

**‘Looking down time’s telescope at myself’:  
reincarnation and global futures in David Mitchell’s fictional worlds**

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the trope of reincarnation across the works of British author David Mitchell (b. 1969) as an alternative approach to linear temporality, whose spiralling cyclicity warns of the dangers of seeing past actions as separate from future consequences and whose focus on human interconnection demonstrates the importance of collective, intergenerational action in the face of ecological crises. Drawing on the Buddhist philosophy of samsara, or the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, this paper identifies links between the author’s interest in reincarnation and its secular manifestation in the treatment of time in his fictions. These works draw on reincarnation in their structures and characterization as part of an ethical approach to the Anthropocene, using the temporal model of “reincarnation time” as a narrative strategy to demonstrate that a greater understanding of generational interdependence is urgently needed in order to challenge the linear “end of history” narrative of global capitalism.

*Keywords:* David Mitchell – time – reincarnation – Buddhism – Anthropocene – samsara – capitalism – Nietzsche

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In the second section of *The Bone Clocks* (2014a) – the sixth of seven novels to date by British author David Mitchell (b.1969) – Cambridge student Hugo Lamb visits his headmaster’s old friend, Brigadier Philby, in a nursing home. The brigadier, formerly a “linguist and raconteur” who taught Hugo how to cheat at card games and get a fake passport, is now suffering from dementia, and is largely “non-verbal” (118). After he leaves, Hugo realises “[w]hen I look at Brigadier Reginald Philby, I’m looking down time’s telescope at myself” (120). For Hugo, the metaphor of time’s telescope reflects his anxiety about his own unavoidably finite lifespan (he notes, “the elderly *are* guilty: guilty of proving to us that our wilful myopia about death is exactly that”), a preoccupation that leads him to join the soul-stealing, immortality-seeking Anchorites later in the novel (116). However, as this essay will demonstrate, the notion of “looking down time’s telescope at myself” as a form of future-facing temporality has far greater significance: both for Mitchell’s literary approach to time across his oeuvre and also for the exploration of alternative cyclical temporalities that it prompts outside of his fictional world.

As an imaginary model, “time’s telescope” makes visible the gaze of the present self at its own future, and by implication, the causal relationship between them. The telescope holder becomes both immediate viewer and future subject, a simultaneously cross-temporal spectator and actor. This is not just any telescope: it is “time’s telescope,” allowing the individual to see their future self as a separately observable entity. It is an image of the temporally-multiplied self that evokes the author’s fascination with cyclical temporality, transmigration and reincarnation in his fictional world, “time’s telescope” providing an imaginary model that makes visible the gaze of the present self at its own future, and by implication, the causal

relationship between them. The sight line created is both linear and cyclical – a linear device that provides a means of cyclical self-observation. However, such self-observation does not form a perfect circle but a spiralling gaze which continues to move forward in time, creating a feedback loop: having seen their future self, the present self can choose to modify their actions in response, in a relationship that fosters a heightened awareness of personal responsibility and agency. After all, it is only by choosing to gaze down this metaphorical instrument that the actions of the future self become visible, magnifying a temporally distant self which is *other* to the self, but “othered” only by time, creating a relationship in which the actions of each self – present and future – can become mutually influential.

Building on this idea of “looking down time’s telescope at myself,” this essay explores the trope of reincarnation in David Mitchell’s works as an alternative approach to linear temporality, whose spiralling cyclicity warns of the dangers of seeing past actions as separate from future consequences, and whose focus on cross-temporal interconnection demonstrates the importance of collective, intergenerational ethical action in the face of ecological and humanitarian crises.

## 1. “Time’s Telescope” and Reincarnation

In a 2016 interview, David Mitchell notes:

linguistically time is singular, but actually it’s plural – there are so many different kinds of time. There’s a lifespan [...] there’s geological time [...] there’s reincarnation time [...] these tiny, tiny moments where vast things can happen. (“Interview by Rose Harris-Birtill,” Mitchell 2016b)

