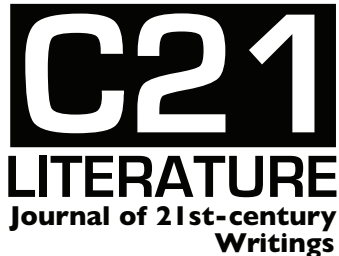




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ARTICLE

Schrödinger's Cat Metalepsis and the Political Unwriting of the Postmodern Apocalypse in David Mitchell's Recent Works

Scott A. Dimovitz

Regis University, Denver, CO, US

sdimovit@regis.edu

In the beginning, David Mitchell's early postmodern fictions staged the impossibility of rendering the End. In each of his first three novels, Mitchell creates eschatological narratives that lack the moment of destruction: *Ghostwritten* points elliptically to the coming comet that an artificial intelligence, Zookeeper, will allow to destroy the earth; *number9dream* ends in a chapter that literally lacks letters, leaving a stark blank page after a quasi-apocalyptic earthquake hits Tokyo; and *Cloud Atlas* frames the event of the apocalypse without ever depicting what actually caused the deadlanding of most of the planet and the obliteration of most of humanity. This deferral of representation points to a postmodern problematic in apocalyptic figuration, and for Mitchell's work constitutes a lack at the center of representing the real, when that reality is its own annihilation. This essay considers how Mitchell's more recent works' development have retroactively extended, transformed, and undermined the significance of the earlier works' figurations of postmodern apocalypses. *The Bone Clocks* (2014), *Sunken Garden* (2013), and *From Me Flows What You Call Time* (2016/2114) collapse the postmodern indeterminate eschatologies that Mitchell had established in the early works, like a literary quantum superposition collapse in the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment. The argument demonstrates how Mitchell's recent works have denied the individual autonomy of the universes in each narrative, thereby establishing a retroactive Mitchellverse—a shared world that undoes the postmodern indeterminacy of the unfigured apocalyptic moment in favor of an increasingly didactic political critique of apoliticism in the face of apocalyptic climate change.

Keywords: Mitchell; postmodernism; politics; climate change; metalepsis; narratology

In the beginning, David Mitchell's early postmodern fictions staged the impossibility of rendering the End. In each of his first three novels, Mitchell created eschatological narratives that lack the moment of destruction: *Ghostwritten* (1999) pointed elliptically to a comet that an artificial intelligence, Zookeeper, would apparently allow to destroy the earth; *number9dream* (2001) ended in a chapter that literally lacks letters, leaving a stark blank page after a quasi-apocalyptic earthquake hit Tokyo; and *Cloud Atlas* (2004) framed the effects of apocalyptic events without ever depicting what actually caused the obliteration of most of humanity and the deadlanding of most of the planet. Mitchell continued this aesthetic technique of framed absence in his libretto for Klaas de Vries's opera, *Wake* (2010), written to commemorate a 2000 firework depot explosion in Enschede, Netherlands, which destroyed an entire neighborhood. Like *Cloud Atlas*, the opera's narrative frames an absence and only symbolically depicts the event using a sonic boom, with no representation on stage.¹

Unlike the religious apocalyptic visions of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (among others), which rely upon foundationalist assumptions so anathematic to postmodern theory, this deferral of representation in Mitchell's work points to a postmodern problematic in apocalyptic figuration and shares what Brian McHale describes in *Constructing Postmodernism* as the 'problem of how to represent the apocalypse' in the postmodern age; namely, 'How do we express the inexpressible?' (1992: 160). McHale uses as a prototypical example the final scene in Thomas Pynchon's influential 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, which ends with a missile poised just above a movie theatre, about to explode, but not actually exploding in the text itself. This hiding of the terminal event may seem paradoxical, insofar as 'apocalypse' literally means 'revelation,' yet McHale's postmodern apocalypses only point to destruction, thereby avoiding graphically theatrical depictions and relegating such imagery to religious visions, fantasy, film, and other popular forms of representation. It also may seem paradoxical, since we often associate apocalyptic narratives with the complete obliteration of humanity; however, as Elisabeth Rosen reminds us in *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*, most

¹ See Mitchell (2010a) on his description of this process.

traditional theological apocalypses are about the destruction of *part of* humanity—usually the part that has perpetrated some injustice to the prophet's group (2008: xv). Mitchell's early postmodern apocalyptic narratives avoid the prophetic prophylactic function by neither pointing to specific causality nor by offering alternatives. Rather, the negation of the figuration of the apocalyptic moment highlights a postmodern aesthetic technique that reinforces a radical epistemological indeterminacy in the worldview of the texts, while also suggesting an inevitability to the terminal moment.

