

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO DAVID MITCHELL'S SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES IN *CLOUD ATLAS*

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75

Style is not specific to an author but to a particular narrative. Nobody shows this better than David Mitchell in *Cloud Atlas* published in 2004. This novel is composed of six different stories linked by a diegetic thread but set in different epochs, from the 19th century to a distant post-apocalyptic future. These six stories have stylistic, rhythmic, semantic and grammatical structures of their own, perfectly suited to their content. The reader just has to follow the rhythm to be plunged into the atmosphere of the narrated story. In other words, *Cloud Atlas* seems to illustrate a truism: the same language can create different worlds by deploying stylistic devices adequate to the overall design. However, it must be acknowledged that David Mitchell is doing more than 'using' language to that effect: he remoulds standard English to fit the world he has in mind. The subject matter is carved into existence through a carefully sharpened language.

It can therefore be said that this finely-worked language does not merely mirror the story it narrates, it gives shape to it, it makes it possible. Standard English would not have been up to the task. This makes David Mitchell akin to writers such as Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*) or Russell Hoban (*Riddley Walker*), who indulge in similar alterations of the English language. To illustrate this, we shall focus on the two stories that take place in the future in *Cloud Atlas*¹ "An Orison of Sonmi ~ 451" (Sonmi) and "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After" (Sloosha). These two opposite worlds —the first one portrays a genetically-

engineered world in the 22nd century, the other depicts humanity back in an Iron Age after the explosion of the nuclear bomb— are produced by two discourses which could not be further apart in their structures and rhythms. Mitchell manages this *tour de force* of making language speak completely differently from one story to the next.

We shall first see how in both stories, language acquires a defamiliarizing strangeness, reflecting the new context. We shall then analyse in what sense language can be said to create the story. The writing of these two stories follows different patterns: following Gilles Deleuze's terminology, we shall call "Somni" an 'arborescent' kind of writing and the other story a 'rhizomatic' type. Lastly, we will examine how far language has gone in its evolution in both stories. In "Sonmi", discourse seems to be the result of a political manipulation that has tampered with its natural evolution. In "Sloosha", however, the bomb appears to have liberated language from the grammatical shackles that used to stifle it: the new language is powerfully alive and appears to have come back to its 'essential' state.

Though worlds apart, the two stories yet produce a similar defamiliarizing effect on the reader. In "Sonmi" we are presented with an exceedingly modern world composed of *purebloods*, *xecs*, *genomicists*, *syntaxists*, *aides*, *tellers*, *archivist* and *fabricants*, who have been given mathematical names, like Yoona-939, Wing-027, or Sonmi-451, the fabricant interviewed in the story, in the purest science-fiction tradition (we need only think of Zamyatin's *We*). The text is strewn with unfamiliar technological and medical words (kalodoxalyn, stimulin, amnesiads, xenon, neon, carbdiiox, ascension catalyts, soporifix, medics, aircon inflows, Medicorp, biocosmeticians, healant), sometimes in the form of abbreviations or capital letters (*sync*, *EyeSats*, *Xultation*, *AdV*). It is permeated with signifiers belonging to the rigorous field of science (portion, encompass, approx, milligrams). There is a striking contrast with the other story, in which English seems to have regressed just as humanity has. The linguistic fabric has become threadbare; some letters have completely disappeared, replaced by apostrophes, which makes the text sometimes hard to read. The nuclear disaster has brought about some kind of linguistic entropy, illustrated perfectly illustration in the signifier "hole" standing for "whole"; the loss of this <w> reveals a bigger loss: people have been literally plunged into a big bang from which they painfully try to recover. There are two contradictory forces in this post-apocalyptic writing, reflecting the atoms at work in their contradictory activities of fusion and fission. The reading is axed by the apostrophes: they indeed tend to make the reader halt, as they sharply cut the rhythm. At the same time the sounds are sometimes so close that they seem to blend into a kind of fusing whole, to the point of being almost unreadable. The alphabetical atoms are indeed tending towards fusion, creating new, unfamiliar

linguistic entities: 'n'kin'n'age'n'all. The survivors of the Apocalypse try to grasp what certain ancient technological words used to refer to, by translating them into familiar words: a *tel'scope* is thus defined as "the furthest seeing eye"; *'lectric* has to be comprehended in known words: "Smart magic like a heart works the body". The survivors attempt to make do with what remains: they are "bricoleurs" in Lévi-Strauss's meaning of the term and of the activity of 'bricolage':

[The bricoleur's] universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand", that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 17)

As in Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic story (*Riddley Walker*), the survivors make the most of the fragmented words that have lost their previous referents, trying to remember what there was before the blast and to make sense out of the incoherent and heterogeneous.

