a "wombtank." To put this more suggestively, Sonmi's conception was "immaculate." Secondly, Sonmi was betrayed by one who was closest to her. In the Valleymen's dialect—which teems with the memoranda of dead civilizations—the word for betrayal is "judasin." When applied to Sonmi, the ancient resonance of this word is reawakened. Sonmi was, after all, a messiah who was betrayed, put on a show trial, and executed. There is a further correspondence: when he beholds the supernatural marvel that is Sonmi's three-dimensional hologram, Zachry has no words to describe it other than as a "smart ghost" (Mitchell 2003, 291). In other words, through the device of the "Orison," the once-martyred Sonmi has been spectrally resurrected. From conception to resurrection, Sonmi follows the typology of Jesus Christ.

Typology in *Cloud Atlas* also involves the refiguration of other key episodes from the Bible. In the second story, the musical composer Vyvyan Ayrns speaks jokingly of the occasional need to play to the gallery: "to get the crowd to cry Hosanna, you must first ride into town on an ass. Backwards, ideally, whilst telling the masses the tall stories they want to hear" (Mitchell 2003, 83). Four stories later, Zachry describes his journey to the Honokaa fair: "we telled yarnies to shrink the miles, with the yarner sittin' backwards on the leadin' ass so ev'ry'un could hear." One of these "yarners" happens to be Meronym, who tells a parable about "*how we humans got our spirit*" (Mitchell 2003, 298–99). This scene as well as its premonition are borrowed from the Bible. The penultimate book of the Old Testament, Zechariah, contains the prophecy of a messiah who will come to Jerusalem, "lowly, and riding upon an ass" (Zech. 9.9). In the New Testament, we encounter the realization of that prophecy (Matt. 21.7). When Zachry's party reaches Honokaa, another biblical *déjà vu* awaits the reader: "Last there was the bart'rin' hall, a whoah spacy buildin' what Abbess said was once named *church* where an ancient god was worshiped but the knowin' of that god was lost in the Fall" (Mitchell 2003, 300). What was once a temple is now a bartering hall.

Thus a famous scene from the Bible is evoked, in which the messiah finds his house of prayer taken over by the moneychangers (Mark 11.15–17).

One of the reasons why *Cloud Atlas's* mythopoeia must be deemed postmodernist has to do with a feature called “ontological anarchism.” The term, coined by the philosopher Thomas Pavel, denotes a refusal to choose between two or more incommensurable ontologies.<sup>6</sup> Sonmi’s story presents a telling instance of ontological anarchism or pluralism in the novel. As we have already seen, there are unmistakable similarities between Sonmi’s life and that of the biblical Christ. At the same time, however, the novel offers us an alternative ontology: it compels us to acknowledge that Sonmi’s life has been fashioned after a nineteenth-century fairy tale. Trapped in her corporate prison, the fabricant Sonmi chances upon Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” which she calls, “a dark treatise on unbelonging” (Mitchell 2003, 233). Following this cue, the reader begins to note the parallels: Sonmi, like the little mermaid, has lived all her life below the surface of the earth; she must complete a stipulated tenure in her subterranean world before she is permitted to go to the surface; just like her “sisters,” Sonmi lacks a “Soul” (a subcutaneously implanted electronic wallet that distinguishes the humans from her); like the mermaid, Sonmi falls in love with a human being who then betrays her; finally, through her martyrdom, Sonmi achieves immortality: she is turned into a divinity in the subsequent narrative. The mermaid’s story matches Sonmi’s in each of the details listed above.