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Mitchell's works reflect this fascination with "many different kinds of time," often using the micro-temporal to depict the heightened significance of immediate present-time decisions as "these tiny, tiny moments where vast things can happen." To give just one example, his short story "My Eye On You" (2016a) depicts a break in conventional temporality to introduce a simultaneous dimension in which time is experienced at a twelfth of the speed of "normal" time. Here, the use of a slowed timescale lengthens the lived present to introduce an alternative temporality embedded within our own, a form of reflective time in which its narrator is able to make life-changing ethical interventions to help others in need. As several critics have noted, this exploration of temporal plurality runs throughout Mitchell's works. To give just a few examples, in "David Mitchell's Fractal Imagination: *The Bone Clocks*" (2015a), Paul A. Harris rightly notes the "labyrinthine nature of time" portrayed with the novel's temporal shifts (149), while in "The Historical Novel Today, Or, Is It Still Possible?" (2013), Fredric Jameson explores the layered temporalities of *Cloud Atlas* (2004a) using the model of an elevator lurching through "disparate floors on its way to the far future" (Jameson 2013, 303). Similarly, Patrick O'Donnell notes in *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell* (2015) that Mitchell's depiction of temporality occupies "multiple domains" (16).

Alongside this recognition of temporal plurality, several critics also note the author's portrayal of cyclical timescales, often presented in conjunction with a disrupted linear temporality. For example, in "Genome Time: Post-Darwinism Then and Now" (2013), Jay Clayton suggests that *Cloud Atlas* displays a "paradoxical combination of linear and cyclical perspectives on time" (58), while in "'On the Fringe of Becoming' – David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*" (2004), Philip Griffiths discusses the novel's "disparate, discontinuous and cyclical view of history" whose "linear chronology of events is broken down" (80-84). Similarly, Marco de Waard, writing in "Dutch Decline Redux: Remembering New Amsterdam in the Global and Cosmopolitan Novel" (2012), argues that *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob*

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*de Zoet* (2010a) “articulates a cyclical conception of history” (115).<sup>1</sup> In each case, a cyclical temporality is identified in Mitchell’s works which disrupts readerly expectations of temporal linearity but doesn’t necessarily overturn it altogether, suggesting that a model which combines the linear and the cyclical – the spiral – may be more appropriate.

In his 2016 interview, Mitchell also names “reincarnation time” as a specific form of temporality (“Interview by Rose Harris-Birtill,” Mitchell 2016b). Read as a temporal model, “reincarnation time” can be seen to share the inherent spiralling cyclicity and future-facing self-awareness evoked by “looking down time’s telescope at myself.” Defined as “[r]enewed incarnation; the rebirth of a soul in a new body or form,” reincarnation or rebirth forms part of many global belief systems, including Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, Inuit and Tibetan Bon traditions.<sup>2</sup> However, it is also defined as “revival, rebirth, or reinvention,” providing the basis for a secular interpretation focused on causality, change, and rebirth. The concept of “reincarnation time” offers a flexible and specifically human temporal model, measured not by the mathematically-calculated and ultimately arbitrary second – a base unit calculated from a fixed rate of radioactive decay – but by the individual lifespan. The duration of a single human life provides a flexible temporal unit that is different for every individual, its finite length based not on assumed similarity, but on constant change. Read within a secular framework, “reincarnation time” provides a means of approaching the overlapping linearity of intergenerational interconnection, seeing each generation of species reproduction as not merely

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<sup>1</sup> Several other critics also draw attention to the simultaneously linear and cyclical nature of Mitchell’s works. In *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009), Berthold Schoene describes *Ghostwritten* (1999a) as an “oddly timeless and dislocated” work whose ending, linking back to its beginning, “dissolves the novel’s linearity” altogether (Schoene 2009, 111). In ‘Cannibalism, Colonialism and Apocalypse in Mitchell’s Global Future’ (2015), Lynda Ng describes *Cloud Atlas* in terms of an ouroboric timescale which disrupts Western conventions of linear temporality (107, 118), while Peter Childs and James Green also note in “David Mitchell” (2013) that *Cloud Atlas*’ structure is “at once linear and cyclical” (149).

<sup>2</sup> “reincarnation, n.” 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161570>.

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the beginning of another life, but as a form of rebirth in which past actions are unavoidably connected to – and visible in – the future lives of others.