By contrast, the language of "Sonmi" could be the tool of 'the engineer', as it seems to be perfectly designed to serve the new reality. Unlike the "bricoleur", the engineer (to use Lévi Strauss's dichotomy) "subordinate[s] each of the [diverse tasks] to the availability of raw material and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the projects" (Lévi Strauss 1992: 17). In this dystopian near future Korea (Nea So Copros) run by corporations, what is a brand in our reality has now become a common name without any capital letters: 'traffic jams' are now called *fordjams*. People are equipped with their *sony*, they wear *nikes* and *rolex*. The Media use *nikons*. In this *consumerdom*, everything has been de-sacralized, or rather, only one thing is sacred: business. Even the contents of the Encyclopaedias have been translated into the new consumerist language: there are now only *encyclopaedia of consumable*. Music takes the form of scientific programming: "programmable violin". Commitment is now synonymous with "Investment". Alienated to the consumer society, human feelings and expressions have changed meaning. One father complains about his inability to look at his neighbours "in the eye", not because he has made a mistake involving his honesty and dignity as we would have expected, but because he could not get his daughter the most fashionable doll: "How am I supposed to look our neighbours in their faces if our daughter is the only girl in our carousel to *not* have a Zizzi?" (Mitchell 2004: 355). We then realize just how far the human race has gone down the consumerism line. People are asked to "work, spend, work" (Mitchell 316). That most sacred of human activities, giving birth, has turned into a real market: you can "sell baby quota". As in

Huxley's book, in this brave new world too, life-giving has been taken over by the State. It produces genetically-engineered slave-workers called *fabricants* whose life and death are entirely controlled. The scientist has become all powerful in this bypassing of natural reproduction: the human body no longer constitutes a limit; the border has been crossed, as evidenced by the new word *wombtank*, bringing together the natural locus of birth and an artificial container. The era of the post-human has already begun.

Man has taken total control of nature. Natural elements only exist in so far as they are human-engineered. For instance, science takes care of the dissemination of seeds, as the now "sterile" wind cannot carry out this function any more ("the sole sound was a sterile wind swishing blunted needles" (Mitchell 328)). Irrational uneven nature has been dealt with: the mountains are being "processed". The trees have been planted in a mathematical, rigid order so that they look like a military corps: "The Norfolk pine-rubberwood hybrids were planted in rank and file and created the illusion that trees were marching past our ford in a billion-strong regiment" (Mitchell 328). Science has infiltrated the natural world to the point that nature can no longer be described in its own terms: the 'natural' world has been subordinated to the engineer's language and vision. Even the moths are described as "electron-like". In the living-room the old "aquarium" has been superseded by a *dysneyrium* (displaying films): natural elements have been taken over by culture *linguistically* too. In the latest linguistic software the Party has installed, the new cultural files have indeed deleted the old natural ones. There thus can be no such thing as a comparison between the two worlds any more since there is only one left. As a matter of fact, there are very few comparisons in "Sonmy", unlike the other story where nature seems to have regained its rights after the nuclear disaster. In "Sloosha", nature appears to be coming back unexpectedly through the linguistic door. For instance, what used to be scientific and therefore exclusively human ("observatories") is now written *observ'trees*. Most comparisons take nature as their standard of comparison: "my eyes got owlier", "slipp'ry as cave fish, heavy as a cow, cold as stones", "she din't b'have like no queeny-bee", "lornsomer'n a bird in a box in a well". Nature proves to be a rich linguistic source for the survivors in their description of human movements, for instance: "hawkeyeing me", "to spider up the crumbly ridge". The process of 'life-giving' is following natural rhythm and evolution here, as the images make clear: "I planted my first babbit up Jayjo from Cutter Foot Dwelling", "when Jayjo plumped up ripe" (Mitchell 243). Living in complementarity with nature, the post-apocalyptic survivors communicate with their environment. This harmony is linguistically rendered by the indifferent use of the genitive form for human and non-human elements, showing that now humans are just one category among others. This form is not the preserve of animate beings any more: "this busted world's fault". As we shall

proceed to see, the choice of semantic and grammatical structures is determining in both stories.