I have elsewhere (Dimovitz 2015b) explored this aspect of Mitchell's early works and how they press against the limits of the tendency towards linguistic idealism or reductivism in the more radical postmodern theorizations. This essay extends those ideas to consider how David Mitchell's writings in the 2010s have retroactively undermined, extended, and transformed the significance of the earlier works' framed non-figurations of postmodern apocalypses, thereby complicating the sheer indeterminacy of the narratives so emphasized by Mitchell's postmodern texts as a mimetic reflection of an indeterminate world. In Mitchell's latest works, a turn towards political commitment in the face of the probability of future apocalyptic events trumps the desire for absence. In this turn, Mitchell's works share a trend I have elsewhere (Dimovitz 2005) described as not just post-postmodern, but rather *contrapostmodern*: texts that incorporate the techniques and motifs of postmodern aesthetics along with meditations on the concerns of postmodern theory in order to challenge and undermine the more extreme ontologies and epistemologies suggested by those postmodern theories. As this essay will argue, *The Bone Clocks* (2014), *Slade House* (2015), *Sunken Garden* (2013), and *From Me Flows What You Call Time* (2016/2114) collapse the unfigurable, indeterminate eschatologies that Mitchell had established in the early works, like a literary quantum superposition collapse in the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment. In the interest of a more overtly didactic political turn in his writing, this collapse continues Mitchell's distancing of his works from the postmodern epistemologies they have engaged and subverted across his career; yet even here, I will argue, Mitchell's works both assert and deny the central signifier that will fix the ground of meaning.

From Postmodern to Contrapostmodern

The postmodern epistemological and aesthetic focus in Mitchell's early works should come as no surprise. Mitchell received an M.A. in 1987 from the University of Kent in comparative literature focusing on the postmodern novel, and his first three novels often employ the themes and problematic tensions raised by the theories dominant during the rise of continental philosophy in Anglo-American graduate programs during the 1980s and 90s. The early novels are replete with references to postmodern literature, such as *Ghostwritten's* Marco, whose band is named after Paul Auster's novel *The Music of Chance* (and whose name may carry a reference to Marco Stanley Fogg, a character in Auster's *Moon Palace*). Yet even in these early works, there is an ironic defensiveness to much of that characterization, such as when Timothy Cavenish deprecates the use of literary 'flashbacks, foreshadowings, and tricky devices,' which, he says, 'belong in the 1980s with M.A.s in postmodernism and chaos theory' (2004a: 150). Of course, these are all favorite techniques of Mitchell's works themselves. After all, as Marinus muses in *The Bone Clocks*, 'The Script'—a metaphor both for the fated plot in the novel's world, and also for the entire corpus of Mitchell's *written* universe—'loves foreshadow' (2014: 495). In *The Bone Clocks*, Crispin Hershey also embraces these novelistic devices, and in a lecture titled *On Never Not Thinking About Iceland*, he traces these so-called 'postmodern' novelistic techniques of 'foreshadow and backflash' and 'artful misdirection,' among others, back to the Icelandic sagas (379).

Even with this background, Mitchell himself has resisted the 'postmodern' designation, and in interviews he often bristles at the related label, 'experimental novelist': 'I don't want to project myself as this great experimenter,' Mitchell assured Stuart Jeffries (2013); 'I'm not.' Considering the pro-realist, anti-maximalist and experimental bias in both the publishing world and in popular contemporary criticism of the James Wood (2005) variety,² this might be understandable. *The New York Times'*

² See James Wood's (2005) indictment of what he refers to as the "hysterical realism" of maximalist writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith, among others, who write "books of great self-consciousness with no selves in them; curiously arrested books which know a thousand

Michiko Kakutani (2014), for example, after dismissing the 'supernatural nonsense' and 'razzle-dazzle postmodern surface' of *The Bone Clocks*, backhandedly approved of Mitchell's characterization of Holly Sykes, achieved only because of his 'skills as an old-fashioned realist.' Several critics and scholars since the mid-1990s have asserted the end of postmodernism as a philosophical or aesthetic force, clanging the death knell of the postmodern turn at various historical moments. Theo D'haen (2013) points to Hans Bertens' 1995 book, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, as 'the end of the debate on postmodernism as a vitally alive and culturally dominant literary movement or current' (271) and argues that multicultural and postcolonial literatures have overtaken such dominants. Drawing on Christian Moraru's notion of 'cosmodernism,' a move from more traditional postmodernisms to a Levinasian relational model of aesthetic praxis and being, in general, D'haen sees a fructifying force of postmodern aesthetics in continuing a critique on seemingly fixed hegemonies. Unlike D'haen's (1994) 'countering postmodernisms,' which continues to decenter these 'privileged centers,' contrapostmodernism, as I define it, uses postmodernism's motifs, themes, and theories to challenge postmodernism, itself—to decenter *decentering* by pointing out the limitations of an absolutely indeterminate epistemology, thereby containing the critique that is always otherwise possible. We see this everywhere in the post-postmodern moment, even in popular films like *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by the Wachowskis, who also adapted *Cloud Atlas* for the screen. When the protagonist, Neo, opens a fake copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), we can no longer assume a postmodern position to level a critique of the film's neo-platonic nostalgic fantasy of recapturing the real; the film knows that criticism, incorporates it, and rejects it within the text itself.