The author has spoken on his interest in reincarnation in several interviews, as well as his interest in Buddhism, suggesting that the Buddhist model of reincarnation may be particularly relevant for a discussion of this trope in his works. For example, in an interview with Harriet Gilbert, Mitchell speaks of his “interest in Buddhism” (Mitchell 2010c), while in an interview for Shanghai TV he remarks, “of the great world religions, Buddhism [...] strikes the strongest chord inside me, seems to suit me best” (Mitchell 2012). He later reveals in a 2013 interview with Andrei Muchnik, “I am a kind of secular Buddhist [...] Buddhism doesn’t ask me to sacrifice my rationality or my common sense, it doesn’t ask me to believe the impossible” (Mitchell 2013a). In an interview with Richard Beard he notes, “[t]he Buddhist model of reincarnation is particularly elegant” (Mitchell 2005b). In a 2004 interview by Eleanor Wachtel, although Mitchell states that he doesn’t believe in literal reincarnation, he again notes that “it’s an elegant, beautiful idea,” adding that “there are more humans alive who believe there is such a thing as a soul [...] than humans alive who believe there isn’t such a thing as a soul. So may I be wrong” [sic] (Mitchell 2004c). However, in a 2010 interview with Adam Begley he also emphasises the redemptive value of reincarnation in a secular, ecological sense: “[t]here is solace, however, in the carbon cycle, in the nitrogen cycle. Biochemically, at least, reincarnation is a fact” (Mitchell 2010b). Similarly, in a 2014 interview with Laurie Grassi he notes that there is “solace in the notion we can have another go and try and fix things [...] Reincarnation is a useful idea” (Mitchell 2014b). Throughout, the author discusses his interest in reincarnation in secular terms as a “useful” cross-transferrable model, a metaphysical concept which also has value for interpreting the physical world.

The concept of reincarnation resurfaces throughout Mitchell’s body of fiction. As the author notes in a 2010 interview with Wyatt Mason, his works together form a growing

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“fictional universe with its own cast”; he asserts, “each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel. That’s my life’s work” (Mitchell 2010d). Similarly referring to his continuous body of fiction as an “über-novel,” Mitchell remarks in a 2013 interview with Jasper Rees that his libretti for the operas *Wake* (2010) and *Sunken Garden* (2013) are also part of this textual universe, noting “I like to think of everything I do as chapters in one bigger über-novel and the libretti are also chapters in the über-novel” (Mitchell 2013b). Many of Mitchell’s short stories also continue the themes and characterization of his longer fictions: for example, characters that the thirteen-year-old protagonist of *Black Swan Green* (2006a) encounters in childhood resurface as adults in several short fictions, including “Acknowledgements” (2005a), “Preface” (2006b) and “The Massive Rat” (2009).

As opposed to a series of novels joined by a single setting, time, place, or protagonist, Mitchell’s body of interconnected fictions cumulatively depicts not the world of a single individual or family, but that of a global community, in a macronovel that spans many continents, time periods, genres and art forms. For example, *Ghostwritten*’s (1999a) plot travels through Japan, Hong Kong, China, Mongolia, Russia, London, Ireland and New York; *Cloud Atlas* begins in the nineteenth century and moves forwards in time to a post-apocalyptic far future; *number9dream* (2001) is a coming-of-age novel; *The Thousand Autumns* is a historical novel; *Black Swan Green* a semi-autobiographical novel; *The Bone Clocks* is part-fantasy; and *Slade House* (2015b) is a supernatural horror story. Instead, these disparate works are drawn into an interconnected “macronovel” through their shared characters – such as Marinus, who reappears in several of Mitchell’s novels and short stories, and both of his libretti – and their repeated cross-textual motifs and thematic preoccupations, from the mysterious “moon-grey cat” that appears in *Black Swan Green*, *The Thousand Autumns*, *The Bone Clocks* and *Slade House* (46; 228; 259; 9), to the recurring exploration of reincarnation.

The concept of reincarnation resurfaces throughout the macronovel in several different forms. Its shared characters are both metaphorically reborn, with characters reappearing from text to text, and literally reborn, with several characters depicted as being fully reincarnated, reborn into different bodies, as in *The Thousand Autumns*, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bone Clocks* and *Slade House*. While the formal complexities of Mitchell's macronovel are beyond the scope of this essay – and further critical investigation is certainly needed into the author's entire corpus as an interconnected whole – the concept of reincarnation perhaps influences even the structure of these works. For example, along with *Cloud Atlas*' reincarnated characters,<sup>3</sup> the increasing effects of human predation are also “reborn” in different forms across different time periods and global geographies throughout the novel – as is the ongoing ethical problem of how to prevent such self-destruction. As will be discussed later in this essay, it is this ongoing exploration of how to collectively shape these shared global futures across many lifetimes, as explored through characters reborn across different times and texts, that lies at the heart of Mitchell's macronovel, drawing its disparate fictions into a continuous ethical worldview.