Another instance of ontological pluralism concerns Mitchell’s abiding fascination with an image drawn from Thornton Wilder’s 1927 novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In that novel, set in a small village community in eighteenth-century Peru,

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<sup>6</sup> According to Pavel, our cultural life generally exists at multiple (incommensurable) levels of reality, such as the sacred, the profane, the mythological, the fictional, and so on. In the interest of “ontological coherence” however, we must place these multiple levels in a hierarchy, with one of them deemed central and primary. For example, a religious person might accept as valid both the sacred and the profane levels of reality, but will choose the sacred level as primary. Likewise, a “hard-core positivist” might choose the profane level as central and exclusively valid. The ontological anarchist, on the other hand, refuses to choose any ontological level as primary, since “the simultaneous presence of several types of ontological landscapes cancels the credibility of each ontology. Their multiplicity proves that they are all fictitious” (Pavel 1981, 158). McHale identifies ontological anarchism as “precisely the postmodernist condition: an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural” (McHale 1989, 37).

five lives are lost when a rope bridge hanging over a gorge unexpectedly collapses. Troubled by the apparent randomness of this event, a Franciscan monk undertakes to catalogue the lives of the five people. He hopes to discern some divine intention in the particular choice of those five individuals. Mitchell's novels leading up to *Cloud Atlas* both feature the image of a bridge where human lives are held in peril (Mitchell 1999, 418; Mitchell 2001, 190). *Cloud Atlas* itself has three such instances (Mitchell 2003, 144, 323, 350), the last of which concerns Zachry's narrative. Fleeing the Kona warriors, Zachry and Meronym arrive at a bridge on horseback. Remembering Sonmi's augury, Zachry convinces Meronym not to cross it, and the two instead ford the river downstream. Eight Kona horsemen rush onto the bridge, shooting arrows at them. The bridge collapses, and the Kona fall to their deaths. This episode can be understood at two ontological levels: the first, as a piece of metafiction, explicitly intertextual with Wilder's fiction. There are strong reasons for this reading. After all, the protagonist of the third narrative is named, quite unmistakably, "Luisa Rey." But a second, biblical reading is equally available: escaping from slavery, Zachry has heeded a divine call to abandon common sense and ford the river instead. Zachry's faith is rewarded, while the Kona slavers who follow in pursuit are providentially "punished" by drowning. An allusion to Moses's crossing of the Red Sea is particularly evident.

In both the examples mentioned above, the same set of events in the fictional world can be experienced by the reader via two different and incommensurable ontologies. As Pavel puts it, the presence of multiple ontologies "cancels the credibility of each ontology" (Pavel 1981, 158). Thus, at the level of its mythopoeia too, we see the novel unsettling the ontological stability of its biblical typologies and thereby asserting a postmodernist ethos.

So far, we have noted several instances of biblical typology at work in the mythopoeic narratives of *Cloud Atlas*. Mitchell's typology may be deemed "radical" in the sense that its mythic reading of the Bible recasts biblical narratives in a temporality that is entirely profane and historical. We shall presently see how the apocalyptic moment, crucial to biblical cosmology, is consciously refused: the novel adheres to a conception of human history as eternally recurrent. Rather than inaugurating

the sacred time of paradise, the apocalypse of *Cloud Atlas* merely resets the profane countdown to the next, tragically inevitable fall.

Shortly before he kills himself, the novel's second protagonist, Robert Frobisher, writes:

Strip back the beliefs pasted on by governesses, schools and states, you find indelible truths at one's core. Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortazar'll sail again and, later, Ewing will too [...] 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. (Mitchell 2003, 489–90)

Frobisher's reference to "Nietzsche's gramophone record" does not come as a surprise to the reader. By this time, the novel has made several allusions to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and to his key ideas, especially that of Eternal Recurrence<sup>7</sup> (Mitchell 2003, 84, 85, 480) and the Will to Power (Mitchell 2003, 131, 462).