The two stories are produced by two radically opposed languages. The language in “Sonmi” has the rigour of mathematical writing, the sentences being often introduced by a very scientific colon: “Therefore: we must be vigilant against evil”, “some: but yet more surprises”, “Not really: an enforcer escorted me”. Although this narrative is actually an interview of Sonmi before her execution—Sonmi is a *fabricant*, that is to say, a clone created to serve as a dutiful worker, who has rebelled against the lot reserved for her species by the State—there are absolutely no contracted forms, every word is as fully pronounced as it would be in a very formal speech. In this paratactic way of writing, there is no link between the short sentences, creating a very sharp, chopped-up rhythm. The long words of Latin and Greek origins sound like linguistic fossils, adding to the deadly, cold rhythm: *obscured, chauffeur, reverted, ricocheted, alternated, curtail, acute, soporifix, quandary, simulacrum, malfunction, requartered, morphed*. A preference is given to nouns, which contributes to the impression of a reified language: “Her aloofness was in fact watchfulness”, “Her sullenness hid a subtle dignity”, “Their drunkenness had a recklessness that nite”. The following sentence, designed to explain Mr Rhee’s emotional reaction and behaviour, sounds like a cold medical diagnosis: “Seer Rhee should be understood in the context of his wife”. Similarly, the technocratic-sounding expressions “in the face of” (“Why did the entire conurb not grind to a halt and give praise in the face of such inevitable beauty?”), or “for the comfort of” (“This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods”), tend to technicize language. In fact, beneath the seemingly rich linguistic surface of this ‘engineered’ piece of writing lies a poor language based on a simple mechanical construction. Signifiers can indeed be articulated or disarticulated as you connect or disconnect a computer. The pervasive use of a negative prefix is symptomatic of a language lacking variety and colours: *un-censored, unconscionable, disconnecting, underbelly unmet, unlatched, untouched, unfiltered, unlit, unhood, unflaggingly, unmaled, unpleasantness, uncritical, unthinking, unaided, unsouled, malfunctioned, ill-advisedly, unresponding, uninflential*. It may remind us of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which zealous linguists try to “[cut] the language to the bone” (Orwell 54), exterminating superfluous words: “If you have a word like “good”, what need is there for a word like “bad”? “Ungood” will do just as well—better, because it’s an exact opposite, which the other is not” (Orwell 54). In “Sonmi”, a good “investment” or the devotion of your life to the Juche (the charismatic father of the Corpocracy) has its own technical language: it can be rebuilt in any way whether you are at the top of the hierarchy *twelvestarred* or on the verge of being *destarred*, as everybody is *destarable* until you’re left with nothing (“to zerostar somebody”). This language-machine creates a mechanical world that has in fact more to do with ‘bricolage’ than creativity.

In “Sonmi” indeed, sentences strictly conform to the canonical order: a subject is invariably complemented by its verb, abiding by the ideological standards underlined and denounced by Benjamin Lee Whorf, for whom the old Greek grammatical structures have unquestioningly been governing our way of making sense of the world:

And, pursuant again to grammar, the notion became *ingrained* [...] that the verb class cannot exist without an entity of the other class, the “thing” class, as a peg to hang on. “Embodiment is necessary”, the *watchword of this ideology*, is seldom STRONGLY questioned. (our italics; Whorf 1956: 241)

A sentence like “Ascension merely frees what Soap represses” complies with this linguistic ideology. In Nea So Copros, no deviation from the ‘right’ order is tolerated. The extensive reference to spatial directions (*upstrata*, *instreamed*, *coerced into*, *untermensh*, *downcurved to*, *switchbacked up into*, *parallel to*, etc.) contributes to creating the image of a rigidly hierarchized world where everything is “orientated”. Space is linguistically mastered; each social stratum is addressed with a particular language (“Papa Song’s upstrata lexicon that Matins supports this theory” [Mitchell 196]), ensuring that everybody remains in the place they occupy on the social and linguistic tree. Indeed like the scientists in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who are given just the amount of words that would be needed in their trade, fabricants have to follow their “Catechisms”, ready-made or ready-thought expressions learnt in a training session called “Orientation”; for example “the verb *remember* is outside servers’ lexicons” (Mitchell 230). Natural acquisition is tampered with through the use of a drug called Soap that erases all the new words they have learnt during the day: “Orientation teaches us the lexicon we need for our work, but Soap erases xtra words we acquire later”.