Reincarnated and transmigrated characters span the full length of Mitchell's writing, including: the disembodied spirit in his first novel *Ghostwritten* and short story “Mongolia” (1999b), both published in 1999; *Cloud Atlas*' reincarnated characters; the short story “Acknowledgements,” in which its narrator discovers “psychomigration,” or the ability of the mind to leave the body; and the reincarnated character of Marinus, as mentioned earlier, who appears in three novels, two operas and two short stories to date.<sup>4</sup> However, as Caroline

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<sup>3</sup> In several interviews, Mitchell confirms the inclusion of the shared comet-shaped birthmark that links *Cloud Atlas*' narrators as evidence of their reincarnation. For example, in an interview with Harriet Gilbert, Mitchell notes, “they're the same person [...] it's the same soul, being reincarnated in different stages with just a dim, dream-level awareness that they've been here before and will be here again” (Mitchell 2010c).

<sup>4</sup> Read together, the novels *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010a), *The Bone Clocks* (2014a) and *Slade House* (2015b), the operas *Wake* (2010) and *Sunken Garden* (2013), and the short stories “I\_Bombadil” (2015a) and “All Souls Day” (2016c) form a seven-part subset of Mitchell's writing in which the reincarnated character of Marinus features more prominently, and is more fully realized, than any other character in the macronovel.

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Edwards notes in “‘Strange Transactions’: Utopia, Transmigration and Time in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*” (2011), “transmigration” is “not a common trope in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature” (191). While several critics have mentioned Mitchell’s unusual use of reincarnation and transmigration, there is little sustained analysis of these across his macronovel. For example, in “‘Gravid with the Ancient Future’: *Cloud Atlas* and the Politics of Big History” (2015), Casey Shoop and Dermot Ryan briefly note that “the promise of reincarnation rises above the novel’s bleak record of predacity” (105), while in “‘This Time Round’: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism” (2010), Heather J. Hicks goes further towards a discussion of reincarnation in the novel, suggesting that Sonmi’s ascension is “the fabricant equivalent of the Buddhist state of Enlightenment,” but ultimately concludes that “the complexities of Buddhist spirituality are beyond the scope of this essay.” In “Food Chain: Predatory Links in the Novels of David Mitchell” (2015), Peter Childs also notes the “transcultural” influence of “Eastern philosophies” across Mitchell’s works, observing “[t]he soul thus seems to represent the site and agency of reanimation for Mitchell,” but again, the discussion is tantalizingly brief (190). Existing criticism tends to limit its mentions of reincarnation to *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten*, with no sustained discussion of this trope across his entire fictional universe to date.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the Buddhist philosophy of samsara, or the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, this essay therefore investigates the macronovel’s use of reincarnation as a transferrable temporal model, whose secular application provides a productive means of “looking down time’s telescope at myself.”

## 2. “Treading on Spirals”: Reincarnation in the Macronovel

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<sup>5</sup> To give further examples, Caroline Edwards also comments on the “symbolic figure of transmigration” in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, discussing the use of this trope as part of a construction of “a trans-historical community” that fosters “a forceful, oppositional agency” in the face of “colonial power” (Edwards 2011, 190). Berthold Schoene’s *The Cosmopolitan Novel* also identifies the “eternal cycle of reincarnation” depicted in *Cloud Atlas* as a “general rather than specific symbol of humanity’s potential for communal affiliation” (Schoene 2009, 115-6).

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In Buddhist belief systems, reincarnation broadly refers to the process by which past actions influence future rebirths in an ethical model of cause and effect based on karma, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “[t]he sum of a person’s actions [...] regarded as determining his fate in the next [life]; hence, necessary fate or destiny, following as effect from cause.”<sup>6</sup> Compassionate actions are believed to result in being reborn as a “higher” lifeform, a process which repeats across many lifetimes until the individual breaks the seemingly endless cycle of life, death and rebirth, or samsara, to reach a state of Enlightenment, or nirvana.<sup>7</sup> As Richard Robinson and Willard Johnson note in *The Buddhist Religion* (1997), while reincarnation isn’t unique to Buddhism, its focus on karma offers a quintessentially Buddhist form of “moral causality” which is “intended to be experiential and concrete” (18-19).<sup>8</sup> The concept of “reincarnation time,” in which this approach to reincarnation is considered as a secular temporal model, provides – as I have suggested – an alternative to linear temporalities. Its long timescale, focus on human causality, and potential for progression or regression all suggest an ethical means of approaching a new geological era defined by the shared consequences of compounded human actions over many lifetimes, while maintaining the possibility of positive change or dystopic decline. Its emphasis on causality also prompts a greater focus on individual ethical action and shared consequences. “Reincarnation time” shares important characteristics with the concept of “time’s telescope”; applied to Mitchell’s macronovel, it provides a model through which to approach its expansive temporal dimensions,

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<sup>6</sup> “karma, n.” 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/102561>.

