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"some kind of thing it aint us but yet its in us": David Mitchell, Russell Hoban, and Metafiction After the Millennium

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Abstract

This article appraises the debt that David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* owes to the novels of Russell Hoban, including, but not limited to, *Riddley Walker*. After clearly mapping a history of Hoban's philosophical perspectives and Mitchell's inter-textual genre-impersonation practice, the article assesses the degree to which Mitchell's metatextual methods indicate a nostalgia for by-gone radical aesthetics rather than reaching for new modes of its own. The article not only proposes several new backdrops against which Mitchell's novel can be read but also conducts the first in-depth appraisal of Mitchell's formal linguistic replication of *Riddley Walker*.

Keywords

David Mitchell, Russell Hoban, metatextuality, *Cloud Atlas*, *Riddley Walker*

Everybody has a part in many overlapping stories and it isn't always clear which one is particularly your story

—Hoban (2003, p. 164)

Is there a connexion?

—Hoban (2002b, p. 12)

One may argue that no originals remain in our world

—Mitchell (2008a, p. 227)

It is no secret that Russell Hoban's (1925-2011) masterwork, *Riddley Walker* (1980), is a strong central reference point for David Mitchell's virtuoso, genre-shifting, six-part novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), a fact often referred to in the notes of critical articles, but rarely explored in any detail (Edwards, 2011; Machinal, 2011; Stephenson, 2011). Indeed, within Mitchell's Russian-doll structural premise, itself a mirror of the many sub-narratives of *Riddley Walker* and other post-modern fictions,[1] the final diegetic layer is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape where the inhabitants speak a mangled, phonetically transcribed language much akin to the "Riddleyspeak" within Hoban's novel. This inter-textual anchor is one that Mitchell himself confirmed in a pamphlet for the 2005 "some poasyum [symposium]" of *The Kraken*, the Russell Hoban fan club, where he wrote,

Zachry's voice is less hard-core and more Pacific than Riddleyspeak, but Mr Hoban's singular, visionary, ingenious, uncompromising, glorious, angelic and demonic novel sat on my shelf as evidence that what I wanted to do could be done, and as encouragement to keep going until I'd got it right. (Mitchell, 2005)

In this article, I want to bring focus, first and foremost, to the ways in which *Cloud Atlas*' inter-textuality is surprisingly aesthetically conservative. Through an analysis of the formal contrivance of *Cloud Atlas*' structure, I will argue that the novel forms a tapestry in which the binding thread becomes a re-performance of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, but that this Orphic, nostalgic, backward-looking mode of textual weaving ultimately undermines our ability to claim *Cloud Atlas* as a future-orientated experimental work. This argument is bolstered by the fact that Mitchell's appropriation of Hoban must be considered within the contexts of post-modern parody. In Linda Hutcheon's (1985) formulation, this should include a "critical ironic distance" if works are to successfully re-contextualize their referents (p. 37). While Hoban can be considered "a radically postmodernist writer" (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2000, p. 165), one whose re-working of the Punch and Judy show in *Riddley Walker* clearly exhibits this re-contextualization, Mitchell's 21st-century re-castings of his sources appear more repetitious and less differentiated than might be expected, especially given that many critics—although emphatically not Mitchell himself—are keen to describe the novel as "experimental" (Jeffries, 2013). Mitchell's re-iterations of Hoban's themes and language, I will argue, do not differ sufficiently for claims of radical experimentation to hold.

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As a secondary target of analysis, using Hutcheon's formulations as a basis, I also want to begin to frame Mitchell's inter-textual reference in terms of metafiction, an aspect effected twofold through metanarratorial statements and extra-textual reference. Indeed, in historicizing both Mitchell and Hoban, it is easy to read the former within metatextual and metaleptic traditions of certain North American post-modernist practices and situate the latter in various philosophical discourses (theologocentrism and solipsistic idealisms), to which this article will return. In *Cloud Atlas*, metatextuality is related to inter-textuality and the ontological authority bestowed on the text's various diegetic layers, with every reference drawing attention to not only the work's own relationship to other texts but also its own status as textual object. This is an aspect that sits within a long theoretical tradition and prominently featured in Gérard Genette's model of hypo-/hyper-textuality and transpositions. Although for Genette (1997) it is true that "Every object can be transformed, every manner imitated, and no art can by nature escape those two modes of derivation that define hypertextuality" (p. 284), the function of his model in cases of known reference is to "assess [the] difference and the nature of the hypertextual relation" (p. 381). Extending this further, and also reaching back to the first assertion of this article, the charge of aesthetic conservativism, if we read *Cloud Atlas* under a different model, in this case, Riffaterre's (1978) system of "textual interpretants," it feels as though Mitchell's work lacks any substantial "intertextual conflict," instead presenting a harmonious resonance rather than "conflicting codes" (p. 109). As will be shown throughout this article, while Mitchell's text has high political potential—most notably in his treatment of the Morori genocide—the delegitimating function of the diegetic layering, coupled with an overly harmonious inter-textuality, has some problematic aspects. In its totality, I will finally argue, Mitchell's fiction manages to map and inter-relate the mediated forms of which it is comprised; it is an enjoyable and accomplished whole. However, as Adorno has told us, the whole is the false. When the *Atlas* is segmented into its generic sovereign geographical regions, it is clear that they function autonomously and the map can once again become differentiated from the territory. The territories of the embedded narratives within the novel are smooth and self-contained; they become, in the case of *Cloud Atlas*, new false wholes. As Luisa Rey within that novel posits of Hitchcock,