Through its semantic and grammatical structures, language in “Sonmi” would correspond to the “arborescent” structure Deleuze and Guattari speak of in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which they describe as a pre-defined structure where everything is already known and planned. They quote Jean Petitot and Pierre Rosenstiehl: “The channels of transmission are preestablished; the arborescent system preexists the individual, who is integrated into it at an allotted place” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 18). The mechanical and articulated language of “Sonmi” is modelled on the tree image in so far as “the tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings” (Deleuze and Guattari 13). We indeed have the feeling words are here at the end of the linguistic chain, labelled like manufactured goods at the end of the assembly line. Language in “Sonmi” addresses itself directly to the reader’s brain: it has to do with semantics, with the signified, rather than the signifier; the linguistic process is terminated: words have been processed and deposited on paper, ready-to-be-understood. The abundance of –ed forms in the

text conveys the idea of a stabilized language describing a passive, arrested movement: *well-oriented, genomically modified, unbolstered, upended, a rain-stained, sun-crackled overhang, deadlanded*, “Huamdonggil is not *gridnumbered* or charted”. Besides, the text is strewn with verbs in the passive voice, depriving the subjects of the sentences of any active part: “are entitled to ‘rests’”, “every minute must be devoted to”, “these individuals will be named later”, “Festivities were cancelled”, “The other half was decidedly muted”, “servers are genomed for gruelling nineteen-hour workdays”, “a body genomed for service”, “it was poorly dijjed”. With the passive form, we are presented with the result of an active process that seems to have been accomplished on its own, the agents being rarely mentioned. The grammatical structure here produces this idea of a puppet language being activated by invisible strings. Similarly, the subjects of the verbs in the active voice are often inanimate, creating a situation in which things are going on around Sonmi without her being able to exert any control over them: “an eyehole blinked, bolts unclacked”, “The planked ceiling thumped and creaked, a hatch flipped open, and Ma Arak Na’s face appeared” “the streets funnel the morning wind to high speeds” “the rear door hissed open”.

The first story thus contrasts strikingly with the second story which is littered with *-ing* forms, that give the opposite impression, one of a movement in endless suspension. Nouns, which usually tend to immobilize processes, have been turned into *-ing* verbs. Instead of trips, folly, adventures or choices we find *journeyin’s, follyin’s, adventuring’s, choosin’*. The numerous adjectives ending in *<y>*—mostly absent in “Sonmi”—convey a similar idea of movement: *breathy, selfy, runty, mythy, southly, summery, melty, knotty’n’rooty, waxy’n’silty*. Such a sentence as “there wasn’t no scalin’ it” would be rendered by “escalation was impossible” in “Sonmi”, the noun (*escalation*) putting an end to the movement-in-process embodied by the *-ing* form (*scalin’*). Far from being linguistically obedient, the language of “Sloosha” upsets the ‘ideological’ rules: it is a ‘delinquent’ language flouting the canonical order, as in the following sentences: “so hushly hushly up I was”, “snailsome goin’ was them rockfields”, “Coneys’n’roasted taro we was eatin’”. Words have changed categories. Onomatopoeias abound in verbs: “They was padddoomin’”. The spelling and grammatical borders have been disrupted, giving birth to a new lexical and grammatical layout: *Pa’n’me* is a novel one-word signifier joining words previously separated.

Reading “Sloosha” can leave you out of breath, the accumulated signifiers linked by “n” accelerating the rhythm as if it were never going to end: “She’s fuggin’ your b’liefs’n’all up’n’dow’n’in’n’out”, “Magicky ruby welled’n’pumped an’ frothed on the fleece an’ puddle on the stone floor”. In contrast to the regular tree-like linguistic structures in “Sonmi”, the nomadic rhizome that Deleuze and Guattari speak of may helpfully be invoked here: it has the distinctive feature of

never taking roots. Unlike the rooted tree indeed, the rhizome does not settle anywhere or conform to any already articulated hierarchical structure:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be”, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and... and...’. This conjunction carries enough to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be. (Deleuze 27)

