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Getting Past the 'Post-': History and Time in the Fiction of David Mitchell

Abstract

This paper examines David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas (2004) and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet (2010), with a particular focus on history and narrative time. It seeks to offer an alternative perspective on the multiple and intertwined fictional narratives of Mitchell's oeuvre as these evidence a move past the "post-" of postmodernism.

Keywords: David Mitchell, time, narrative, historiography, experimental fiction, post-postmodernism

Postmodernism has cast an extended influence over much literary criticism in the last fifty years. However, with the end of the noughties now in reach of critical hindsight, and with the shock of September 11, 2001 beginning to subside, significant attention is turning once again toward the new literary vanguard. Efforts to discuss post-postmodernism, critical realism, new materialism, and new-millennial writing are certainly on a par with artistic and literary efforts to move beyond postmodernist playfulness and relativism. Within this broader framework, scholars have debated the fiction of David Mitchell, often straining to include his literary experimentalism with categories of the postmodern. However, resisting these efforts in the two novels chosen for analysis here, Mitchell's writing appears to return from the abstraction and playfulness of postmodern poetics to settle as an engaged writing practice concerned with the materiality of time and of history. With time and history as its conceptual anchors, Mitchell's more literary practice in the novels discussed here confronts developed postmodernist approaches to the past through an insistence upon a sense of time that abjures postmodern paradigms of uncertainty and relativity. This paper will examine time and narrative in relation to selected recent works by Mitchell in order to allow an

alternative perspective on the workings of the multiple and intertwined fictional narratives across his novels; a perspective which can enlarge our understanding of how Mitchell continues to write his way out of the rhizome of postmodernist poetic practice.

While many have heralded Mitchell as a postmodern visionary, in particular since the publication of Cloud Atlas (in light of its seemingly postmodern complexity), the introspective nature of much of his literary self-consciousness, which stems from an overarching frame that links all of the individual texts in his body of work, is frequently overlooked. This self-consciousness suggests continuity, not only within his literary oeuvre but also with other literary fictions that both precede and expand the literary tenets of postmodernism. Advancing from these initial claims, this paper examines David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas (2004) and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet (2010), with a particular focus on the literary techniques that drive his fictions past the "post-" of postmodernism. The novels in focus here evidence a gesture toward a new mode of literary fiction which exceeds the scope of his earlier postmodernist writing as exemplified in Ghostwritten (1999). They do this primarily through philosophical engagement with the concepts of time and narrative, and in their re-writing of the past as a plural space. Mitchell's own critical considerations of the value of historical fiction as a mode of literature, sheds light on his writing practice. From the outset it should be stated that this article chooses to deal with Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet here, and not Black Swan Green, or Mitchell's latest novel The Bone Clocks, as Mitchell's second most recent novel is – echoing Cloud Atlas – focused clearly on the problematics of time and history, and is evidently more experimental in terms of form and content. Furthermore, The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, unlike Black Swan Green, and The Bone Clocks, which present distinctive and personal coming-of-age narratives, can be more readily engaged with in relation to the postmodern for its explicit concerns with literary self-consciousness and aspects of historiography.

In his essay on historical fiction appended to the main text of The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, the author outlines the value, but also the difficulty, of writing a historical novel and implies what may be read as a quasi-positivist dedication to memory. This dedication to memory implies the validity and truth of the past through both empirical data (letters and diary entries found and read by characters across the various narratives), but it also recognizes the experiential

dimensions of truth and memory as individual and subjective events. This positivism seems to be bolstered by the fact that the events of the novel have a solid basis in real Japanese historical events. However, the novel, driven by something of a contradictory impulse, also pursues fantastic, supernatural, and occult occurrences which relay an idea of the past as inherently distanced from the present through language. In trying to navigate through this evident paradox in the novel, Mitchell's employment of various conceptualizations of time and temporality is quite revealing. Significantly, it is time as a philosophical concept that allows Mitchell to reconcile postmodernist approaches to history as fiction with post-linguistic attitudes towards the same.[1] The sense of time presented in both novels discussed here, brings both circularity and causality to the novels, which jars with the narrative creativity through which his various histories are conjured.