While some critics and academics have signaled the end of postmodern aesthetics, *The Bone Clocks* engages in metafictional pushback against such critiques. In addition to satirizing academic discourse—such as the hilarious depiction of Aphra Booth, the feminist critic of Crispin Hershey's Martin Amis-like bad-boy of British

different things—How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market of Detroit! The history of strip cartoons!—but do not know a single human being" (202).

letters persona (326)—*The Bone Clocks* also has plenty of vitriol for the critical community, as represented by Richard Cheeseman, Hugo Lamb's friend from Cambridge. Cheeseman began his literary life in the early 1980s wanting to write a prototypical postmodern novel, which he seems not to know had been done many times before: 'My hero is a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman, working on a novel about a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman, working on a novel about a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman. No one's ever tried anything like it' (106). Hugo Lamb thinks the idea sounds like 'A frothy pint of piss,' although how incisive a literary critic Lamb is should perhaps be taken with an Icelandic glacier of salt. As an adult novelist and critic with a ponderous prose style, Richard Cheeseman's devastating characterization of Crispin Hershey's *Echo Must Die* anticipates James Wood's (2014) *New Yorker* critique of *The Bone Clocks*:

So why is *Echo Must Die* such a decomposing hog? One: Hershey is so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower. Two: The fantasy subplot clashes so violently with the book's State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look. Three: What surer sign is there that the creative aquifers are dry than a writer creating a writer-character? (294)

Paul Harris (2015) has somewhat defensively anticipated some readers' critique of the fantasy sections, arguing that Mitchell 'should be admired for taking a joyfully unabashed foray into fantasy' (150), and, indeed, Mitchell seems to be anticipating such criticisms himself, both in the self-conscious mockery of the 'soul vampire' motif (450), and in Crispin Hershey's editor's drinking as a way to drown his anguish over his client's embrace of fantasy (364).

Hershey seems largely modelled on Martin Amis, whose novel *Dead Babies* (1975), along with the title of a composition (1913) by Erik Satie, partly informs the title of Hershey's breakthrough novel, *Desiccated Embryos*, and whose notorious agent, Andrew 'The Jackal' Wylie, finds a parallel in Hershey's own Jackal, 'Hyena Hal.' Hershey, however, also serves as a kind of alternative Mitchell, articulating all the things he would like to say if he were not so nice. Hershey is an instance of the

very writer-character Cheeseman decries, and this allows many meditations on the publishing world and the art of writing. Mitchell (2004b) himself defended such metafictional techniques outright in his essay on rereading Italo Calvino: 'I've never understood why writers who write on writing get charged with creative onanism when artists are allowed to paint themselves until the Rembrandts come home or a work like *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*—music about music, right?—is fine with everyone.' Further parallels between Mitchell and Hershey include the fact that, like *Cloud Atlas*, *Desiccated Embryos* also has a symmetrical structure (342), and that Hershey's fake novel description takes elements from both *Ghostwritten* and *The Bone Clocks*: 'A jet-lagged businessman has the mother of all breakdowns in a labyrinthine hotel in Shanghai, encounters a minister, a CEO, a cleaner, a psychic woman who hears voices ...' (364). In addition, the novel describes a short story Hershey wrote 'about a gang of feral youths who roam the near future, siphoning oil tanks of lardy earth mothers' (308), which is a very close summary of Mitchell's own 2011 story, 'The Siphoners'—a point to which I will return.

Like Hershey's works, therefore, Mitchell's 2010s writing continues to explore postmodern themes and motifs while embracing some postmodern aesthetics, as Mitchell articulates them, yet they begin to use the techniques against postmodern theory itself. *The Bone Clocks* begins the final foreclosure on the postmodern world-view, but the earlier works had already begun a more direct movement against sheer representational indeterminacy. *Cloud Atlas* takes the novella form of Italo Calvino's postmodern work, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), which likewise interrupted its narratives, but to a final point that none of the stories are resolved.³ In *Cloud Atlas*, however, Mitchell closes the postmodern indeterminacy implied by Calvino's work, as he later wrote in his reevaluation of his early veneration of Calvino's novel:

Friends and relatives were still receiving copies for birthdays years later; I ended up writing a devout MA on (ahem) 'The Postmodern Novel'; even worse, my curiosity got stung to its core by the question, 'What would a novel where interrupted narratives are continued later look like?' I've just

³ Mitchell often references this influence, which is fully explored in McMorran (2011).

spent three years delicately extracting that sting by writing that very novel so I felt it was timely (and safe) to go back and see what the fuss was about. (2004b)