> the key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in . . . But a film that shows the world is a Bates Motel, well that's . . . dystopia." (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 95)

Mitchell's (2008a) sub-plots seem to be the former of these types, sealed off, written in "neat little chapteroids, doubtless with one eye on the Hollywood screenplay" as the novel not only self-deprecatingly but also knowingly, puts it (p. 164). The novel's genre-based recursion, already in itself a trope of post-modernist metafiction, gives us fragments that remain isolated and comparatively sparse. Despite the objection by post-structuralists and beyond of the ways in which all texts might be categorized as mosaics, echochambers, or inter-readings (Barthes, 1975; Bloom, 1976; Broich, 1997; Kristeva, 1969), these fragments are mono-referential, nostalgic recapitulations of source texts whose structural placement within the diegetic layering is a game in which, ultimately, very little appears to be at stake.

Backgrounds and Contexts: The Literary Philosophy of Russell Hoban in *Cloud Atlas*

To contextualize the comparative analysis deployed throughout this piece and to give an understanding of Mitchell's terms of reference, it is necessary and worthwhile to begin with a brief overview of the works of Russell Hoban, a figure whose corpus has largely been overlooked by the academy, and to give a summary with some examples of the features of Hoban's works with reference to their parallels in *Cloud Atlas*. Over the course of a varied career as a wartime radio operator, an illustrator and then novelist, Russell Hoban wrote 16 adult novels (in multiple senses of "adult") and at least 50 children's books (Myers, 1984). From his earliest adult writing, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, through *Riddley Walker, Pilgermann, Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer, The Medusa Frequency*, to *Angelica Lost and Found*, Hoban's thematic concerns and philosophical lineage can be clearly defined. Broadly speaking, Hoban's focus rests upon notions of flux ("flicker") and ontological instability, in the Heraclitean tradition as described by Aristotle; solipsism and subjective idealism, particularly in the tradition of George Berkeley; transcendental idealism's preoccupations with the split between phenomenon and noumenon (Wilkie, 1989b, p. 17); a wariness of science, especially its applied weaponization; an almost psychoanalytic styling of an unknowable self; and mythological references and allusive structures.

Briefly working through these concepts in order and it is clear that the very textual presence of flux and post-modern ontological instability tends to align Hoban's texts with a more content-driven model of metatextuality, in Patricia Waugh's sense of a spectrum in which many novels are, to varying degrees, metatextual (Waugh, 1984). This is well illustrated through Hoban's re-writing of flux as "flicker" across his work, a concept that is inter-related with a diegetic layering of reality. In *Fremder*, for example, high-speed space travel is facilitated through "flicker drive," explained as utilizing "the real reality . . . the moment under the moment" (Hoban, 1992a, Preface). This focus on a "real reality" not only serves to delegitimate the corresponding textual reality but also brings a transience and instability to Hoban's worlds that clearly align with Brian McHale's shift from a modernist epistemological dominant to a post-modernist ontological focus (McHale, 1986).

Correspondingly, this focus on ontological plurality is, evidently, one of the most prominent aspects of Mitchell's novel. This can be seen not only in the proliferation of transhistorical sub-narratives but also through the dreams that pervade the text in parallel to *Riddley Walker*'s "trants [trance]" (Hoban, 2002b, p. 62). Indeed, as in Hoban, when coupled with the narrative's interpolated ordering, these (de) legitimating oneiric constructs consistently undercut stability in *Cloud Atlas*. Taking, for example, the beginning of Frobisher's story, it is clear that the preceding section has, at this moment, been cut off mid-sentence: "Reading my entry for 15th October, when I first met Rafael" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 39). Mitchell (2008a) then begins Frobisher's letters through a paratactic leap in which the dream construct is once again emphasized: "Dreamt I stood in a china shop so crowded from floor to far-off ceiling with shelves of porcelain antiques" (p. 43). Through this move, Mitchell at once signals the post-modern historiographic nature of his work (a delicate fictional/dream china shop filled with historical (likewise dreamt) antiques) while, more importantly, implying that the idea of a "real reality" is not to be found in the "Pacific Diary" section. There is, as he puts it, something "shifty about the journal's authenticity" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 64). Indeed, the only entity that claims an intra-diegetic certainty about reality is the criminal Seaboard corporation: "At Seaboard we deal in realities" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 104). In both Hoban's and Mitchell's works, aspects of metatextuality function to both intra-diegetically and extra-textually destabilize the ontological certainty of layered realities.