<sup>7</sup> The Buddhist goal of Enlightenment or nirvana is variously described in Buddhist interpretations as a state of understanding, peace, and total release from the cycle of rebirth, rather than a fixed place (see “Nirvāṇa” in *The Buddhist Religion* (1997, 332) by Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson), described by John Snelling as “a Way Out of the system, one that did not lead to a temporary resting place” (see “The Buddhist World View” in *The Buddhist Handbook* (Snelling 1987, 48)).

<sup>8</sup> As Marcus Boon notes in “To Live in a Glass House is a Revolutionary Virtue Par Excellence: Marxism, Buddhism, and the Politics of Nonalignment” (2015), “one might consider the doctrine of karma as an alternative form of general economy. Thanks to the ‘kitschification’ of this term by North American countercultures in the 1960s, the philosophical and religious meanings of the word have been obscured. [...] Karma is the universal law of cause and effect” (55).

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its timescale “stretching back approximately seven millennia” from the reincarnated character Moombaki’s distant past in *The Bone Clocks* (415), to several hundred years into the future in *Cloud Atlas*.

The concept of “reincarnation time” also addresses the author’s fascination with temporal cyclicity. As Mitchell notes in a 2015 interview with Paul A. Harris, “metaphorically time can seem mighty circular or phase-like for something allegedly linear” (Mitchell 2015c, 9). David Mitchell further explores the concept of temporal cyclicity in *Cloud Atlas*, referring to the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return. The eternal return or eternal recurrence, described in Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1882 text *The Gay Science* (2008) as the identical repetition of lived experience “innumerable times,” as if the “eternal hourglass of existence [...] turned over again and again,” suggests a potential alternative cyclical model for understanding Mitchell’s treatment of temporality in the macronovel (194). The eternal return refers to a temporal cycle in which life is destined to endlessly repeat itself, as described in Robert Frobisher’s suicide note in *Cloud Atlas*:

Nietzsche’s gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities. [...] my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. [...] Such elegant certainties comfort me (Mitchell 2004a, 490).

Frobisher’s Nietzschean conception of time as an endlessly repeating set of events provides a particularly “elegant” possible temporal model within a book whose tribal warfare in its distant future disturbingly resembles that of its distant past. However, the eternal return is ultimately an ethical thought experiment which interrogates the possibility of acceptance of life as it is, and whose non-linear cyclicity refuses the possibility of meaningful change. As such, it suggests a paradoxically anti-temporal model of temporality, whose focus is not on the course

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of lived events as they unfold, but on the certainty of their endless recurrence. While Frobisher's imagining of an endlessly cyclical temporality may serve to "comfort" him at the moment of his death, this temporal model is not able to account for the vital moments of change that are at work across the macronovel. If such a future is unalterably destined to be repeated – as suggested with Frobisher's reference – then the long-term efforts of the reincarnated Horologists in *The Bone Clocks* are ultimately fruitless, while the narrator's urging of the reader to take up his compassionate lifelong course of helping others in "My Eye On You" is little more than an endlessly repeated plea. As *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates with Frobisher's suicide, the lived outcome of such temporal fatalism may be ideologically comforting, but practically futile. By contrast, the inclusion of reincarnation in the macronovel suggests an alternative model of temporal cyclicity that allows for ongoing change and progression, for better or worse, spiralling across unimaginably long timescales and individual moments alike. Across this endlessly fluctuating fictional world, the depiction of "reincarnation time" in the macronovel reinforces that what is at stake isn't whether change is possible, but whether such changes will result in ethical progression or regression.