At the end of the novel, Mitchell mentions in his acknowledgments that "The character Vyvyan Ayr's quotes Nietzsche more freely than he admits". In fact, the novel as a whole invokes several of Nietzsche's key themes, and there are pointed biographical references to Nietzsche as well. Describing his epiphany of the idea of Eternal Recurrence, Nietzsche wrote in *Ecce Homo* that the idea came to him "walking through the woods along the lake of Silvaplana" (Nietzsche 1992, 751). As *Cloud Atlas* ends, it reveals that its genesis, too, occurred in a place with exactly the same name. Adam, the author of the novel's first narrative, remembers his wife, "Tilda, waving off the *Belle-Hoxie* from Silvaplana Wharf" (Mitchell 2003, 524). The entire journey of the novel, in other words, was launched by this inaugural vision. Silvaplana Wharf is a place of great significance in Luisa Rey's story as well. It is where Luisa's father risked his life to save Joe Napier's; it is also the place where, several years later, Napier dies, saving Luisa's life (Mitchell 2003, 414, 450).

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<sup>7</sup> Coupe notices that the "cyclical pattern" of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence is shared with Eliade's "eternal return" (Coupe 2009, 192). In this article, my focus is on Eternal Recurrence's relation to the Judeo-Christian myth of deliverance rather than on its relation to archaic myths.

Another Nietzschean element in *Cloud Atlas* is the centrality of music in the novel. Nietzsche, describing his composition of *Zarathustra*, observes: "Perhaps the whole of *Zarathustra* may be reckoned as music; certainly a rebirth of the art of *hearing* was among its preconditions" (Nietzsche 1992, 751). The musician Robert Frobisher, who serves as Mitchell's metafictional proxy, outlines the structure of his *Cloud Atlas Sextet* as:

A 'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? (Mitchell 2003, 463)

As would be evident to the reader, Frobisher's sextet is isomorphic with Mitchell's novel. In reading the novel, we are, in a sense, hearing Frobisher's music. Frobisher, like Nietzsche, is fully aware that his work marks a radical break from tradition and will require for its appreciation nothing less than "a rebirth of the art of *hearing*." It is also noteworthy that the final composition that Frobisher begins with his mentor, Vyvyan Ayrs, is a symphony named *Eternal Recurrence*.

Considerable scholarship has been devoted to the explication of *Eternal Recurrence*. After all, Nietzsche described it as the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable" (Nietzsche 1992, 751). *Eternal Recurrence* may be interpreted either literally or figuratively. Taken literally, the idea amounts to nothing less than a cosmology: a theory of time. As a trope, however, *Eternal Recurrence* can be construed in existential terms, as a thought experiment that Nietzsche used to explore the limits of life affirmation. In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche poses the following thought experiment: what would happen if a demon were to suddenly appear before us and inform us that our lives were going to recur endlessly, for all of eternity? In the words of the demon, the recurrence will be such that "there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence" (Nietzsche 1974, 273). Nietzsche wonders how we might be disposed to



such startling knowledge. He suggests two possible responses: the first, the predictable one, is a desperate, impotent rage against immutable fate. The second, that of the Overman,<sup>8</sup> is exultation. Each response, pertinently, is a freely willed disposition to the selfsame fact: the fact that there is no exit from profane time; that worldly existence offers neither escape nor recompense; that the time of this world is all the time we will ever have. The Overman's exultation, his joyful embrace of the demonic fact amounts to an unconditional affirmation of life in this world, with all the woes its joys entail:

Did you ever say Yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained and entwined together, all things are in love; if ever you wanted one moment twice, if ever you said: 'You please me, happiness, instant, moment!' then you wanted *everything* to return!  
(Nietzsche 1969, 331–32)

Only the Overman is capable of affirming such a burden, and such affirmation is founded on *amor fati*, the love of one's fate. Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo*: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity" (Nietzsche 1992, 714). To lack *amor fati* is to evade the present moment and to entrust oneself to ideal worlds of the future—to utopias, religious and secular. Eternal Recurrence abolishes the finality of such imagined worlds, even if they do come to pass. The present moment simply cannot be wished away, for it will recur endlessly.