This aspect crosses over into Hoban's prominent subjective idealism that is almost always one wherein the protagonist's existence depends on an external, ontologically unstable object-as-subject believing in the protagonist. This is most evident in two of Hoban's texts, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* and *The Medusa Frequency*. In the former, for instance, the narrator points out that the "lion," which could be a hallucination of the narrator, could also be having a hallucinating featuring the narrator: "A lion hallucinates me" (Hoban, 2000, p. 125). Likewise, in *The Medusa Frequency*, there is a being called the "world-child" that believes in the world, thus holding it together: "The world-child holds in its mind the idea of every single thing: root and stone, tree and mountain, river and ocean and every living thing" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 98). It is also noted here, however, that the beliefs of the world-child itself, in turn, come about from the "energy of belief," "a kind of cohesion that binds together possibilities that have spun together out of the blackness" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 98). In short, as the narrator remarks, "it just keeps going round in a circle" (p. 99). In *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell (2008a) likewise continues this thinking when Meronym posits that although "Old Georgie weren't real for her . . . he could still be real for me" (p. 286). Such a troubling of perception and its connection to reality is linked to Hoban's dreamscapes as, again, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between dream and reality, one

person and another, a riff on which Mitchell (2008a) is clearly also playing with regard to primarily visual perception when Luisa Rey thinks to herself, "Go home and just dream up your crappy three hundred words for once. People only look at the pictures, anyhow" (p. 90). As it becomes clear that existence depends on the perceiver, in both Mitchell's and Hoban's worlds, the necessity to query the aesthetic construction of the texts and the ways in which they structure our viewing increases; after all, "The flat world is curved in the boy's eye" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 97).

Furthermore, the aspects of transcendental idealism that Hoban brings to the fore relate to the inadequacy of perception and the inaccessibility of true essence, thus often signaling his texts' situation in a post-modernist phase that also incorporates epistemological concerns. This is exemplified in the short story, "My Night with Léonie," wherein an erotic encounter is sought with the noumenal sphinx, entailing the need to, once more, "move in behind the flickering to the moment under the moment" (Hoban, 1992b, p. 22). Often, however, this unknowable essence, this sub-moment, pertains to the self. In *Riddley Walker*, Hoban writes of "some kind of thing it aint us but yet its in us" (Hoban, 2002b, p. 6), while in *Fremder* and *The Lion* there is an inability to "know what was looking out of her eyes or mine" (Hoban, 2000, p. 21; 2003, p. 110). Interestingly, this is an aspect that Hoban shares with Mitchell, whose Bill Smoke "wonders at the powers inside us that are not us" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 419).

Once more, however, this mode of unknowable things-in-*our*-selves points back to Hoban's texts as metafiction. This is because there is a strong personal dimension to such sentiments. Hoban has explicitly stated that he felt "inhabited by a consciousness that doesn't seem to have originated with me" (Wilkie, 1989a, p. 101), while writing these texts, thus signaling authorial presence and simultaneous absence, a key metafictional trait (Aubry, 2011). Likewise, Mitchell (2008a) exhibits metafictional techniques in his own work's generic placement when he writes of "backflashes" to the "1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory" (p. 152). From this perspective of authorial presence and metafiction, the sense of deja vu encountered when opening Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency* immediately after finishing *Cloud Atlas* is also significant. Indeed, Robert Frobisher in the latter directly echoes the disdain and longed-for evasion of Herman Orff in the former, both of which present the authorial fear of non-recognition: "Oh, should I have heard of you?" (Hoban, 2002a, p. 12; Mitchell, 2008a, p. 467). This is not, however, the final word on their resonances for, crucially, the line is spoken, in both cases, by author surrogates within the texts. In Mitchell's case, this much is clear. The "Cloud Atlas Sextet" composed by Frobisher specifically outlines the structure of the novel within which it is depicted. Described as a work in which "[a]ll boundaries are conventions" and that "one may transcend any convention" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 479), the novel here metatextually signals its own intentions to radical experimentation within a sextet form, with a

"semi-invented notion and . . . singular harmonics" (Mitchell, 2008a, pp. 486-487), a "sextet for overlapping soloists" in which "each solo is interrupted by its successor" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 463). Mitchell (2008a) twofold acknowledges the danger here through the ironic mediation of the egoist Frobisher and the direct querying of whether this practice is "[r]evolutionary or gimmicky?" (p. 463), an aspect of judgment to which this piece will return. However, there are also problems, of course, with reading Frobisher as a direct transcription of Mitchell (2008a) beyond the usual warnings that must be sounded for this approach and that are echoed in Ayrs' statement: "If they want to know 'what I mean' they should listen to my bloody music" (p. 71). For one, Frobisher appears as an extra-authorial presence in *Black Swan Green*, Mitchell's (2006) semi-autobiographical fiction.

Hoban, however, deploys an identical strategy in *The Medusa Frequency*. Hermann Orff is clearly, in many ways and as with most of Hoban's protagonists, affiliated with the author. For instance, Hoban's (2002a) character is frustrated at the inability of newspapers to realize the inventiveness of his early novels when "*The Times* found the writing 'a little slippery'; the *Guardian* noted that the story was 'a downhill sort of thing'" (p. 12), one of Hoban's frequent personal complaints.[2] Crucially for a resonance with Mitchell's dislocated authorial self, however, Orff is also only partial. Other characters in *The Medusa Frequency* share Hoban's (2002a) own personal traits, such as Gosta Kraken who is interesting, or pretentious, "for his use of Orpheus as semiosis rather than as story," but is also "obsessive," working the same material over and over because "[h]e says it's an inexhaustible theme and he's got a lot of new ideas for another approach" (p. 105). Hoban's autobiographical aspects are dispersed throughout his characters so that the novels form psychic maps of his unconscious; "Hoban operates as the classic, premodernist cult of the undead author who is tenaciously and egocentrically alive both in and out of his fictions" as Wilkie-Stibbs (2000, p. 175) puts it.