Unlike the cyclical model of the eternal return, the spiralling model of "reincarnation time" is also visible across the macronovel's narrative structures, as well as in its content; a progressive narrative cyclicity is frequently embedded into Mitchell's works. For example, this is visible in *Ghostwritten*'s interlinked beginning and ending (its narrative begins and ends with "[w]ho was blowing on the nape of my neck?" and "[w]ho is blowing on the nape of my neck?" respectively) (3, 436), in *Black Swan Green*'s depiction of a single January to January year in its narrator's life, in *Cloud Atlas*' journey from the distant past into the distant future and back again, and in *Slade House*'s repeated depictions of victimhood and soul-stealing, each successive generation of entrapment carried out in the same way, by the same people, in the same setting, for each of its characters. Yet even within these cyclical structures, a sense of

ethical progression is maintained that prevents each narrative loop from being fully closed, allowing for change and movement within each text. For example, *Ghostwritten* returns the reader to the start of the novel, but it is with a new awareness of the fragility of shared human existence gained from witnessing its near-destruction by the sentient global security system in its final chapter. *Black Swan Green* returns to the beginning of another year for its narrator, but his life has been irrevocably altered with his parents' divorce as he leaves his childhood home at the end of the novel. The author's endings are often beginnings, rebirths in disguise: for example, the last words of *Black Swan Green* are Jason's sister Julia telling him "it's not the end" (371), while *The Bone Clocks'* final line is "[f]or one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of" (595). Similarly, the final words of *number9dream*, "I begin running," indicate a new beginning for its narrator (418), while *Slade House* ends with the rebirth of Norah Grayer as her soul leaves her dying body and transmigrates into "a foetal boy" (233). In each case, the narrative's structural cyclicity is accompanied by definitive narrative progression in its content, providing a spiralling temporal frame of reinvention and rebirth.

Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, first published in four parts between 1883 and 1885, also develops the theory of eternal recurrence. In it is the assertion that "[a]ll that is straight lies [...] All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle" (2006, 125). However, the macronovel's cyclical narrative structures refuse to provide the perfect temporal closure of the eternal return, maintaining the possibility of change and ethical progression; Frobisher's Nietzschean model of perfect temporal circularity is overturned in favour of a temporal model based on a simultaneously cyclical and linear "reincarnation time." In David Mitchell's essay "The View from Japan" (2007), he refers to the artistic process of "bending [...] time's false straight line into its truer shape, the spiral"; as opposed to a perfect circular temporality, "reincarnation time" maintains a spiralling possibility of forward and backward progression in a revaluing of the linear within the cyclical, even while conventional linearity itself is disrupted.

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In *The Bone Clocks*, we meet a benevolent race of compassionate reincarnated beings, called Horologists, who “live in this spiral of resurrections” (431). Significantly, their reincarnations are described as a “spiral,” rather than the simpler circle that such rebirths would suggest. It would seem fitting, therefore, that when one of the novel’s narrators, Crispin, hears a mysterious premonition that mentions spirals, it is only at the moment of his death that he finally realises the spirals were there all along, stitched into the carpet under his feet: “Not dots. *Spirals*. All these weeks. Treading on spirals. Look.” (382).

The macronovel’s inclusion of reincarnation ultimately presents the reader with a long view of the shared historical consequences of human action – or inaction. As Robinson and Johnson note, reincarnation isn’t unique to Buddhism, but is a belief “documented among archaic cultures throughout the world,” identifying that “[t]he specifically Buddhist feature is the ethical correlation of good karma – intentional deeds – with happy births and bad karma with miserable ones” (1997, 18-19). Mitchell’s reincarnated characters make visible these generations of human cause and effect, a narrative strategy that is particularly representative of Buddhist approaches to reincarnation, using a secular version of its experiential moral causality which depicts the far-reaching positive or negative consequences of individual actions across a vast scale, and portraying the macronovel’s dystopic global future as caused by compounded human activity. As Holly realizes in *The Bone Clocks*, we are “leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid,” the ecological disaster in the novel directly caused by generations of damaging human behaviour in a secular depiction of the karmic model; she laments, “the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted [...] the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered [...] all so we didn’t have to change” (533).

Cumulatively, Mitchell’s secular depiction of “reincarnation time” suggests a form of collective experiential time with its own ethical foundations and consequences, based not on mathematical formulae or radioactive decay, but on the revisited consequences of human

actions over many lifetimes, and the importance of individual action as the essential precursor to collective change. The measure of such a temporal system is what may be achieved – or destroyed – for current and future generations at any stage in the cycle, each individual human lifespan providing a critical opportunity to make positive ethical decisions to help others. As Fredric Jameson notes in “The Historical Novel Today, or, Is It Still Possible?” (2013) “for better or for worse, our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well” (312). The macronovel’s depiction of “reincarnation time” allows for such an incorporation of past and future temporalities. What is important in such a system isn’t a literal belief in reincarnation, but living *as if* the individual will be reborn to see their own behavioural consequences, and in doing so, “looking down time’s telescope” not at an abstract future, but at future versions of “myself” – the lives of other finite yet interconnected beings who will inherit the future that we create, just as we inherit the consequences of others’ past lives. Crucially, such a model uses the influences of Buddhist ethical philosophies to build a secular, humanist approach that isn’t dependent on the promise of a final redemptive heaven or nirvana, but also avoids the ethical stagnation of a self-centred postmodern nihilism. It suggests a temporal system rooted in humanist action, rather than the potentially damaging ideologies of religious doctrine or utilitarian sacrifice, by which the individual is marginalized for the greater good.