By closing the broken sections, *Cloud Atlas* moves beyond the open-endedness of Calvino, partly because Mitchell later found the work wanting: 'Describing our world's unknowability in terms of labyrinths and mirrors no longer cuts the metaphysical mustard, somehow' (2004b). This claim at first seems puzzling given the centrality of labyrinths in *The Bone Clocks*. What the Horologists negotiate, however, is not technically a labyrinth, but a maze, and unlike the Borgesian solitary protagonist, trapped in his labyrinth, Holly Sykes is able to *use* the maze as a conduit to escape to the real world. *The Bone Clocks* now overtly begins to use the imagery of postmodern literature as a way to flee from the solipsistic enclosure of that literature—a contrapostmodern escape.⁴

Schrödinger's Cat and the Überbook

While Mitchell's early works point to an unrepresentable apocalypse, which, if depicted, would provide a sense of closure that would deny the indeterminacy of the text, Mitchell's more recent works have subverted this more extreme ontological extension of the aesthetic by providing the missing information. At first, it had seemed that the universes of *Ghostwritten's* noncorpa and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet's* samurai soul vampires were unrelated. His recent works, however, have attempted to deny the individual autonomy of the universes in each narrative, thereby establishing a retroactive Mitchellverse—a shared world that undoes the postmodern indeterminacy of the unfigured apocalyptic moment in favor of a growing mythopoeia, first established in *The Bone Clocks* and crystalized in *Slade House*. Paul Harris (2015) has called this Mitchell's 'intertext,' and Mitchell himself

⁴ In addition, Echo, Ovid's mountain nymph who can only repeat others' words, has been a favorite metaphor for postmodern belatedness at least since John Barth's short story 'Echo' in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). In *The Bone Clocks*, however, we find this metaphor must not stay with us forever in Hershey's novel, where *Echo Must Die*.

has taken to referring to his entire corpus as a vast 'Überbook' that he intends to develop over five or so more novels.⁵ A central feature of this Mitchellverse is that it attempts to rewrite the significance of the earlier books, at times overwhelming their status as standalone aesthetic objects. This retroactive movement functions like Harold Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence,' in which an earlier work's meaning and significance gets rewritten by a strong later text, such as reading Homer's *The Odyssey* (c. 8th Century BCE) after reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). This rewriting of the apocalypse by filling in that which was previously unrepresentable is a large-scale version of Mitchell's rewriting of Calvino, as Mitchell also critiqued his postmodern use of radical narrative indeterminacy. When rereading *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, he felt that 'knowing that the endings stay untold meant I didn't invest any emotional capital in the stories' (2004b); as *Cloud Atlas's* Frobisher claims, 'A half-read book is a half-finished love affair' (64). This affective component as a result of narrative structure choices seems to have partially influenced Mitchell's desire to fill in the blanks and show the exact causes and mechanisms leading to the apocalyptic moment of the Endarkenment that each novel, short story, and opera share (or will share one day).

This rewriting of earlier works has the potential to undo some of the works' previous significance. For example, one of Mitchell's signature marks of writerly virtuosity, like Chaucer and Joyce before him, is his ability to mimic other styles and modes. The 19th-century seafaring tale of Adam Ewing's section of *Cloud Atlas*, the later 1970s potboiler of Luisa Rey, the thick Michener-esque historical novel of *Jacob de Zoet*, and the lucid, finely-crafted Bildungsroman realism of *Black Swan Green*, each meta-fictionally explore their genres and the possibilities of story-telling on their own. This novelistic polyphony, however, collapses in on itself when the later works claim priority over the earlier works, as happens in the third story in both Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels* (1959), *The Unnamable* (1953), and its later American retelling in Paul

⁵ In *The Bone Clocks'* paperback afterword, Mitchell (2015a) makes it clear: 'If I were to choose a title for that volume, I would call it *The Überbook*.' Joseph Metz (2017: 123) has usefully pointed out the importance of the term 'redaction' in the novel, emphasizing that this term is akin to the process I am describing.

Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987). Several critics, such as novelists Julian Novitz (2014) and Ursula K. Le Guin (2014), have seen this as a narrative failing that threatens to diminish the achievements of the previous works, but I am more interested in how this aesthetic turn functions than in whether or not Mitchell should be doing it.

The effect of this double encoding creates a strange narrative form, a reception theory version we might call a Schrödinger's Cat metalepsis. In linguistics, metalepsis refers to a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used in a different context, thereby changing the significance while carrying a trace of the original meaning. Gérard Genette appropriated this structure in his narratological version, where he delimits "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse" (1972: 234–35); it is a violation of the "sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (236). Courtney Hopf (2011: 115–20) has been the critic to explore most explicitly the use of metalepsis within the self-contained narrative world of *Cloud Atlas*, although this does not quite function in the same way across multiple texts. Mitchell, himself (2015a), perhaps thinking of the linguistic definition, rejects the use of 'metalepsis' for the reuse of characters across texts, preferring "reappearing characters" ... until something classier comes along.' Metalepsis is, however, the closest narratological term, so I propose this subset here.