Most interestingly, though, Hoban continually implies a mythico-allegorical backdrop to his fables. Often this can be inferred by the direct presence of mythical and religious figures in the content of Hoban's novels: Boaz and Jachin, the devil figure in *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer*, Orpheus, Eurydice, and others (including the over-sexed re-imagined hippogriff, from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in *Angelica Lost and Found*). In other ways, though, it is the form of allusive practice that Hoban deploys that leads to this reading, the insinuation of meaning behind extra-ordinary occurrences that ties in with the transcendental idealism in his works. The broad range[3] of often subtle allusion in *Cloud Atlas* fulfills a similar function in both its high and low components to establish a specific cultural milieu against which to frame its narrative.

As some closing remarks on Hoban's place within the canon, it is important to note that although Hoban's themes are consistent throughout his oeuvre and are shared with

Mitchell's novels, it could be argued that *Riddley Walker*'s distinction as almost the only of Hoban's adult novels to receive substantial academic attention attests to the varying standards of his work. As Wilkie-Stibbs (2000) puts it, "[w]hen we think of Russell Hoban we probably think of *The Mouse and His Child* [one of Hoban's books for children] and *Riddley Walker*" (p. 165). It is certainly true that there was a marked decline in the quality of Hoban's output in his later years between *Come Dance with Me* and *My Tango with Barbara Strozzi*, before a return to form in his final works.[4] However, this stance does not bear up under scrutiny as even those works that fall outside these "bad times," as Riddley might put it, have remained neglected.

Of Hoban's works, *Riddley Walker* is the most critically discussed, not only on account of its formal invention but also because it is the most concessionary to critical discourses. Indeed, the novel invites a Freudian analysis of the early primal scene in which Riddley "los [his] footing" and thereby crushes his father to death in Widders Dump (Hoban, 2002b, p. 11), an episode that has a direct parallel not only with Goodparley's failed differentiated repetition later in the text but also in *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 251). The text also seems to advise a Luddite caution against technology and especially nuclear technology, as does Mitchell's novel, in the "1 Littl 1" and the "1 Big 1" and the "Clevverness" that "is gone now but littl by littl itwl come back."[5] Finally, *Riddley Walker* foists "the shock of recognition" (Granofsky, 1986, p. 175) upon us, wherein we connect our reality to the intra-textual world that resonates with Mitchell's cyclical version of history: "'O, what we ben! And what we come to!'" (Hoban, 2002b, p. 100). Although only one novel written among a life dedicated to producing works that seem almost to be literary philosophy, *Riddley Walker* was the singular greatest aesthetic achievement of Hoban's career and it is little surprise that, of all Hoban's works, it is to this post-apocalyptic deconstruction of society, myth, and language that Mitchell chooses to turn.

Mapping the Atlas: Metafiction, Genre-Poaching, Diegesis, and Inter-Textuality

As has been briefly outlined in the preceding section, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* resonates with many of Hoban's life-long fascinations but particularly those with metafictive elements. There are, however, also divergences, particularly when notions of authorial presence are explored. This is most evident in the fact that, although Mitchell also deploys his authorial voice in a scattered fashion, the cartography of *Cloud Atlas* is not one of an unconscious but rather a literary-historical consciousness that repeats itself in different formal registers. Indeed, Hoban (2002b) gives a description in *Riddley Walker* that would be just as suited to *Cloud Atlas* when Lorna notes that "What they are is diffrent ways of telling what happent" (p. 20) which then leads to a discussion of

the varying stylistic permutations through which the tales could be told: "Les jus tern it roun and look at it the other way" (p. 23). In many senses, then, the genre parody in Mitchell's work is reminiscent of, but works very differently to, Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*, wherein a mode of "*mediated historiography*" has been mapped by Brian McHale (2011, p. 25). Mitchell's progression of genres seems emblematic of a similar historiographic metafictive function in his works. Moving from allusion to Melville and seafaring narrative, through to an epistolary form, into the crime thriller mode, delving into farce before hitting science/speculative fiction and then the post-utopian Hoban frame, Mitchell charts a parallel project of historiography at the aesthetic level.

The sources and contexts that inform Mitchell's genre-poaching and the polyvocal constitution of *Cloud Atlas*' shored fragments are many. In his *Book World* interview, Mitchell gave his own take on sources for the work and in each instance, this is informative. In other ways, though, Mitchell does not get the last word on this: The histories of the genres he deploys are wider ranging than he anticipated. This is well illustrated in the novel's first section. Written in the diary form of a seafaring narrative, Mitchell states, "[m]y character Ewing was (pretty obviously) Melville, but with shorter sentences" (Book World, 2004). The seafaring voyage narrative obviously has a history that stretches back at least to the *Odyssey* but, in prose style and Pacific location, Mitchell's frame is substantially narrowed. However, although it might be tempting to frame "The Pacific Diaries" segment in terms of a Melville-Hemingway cross-pollination ("Melville, but with shorter sentences") and for which Robert Foulke's (1997, pp. 112-136) chapter on these authors would be highly instructive, the seafaring romance is undercut by its situational irony of a layered metatext. Instead, the primary focus of the first chapter of *Cloud Atlas*, at a level that escapes the genre-irony through readerly dramatic irony, is upon the Moriori genocide. Impossible but to re-contextualize in terms of later (and more widely remarked upon in European and American discourse) 20th-century horrors, this first segment, when stripped of its contrivance, is closely aligned with the post-modern relativism of texts such as Pynchon's *V*. Indeed, Pynchon's (1995) first novel specifically invokes this same mode of trans-temporal, relativizing comparison through its representation of the genocide committed against the Herero populous in its ultra-ironic quip: "[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good" (p. 245). It is, I would suggest, this focus upon genocide and the relativity of these events to one another, including that to American slavery and the "underground rail-road" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 27) that defines the lowest diegetic layer of *Cloud Atlas*.[6]