In presenting an argument structured around these ideas, focus will be placed on Mitchell's playful engagement with narrative structure and with the genre of historical fiction as these are used to extend notions of interconnectivity and unity to what could otherwise be an entropic view of history and narrative. Mark Currie's ideas on the expansion of tense will be discussed in relation to the potential that exists within the process of reading to time travel and the manner in which this concept is apparently exploited in Mitchell's fiction. Evidence will be analyzed which demonstrates how chronology and anachronism are established and subsequently undone in the novels, problematizing both the idea of meaning and also the roles of author and reader. By concentrating on Mitchell's use of tense and temporality in Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, this paper will examine how the sense of time and narrative offered, works in opposition with the exhaustive impulses of postmodernism. It will subsequently extend these points on time and narrative to the idea of history to say that Mitchell's writing poses a further challenge to postmodern norms by enquiring into contemporary issues in historiography and cultural criticism.

A significant number of scholars have engaged with Mitchell's fiction in relation to postmodernism, concluding that his writing affirms a significant number of postmodernist poetic principles. Among these scholars are Sarah Dillon and Helene Machinal. As Machinal points out, for example, "Cloud Atlas presents the reader with a number of characteristics that are typical of postmodern writing, not least of which include generic hybridity, a fragmented structure, interrupted narratives, and an emphasis on illusion and simulacrum" (127). These characteristics are most definitely present in

the text, and are particularly demonstrated in and through Mitchell's general use of narrative unreliability. Notably, these same scholars also appear to be drawn to the contradictory nature of Mitchell's use of postmodernist poetics. For example, Dillon answers the question "Is Mitchell a postmodernist?" by answering, both "yes and no" (18) citing the prevalence of postmodernist literary techniques and ideas in his writing, but also Mitchell's lack of engagement with the "exhaustion" that postmodern writing so frequently entails.[2] True, Mitchell's fiction does not relay the sense of apathy of fatigue, conventionally associated with postmodern writing. If anything, it offers a buoyant and even comforting contemplation of universal ideas to do with life and death, beginnings and endings. But Dillon also highlights the significance of Mitchell's avoidance of the moral problems that usually go with this, namely: the "apolitical and anti-social nihilism of postmodernity" (18). In accordance with her argument, one could refer to numerous examples of ethical undercurrents in even the more experimental of Mitchell's narratives. Of these, one would have to include the manner in which Cloud Atlas concerns itself with issues of slavery and man's inhumanity to man as illustrated most emphatically in "Sloosha's Crossing and Ev'rythin' After," where the master slave dialectic and the problems associated with servitude are directly addressed. And so it is easy to concur with suggestions that Mitchell's writing, in particular in his later works, moves away from postmodernism, not just politically, but in terms of literary practice.

Since much has been written to account for the fact that Mitchell's early fiction is both postmodernist and extending beyond postmodernism, there is now a considerable space opened up for research that investigates the how of Mitchell's positioning in aesthetic and cultural terms. This is further justified if we consider the sincerity and positivity of his more recent work. Underlying the cautious optimism with which Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet attempt to manage the past, is a sincerity of style and character which may easily draw Mitchell's work into the domain of what Adam Kelly would call the "new sincerity" referring to ideas put forward by David Foster Wallace in relation to the potential of contemporary fiction to move beyond postmodernism by returning to "human troubles and emotions" with "reverence and conviction." Kelly's reading of Foster Wallace's literature and criticism outlines a revived sincerity in post-millennial fiction, marked by a reconsideration of authenticity in response to "contemporary conditions" of late postmodernity (131). The sincerity at the heart of Mitchell's fictions, however,

appears to be at odds with his excessive formal experimentation and playfulness. Equally, the plain acceptance of anachronism that the new sincerity seems to bring to literature offers too tight a closure on issues to do with history and fictionality than Mitchell seems to be comfortable with, as evidenced in the over-arching thematics of his fictions, which suggest circularity and causality, but never finality.