Mitchell's Schrödinger's Cat metalepsis demands the ontological instability of the location of textual meaning based upon extradiegetic claims of both the author (usually in interviews more than in a textual voice) and the other works of his corpus. I take this name from Erwin Schrödinger's relatively well-known 1935 thought experiment, which was initially a critique of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, but has later been used as an illustration of that theorization (Trimmer 1980). For Schrödinger, quantum superposition was like having a cat put into a box with a small amount of a radioactive substance. Whether or not the cat survives at any given moment depends upon whether the atom decays enough for a vial of hydrocyanic acid to shatter. Until the box is open, the cat both *is* and *is not* alive, as Hugo Lamb overhears someone joking at his Cambridge pub: 'Have you

heard the news about Schrödinger's Cat? It died today; wait—it didn't, did, didn't, did' (*The Bone Clocks* 109–110). The cat stays in this dual state until an observer opens the box to collapse the superposition duality into one possible reality. Schrödinger's model critiqued this paradoxical dual ontology as an absurdity, but the thought experiment has become a favorite recurring image in postmodern literature as well as a part of some postmodern reception theories, where the observer-reader is the ultimate constructor of meaning. Is Stephen Dedalus the callow romantic hero at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), or is he the self-deprecating depressive in *Ulysses*? The metaleptic Schrödinger's Cat answer, of course, is 'yes.'

Likewise, the fact that Mitchell has claimed that all of his books take place in the same universe does not, ipso facto, mean that they do. Or rather, they both do and do not, as there both is and is not a connection between the stories, depending on whether the reader knows about Mitchell's other texts or whether or not the reader chooses to see such connections. As Mitchell (2015a) himself wrote in his afterword to the paperback version of *The Bone Clocks*, 'I want each of my novels to be its own stand-alone self that can be read independently, but I also want a limited amount of foot traffic to and from my past and future novels.' This raises complicated questions for interpretation. For example, on its own, the comet birthmark that unites the protagonists across *Cloud Atlas*'s sections does not suggest a literal reincarnation—it could not completely, as Luisa Rey and Cavendish are alive at the same time, among other problems—but rather serves as a symbol for the transforming and recurring universality of human predacity and those who resist against it. *The Bone Clocks*, however, wants to cannibalize the symbolism into the larger literal war of the predacious soul-sucking Anchorites against reincarnating Horologists—the ultimate literalization of this tension (even if, Mitchell makes clear, this is still a metaphor for a very real human predacity). Once the reader encounters *The Bone Clocks*, it becomes almost impossible not to think that perhaps Adam Ewing was an unknowing Horologist.

One of the many interesting aspects about this ontological narrative doubling (tripling, etc.) is to think of Mitchell's oeuvre in relation to the postmodern novel, which, I am arguing, his project begins by embodying and later critiques. As I explore

elsewhere (2015b), much of *Cloud Atlas* interrogates the limits of language as the final or only guarantor of meaning, thereby undermining reductive versions of Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction, which interprets the (in)famous line from *Of Grammatology*, 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' (1967: 158) ('there is no outside-text') as 'there exists nothing outside of the text.' From this more radical postmodern and deconstructive perspective, reality is radically mediated by language, and the epistemological slippage inherent in language cannot be averted. Mitchell's early novels challenge that reductivism and constantly point to scenes and character emotions that cannot be represented or contained in language. Likewise, some of Mitchell's later works have begun incorporating visual signs that transcend words, such as *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet's* cross-sectional medical drawing of a breach-birth fetus that is sticking its arm out of its mother's vagina (2010: 6), Jacob's drawing of Dejima (17), and *The Bone Clocks'* postcard from Ed Brubeck to Holly Sykes (194), all of which seem to root the indeterminacy of the text into a more stable, or at least less unstable, visual signifier. Of course, the fact that these are almost always drawings problematizes that stability, as well, yet Mitchell's works plainly are trying to clarify their intentions, stripping away the obsessive pointing to the inability of the signifier to capture the real.

Climate Change and the Political Turn

'We have to be more interventionist politically than—than my mother used to be.'

—Marinus to Holly Sykes,
The Bone Clocks (2014: 619)

Like many other post-postmodern works, Mitchell's contrapostmodern fictions subvert more extreme forms of postmodern theories partly because they largely lack the ability to theorize political action. To paraphrase Patricia Waugh to describe some theorists' rejection of these forms of postmodernism, for those with an interest in emancipatory politics, like feminism, 'the goals of agency, personal autonomy, self-expression and self-determination, can neither be taken for granted nor written off as exhausted' (1992: 194). Beginning with *Cloud Atlas*, where Adam Ewing com-