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<sup>8</sup> "Overman" here refers to Nietzsche's conception of the Übermensch, sometimes translated as "Superman." Walter Kaufmann observes that the latter word loses the all too important association of Übermensch with Überwindung, 'overcoming.' Nietzsche's use of the term, as it appears in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, refers to a superior kind of individual who has overcome the normal constraints of the human spirit—moral, emotional, intellectual—and thereby risen above the "mediocrity and stagnation" to which the mass of humanity is otherwise condemned. See Kaufmann 1974, 307–16 for a detailed explication of the term.

In *Cloud Atlas*, we find a reworking of Nietzsche's concept of Eternal Recurrence.<sup>9</sup> The novel interprets the idea not as the repetition of the *same*, but as the repetition of the *similar*.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned earlier, the novel's six stories repeat, at different points in history, the recurrent theme of enslavement and exploitation. Furthermore, the novel actively employs an aesthetics of repetition to thematize this idea. For instance, the novel brims with instances of *déjà vu*, visual as well as textual. *Déjà vu* is experienced by characters who find themselves in structurally similar situations, even if those situations occur in entirely different fictional worlds. Chancing upon a sleeping Kona warrior, Zachry decides to avenge his father's murder by slitting the Kona's throat. Centuries earlier, tiptoeing past a sleeping Ayr, Frobisher manages to resist an identical urge. The motif of throat-slitting has appeared even farther back in time, in Adam's story, when Autua, the Moriori stowaway, threatens to take his own life (Mitchell 2003, 316, 476, 27). *Déjà vu* is used to juxtapose horror with farce when Luisa and Sonmi find themselves in situations that are visually similar, but which differ vastly in import. Luisa, on the run from Bill Smoke's henchmen, finds herself in an underground sweatshop "clattering with five hundred sewing machines" where "Limp Donald Ducks and crucified Scooby-Doos have their innards stitched" (Mitchell 2003, 443). In another century, Sonmi will find herself peering down in horror at a

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<sup>9</sup> The novel's unwillingness to commit to either linear or cyclical time has been noticed by other critics. For example, Heather J. Hicks (2016) holds that the novel finds both temporalities confining, and that therefore, it equivocates between them at thematic and formal levels. Rose Harris-Birtill (2017) argues that the novel uses "spiralling cyclical time," which is a synthesis of linear and cyclical time (177). This third temporality enables the novel to follow the cyclical modality of "reincarnation time" while avoiding the pitfall of fatalism entailed by a strict interpretation of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence (163).

<sup>10</sup> Such an interpretation has the support of some Nietzsche scholars. Joan Stambaugh highlights Nietzsche's pointed use of *Wiederkehr* ("recurrence") and *Wiederkunft* ("return") rather than the more unambiguous *Wiederholung* ("repetition"). In other words, Stambaugh suggests that Nietzsche did not have in mind an exact repetition of the same. Moreover, Nietzsche's word for "the Same," *das Gleiche*, "does not express simple identity, and therefore does not, strictly speaking, mean the Same. It lies somewhere between the Same and the Similar, but means neither exactly" (Stambaugh 1972, 30–31). David Wood adds to this discussion in *The Deconstruction of Time*, pointing out that for Eternal Recurrence to have any psychological force at all, the hypothesis of "precise repetitions" must be abandoned. For unless each cycle of time is "marked" by the awareness that it is a repetition of a previous cycle—and will recur again—the problem of affirming the instant is hardly a weighty one (Wood 2001, 16, 24).