In order to fully engage with the ongoing discussion of how we might accurately position Mitchell in critical terms, we need to engage in close reading of his intimate and intricate fictions. However, before examining Mitchell's literary practice in detail, it is important to stress the perspective on postmodernism that is the foundation for this argument. Since postmodernism is such an equivocal term and in view of the fact that it is used as part of many and variant discourses, it is worth establishing that this paper engages with postmodernism in its analysis of Mitchell's writing as a literary and cultural movement that can be outlined through an identifiable poetics and politics and the interaction between these. Leaving the concept of postmodernity aside, the primary relevance of the terms postmodern and postmodernist to Mitchell's fiction is in terms of the author's recurring literary strategies and thematics. With an approach to postmodernism specified as such, it would not be correct or appropriate to engage notions of "evolution," "development," or "chronology" to Mitchell's experimentation with narrative. The idea of "getting past the post- of postmodernism," is therefore a concept oriented simultaneously toward Mitchell's fiction, but also literary scholars and critics. There is a need to circumvent the problem of the "post-" label. It is a given that literary poetics and movements are not time bound and so the post- of postmodernism is not an indication of an "after," nor of "subsequent-ness." The use of the post- prefix only derives function as a discursive tool constructed by readers, and in retrospect by historians to echo Brian McHale (3-4).

In order to discuss postmodernism retrospectively, it is necessary to understand it as a literary poetics based on a definable politics. Since no definition of postmodernism can be comprehensive, we need to work with a multifaceted understanding of postmodernism as both a theory and a practice. As literary critics, the practice is perhaps most crucial to our considerations of the limits of the postmodern. This practice most obviously precludes conclusive interpretation through a radical reshaping of conventional approaches to both reality and history. Hence, Patricia Waugh claims that postmodernist poetics are all about the "quest for fictionality" and the celebration of uncertainty

(10). These poetics include metafiction, fabulation, inversion, multiple and forking narratives, playful engagement with notions of doubt, and the disruption of history as a monolithic concept. Effectively, the practice of dismantling grand narrative and inventing allusions to the unrepresentable (Lyotard 79) in postmodernist literature, reminds us of the futility of meaning-making and the problematics of authenticity in representation. This has significant implications for our understanding of history so much so that the problem of history can be argued as one of the central preoccupations of postmodernism. Peter Boxall has commented on the shift in our "historical consciousness" that characterized the latter half of the 20th century, arguing that a sense of the end of things and a general "cultural agedness" has informed the "historical mood of the last several decades" (682). This cultural agedness informs the exhaustion implied by the postmodern project in relation to history but it also drives the postmodern impulse for novelty and multiple narratives. History, in postmodernism, is decentered, but its validity is accessible through narrative playfulness and fictionality.

Postmodernism as a project, is, and always will be, according to Jean Francois Lyotard, incomplete (xvi, 72) and so in philosophical and critical terms, it is "post-", not due to any historical consequentiality, but primarily due to the fact that it rejects the notion of future. Nothing can come after postmodernism because postmodernism is a recognition of the death of art. It also affirms the death of the artist and the author. In postmodern thought and practice, there is no space for optimism, or modern notions of progress. This may be the reason for the prevalence of so much post-apocalyptic literature in recent years and perhaps also for the post-apocalyptic worlds created in Mitchell's fictional texts (but that's for another discussion). Ultimately, the "post-" of postmodernism is a highly problematic term and it belies the deficiency of terms such as post-postmodernism which cannot garner any genuine understanding about the cultural and literary movements that will grant antecedence to the dominant cultural and artistic milieu of the late 20th century.

Time and narrative are in focus here due to the complex manner with which they are handled in Mitchell's fiction, but also because of the significance of both to postmodern conceptualizations of history and fiction. This general idea of the ephemerality of postmodernism as a literary theory and poetics (outlined above), and our oppositional desire as critics to view it chronologically, actually

tallies with Mitchell's overall engagement with time and narrative and the manner in which these relate to history. Both Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet are revealing of the tension that exists in Mitchell's writing between the simultaneous desire to find, and to abandon coherent notions of time and subsequently, history. In both novels we can observe a continuation of a straightforward idea of time in relation to writing narrative. For example, there is a traditional logic at work in the manner that each of the narratives is composed. Although fragmented on the whole, Cloud Atlas presents particularized accounts of specific situations through conventional framing devices. For example, in the "Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," Adam, at one point, reads an earlier diary entry from the 15 October and looks back on his first encounter with Rafael. His interpretation in the new entry highlights his self-consciousness but also reveals a system of foreshadowing that can be found in earlier parts of the text. These traditional narrative strategies in an otherwise complex novel are also to be found in The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, which relies on the convention of the omniscient narrator to offer a single point of view on the events of the story.