As a human-centred exploration of a spiralling cyclical temporality, “reincarnation time” suggests that a greater focus on generational interdependence and ethical causality are urgently needed in order to challenge the seemingly inescapable linearity of the “end of history” narrative of global capitalism. As Fredric Jameson observes in *The Cultural Turn* (1998), “[i]t seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; and perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination”; such imagined “deterioration” seems all the more worrying in light of the

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proposed geological epoch of the Anthropocene, marking a new era defined by global human impact (50). Under the current geological system, the formal categorization of such an epoch will form a permanent addition within an irreversibly linear geological time scale. The challenge within such an era, then, will be to imagine other temporal counter-strategies which may help our species not merely to survive, but to regenerate; as the macronovel demonstrates, “reincarnation time” offers one such strategy.

### 3. “Reincarnation Time” and the Anthropocene

Mitchell’s use of “reincarnation time” suggests the value of alternative temporalities in the face of the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch proposed to succeed the Holocene. As Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin note in “Defining the Anthropocene” (2015), “[r]ecent global environmental changes suggest that Earth may have entered a new human-dominated geological epoch” in which the “impacts of human activity will probably be observable [...] for millions of years into the future,” and that consequently, “human actions may well constitute Earth’s most important evolutionary pressure” (171). At the time of writing, no date for the beginning of such an epoch has yet been agreed on. As Lewis and Maslin recognise, “there is no formal agreement on when the Anthropocene began, with proposed dates ranging from before the end of the last glaciation to the 1960s” (171). However, these geological changes created by global human activity are already visible in the macronovel, a huge project that effectively traces the evolution of this human-centred epoch, from the early depiction of imperial conquest in *The Thousand Autumns*, to the near-future oil crises in *The Bone Clocks*, to the far-future civilisation breakdown in *Cloud Atlas*. For Mitchell’s fictional world, the categorisation of this human-engineered global era isn’t under debate: it’s already here.



The author's engagement with these concerns is by no means limited to the macronovel; Mitchell also notes the worrying ecological trajectory of globalisation in several interviews. To give just a few examples, in an interview with Wayne Burrows he notes that "[t]he logical extension of neo-capitalism is that it eats itself [...] corporate interests really will pollute the land that supports them, because they can make money by doing so" (Mitchell 2004b); in an interview with Adam Begley he observes that "[w]hat made us successful in Darwinian terms – our skill at manipulating the our environment – now threatens to wipe us out as a species" (Mitchell 2010b); and in an interview with Zahra Saeed he notes that "the increases in the standards of our living are being bankrolled by the standards of living of our children and our grandchildren" (Mitchell 2014c). In a 2015 essay, Paul A. Harris usefully recognizes that Mitchell is a "novelist of the Anthropocene" (Harris 2015b, 5); this is an author whose interconnected fictions, with their shared past and future, illustrate the shared causality – and consequences – of the Anthropocene in action. The macronovel forms a huge project that effectively depicts the evolution of this human-centered epoch, its earliest novel to date set in 1779 (*The Thousand Autumns*) during the age of imperial global navigation and trade. Read cumulatively, the macronovel shows the predatory human actions that contributed to the creation of such an epoch of Anthropocentric global impact, and warns of the potential futures created by such actions. However, while the categorization of a new epoch exists within an irreversibly linear geological temporality, the use of a spiralling "reincarnation time" in the macronovel complicates this with the possibility of a multiplicity of beginnings and endings at any stage, suggesting the value of the cyclical within the linear for envisaging productive strategies for change.