“slaughterhouse production line” where her fabricant sisters are being culled, and their “biomass” recycled. Sonmi’s scene is reminiscent of Luisa’s sweatshop in the detached, assembly-line professionalism with which the evil is perpetrated: “The devils down there snipped off collars, stripped clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, off-cut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs [...] Drains hoovered the blood [...] the noise was colossal” (Mitchell 2003, 359). The evil of the slaughterhouse is amplified by the banality of the sweatshop that prefigures it. Sometimes, the recurrence is purely textual, and it is the reader who experiences the *déjà vu*. The sentence construction, “he slung me over his shoulder” (and minor variations thereof) occurs no less than three times in the novel, each time in a different fictional world (Mitchell 2003, 179, 215, 517). The sentence “only the inanimate may be so alive” occurs twice (Mitchell 2003, 20, 345). To add to these examples, we have already noted the textual as well as situational *déjà vu* that has arisen from Ayr’s prophetic remark about the messiah who will arrive in town, riding on an ass.

A coming-to-grips with the idea that there is no respite from history and from its eternally recurrent maladies necessitates a new approach to the project of world-making. The grand task of setting the world in order—of making it perfect for all eternity—is given up in the light of the realization that the task itself is recurrent and eternal. This worldview is not, however, hostile to the utopian vision *per se*; what it strenuously denies, rather, is the finality of any utopia. The novel repeatedly invokes Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1776–88] (Mitchell 2003, 10, 155, 228, 490) only to assure us that every spell of civilizational glory must eventually succumb to the unforgiving logic of history. The pacific Moriori must encounter the Europeans and the Maori; and the Valleysmen, the Kona. Human utopias are always guaranteed to “fall.” But with every fall also arises a new historical scene, a new utopian promise. The utopian dream, because it is always in response to a particular moment in history, must constantly be renewed, re-contextualized, and re-imagined.

Particularly conducive to a mythopoeia of utopic re-imagining is the biblical myth of the apocalypse. Coupe identifies in this myth a special narrative dynamism that has caused it to be rewritten over and over again (Coupe 2009, 103–08).

The explosive uncertainty in its “not yet” makes the myth live and labile. As Frank Kermode has noted, the biblical apocalypse has been prophesied as imminent throughout Christian history, and repeatedly, the prophecy has been disconfirmed.<sup>11</sup> Yet, remarkably, the myth has persisted, because “Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited” (Kermode 2000, 8). In other words, history may repeatedly belie the human faith in redemption, but it cannot overcome it. The coming of the liberator will always remain a live possibility.

In his second *Meditation*, Nietzsche states his position on the destiny of humankind: “the goal of humanity cannot lie in its end but only in its highest exemplars” (Nietzsche 1983, 111). Here is an early instance of Nietzsche’s consistent rejection of teleology and his apotheosis of the exemplary individual. But these words are also prescient: they express a notion of the messianic that integrates Nietzsche’s later conceptions of Eternal Recurrence and the Overman with uncanny felicity. We have already noted that the Judeo-Christian cosmology (in contrast to the earlier cyclical cosmologies) models time as linear and discontinuous—a structure that enforces a strict separation between the sacred and the profane. Symmetric with the fall of Adam that began the profane time of human history, the arrival of the messiah will bring about a second cosmological rupture: the apocalypse. History will end, eternity will begin. The great eschatological transition from profane time to sacred time will thus mark the fulfilment of human destiny. Eternal Recurrence as a cosmology repudiates this story; it conceives of history as endless, and as possessing no destiny that is fixed or lasting. At the same time, human societies cannot survive without a sense of destiny—without, that is, some utopian goal to drive them forward. Under the Nietzschean scheme, the only destiny that humanity can fashion for itself is the periodic and transient glory of the Overman. In other words, Eternal Recurrence, interpreted as the endless repetition of the *similar*, is consistent with the idea that “the goal of humanity” can lie nowhere else but “in its highest exemplars.”

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<sup>11</sup> See Kermode 2000, 8–17, for a survey of the numerous deferrals of the apocalypse through history, by Christians of various denominations.