In some ways, these literary conventions set up a basic chronology which works as an ideal of anachronistic writing narrative that Mitchell then works to expose in the remainder of each novel. What is interesting is that in opposition to this approach to time and writing, we can observe a different conceptualization of time in Mitchell's novels in relation to reading narrative. Narratives are written in a particular time and place as a general standard in Mitchell's work, and this concept of time and narrative is dependent upon the functions of the author and the reader, wherein the time-scape of the reader appears to be given precedence over that of the author in terms of how meaning is constructed. Each of the characters that we encounter is both an author and a reader as part of their functionality in the text, but it is their role as reader that allows narrative continuation and the process of meaning construction to be engaged. This would appear to be quite postmodern. However, Cloud Atlas provides an interesting poetic gesture of rebuke toward this most iconoclastic of postmodern theories. If we consider the general premise of Cloud Atlas, which is based on the idea of an author character reading the narrative of an antecedent author character, with whom they are in some mysterious way connected, we find that the author is not dead as Roland Barthes might have us believe. In fact, the author is reborn in unlimited futures and

repeatedly in and through the figure of the reader, both literally and figuratively – in the reader characters of the novel but also the reader outside of the text. This may seem to be an over-simplification of Barthes' theory. However, it is clear that the postmodernist notion of meaning-making is dismantled here in a fictional game in which authors and readers continuously die and are reborn. It is arguably this very process which offers an overarching system of meaning that holds this very complex novel together as a whole, offering a sense of unity and also circularity to an otherwise disconnected text. Robert Frobisher, as one of many authors in the novel, explains this clearly when he proclaims: "[t]ime cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go. My birth, next time round, will be upon me in a heartbeat. In thirteen years from now we'll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I'll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. Such elegant certainties comfort me. Sunt lacrimae rerum" (Cloud Atlas 490).

If the author is not dead, then where is meaning generated? Cloud Atlas overtly and playfully fuses genres, timelines, characters, and narratives. However, if we concern ourselves less with form, the novel is essentially based upon the premise of writing and reading (or listening to) narrative. Each story that forms part of the composite story of the text only exists and bears meaning because it is read by a character in another story which is set further ahead of it in chronological time. The manner in which Mitchell has structured the novel implicitly suggests on the one hand, that meaning, like time, is an artificial and arbitrary construct, and on the other, that it is not time and location specific. On the surface level, this appears to be another idiosyncrasy of literary postmodernism. But in relation to the temporality of the novel on the whole, the notion of meaning is taken much deeper than a straightforward postmodern relativism and actually allows us to reconnect the ideas of past, present, and future through the very concept of reading. To refer again briefly to "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing," we find that the diary entries are all time specific. The meaning of the diary entries, however, is not. Meaning is generated in one instance by a fictional reader, Robert Frobisher, who finds the journal in two parts under a piece of furniture, and in another, it is generated by the interrelation of all of the stories in the novel and the ideas put forward in "Sloosha's Crossing and Ev'rythin' After," wherein a birthmark is interpreted as connecting the protagonists in all of the narratives. Meaning is still created on a macro-level by the

reader of the novel. Nonetheless, the manner in which they choose to interpret the very abstract concepts suggested by the interrelationship of the stories is governed by the novel's wider structure and the way it works to order the reading process based on the links between the stories and the characters. This imposes a grand narrative of sorts onto the world of the text.

The abstract ideas mentioned above, are, importantly, linked to issues of time, memory, and history, and they do work to a certain extent on an ideological level. But they are also bound to personal and even mystical concepts of faith and transcendence; faith in the interrelatedness of all things, and transcendence as a possibility for human consciousness. This allows for a reconciliation of personal and collective meaning. As such, "meaning" in Cloud Atlas is contingent upon the individual reader's interaction with the text while the text asserts itself as remaining outside of time and as being ultimately a-temporal. This situation completely dislocates the narrative from temporality and spatiality and grants fluidity to the ontology of the fictional world so that the novel becomes very much like its central metaphor which is the atlas of clouds; as Timothy Cavendish puts it: "a never-changing map of the ever- constant ineffable" (Cloud Atlas 389).