mits to the emancipatory goals of the Abolitionist Movement, Mitchell's apocalyptic work has become increasingly clear in its didactic political messages, from Aziz and Ed Brubeck's assessment of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan (243), to Marinus's long 41-year catalogue of the problems of the state of the world to a waking Ester Little (500). Mitchell's dominant political turn crystallizes around climate change, and this explicit depiction of destruction moves the message from metaphor to hortatory cautionary tale. In the early works, apocalypticism served as an index of our inherent tendency to self-destruct, a function of a primal desire inscribed within us at birth.⁶ *Ghostwritten's* implied apocalyptic comet became inscribed upon *Cloud Atlas's* characters' bodies as a birthmark, suggesting a Lacanian metaphor about humanity's being constituted by a lack—a constantly deferred desire caused by our fall into language that causes humanity to rush to its own annihilation in the hopes of filling a void. Discussing *Cloud Atlas's* implied ecological disaster, Mitchell told Adam Begley (2010) that that which made us unique is what will lead to our destruction: 'What made us successful in Darwinian terms now threatens to wipe us out as a species.' This apocalyptic worldview lent the early works a fatalistic air, pointing to a universality in the struggle between predator and prey, Maori and the Moriori, Kona and Valleysmen.⁷ Abolitionist resistance against this binary fight was universal, as well, but the struggle was repeating and entropic, gradually grinding down humanity. The *cause* of the final deadlanding of most of the planet was not as important as the fact that it was inevitable.

The Bone Clocks literalizes this metaphor as a struggle between the benevolent Horologists, ten or so reincarnating mortals who know neither how they reincarnate nor why, and the nefarious Anchorites, a group of upstarts who purchase immortality at the price of seducing and killing others, preferably children, by 'decanting' their

⁶ Jennifer Rickel (2015) has gone so far as to indict *Cloud Atlas* as being a part of a neoliberal false universalization of humanity, which 'detracts attention from structural inequalities and circumscribes reading practices to such an extent that readers become unable to perform the kinds of critique required for real social transformation' (160).

⁷ As Mitchell told James Naughtie (2007): 'I hope that by electing the people with the most integrity and the most wisdom, they can protect us from this urge within us that makes us, as a species, so successful, but as citizens of the planet, so abhorrent Probably in the long run, we're kind of doomed.'

souls. Some critics have had a hard time squaring the realist writing with the fantasy writing in the novel, yet it is clear that the war of quasi-immortals is yet another version of universal struggles between the predators, their prey, and the Abolitionists who want to stop them. The important difference here is that while there are those who elect to become apex predators, it is by no means a necessary universal. *The Bone Clocks's* dystopian world of 2043 is caused by a very specific reason, and the novel is practically a catalogue of disaster literature's recurring imagery—melted ice caps, floods, ratflu, gigastorms, a looming nuclear meltdown, deadlanded regions, etc.—all set in motion very specifically by climate change. Holly pointedly indicts our culpability, blaming us for the 'comforting liars we voted into office—all so we didn't have to change our cozy lifestyles,' and claiming that we had summoned the coming Endarkenment 'with every tank of oil we burned our way through' (560–61). Here, Holly takes responsibility for her role in the decimation of the planet, and this recognition continues very clearly throughout the novel in a way only implied in earlier works. Holly had learned this reality prophetically from Esther Little, who seems able to see the past and the future, as though the world really were scripted like a text. At the time of the 'Horologist's Labyrinth' in 2025, Esther prophesizes a massive culture regression where the 'future looks a lot like the past' because of 'population growth and lies about oil reserves' (502). Holly lives to see the inevitable conclusion of what happens when we disregard climate science.

This masochistic prophecy of how humanity will deserve its fate echoes throughout the text. In a climactic scene in which a marauding gang steal the solar panels off Mo Muntervary's house, *The Bone Clocks* rewrites a scene from Mitchell's earlier 2011 short story, 'The Siphoners,' and the changes are suggestive. The story takes place in 2033, the missing decade between 'An Horologist's Labyrinth' and 'Sheep's Head,' eight years after the internet has been lost and an unspecified apocalypse has occurred, which includes the decimation of global agriculture because of climate change. In that story, a gang of roving bandits steals the last of the rationed oil from retired anthropologists Avril Brendon and Bruno Thoms, her husband who suffers from dementia. '*Economics has eaten itself*,' Avril thinks with uroboric imagery, and '*climate change has crippled global agriculture*' (2011: 132). As in *Bone Clocks*, the

chief bandit, this time named Wyatt, offers 'mercy beans,' which are suicide pills that will help when the 'Jackdaws arrive' (2011). Wyatt explains that the Cordon protecting them is moving south, putting their house outside the protection zone, but they will not be allowed to migrate because the new immigration bar will forbid any man over thirty-five or woman over thirty to immigrate. In despair, Avril goes back to her book, awaiting the inevitable fate of a world that has lost respect for their elders.