The cosmology of *Cloud Atlas* is remarkably faithful to this Nietzschean formulation, and the consistently messianic idiom of its narratives catches the reader's attention. The novel's six fictional worlds all foreground the exemplary individual: four of these individuals are emancipators (Adam, Cavendish, Sonmi, and Meronym); one averts a nuclear catastrophe (Luisa); and one is a visionary artist (Frobisher). As seen earlier, some of these protagonists even emerge as anti-types of biblical messiahs. The novel goes a step further in putting its messianism beyond any doubt: all the protagonists, with the possible exception of Adam, bear a comet-shaped birthmark on their bodies, between the shoulder-blade and collar-bone (Mitchell 2003, 85, 122, 204, 319, 373).

Interestingly, the image of the comet had already made several appearances in Mitchell's earliest novel (Mitchell 1999, 16, 131, 194, 307). *Ghostwritten*, in fact, even contained a reference to the comet-shaped birthmark that would recur in *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell 1999, 295). Apart from its being an emblem of recurrence, the figure of the comet has, throughout history, carried associations of the apocalyptic and the messianic. The mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult, spawned by the comet Hale-Bopp, is a disturbing contemporary example. A rare and spectacular celestial event, the appearance of a comet can inflame the messianic imagination with a sense of urgency. Pertinent to the biblical mythopoeia of *Cloud Atlas* is the widely held belief that the "star in the east" that guided the wise men to the saviour (Matt. 2.2) was, in fact, a comet. The deeply religious Adam Ewing mentions reading the second chapter of Matthew during his voyage (Mitchell 2003, 516). We shall presently see that the figure of the comet holds the key to *Cloud Atlas's* mythopoeia. All that has been discussed above—regarding the novel's biblical messianism and its appropriation of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence—is microcosmically borne by the symbol of the comet.

At a fundamental, formal level, the comet-shaped birthmark is a leitmotif: it is a fictional device used to unify different moments of time in the novel. The reappearance of the selfsame birthmark on individuals from different epochs signals to the reader (and importantly, to the protagonists themselves), a paranormal or mythic dimension to the narratives. Clearly, any kind of birthmark (star-shaped or

butterfly-shaped, for example) would have sufficed to unify the temporally distanced lives of the protagonists; why the image of a comet in particular? The comet, we realise, is meta-figurative. It serves not merely as a particular instance of leitmotif (i.e., the birthmark), but simultaneously, as a symbol for leitmotifs in general. As a celestial object that appears repeatedly, and at different spots of time in the earth's historical narrative, the comet connotes a sign whose very essence it is to recur (in this sense, it is distinct from a symbol such as a star or a butterfly).

This aspect of recurrence in *Cloud Atlas* can be understood with the aid of Jacques Derrida's concept of iterability. To put it briefly, iterability refers to the reusability of the signifier, the mechanism through which the same signifier manages to signify in different contexts. The word "iterability," for example, occurs in all the sentences of this paragraph, signifying something slightly different in each: it is introduced in the first; defined in the second; exemplified in the third, and so on. Iterability, in other words, is a basic condition of language; without it, a signifier could not proceed beyond the context of its original usage. Viewed (as I am suggesting here) as a fictional trope, iterability can be used to describe various kinds of repetition where the "sameness" of the repetition is always pervaded by the ineradicable difference entailed by the very fact of repetition.

The possibility of extra-discursive transfigurations of the concept of iterability is anticipated by Derrida himself. For Derrida, writing—which is structured by the iterability of the sign—is generalisable to domains beyond "semiolinguistic communication" and indeed, to "the entire field of what philosophy would call experience, that is, the experience of Being: so-called presence" (Derrida, 1991, 92). The whole complex of relations that the phenomenon of iterability establishes between identity, context, repetition, and difference, is no less valid for, say, the human self, as it is for the written mark or signifier. The human self, like the written mark, is always caught up in a milieu of other marks, other selves. As it travels in time, the milieu—the context—continually changes; but through all its repetitions in these different contexts, the self continues to signify as an identity. It is able to do so only because it is iterable and not a full presence, because a part of its signification must always be supplied by the context of its repetition. As Derrida puts it, "No meaning can be determined out

of context, but no context permits saturation" (Derrida 1979, 81). Whatever the self signifies, it signifies only by virtue of its iterability across time and context.