Through its abundant use of the conjunction “and” accelerating the rhythm of the sentences, the language in “Sloosha” is indeed characteristic of the rhizome, always on the run, gathering speed in mid-sentence: “The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed” (Deleuze 2004: 28). It gives the impression of a ‘stammering’ process that will not finish. The idea of rapidity is also rendered by verbs that are then immediately followed by a direct object complement: “She sorried losing”, “she looked spikers at me”. The text here is not addressed to the reader’s brain but to his/her senses. Indeed, after a technical language (“Sonmi”) there follows a very concrete, figurative language that appeals to our emotions. Rather than semantics, what is at stake here is semiotics. The percept is substituted for the concept. The onomatopoeic sounds replace the finished linguistic goods; *cockadoodlydooing*, “an’blissweed’ll lead you b’tween the whack-crack an’boom-doom an’ pan-pin-pon till we...”, “an’ suddenwise *whoah* a whip binded my legs t’gether an’ *whoah* up I flew an’ *whoah* down my head dropped an’ *aieeee* the pavestones smashed my skull” (Mitchell 289). In “Sloosha”, language is not conceptual: it is a language “in the making”, describing things as they occur without any prior structuring. Thus you do not “sob your eyes out” in “Sloosha” but *sobbed’n’sobbed’n’sobbed*. Likewise, “an’up Old Georgie’s’closure we scaled hand by hand by hand” (p. 275).

This very concreteness of language makes it a good candidate for humorous remarks that would be impossible in the other language (where “Humor is the ovum of dissent, and the Juche should fear it”). Funny jokes are possible because language has crossed the barriers of decency. It tends indeed to be more colloquial: “fear pissin’in my blood”. Such expressions as *ass-belched*, “my voice was jus a duck fart in a hurricane” cannot but trigger a smile. Far from the obscure, alien-sounding words in “Sonmi”, language here is as close as it can get to the thing itself: “he spoke knuckly like savages”, “blissweed” or “no mornin’ for sluggybeddin” need no translation. Words are on a par with things anyway: “stones’n’shapes’n’words”. There are no fossilized words; language here is expressive, striking and vivid; simple answers and questions have become verbs: *to yay*, *to howzit* (how are you / is it with you), “to say-so somebody” (to order), *to naysay*, “there’s no but whying”. There is something very ‘practical’ in the expression “to coldwater the plan” and its exact

opposite “it fired hot” to refer to the success or failure of a project. “To hesitate” has a more expressive and ‘natural’ translation in the language of the future: “to donkey ’bout with it”. “Going back to some place very fast” is expressed by the metaphor of a rapid animal: “to back rabbit”. Our complicated words have been replaced by signifiers clearly expressing their meaning; thus if you are a veterinarian, what you do is indeed “animal doctoring”; the concept ‘nonsense’ tends to be more ‘vividly’ rendered in the new language: “animal farting”. The numerous comparisons in the text conjure up colourful images that make language all the more transparent and clear. Such sentences as these are very visual: “wriggling like eels on the sand”, “I was hooded like a goat b’fore slaught’rin”, “helpless as a strung-up lardbird bein’ bled from the hook”, “but the gone-lifes outnumber the now-lifes like leaf outnumber trees”.

If language is so different in both stories, it is because its very essence, its very substance has been ‘manipulated’ in two radically opposed ways.

In the two stories, language has taken different evolutionary paths. More particularly in “Sonmi”, it reveals the manipulation it has been subjected to. Indeed, the English language of the 22nd century would have been more corrupted than it is here, had it followed its natural evolution. In fact the Unique Party of the Corporation has mastered not only nature but also what is the most natural to man, that is to say their language. The irregular verbs for instance have been maintained. The natural process of simplification at work in any language has been curbed here through intervention. The linguistic DNA has been fixed once and for all: it is a *genomed* language. Repetitions, synonyms, superfluous or deviant elements are not seen in a good light by the Party as regards fabricants. The fabricant Yoona-939 became a suspect when she started using “irregular speech” and “finer-tuned” words. Language must conform to the mould sanctioned by Papa.