The epistolary framing of Frobisher's letters to Sixsmith in the second level of Mitchell's novel is also fairly easy to place. In fact, Mitchell has stated that this segment derives specifically from "Christopher Isherwood, especially in *Lions and Shadows*" (Book World, 2004). More interesting, however, is the signification of the history of this mode. The epistolary novel, in Joe Bray's (2003) assessment, was most prominent in the period from "Roger L'Estrange's first translation of *Les Lettres portugaises* in 1678 to Jane Austen's decision in late 1797 or early 1798 to transform the probably epistolary 'Elinor and Marianne' into the third-person narrative of *Sense and Sensibility*," but frequently comes under fire for its "perceived inferiority in a key area of the novel's responsibilities: the representation of consciousness" (p. 1). While Bray's (2003, p. 19) study of the epistolary form deals with the matter in far more detail than can be attempted here, the focus he brings to Laura Visconti's (1994, p. 299) argument that "the letter leaves out the past and ignores the future" is interesting in Mitchell's case. In a doubly curious passage in *Cloud Atlas* that deliberately distorts this temporal characteristic with the same fusion of musical language and temporality as Hoban's substitution of "minim" for "minute" in Riddleyspeak, Mitchell (2008a) frames Frobisher's suicide thus: "Shot myself through the roof of my mouth at 5 a.m." (p. 487). Although it is true that Frobisher has "no knowledge of the larger story in which these events may ultimately play a role" (MacArthur, 1990, p. 8), in *Cloud Atlas*, the same predicament is true for the reader: Only in *Black Swan Green* does Mitchell relate the full impact of the suicide. Aside from other aspects, particularly the fact that this is another text where the "dominant motifs of epistolarity [have been continued] into the twenty-first century," the key aspect upon which I want to draw here, and to which I will return, is the temporal disjunction (Kauffman, 1992, p. 222).

The Luisa Rey segment of *Cloud Atlas* has been attributed, by the author, as "any generic airport thriller" (Book World, 2004), but there is also an underlying affinity here with the Melville of the first section for, as Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (2010) writes, "Postmodernist crime novels inevitably hark back to Hawthorne's and Melville's dark romances" (p. 164). Although it is tempting to situate *Cloud Atlas*, mostly for its historical placement, in the post–postmodernist camp, the novel is distinctly post-modern; as with Hoban, its nested Chinese-box structure, ontological pluralities, already-seen affinities to American post-modernists, and metatextual functions are instantly recognizable. The Luisa Rey mystery detective portion, then, is not "any generic airport thriller" because it is instead situated within an ironic genre-fusion wherein the further one quests, the less one knows, again with parallels to Pynchon, among others.[7]

The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish is perhaps the hardest section of *Cloud Atlas* to place, but also yields some insights into the overall mechanism of the novel. Mitchell's own description of the generic precursor here is singularly unhelpful, with an air of Gertrude Stein: "Cavendish is Cavendish" (Book World, 2004). That said, it is probably most applicable, albeit in the form of a novel, to designate

the genre as "farce." Indeed, Barbara Bowen [née Cannings] gives a helpful, if extremely crude, key to distinguishing farce from other modes. For Bowen, although many works may feature "the accidents of humdrum existence—conjugal infidelity, debtors and creditors, petty thieves and swindlers, family quarrels" (Cannings, 1961, p. 558),

> if it is about people it is a farce, whereas if it is about political, historical or religious ideas, if its significance is symbolic rather than personal, or if it is merely a display of verbal pyrotechnics, it is not a farce (Cannings, 1961, p. 560)

This distinction, although blunt, helps explain "the critical prejudice against farce" that Joan Dean (1982, p. 485) raises in her article on the re-shaping of the form by 1960s dramatists such as Joe Orton but also somewhat troubles the mode in *Cloud Atlas*. At one level, the narration is clearly concerned with the personal woes of the narcissistic protagonist. In other ways, though, the juxtaposition of the genre with others elevates it into significatory status and, therefore, into a non-farcical mode. It seems, from this "Schrödinger's novel" formulation, that Cavendish can at once embody intra-textual farce and extra-textual reference. The referent to which the farcical signifier refers must be, as the prime cause of all the subsequent actions, the literary publishing world, in which the novel once more makes its own conditions of production perspicacious and enters the realm of metafiction.