The Bone Clocks rewrites this scene, putting Avril's self-critique into the mouth of the gang leader, Hood, who explains his lack of conscience in their theft as an action justified by the sins of the past: 'They had a better life than I did, mind. So did you. Your power stations, your cars, your creature comforts' (600). To Mo's defiant taunt, 'So you're reinstating the law of the jungle?', Hood retorts, 'You were bringing it back, every time you filled your tank' (600). In this rewriting, *The Bone Clocks* places the blame for the final descent into apocalyptic predacity—the primal 'law of the jungle' that civilization barely contains—squarely on the effects of climate change, caused by our contemporary corrupt and decadent disregard for the effects of our consumption. Mitchell has repeated this prediction in interviews. In response to Jonathan Ruppin's (2010) question regarding whether this dystopian depiction echoed Mitchell's own thoughts of where we are heading, Mitchell replied, 'Yes. I'm afraid our civilization is defecating in the well from which it draws life. We're leaving our grandchildren a hotter and less secure world, waste, rats and cockroaches. We're intelligent but we're not wise.'

The far more political desire to efface the indeterminacy of the early works also came as a direct attack on the kinds of apoliticism suggested by some self-referential postmodern texts. As Mitchell told Leigh Wilson (2008) after writing *Cloud Atlas*, he was getting concerned that 'consumerism is destroying the ecosystem of our planet, and that apoliticism might be a form of passive suicide, or collaboration in the premature deaths of our children,' adding that he was 'getting itchy to write a book that will try to disseminate this unease with where our species is blundering more explicitly than *Cloud Atlas* did.' In many ways, *The Bone Clocks* both fulfills that goal and also enacts that tension between those who actively engage with transforming

the world and those, like the Anchorites, who would like to see themselves as outside of politics. This apoliticism, the novel implies, is not an innocent or merely passive position, as the lack of engagement is a choice in itself. Pfenninger informs Hugo Lamb that the Anchorites are apolitical, 'As long as we are left alone' (200), and the implication is that the Anchorites' ability to conquer death is only possible with a complete embrace of a sociopathic predacity. The Anchorites' name itself derives from the ancient Greek word *anachōrētēs*, which means 'one who has retired from the world,' and the more modern word refers to a group of medieval ascetics, mostly women, who were so committed that they underwent a ritual death before walling themselves into cells attached to a church to attain eternal life (much like the Blind Cathar became part of the Chapel).⁸ Of course, like the medieval ascetics, *The Bone Clocks'* Anchorites' capacity for apoliticism is completely dependent on exploiting the system it claims to reject.

The Bone Clocks depicts the Anchorites' desire to freeze time and violate the universal march towards death that is the fate of the rest of the human 'bone clocks', which echoes everywhere throughout the text as something that is inhuman, and thereby wrong. Hugo Lamb's alias, Anyder, which Pfenninger approvingly notes (200) comes from Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516), is the river that runs through the capital, Amaurot, yet paradoxically means 'no water'; this symbolism opposes Sykes, which is from the Middle English for 'marshy stream,' and Brubeck, whose name means someone who lives by a brook. In addition, Anchorite femme fatale Immaculée ('pure, virgin') Constantin ('stand still, firm') has a name that roughly translates to 'perfectly unchanging.' In contrast, the Horologists, while reincarnating, constantly change in each new life, even shifting their races, nationalities, and genders. Holly's great-aunt Eilish tells Ed that Jacko and the other Atemporals would have been called 'change-lings' in the old days, and this more human transformation juxtaposes against the Anchorites' desire for stasis. As Holly tells Rafiq: 'Change is sort of hardwired into the world. ... If life didn't change, it wouldn't be life, it'd be a photograph' (589). This

⁸ For more on anchorites, listen to BBC Radio 4's *Making History*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0576l6s?ns_mchannel=social& [accessed September 30, 2017].

equation of a static image with the Anchorite desire echoes again in *Slade House* (2015b), as the Grayer twins' methods of capturing their victims by freezing their images into paintings in their atemporal mansion.

The Bone Clocks establishes this political turn perhaps most clearly in the first chapter. Against the background of discussions and other hints of the looming UK Miner's Strike of 1984, the socialist activists Ian and Heidi tell Holly Sykes about another invisible war that has gone on through history—the class war: 'Owners versus slaves, nobles versus serfs ... the haves versus the have-nots,' a constant struggle to oppress the working classes with a host of lies, including 'the most weaselly lie of all, that there *is* no class war' (54).⁹ While the young Holly ironizes their certainties as being like Jehovah's Witnesses, the novel supports their worldview. Heidi even uses the same uroboric imagery Avril Brendon had used in 'The Siphoners'—'*Economics has eaten itself*'—when discussing how Karl Marx had 'proved how capitalism eats itself' (55). *The Bone Clocks*' war of the near immortals that Hershey's poet-murderer Soleil Moore refers to as the 'secret war' (399) serves, thereby, as a concretized symbolic version of the perpetual class warfare between the fat cat Anchorites who want to increase themselves forever at the cost of sucking the souls of the proletariat. After all, they are awfully white and aristocratic compared to the cultural and racial diversity of the Horologists—a racist point given away by Constantin, who describes the Horologists' betraying British Pakistani house warden, Sadaqat, as 'A talentless, chakraless, *brown* traitor' (528).