The absence of metaphors or any figure of speech in this language (“Sonmi”) is the symptom of a dispassionate language. It has reached the final stage Rousseau talked about in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, moving further away from its passionate, metaphorical initial state. For the French thinker indeed, language was metaphorical in its origin because it was born of man's passions: “As the first motives which brought man to speak were passions, his first words were tropes. Figurative language was the first to arise, the ‘proper’ meaning was found last [...] We started reasoning a long time afterwards” (Rousseau 1993: 63, our translation). The language of Sonmi is a rationalized language that has done away with human passions and emotions. Vowels are rare in this consonant-dominated language devoid of any imaginative power; for instance, “ex” is systematically replaced by a simple x: “we xited the overway at xit two” (Mitchell 323). In “Sonmi” the earth is poisoned, compelling the remaining citizens to keep to the

cities run by a power obsessed with property. This cleaning process has affected words too: language has been made 'proper'. What belonged before to the abstract, metaphysical sphere has now been brought down to the level of material elements. A "Soul" is the new word for a microchip. Hence the disappearance of metaphors or similes whose main function, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is to enable us to grasp abstract elements (Lakoff 1980: 115). Indeed metaphors permit us to put things in relation and open perspectives so as to create meaning and understand the world: "because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (emotions, ideas, time) we need to get a grasp on them by mean of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects...)". For instance, "love" can only be defined with the help of other concepts: "Love is madness", "Love is a journey", "Love is war" (Lakoff 115). By contrast, in the other story, metaphors are plentiful, which is understandable among survivors who try to grasp the world around them. Besides, the narrator, Zachry, is narrating the story of his life as a child when he tried to face and understand the adult world. For instance, he resorts to a metaphor in his attempt to describe what lies are: "Lies are Old Georgie's vultures what circle on high lookin' down for a runty'n'weedy soul to plummet'n'sink their talons in".

84

Sonmi comes close to reintroducing metaphors, as she moves away from Papa's catechism. The spheres she is bringing together are far apart and create a surprising vision: "The statue itself assumed a comic majesty", or "Snow is bruised lilac in half-lite". She is reintroducing some kind of tension inherent to metaphors according to Paul Ricoeur (1975). Indeed, for the French philosopher this trope always displays a tension between the "is" and the "is not" of a metaphorical sentence. In the expression "this man is a lion", he *is not* (literally) and *is* (metaphorically) a lion. The literal meaning yields to the new impertinent meaning while resisting it. Both meanings cohabit in a way. The State would not allow such resisting and impertinent tension in the meaning of words. Just like the Inner Party in Orwell's novel, it has taken hold of the identity of things and determines what is and what is not. Tension or dual cohabitation is unthinkable for the Party of *Unanimity*. The opposition they are fighting (*Union*) is non-metaphorically called "Cancer". It literally embodies a disease to be fought by the Party of cleanliness and health, as the vocabulary reveals: "The Juche's rounds of new Enrichment Statutes are sticking band aids on hemorrhages and amputations". All that used to be abstract now corresponds to something very physical in the 22nd century. "Evil" has taken up a very concrete embodiment:

Papa Song told us a gas called evil xists in the world; purebloods called terrorists breathe in this evil, and this gas makes them hate all that is free, orderly, good and corpopratic; a group of terrorists called Union had caused yesterday's atrocity by

infecting one of our own sisters, Yoona-939 of the Chongmyo Plaza Dinery, with evil. (Mitchell 196).

In this literal, orientated language, words have been reduced to one smoothed-out semantic layer with one fixed meaning. The Party has indeed tampered with the paradigmatic axis of language, condemning it as a lively and changing organism. This inability of language to deviate from its pre-assigned form has an equivalent at the diegetic level: indeed, we learn that the story Sonmi is narrating had a pre-planned outcome. Its end was contained in its beginning and Sonmi was aware of it from the start: she knew that the people supposed to be her accomplices in her “ascension” have always been part and parcel of the Party’s conspiracy to bring her down, with this aim in mind: “To generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture downstrata consent for the Juche’s new Fabricant Xpiry Act. To discredit Abolitionism. You can see, the whole conspiracy has been a resounding success” (Mitchell 349). The idea of circularity and impossible escape is in keeping with the stifling language of the story, too mechanical and paralysing to allow any escape into the unknown or to let imagination grow. Similarly, no escape into the past is possible; the latter is a “forbidden zone” (Mitchell 233). The Party has indeed eliminated all the elements belonging to Pre-consumer times: “An abbey had stood there for fifteen centuries, until Corpocracy dissolved the pre-consumer religions after the Skirmishes” (Mitchell 329). No cohabitation of elements belonging to different periods of time is thinkable: it would introduce some kind of dissemblance or dissymmetry in which tension and dualism could reappear. Language guarantees this erasure of the past, as old words have been discarded and forgotten. Having only one meaning, the new signifiers cannot hide any other. Linguistic ‘palimpsests’² are impossible since hypotexts have been deleted, washed clean.