The penultimate level of *Cloud Atlas*, "An Orison of Sonmi~451," is described by Mitchell as "borrowed from gossip magazines in which a rather gushing hack interviews some celeb bigwig" (Book World, 2004), but this is plainly addressing only the aesthetic interview format that Mitchell adopts. Indeed, this episode is split, by this choice of format, into two further diegetic levels. The most privileged of these layers is the interview format, but the inner narrative is still interesting for the discussion here because Mitchell re-presents, within his speculative fiction genre-imitation, this same structural layering. For instance, consider that the world of Sonmi~451 is a tale of two cities, or at least of two classes: the above-world and a "fabricant underclass" (Mitchell, 2008b, p. 352).[8] This is a situation that is mirrored in Hoban's novel *Fremder*, albeit with a somewhat inverted mode that is more akin to Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* with its scenes where "angry mobs systematically hunt down the intelligent and the educated" (Cowart, 1989, p. 81). In *Fremder*, Hoban's (2003) own excursion into the realm of speculative fiction, Class A subjects such as Fremder Gorn are given safe passage by specific class-segregated "walkways" whereas the "street level" is populated by "Prongs and Arseholes, Shorties, Clowns, Funboys, Executives and Wankers" where the primary activity is "kicking each other's heads in" (pp. 148-149). In a way, Mitchell's and Hoban's critiques are similar here, but present inter-class violence very differently. Hoban shows the result of an ever-widening chasm between a techno-class that views itself as superior and an uneducated mob, while Mitchell (2008a) demonstrates the mediated and hidden violence of a vast wealth gap that depends on slave labor, albeit a wealth that seems, in this future society, to be technologically rooted, "[t]hen, as now, dystopia was a function of poverty" (p. 244).

Although this lends a certain political credence, or project, to Mitchell's novel, one of the key problems with, or aspects of, the text is that the frequent and deliberate use of metatextual tropes relegates each sequential diegetic layer to that of a mere story; these are, after all, overlapping "soloists," rather than a harmonious, simultaneous sextet. There can be no re-connection with the reader's reality except through formalizations such as the shared predicament already outlined in the epistolary section. Despite the transgressive metalepsis that Courtney Hopf (2011) signals as violating the hermetic nature of this narrative, the overall conceit of *Cloud Atlas*' structure tends to undo any genuine potential for intrusion. That is, except for the one narrative in *Cloud Atlas* that is "granted the highest ontological authority": Sloosha's Crossin' (Hopf, 2011, p. 118). Despite being positioned oddly for a section with "ontological authority"— it is the final, encapsulating narrative chronologically, but neither the first nor the last narrative of the linear textual object—this sub-narrative, the "reality" within which all the other mere tales are encapsulated, can be read as the most privileged diegetic layer and is, as we know, inspired by Russell Hoban. What can now become clear, however, is the extent to which the entire form of *Cloud Atlas* owes much to Hoban's fictionally realized philosophies and how the former appears as a derivative, rather than a radical experimentation, in this light.

Sloosha's Crossin', *Riddley Walker*, Repetition and Difference

Through the generic map of Mitchell's text that I have presented here, alongside Russell Hoban's philosophico-literary oeuvre, I have attempted to sketch out the beginnings of an affinity on a stance toward metafiction between the writers. This stance can be seen most clearly in Hoban's work in the essay "Pan Lives" in *The Moment Under the Moment*, his piece on reality, textuality, and the nature of thought, expression, and representation, an essay that is useful for a cross-comparison with Mitchell on issues of free will and philosophies of language. This essay expresses sentiments as close to Hoban's central vision as seems possible, especially given that the volume's foreword forewarns the reader that "Reality is ungraspable." Indeed, Hoban seems here trying to sketch out knowledge as a "provisionalized product of an open dialogue," as Graeme Wend-Walker (2012, p. 30) puts it, a conversation with reality that is ongoing and within which we are situated. At the beginning of this essay, Hoban (1992c) describes the "coming of evening to Eelbrook

Common" but immediately notes that "It seems . . . that what I was describing was itself language, all of it . . . . To me it seems that everything that happens is language" (p. 126). This is, obviously, a form of logocentrism and tends toward an explicit mode of metafiction, but it does not appear to be a logocentrism of the purely structuralist variety. Although Hoban (1992c) posits a potential external point of reference as the "universal mind," asking "Can God and word and reason be thought of separately?" and answering "Obviously not" (p. 127), "Pan Lives" also inter-relates linguistics and knowledge,

> Now he doesn't know any more than he did before but he has a word to call it by. Will he think less about what the word refers to now? . . . Can there come a time when he will perceive only those things there are words for? . . . No, not my Ben [Hoban's son]. . . . If I say there's a language failure somewhere does that make any sense? Am I saying that there's an everything failure? (pp. 130-131)

This type of thinking appears to generate two contradictory statements: (a) all things are language; but (b) language is independent of, and mediately refers to, things. This is dialectically resolved when Berkeley's solipsistic idealism is re-introduced: The universal consciousness, analogous to an author in Hoban's (1992c) setup, creates through a universal language, "the language of everything" (p. 139), which merely remains unknown and appears to have a referential quality. All sub-languages are derived from this universal language which "meant itself, that's all" (Hoban, 1992c, p. 137).

Varying philosophies of language advance arguments for the ways in which this kind of thinking can constrain our potential for ethical agency and which thereby provide an overlap with Mitchell's work in the sphere of metafiction. Foremost among these is Wittgenstein's early consideration of atomized propositions that must exhibit logical independence and which also rests on the basis of the ability to analyze language down into elementary propositions (Tejedor, 2011). Seemingly designed to counteract Schopenhauer's conceptions of noumenal will, Wittgenstein's (2006) view posits no necessary causal connection between propositions and so gives no potential translation between will and action. The atomism of Hoban's linguistic philosophy seems to imply a similar setup: Characters frequently find their epistemologies and ontologies constrained by forces over which they have no control and commonsensical causal links are demolished. This is, certainly, not so very far from the narrator's proclamation in Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* that our lives are "pre-ghostwritten by forces around us" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 296), or Somni ~451's declaration in *Cloud Atlas* that "free will plays no part in my story" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 365). Indeed, characters in *Cloud Atlas*, from Cavendish through to Frobisher, Sixsmith, Rey, and Ewing, are continually moved by forces beyond their control, which is the singular advantage of Mitchell's sweeping temporal range. Of course, in this case, it is more a generic than historical *geist* that taints their existence.