Mitchell consistently unpacks standard notions of time to inflate the ontology of his fictional worlds (and potentially lead them out of postmodernism) through what Mark Currie refers to as "the expansion of tense" (354): a practice of dislocating the time-scape of his stories as part of a reflection on the relation of time to the reading and writing/telling of stories. Mitchell discusses the ontology of his fictional world in depth in an interview with Wyatt Mason in which he claims that the individual worlds that make up each of his novels is part of a broader world of fiction outside the text but within his contributions to literary fiction on the whole: "each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel"; "I write each novel with an eye on the bigger picture" (Mason 2010). With distinct relevance to this point, Currie has explained the expansion of tense as follows: "We are not imprisoned in the now of the narrative when reading. We are, firstly in the constantly moving now of time (to refer to the Classical philosophical approach to time as a moving present), but secondly, we are in a position of control over time to a certain extent, having the ability to stop reading, to skip ahead, or to return to a previous event" (355). This potential within the reading process, to time-travel, is explored in Mitchell's first novel, Ghostwritten, in which a disembodied consciousness travels the globe in search of an old forgotten story, as it is in Cloud Atlas. Both

novels scrutinize the practice of reading in order to generate a sense of the future that is ensconced in the past, and equally a past that can only be defined by multiple potential futures. Mitchell's theory of eternal return set down in Ghostwritten and Cloud Atlas is put into practice by this focus on the a-temporality of the reading experience and the manner in which the reader is afforded the possibility to reconstruct past and future in the timeless now of the reading process.

Significantly, the apparent postmodern poetics of this reading game, which has been compared by Will McMorran (155) to Italo Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveller due to structural overlaps but also due to the stylistic linking of the closing and opening sentences across the stories, can be seen to extend to a philosophy of time that has implications for collective meaning and therein subverts the radical subjectivity of the postmodern. It suggests a firm sense of the correlation between time and narrative through which grounded meanings can be construed. By offering a sense of the meaning which is universal and not time contingent, the novel invites us into a philosophical consideration of meaning along the lines of Wittgensteinian thought wherein meaning is "use": it is socially structured, and those structures essentially do not change over time.[3] This approach to Mitchell's philosophy is supported by Machinal who (although uninterested in Mitchell's timescapes) asserts that his novels "transcend[s] postmodernity by introducing a philosophy that works on a collective level; a shift from an ontogenic to a phylogenic perspective" (127). While Machinal's language speaks to the evolution of literary poetics, the significance of her claim lies in the fact that it points to the notion of shared experience that is advocated in Mitchell's stories, and their intrinsic rejection of solipsistic points of view.

Following on from Cloud Atlas, The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet offers a somewhat more coherent approach to narrative and the narrated past. The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet is a novel that on the surface appears to have abandoned the cross-referencing, the redeployment of characters, and the postmodern playfulness that defines Mitchell's earlier work.[4] Written in the standard form of present tense throughout and told chronologically, the novel presents a realistic story set in 18th century Japan. The protagonist, the flame-haired Jacob de Zoet, works as a notary for the Dutch East India Company and his romantic involvement with a Japanese midwife extends to a consideration of Europe's 18th century clashes with a culturally and politically insular

Japan. Significantly, it is written in the genre form of the historical novel, and is the first of Mitchell's novels to be written in the third person.

With this novel, Mitchell's fiction appears to engage directly with critical discourse on the current state of literature in relation to postmodernism through its contribution to renewed discussion of the concepts of history and fictionality in relation to both literary and historical studies. Although it initially seems to be a traditional piece of historical fiction, The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet destabilizes the past by juxtaposing empirically and subjectively grounded "truths" in a time-bound narrative. The novel includes a historical timeline as a factual index to the narrative, and also an essay on historical fiction and the fictitious nature of history. This tension appears to tally with the principles of historiographic metafiction, but in fact, it explicitly poses a challenge to postmodern norms by maintaining a space for faith in the authenticity of personal experience and subjective narratives. Engaging with repeated themes found throughout his work, such as translation and transculturation, mysticism and mythology, Mitchell is very much focused on the experience of Otherness and of being "other" in the story. Jacob finds himself a stranger in Japan, and is a champion of the repressed in a society of strict hierarchies. While this engages quite a simplistic view on alterity overall, it does suggest that Mitchell is attuned to the value of giving a voice to the "other" in literature and there is something sincere to be found in his empathy toward our basic human engagement with stories of timeless love, and good overcoming evil. While thematically, the novel is complex, the reader finds him or herself in sympathy with well-rounded and appealing characters in a narrative that is very much self-sustained and driven by a fixed notion of history and the historical.