Yet some hope remains and it is paradoxically to be found in language itself. Indeed if Sonmi played the game all the way till her preplanned arrest and condemnation, it is because she knew that her testimony would be read. Whether it is seen as “the ugliest wickedness in the annals of deviancy” does not matter. This piece of writing will somehow make its way through people’s minds and start ‘germinating’ there:

We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my *Declarations*, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve “blasphemies” now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide “Vigilance Day” against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold. [...] As Seneca warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor. (Mitchell 349)

Linguistic seeds can grow some kind of rebellious feelings when and where least expected. In the long run this germinating language will get the better of the genomed language, starting the ‘-ing process’ again. Sonmi seems to think that, like nature, language is resilient enough to counter any manipulative action. Like the genomed moth whose “wings’ logos had mutated over generations into a chance syllabary” and thus represents “a small victory of nature over corpocracy” (Mitchell 328), language may deviate from the linguistic route laid out by the Party.

It is precisely this linguistic resistance that is at stake in “Sloosha”. Unlike the other story, in this one language has not been tampered with. It is in the state it is in because of the circumstances. Apparently diminished, it has in fact found the strength to rebuild itself on a demolition site. In the process, grammar has simplified itself: most verbs have lost their irregularities (*I knowed, she thinned, I’d bringed, he finded, forbidde*), the plural is marked by a simple ‘s’ for all nouns now (*foots*); *was* applies invariably to singular as well as plural subjects (“we was eatin’”, “our bodies was”). The same simplification applies to comparatives, sometimes operating on the irregular forms (*badder, bestest*). It has a powerfully poetic aspect: far from the perfect, military sounds of the first language (as in “the crush of consumers cleared in an instant”, for instance), it seems to follow the rhythm of life. Hence the numerous superfluous elements; “n all” punctuates many phrases: “wise up my people’n’kin to the Prescient’s truesome plannin’n’all”. As life is, the text is full of redundant repetitions: “mocking us mocksome”. A binary rhythm gives the tempo to most phrases, making them sound as light as children’s songs: “Ma was flappin’n’anxin’”, “Pa was still lyin’n’bobbin’”, “Dawn fogged waxy’n’silty”, “bumpy’n’thorny”, “runty’n’weedy”, “not lazy’n’spotty”, “over knotty’n’rooty ground”. The childish-sounding words give a lively turn to the signifiers: “umb’licky word”, “nothin’ to be gained by dillyin’”, “a squeazywheezy”, “he snaky-snuck up a leafy hideynick”.

Far from being a one-layered language, words in “Sloosha” can sometimes be multi-layered. They indeed carry the burden of the Old Civilisation. The signifiers convey several meanings, dragging some remains of the past, forming a real palimpsest. They are sometimes funny (when we get what the *kole kole* girl refers to for instance), but they sometimes carry more scathing overtones. Just like in *Riddley Walker*, language seems to know things its speakers ignore: the word *Civ’lize* for instance insists on the sounds “lize” or “lies”, as if the most civilised and scientific of all countries had lied to its fellow-citizens not telling them everything about the bomb. Many portmanteau words offer an acrid denunciation of our civilization: the term *trespyin* mixes two ideas “to trespass / to spy”. Death seems to show through the new version of skeleton *skellyton* mixing such words as “skull/shell/hell/y”. *P’mision* seems to insist on the mission any permission gives rise to. But unlike what happens in *Riddley Walker* where people blindly trust

language—in which they are sure to find the secret of the bomb—, Zachry is conscious of the power of language and thus of the need to denounce it, as he mistrusts people's nice words: "You can't go trustin' folks what lassoop words so skillsome as him" "No un but me seen the arrow o'flatt'ry them words fired" (Mitchell 252), "her words was slipp'ry wrestlers they jus' flipped your nay into a yay" (Mitchell 254).