The Bone Clocks' use of overt political allegory finds more subtle reinforcement throughout Heidi and Ian's section of the novel, such as Ian's reference to Gil Scott-Heron's (1974) funk spoken-word hit, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,' which mocks, among other things, Timothy Leary apoliticism ('Plug in, turn on, and cop out'). In a subtler allusion, Heidi walks by with a copy of Orwell's 1940 essay collection, *Inside the Whale*, the title essay of which was a direct critique of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), which Orwell indicted for its quietism, especially in the face

⁹ Metz (2017) intriguingly links this invisible war to two kinds of history explored in the novel, which he terms 'classically postmodern' and 'pre-postmodern' (124).

of the rise of European totalitarian dictators. Orwell references run throughout the novel, as they did in *Cloud Atlas*. After all, Holly's first chapter begins the novel in 1984, and Orwell's political dystopia of that name haunts and informs many of the fears that *The Bone Clocks'* political world portends.

The Maddening Richness of Ambiguity

Even in this greater desire for specificity, for effacing indeterminacy in the text for political purposes, Mitchell seems wary of embracing absolute clarity in the fictional world he chooses to construct and inhabit. In an interview with Charlotte Higgins (2013), Mitchell describes the visualization and concretization of his libretto's imagery in the production of his collaboration with Michel van der Aa in his 2013 opera, *Sunken Garden*, and he delineates a spectrum of representational clarity, placing fiction back into the uncertain:

There's a spectrum in art, with specificity at one end and ambiguity at the other. Fiction is at the ambiguous end. Take the characters in *Cloud Atlas*. There are as many ways of seeing the characters as there are readers—until it's filmed. I know that my Timothy Cavendish will never be anyone other than Jim Broadbent, and Jim Broadbent's Timothy Cavendish is even there in my next book.

For Mitchell, while Calvino's indeterminacy was bloodless and provided no emotional connection for the reader, *ambiguity* was important for fiction, too, as the inherent instability of language allowed for the polysemousness that provides a different kind of aesthetic pleasure. In this, Mitchell's works of the 2010s share more in common with a New Critic like William Empson, whose 1930 book of literary criticism, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, still underwrites the way many English literature 'appreciation' classes are taught today.

The ultimate move for Mitchell in containing indeterminacy while preserving this ambiguity through his Schrödinger's Cat aesthetics has been his 2016 novella, *From Me Flows What You Call Time*, which he wrote as part of Katie Paterson's Future Library project. This series tasks 100 writers each to compose one work, one each year

for 100 years, only to be metaphorically buried in the forest above Oslo until 2114, when they will be published together. No one is to know anything about *From Me Flows What You Call Time*, except that it is a 90-page novella. The title was taken from a musical piece by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, which Marinus also listens to in the opening pages of 'An Horologist's Labyrinth.' Mitchell (2005) has described Takemitsu's work as 'otherworldly compositions' that 'demonstrate how loud silence can be,' and the silence of Mitchell's novella is deafening. It is perhaps not insignificant that the piece is stopped 'in midphrase' (405) after Marinus cuts her car's engine, yet what is the other half of that piece, and what is on those missing pages of the Überbook? Perhaps Mitchell's buried novella sutures Marinus's half-listened-to love affair. Perhaps it includes an essential piece of understanding the Mitchellverse that he is constructing, as he taunted in an interview with Randall Mikkelsen (2015): 'I might put into (it) something important to the uber book, a key.' This somewhat maddening reality is a perfect metaphor for the Schrödinger's Cat metalepsis that Mitchell's work suggests: contemporary readers of this essay will never be able to close the other half of Calvino's story, but Mitchell, aggressively reasserting the Life of the Author, will. And in that buried manuscript, which may or may not have had its vial of hydrocyanic acid explode, Mitchell's work both does, and does not, overturn the indeterminacy it had desired to close.

In terms of Mitchell's Schrödinger's Cat metalepsis, the Überbook can have it both ways—both postmodern indeterminate and pre/post-postmodern closed. Assuming the End Times do not come before 2114, then reading the last work will collapse the meaning of the Überbook into the fruition of an optimistic future narrative; if the apocalypse does come, more than meaning will be collapsed. Mitchell has, in fact, stated to Gaby Wood (2016) that his contribution to the Future Library reflects his hope that the world of inevitable destruction the Überbook depicts will somehow not come to pass—that 'all the dystopian stuff about climate change, about terrorism, about demagogues seizing control of large, industrialized countries [...] won't win,' and that the side that embraces the things he values, such as reading and empathy, may have 'an equal shot at influencing the future.' While the world of Mitchell's universe seems closer to the world of the 'dystopian stuff' he here describes, and while

'an equal shot' does not exactly ring of cheery optimism, Mitchell also let it slip in the same interview that *From Me Flows What You Call Time* includes a quote from The Beatles' 'Here Comes the Sun.' Perhaps that gives a clue to Mitchell's newfound optimism that humanity might make it that far. After all, an 'equal shot' is better than none. Perhaps.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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