Metafiction appears to take the form of such a constraining sub-structure, a "language of everything." Although this is, in one sense, a restatement of Waugh's argument, reframing it in this way allows the concept to be cast in the realm of agency and progressive empowerment within the domain of literary production. This becomes important when it is seen that inter-textuality is not only one of the oldest elementary propositions within the metafictive master language but also one of its most potentially conservative. Such a sentiment has to be approached with caution: The modernist and postmodernist projects of experimentation and revitalization of the encyclopedic form cannot be said, in every instance, to perpetuate this conservativism. Indeed, within the frames here discussed, Hoban's works are enlivened through their subversive re-workings of the *Orpheus myth, Orlando Furioso* and appropriations of German Expressionist cinema. Likewise, *Cloud Atlas* is interesting, if not pioneering, in its generic topography. However, where this work becomes problematic is its point of crossing over into nostalgia.

As suggested at the outset of this piece, if the experimental form of inter-textual reference is to be preserved, I would suggest that at least one of two factors should be present: (a) the work should radically supplement, rework, or subvert, beyond recuperation, the source text; (b) the work should layer itself to provide an overloaded proliferation of referents to destabilize and re-contextualize the source material. Mitchell fares ambivalently by these measures. Clearly, as with Self's *The Book of Dave*, Mitchell's use of *Riddley Walker* is acknowledged and derivative. Although David Cowart (1989) praises the fact that "Hoban surely knows that a language would change more radically in twenty-five hundred years" and so Riddleyspeak must be deemed a "brilliantly stylized version of the English language as it would exist in the fifth millennium," this puts Mitchell's even more recognizable language in a tricky spot (p. 87). Can it be said, though, that Mitchell's language is also "not to be taken as a realistic depiction of linguistic principles, but rather as a metaphor for the scale of human disaster" and, if so, must we concede that there is a lessened effect at work here by comparison to the work to which it refers? (Cowart, 1989, p. 87)

This is debatable. The linguistic derivatives in *Cloud Atlas* are clearly less radically experimental than in Hoban's work. Conducting a comparison and collocation exercise using Peter Christian's (2012) *Riddley Walker Concordance* makes this derivation clear. Consider, for instance, the first sentence of Sloosha's Crossin', "Old Georgie's path an' mine crossed more times'n I'm comfy mem'ryin, an' after I died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 249). Conversely, *Riddley Walker* begins thus,

> On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs

any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen. (Hoban, 2002b, p. 1)

First, note that these sentences share several thematic characteristics: temporal locative phrases; aspects pertaining to memory and the past; references to, or characterizations as, wild beasts; and speculations on the future. This thematic similarity only increases when, in relation to Riddley's "naming day," again on the first page, Zachry is told to "*Name y'self, boy, is it Zachry the Brave or Zachry the Cowardy?*" (Mitchell, 2008a, p. 249). Mitchell's language is, however, instantly more comprehensible, and instantly less experimental, as it deploys sub-clausal commas to mark different senses and apostrophes to indicate elided word forms: "an'," "times'n," "mem'ryin'," "y'self," and "sayin'." This gives, in Mitchell's work, a strange perspective on the narration. At this point, it is supposedly Zachry's now elderly son, far in the future, telling his father's story. However, the way the tale is written with eliding apostrophes indicates that the grammatical conventions of the authorial environment (which, again, can be a different environment to the diegetic proleptic telling of the tale) are such that elision is required when notating the past upon which it looks back. As a corollary, in the entire text of *Riddley Walker*, there are no apostrophes, thereby giving a more immanent position and further avoiding the nostalgia trap.

Using the concordance allows easy identification of the synonymous terms deployed between the authors. Within this first sentence, approximately[9] 53% of the terms used are identical, or practically so, to the vocabulary of *Riddley Walker* and are shared directly with contemporary usage: "old," "path," "mine" (Hoban: "my"), "comfy" (Hoban: "easy"), "after," "I" (Hoban: "i"), "died" (Hoban: "dead"), "no," "what," "that," "try," "do," "to," and "me." A further 15% of the sentence can be seen as identical with both Hoban's, and contemporary, usage when Mitchell's signaled elision is removed to give "and" and "saying." From here, however, the two texts diverge. Hoban's unsignaled elision can be seen as more complex than Mitchell's forms, constituting 11.5% of the first sentence of the latter with "more times'n" (for which Hoban would give "moren"), "I'm" and "won't." In the remaining 15% of the sentence, Hoban and Mitchell use different terms: For "crossed," Hoban would most likely give "mixt"; for "mem'ryin'," Hoban renders "memberment"; in the case of "fangy," Hoban (2002b) gives "toofy"; and the closest we get to "devil" in *Riddley Walker* would be "Mr Clevver" with "the same red face and littl poynty beard and the horns and all" and his satanic rhyming slang, "they call me Mr On The Levvil" (p. 137). It is also clear here that for half of this final 15%, Mitchell uses two terms that are straightforward contemporary English ("crossed" and "devil"), whereas in the other half ("fangy" and "mem'ryin'"), Hoban's usage remains more experimental and, in the case of "toofy," phonetic.