What we have growing here (in the form of the rhizome) is real germinating language. Not taking root anywhere, it simply follows the flow of life. As compared with the flat line on the electroencephalogram the one-layered language in "Sonmi" could represent, the accumulated 'n'n'n'n'n'n'n'n'n' could be an image of the heart oscillations signifying life. Yet, things are not so clear-cut. They tend to permanently oscillate between life and death, right and wrong. The wise prescient Meronym—a member of the remaining technologically-advanced civilisation who is visiting the primitive tribe the narrator belongs to— teaches Zachry that every single thing has two sides to it; it can never be one-sided and clear-cut:

List'n, savages an' Civ'lizeds ain't divid'd by tribes or b'liefs or mountain ranges nay, ev'ry human is both, yay. Old Uns'd got the Smart o' gods but the savagery o'jackals an'that's what tripped the Fall. Some savages what I knowed got a beaustome Civ'lized heart beatin' in their ribs. Maybe some Kona. Not'nuff to say-so their hole tribe. (Mitchell 303)

87

'Unanimity' is impossible: there always are and must be some counterbalancing elements. Thus Meronym reinstates the dualism and the dichotomies laid down in the first language, and claims the possibility of standing in-between. The "Sloosha" language itself, as a rhizomatic one, grows in the middle. Thus within the new spelling of *Hawai* can be read the questions of the survivors in regard to their lot: "Ha Why". A "lullaby" is now a *babbybye* oscillating between life (baby) and death (bye).

It is still possible for Zachry and his tribe to imagine a different future from the one they have, a possibility linguistically blocked in the other story: "an' 'magin' flyin' kayaks an' no-horse carts wheelyin' here'n'there" (Mitchell 285). But the term *'mazement* expresses people's ambivalent feelings concerning their future, oscillating between hope and loss: people are both ready to be 'amazed' and yet are lost in a "maze" where they cannot see very far ahead. Language conveys this ambivalent wish to go forward and the inability to do so. Likewise, the signifier *f'got* in its new spelling seems to hesitate between to get / to have and to forget / to abandon. Language does not exhaust itself in one fixed meaning: like the people, it has become nomadic, refusing to settle itself anywhere. Rhizomatic words can thus disseminate themselves on unknown territories and experiences, where everything is not rigorously set out for them in advance. Language has been set free. On the whole, it seems to have come back to the time when it was at its

most natural and this seems possible only because nature has regained its genuine place and function.

Conclusion

What can be said of the “Sloosha” story can also be said of Mitchell’s novel as a whole, as it seems to refuse to follow a straight chronological line: the six stories are indeed embedded in a Matryoshka doll fashion; the whole structure thus forms concentric spheres that do not allow the readers to settle anywhere; when they become familiar with a story, they are indeed suddenly “deterritorialized”—to use Deleuze’s term—and plunged into a new spatio-temporal universe. We never know where the next story is going to take us, just like the clouds in Sloosha’s last image: “Who can say where the cloud’s blown from or who the soul’ll be ’morrow? Only Sonmi the east an’ the west an’ the compass an’ the atlas, yay, only the atlas o’ clouds” (Mitchell 308).

The stories themselves are a palimpsest, drawing on very well-known literary styles (from the typical 19th century epistolary mode to the futuristic world and language that Huxley, Zamyatin, Orwell or Hoban have made us familiar with). The mosaic image Mitchell is building out of fragmented heterogeneous elements compels us to take a look at humanity’s social, literary and linguistic history from a distance. At first sight very pessimistic—all the stories depict characters in a stifling situation, and the embedded structure of the stories adds to the impression—, *Cloud Atlas* nourishes hope of some rhizomatic germination in the middle. And precisely the middle story, the only one which is uninterrupted, is the post-apocalyptic “Sloosha” story, where language is paradoxically at its most lively and essential, as if language and mankind needed to undergo such a trauma to be brought back in line with nature. Luckily, writers reinvigorate language for us before any catastrophe takes place. But Mitchell’s writing, like Orwell’s or Hoban’s, remains a warning.

88

Notes

¹. The first four stories take us from the South Pacific in the 19th century to 1931 Belgium, moving on to the seventies in California, and lastly today’s England, before focusing on 22nd-century Korea (Sonmi) and Hawaii in a distant future (Sloosha).

². We here refer to the title of Gérard Genette’s book, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), by which he means that a literary text can always hide another that it never manages to conceal entirely, so that the text often lends itself to a double reading where hypertext and hypotext are superposed.

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