Mitchell's chronology of Japanese economic and political development since the 16th century is quite revealing of the author's attitude to time and narrative and of the philosophy of time pursued in his earlier novels and it offers one part of what Mitchell refers to as the "stereo narrative" of the historical novel, a narrative defined by the coexistence of two tones. As he explains in his essay: "from one speaker comes the treble of the novel's own plot, while the other speaker plays the bass of history's plot" (Thousand Autumns 558). The "treble of the novel's plot" in The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, deviates from the bass of history at key points and provides us with insight into Mitchell's continuing use of playful narration and his development of the themes of

interconnectivity and eternal return. This treble can also be seen to engage the same approach to time and narrative seen in Cloud Atlas, an approach which can be illuminated by Paul Riceour's idea that the time locus of narrative is based on circularity and is aware of the fact that narrative structures time in the act of retrospective representation.

In Time and Narrative, Riceour, in response to Edmund Husserl, puts forward a defense of narrative in terms of its recreation of the human sense of time. The "river" of time, or, cosmological time, is actual time passing, while phenomenological time is time experienced through concepts of past, present, and future. We can only experience time through a combination of these two things, physical time and conceptualised time. One is "inscribed," as he puts it, on the other (105). As an example of Mitchell's narrative structuring of time in the text, one could consider the opening chapter of The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet. The story begins in medias res as the midwife struggles to bring to life "a newborn boiled-pink despot." Set in a dramatic present, it immediately gestures toward a future reality when the newborn boy has become the high-handed ruler of the region (3-4). Referring to the newborn infant in terms of his future identity in this way, engages a mode of reading that is driven by teleological retrospect. As Currie explains, the narrator "seeks to explain past events in the light of later events" therein imposing a significance that they did not possess at the time of their occurrence (359).

Peter Brooks has outlined this ideological retrospect in more detail, stating that "if the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we already know to be in place, already in wait for us to reach it"; "the anticipation of retrospection" is a "strange logic" (230). Mitchell's consideration of narrative and temporality along these lines provides a schema for the plot development of The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet and is almost systematically presented across the plot and subplot of the novel. Characters are drawn to contemplations of time; the novel's structure is based on a narrative of time that is "other" in that it is based on the lunar calendar which denotes Japanese dates as opposed to the reader's familiar equivalent; and the narrative form forces the reader to reconsider both their own temporality and the time-scape of the story. But significantly, the plot comes to a conclusion back on European time when Jacob is sixty. As he takes his final breaths, his attention is brought to the clock's pendulum and the ghost of his lost love, Orito, bringing death in a final kiss to his forehead (

Thousand Autumns 546). In this mystical moment Mitchell returns to the notion of time that he has firmly established through his exploration of eternal recurrence in Cloud Atlas. At this point, the omniscient narrator informs us of Jacob's personal experience of temporality as he embarks upon his death and his entry into the Atlas of Clouds. "Looking backwards, Jacob sees pages from the months and years ahead" (Thousand Autumns 544). For Jacob, time is framed only in terms of the memoir that he never managed to write.

This notion of time structured by narrative is clearly present in both novels, particularly in their considerations of the relationship between past and future and it is something that is exposed when we become conscious, as readers, of our sense of time moving (or cosmological time) in the present outside the text. This metafictional facet of the narrative is not particularly postmodernist in that it does not function to relativize meaning or to destabilize the ontology of the fictional world of the reader. Instead, it invites us as readers to think about how we read the past in relation to the present of our reading practice and also in relation to the future (and ending of the novel) which we know to exist. This is actually a traditional logic in terms of narrative practice, and is not particularly postmodern. Rather than destabilizing meaning in a postmodernist manner, this comparative sense of time and narrative actually lends stability to the reality and meaning of the text.

Machinal claims that Cloud Atlas "revolves on itself as its chiasmic structure grants a central and pivotal position to Zachry's post-cataclysm tale, the only narrative that is given as a whole" (134). While the disruption of the narrative, the ruptures, are postmodern, when they are repeated to form a pattern, they implicate a wider sense of continuity (135). This sense of continuity is bolstered by the relationship between the characters across the stories – an aspect of the novel that is given much emphasis throughout. For example, in "The First Luisa Rey Mystery," Luisa finally gets hold of the remaining old letters from Zedelghem and inhales their scent, wondering, "[a]re molecules of Zedelghem Chateau, of Robert Frobisher's hand, dormant in this paper for forty four years, swirling in my lungs now, in my blood? Who is to say?" (Cloud Atlas 453). Equally, the reappearance of characters across Mitchell's novels – Luisa Rey is a character from his earlier novel, Ghostwritten – adds what the author himself has called "reality concreteness" to his writing (Dillon 6). The identifiable nature of the characters and their characteristics render them less elusive than familiar and harness the effort to make meaning in the reading process. This also reflects a strong