Such empirical linguistic analysis is far from conclusive. For a start, the small sample of the first sentence is only one measure by which the experimental form can be judged and, in this case, I have taken account neither of word order typologies in the works, nor that this mode takes Mitchell's sentence as the base and cross-correlates with the entirety of Hoban's novel. It remains clear, though, even if demonstrated with a small, weighted sample, that *Riddley Walker*'s vocabulary is more complex and difficult to parse than that found in *Cloud Atlas*, with phrases in the former unmatched in the latter such as "deacon terminations" for decontaminations, "fissional seakerts" playing on nuclear technology and the Official Secrets Act, and "spare the mending" for experimenting. With this aside, then, what could be said more broadly about the measures of experimental inter-textuality already mapped out?

By these yardsticks, Mitchell's novel is not an instance of radical inter-textuality. His use of broader generic tropes is clever, and it is an understatement to say that Mitchell is a virtuoso writer of the shifting voice. However, the most explicit referent in the work, Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, is appropriated as an ur-text that merely serves to replicate itself. Mitchell's text harkens back to *Riddley Walker* only with the desire to repeat it. Indeed, the frame of a post-apocalyptic environment, containing sub-narratives, with the same linguistic tropes as Hoban's novel creates an environment that fails to re-contextualize its source. Although there is some danger of couching this referential function within an outmoded naïve chronology of progress, it nonetheless holds true that in Mitchell's text, and in others that deploy a similar formation such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this presents a mode of past orientation with *nostalgia*, rather than future orientation for *experimentation*.

This is not, as I've taken pains to point out throughout this piece, to overly disparage Mitchell's (2008a) novel in some Leavis-esque manner, to become one Felix Finch among *Cloud Atlas*' "*cloud of critics*" (p. 149), the types who "insert the 'Mr.' before sinking the blade in" (p. 150), but merely to pre-empt and tentatively counter claims for experimental novelty and new generic classifications. It is also clear, though, that the specific use of *Riddley Walker* is a derivation that only moderately transforms the work and appears to be conservatively longing for by-gone radical forms; art through situation (a form of generic placement) is not a new phenomenon. Although this conflicts with the *pleasure* of reading Mitchell's novel, which remains great, it is important to recognize the function of reference and metafiction after the millennium to identify whether we are, too, succumbing to a nostalgia, wistfully looking back, believing that coherent sovereign fragments nested together add up to an experimental overloading and to remember, after all, that "[i]n the false world all ηδονη [*pleasure*] is false" (Adorno, 2004, p. 15).

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Notes

1. Even within the first 20 pages of *Riddley Walker*, we are given two such narratives: "*The Hart of the Wood*" and "*Why the Dog Won't Show Its Eyes*."
2. Curiously, however, if Orff is a Hoban surrogate, he is a downgraded version of the author. As with Roberto Bolaño's reclusive author character Benito von Archimbaldi in his final masterpiece, *2666*, whose literary talent is depicted as inferior to Bolaño's own (Farred, 2010, p. 699), Orff abandons his high pretensions and succumbs to "writ[ing] comics" to earn a living (Hoban, 2002a, p. 12). Although Bolaño's (2009) author continues to write novels, Archimbaldi's style is full of pretentious tics, with chapters ending in clumsy, repeated phrases in an effort to be poetic, a trait that, incidentally, draws literary critics to his work. In both cases, Bolaño and Hoban cannot let their author figures out-write them.
3. For instance, we are given *The Tempest* with its island "humming" (6), Coleridge (30), Nietzsche (63), Wagner (65), Emily Brontë (67), *The Merchant of Venice, The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (74), *Verlaine and Rimbaud* (81), *Webern* (83), *M*A*S*H* (90), Disney's *The Jungle Book* (91), Norman Mailer (109), David Bowie (149), *Macbeth* (171), and innumerable others.
4. Although I cannot conclusively prove it, I attribute this return to form to the informal editorial intervention in 2007 of Jake Wilson (who appears as a character in *Soonchild*).
5. Interestingly, the term "Big 1" (or "Big I") also appears in Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2008a, p. 305). *Cloud Atlas* also advocates a cycle of civilization, rather than positivist progression, through its many allusions to Gibbon. For one such example, see Hoban (2002b, p. 318), *Riddley Walker*, p. 4.
6. The ontological authority awarded to each of the diegetic layers in *Cloud Atlas* can be disputed. In one reading, the primary thesis that I will advance here, the final narrative to appear ("Sloosha's Crossin'") has the highest authority as it is the most chronologically advanced and contains all the other narratives as mere texts. In another reading, however, the inverse could be deduced; this narrative, after all, appears last.
7. It is notable that Hoban specifically denied having read, as one example, any Pynchon when I questioned him in 2009 in El Metro restaurant, Fulham (although Hoban's statement is of debatable veracity as he also often claimed, with limited truth, to abstain from any contemporary fiction).
8. Note that this phrase only appears in the Kindle Edition, which is substantially different to the printed version.
9. Figures are rounded down; hence, the total is not 100%.

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