The symbol of the comet, we are now able to see, connotes not only the messianic but also the recurrent. Thus, the comet is not only figurative but also meta-figurative: it can serve as an eloquent symbol for semiosis, understood using the poststructuralist notion of iterability. Just as the linguistic sign incurs an enrichment of its meaning as it is instantiated in each new context, the comet, the harbinger of the messiah, incurs an enrichment of meaning each time it makes an appearance in history. Such an interpretation of the comet-symbol dovetails perfectly with Mitchell's interpretation of the messiah as a recurring anti-type. Mitchell's typology, moreover, is not biblical but Nietzschean. Under the biblical model of time, the meaning of the messiah-type is closed: it is the selfsame messiah who will make a second appearance in history—and what is more, the context and the mode of his reappearance have already been revealed. In *Cloud Atlas's* model of time, on the other hand, the narrative of history will continue to unfold eternally, presenting an unending sequence of sentences. Moreover, just as this narrative is certain to throw up unsavoury surprises—or "unusual events"—the messiah, too, is certain to recur eternally, as Adam, Frobisher, Luisa, Cavendish, Sonmi, Meronym, and so on.

I now conclude with some observations on the generic status of *Cloud Atlas*. At the beginning of this article I had remarked that the very idea of a "postmodernist mythopoeia" seemed paradoxical since it implied the coexistence of two mutually exclusive dispositions: skepticism and belief. Precisely such a tendency has been noticed in recent years in diverse domains of art, and attempts have been made to theorize it. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have coined the term "metamodernism" to designate a new "emergent sensibility," especially in architecture, painting and film, that is untroubled by such paradoxical juxtapositions (2010, 5–6). They define metamodernism as an "aesth-ethical" paradigm that "oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity." One might say that each of

metamodernism's nouns—enthusiasm, irony, hope, melancholy, naivety, and knowingness—is, in turn, personified by Adam, Cavendish, Luisa, Frobisher, Sonmi, and Meronym. The metaphor of pendular oscillation is central to this theorisation. A metamodernist work does not seek a harmonious equilibrium; it preserves both the terms, swinging to and fro between them. The motive for such an aesthetic is to preserve postmodernist skepticism but to retreat from its apathy and disengagement; to preserve modernist enthusiasm but to retreat from its naivety and fanaticism. Vermeulen and Akker note that “metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” and that it “moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find” (5).

These observations capture with admirable accuracy the essential import of my argument concerning Mitchell's “aesth-ethical” use of the trope of Eternal recurrence. Indeed, notwithstanding the ludic and sometimes deflationary spirit of its “tricksy” postmodernist devices, *Cloud Atlas* remains a resolutely ethical novel. Its narratives immerse and embroil us in their moral dramas, even as they use every opportunity to confess their merely textual status. To this extent, I would assert that the postmodernist mythopoeia of *Cloud Atlas* can be classified as an instance of metamodernist art. A deeper exploration of this claim, which is beyond the scope of this article, might help establish whether the novel indeed captures a larger shift in the literary zeitgeist. In this article, I have tried to show that *Cloud Atlas* engages, on equal terms, the mythical as well as the postmodernist sensibility. Through its Nietzschean typologies of biblical messiahs, and through its parallel aesthetics of world-breaking and world-making, the novel reveals the surprising possibility that skepticism and belief can coexist without each requiring the slightest sacrifice of the other. “One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so,” declares the ambitious Frobisher as he composes the *Cloud Atlas Sextet* (Mitchell 2003, 479). But he also wonders, with metafictional irony, whether his conception is “revolutionary” or “gimmicky.” Perhaps, by the time he has set down the sextet's final note (a “violin note, misplayed, hideously,” he informs us), he has realized that it can be both.



## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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