orientation toward materiality and subjectivity in the novels; a motivation which is further illustrated in the sensuousness of style to be found in many of his stories, notably in Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet. A sense of material reality oozes through Mitchell's descriptive prose, such as in Robert Frobisher's account of a "drain pipe ripped free of its mounting with the noise of a brutalized violin" (Cloud Atlas 43). This is also exemplified in the "groaning trams" – the aurality of which defines a narrative that is heavily decadent and affective. Frobisher also describes "coffinesque streets," "a decrepit empty train," the "foggy landscape," and the "aroma of fresh bread" in the bakery (47), and his intensely evocative passages also extend to the visual, notably in drawings of people, including a "beetroot faced gardener was clearing a weed-choked fountain" (53). This sensual recall evoked in the narratives, combined with sharp visual imagery, may be tied to Mitchell's historical methodology, wherein the aura of the material world functions to aid the evocation of the past in both the mind of the author and the reader.

This paper proposes that these aesthetics, together with the author's considerations of time and history, work to enforce an overarching quasi-positivism in Mitchell's fiction, where "truth" is ultimately upheld as an ideal and as a direct consequence of experience in the material world. Meronym tells Zachry at the end of "Sloosha's Crossing and Ev'rythin' After" that the "true true is diff'rent to the seemin' true," its "presher'n'rarer'n diamonds" (Cloud Atlas 287-88) suggesting that truth exists, albeit in a form that is evasive to human cognition. This sense of verisimilitude underscores the sincerity of Mitchell's writing and is inflected in the optimism of his endings. This certainty is even to be found in the darkest of places: as Adam Ewing writes toward the end of his narrative in Cloud Atlas,

> *[i]f we believe that humanity may transcend tooth and claw, if we believe diverse races & creeds can share this world 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 Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real. (Cloud Atlas 528)*

To characters like Adam, which proliferate across both Cloud Atlas and The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, reality is "[t]he flat world [that] is curved in the boy's eye" (Cloud Atlas 97). It exists, although it can only be accessed in a mediated form. But it is also contingent upon belief. Through

comments such as Adam's, Mitchell's writing engages what could be considered a guarded epistemological conviction. This is opposed to the more radical epistemological uncertainty of postmodernism. His insistence upon the universal and a-temporal nature of meaning, however, does not suggest a monolithic version of truth or reality. As Berthold Schoene points out, Mitchell's universalism "is not an inert featureless universalism"; instead it is a way to reposition the intimacy of experience in relation to a contemporary global and cosmopolitan view of reality, and also a way to reestablish an exchange between past, present, and future (53). Accepting these points, it is possible to place Mitchell's fictional oevre, generally, within the spheres of the transcultural and the cosmopolitan, but the candour and underlying thematics of these later novels and their suggestion of faith in universal certainties and the prospect of transcendence, reflects the contemporary moment in literary scholarship and theory as it hesitates on the most outer limits of the postmodern.

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[1] The critical turn away from textual idealism reflected in post-linguistic thinking as it challenges the assumptions of poststructuralist thought seeks out both the non-linguistic and the material as a counterpoint to discourse and text and appears to reframe history as experiential and embodied. Mitchell's account of time and history reflects both historiographic metafiction (usually aligned with postmodernism) and the new materialist idea that "matter kicks back" (see Barad 112), and that history is conjoined to material reality.

[2] By exhaustion here I refer to the exhaustion of representation highlighted in the 1984 essay titled "The Literature of Exhaustion" by John Barth, an essay which points to narrative function and prioritizes this over aspects of innovation and literary style. Such a perspective is useful to an understanding of Mitchell's work which is so heavily engaged with narrative and plot.

[3] Sect. 43 of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations claims that: "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (20).

[4] Character redeployment is still a feature of The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, such as in the case of Boerhaave, a malicious character from Cloud Atlas, who appears in the novel a religious and earnest younger man. However, this play on characters' capacity for trans-dimensional travel is less in focus than the historical action and the sense of time that moves the narratives forward.

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