Mitchell notes in an interview with Richard Beard that "[t]he history of our species is made of endings and beginnings"; the macronovel's use of "reincarnation time" depicts this concept in action (Mitchell 2005b). For example, its oldest reincarnated character to date is

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Moombaki from *The Bone Clocks*, revealed not in terms of her age or birth date, but through the combined names of each of her previous selves which together form her “long, long, true name” (416). Listing rebirth after rebirth, Moombaki gradually reveals to Marinus that she has lived in 207 “previous hosts”, and is “not thought of as a god [...] but as a guardian, a collective memory”; with no conventional age or date of birth given, it is Marinus who calculates that her lived history dates back “approximately seven millennia” (414-15). Moombaki’s long name reimagines geological time’s linearity in specifically human terms, each interconnected life becoming a unit of measurement, a literal depiction of Mitchell’s envisaging of the “history of our species” through individual human “endings and beginnings.” As Mitchell also notes in a 2016 interview, “[t]he atemporals are perhaps core samples [...] that record the human experience” (“Interview by Rose Harris-Birtill,” Mitchell 2016b). Moombaki’s long name offers a particularly human form of core sample, whose compacted layers do not comprise inert geological strata, but the grit of individual human lives.

Read through a purely linear sequence of events, the macronovel is heading toward periods of widespread dystopic decline. However, Mitchell’s macronovel disrupts such linear temporalities with its shifts backwards and forwards in time, as in *Cloud Atlas*, but also in the publication of its narratives along a chronologically discontinuous timescale – for example, a 1980s period-piece (*Black Swan Green*) is followed by an eighteenth-century historical novel (*The Thousand Autumns*), which in turn is followed by a novel whose timescale envisages the near-future (*The Bone Clocks*). Such strategies deliberately complicate any attempt to read this body of works through a strictly linear chronology. Throughout, the possibility of meaningful change for each generation becomes a form of rebirth as another chance to alter the future, made possible through the ethical actions of individuals engaging anew with their responsibility to protect future generations within a global framework of impending ecological destruction. Such efforts can be in the form of big-scale interventions, such as Mo Muntevary’s

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efforts to safeguard potentially devastating military technology in *Ghostwritten*, or in small-scale ethical decisions, such as Marinus' efforts to protect Holly's grandchildren in *The Bone Clocks* – regardless of their positions in the macronovel's chronological sequence of events. This is a narrative world infused with the possibility that “reincarnation time” brings, a human-centred model of a spiralling cyclical time which isn't doomed to repeat the past, but finds the agency and determination to begin again in each successive generation, in what Heather J. Hicks (2010) describes as a “more hopeful deployment of a cyclical apocalyptic narrative.”

If, as Berthold Schoene notes, “no one person or group of persons is ultimately in charge” of global events now unfolding, we must ask how humanity “can still hope to make a difference and shape such a world” in which “political agency is dilapidating into crisis management” (2009, 2). Mitchell's use of “reincarnation time” places intergenerational human action at the centre of this global “crisis.” As he notes in a 2015 interview with Paul A. Harris, the reincarnated Horologists “are role models for me [...] I value the notion of reincarnation as a kind of metaphor for a single life” (Mitchell 2015c, 13). He adds:

Horologists, then, are metaphors of mortals. They have repeated lives to slouch towards enlightenment, and we have just the one to scramble there as best we may, but the methods and the destination are the same.

The author's reference to supernatural beings that “slouch towards enlightenment” evokes William Butler Yeats' poem “The Second Coming,” first published in 1920. Although in Yeats' poem it is a “rough beast” – and not a reincarnated Horologist – that “Slouches” towards “birth,” the poem's opening line, “Turning and turning in the widening gyre,” offers a structure for the immanent rebirth that it describes, again evoking the spiralling cyclicity of “reincarnation time” (Yeats 1997, 189-90). However, as “role models,” the Horologists provide

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a collective example of the ethical actions that must be achieved in a “single life” if we are to avoid the same debilitating ecological and social meltdowns that they face, within a fictional world whose negative human impact remains unchecked. Although the Buddhist terminology of “enlightenment” is used, its dual meaning makes it particularly relevant to the macronovel, here referred to as the secular “action of bringing someone to a state of greater knowledge, understanding, or insight.”<sup>9</sup> However, the difficult “scramble” towards such insight must be undertaken without the benefit of the Horologists’ many lifetimes of lived experience; as such, the macronovel provides a shorthand depiction of the co-operative, compassionate actions that could be learnt through living in “reincarnation time.” As in the macronovel, it is by no means certain whether such changes will be sufficient to avert global crises, but such collective action provides our only chance at redemption. The concept of reincarnation may be thousands of years old – but as Mitchell’s macronovel demonstrates, it suggests a new temporal strategy whose interconnected past, present, and future reinforce the vital importance of intergenerational ethical action in imagining meaningful change.

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<sup>9</sup> “enlightenment, n.” 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/62448>.

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