

TRaversing the Fantasy in the Twenty-First Century Bildungsroman: The Ontological Quest and Lacanian Psychoanalysis in David Mitchell's *Number9dream*

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“[...] if we really want to change [...] our social reality, the first thing to do is change our fantasies that make us fit this reality”.

(Žižek 2010)

In the 2007 *Time* list of the 100 people who are transforming the world, British writer David Mitchell appears as the man who “created the 21st century novel” (Iyer 2007) with his debut *Ghostwritten*, published in 1999. Mitchell’s 2001 novel *number9dream* has predominantly been read in terms of the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age formula of a hero going out into the world to search for his identity and a place in society.¹ It is not difficult to see why: preceded by an epigraph taken from Don DeLillo’s debut *Americana*, “It is so much simpler to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams”, *number9dream* tells the story of nineteen-year-old Eiji Miyake, a daydreamer extraordinaire, arriving in Tokyo to search for the father whom he has never met, having grown up on a rural Japanese island. “What is a missing father but the absent source of the narrative of one’s own life?” as Jonathan Boulter poignantly noted apropos of Mitchell’s coming-of-age tale in his book on *Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (2011: 124).² That Eiji’s identity and position in the world are nothing short of muddled at the outset of his voyage is established in the course of the first chapter of the novel. Having just arrived in Tokyo on the verge of turning twenty, the narrator of his own story, Eiji

Miyake is a regular visitor to Tokyo's video game arcades, as well as to the café in which his love interest works. Moving in and out of temporary jobs, Eiji spends his leisure time mostly alone in bed in the capsule-room he rents above a video shop, where he principally daydreams, smokes cigarettes, and listens to the music of his all-time hero, the 'dreamer' John Lennon (whose song "#9dream" lends its title to the novel).

Surely fostered by the complex, mass-media infused realities of the late capitalist postmodern world Mitchell conjures up in *number9dream*, Eiji's achievement of 'self-knowledge' and 'awareness', the major goals of the traditional *Bildungsroman*,³ is primarily delayed by his own escapist pursuits and the generally reclusive and introverted lifestyle that characterize him in the early stages of the novel. These obstacles to the protagonist's achievement of maturity (as well as Eiji's more profound psychological problems, which are revealed as the narrative progresses) are likely to be overcome in the course of a *Bildungsroman* narrative, and, as many will argue, they are overcome to some extent in Mitchell's novel. But, assuming that *number9dream* at least partly fulfils these basic *Bildungsroman* goals, and the protagonist is ushered into the world as a more capable and clear-thinking young man than the man he was before, what exactly does this mean in the acutely *contemporary* context in which the narrative visibly operates?

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Kathryn Simpson's contribution to the first collection of essays published on David Mitchell⁴ helpfully discusses *number9dream* as a "postmodern *Bildungsroman*", a novel that "engage[s] in the process of redefining the coming-of-age narrative through a postmodern frame" (2011: 51). Simpson asserts that the novel shows Eiji attaining, through his various experiences, "a more adult perspective on the world" (2011: 68), though she also argues, taking her cue from Linda Hutcheon's 'parodistic' reading of postmodernist poetics, that this "humanist concern" of *number9dream* is at the same time "destabilize[d] and question[ed]" by the "knowingly postmodern qualities" of the novel. Referring more specifically to the excessively practiced "blurring of boundaries between reality, virtual reality and fantasy" (2011: 51),⁵ Simpson at once acknowledges the importance and centrality of fantasies and dreams to Eiji's ongoing creation of his identity and perceives them as counter-productive in this respect (2011: 69). As a result, for Simpson "the question that finally hangs over the novel is whether Eiji will or can ever stop dreaming" (2011: 70).

While agreeing with Simpson's point about the complex significance that dreams and fantasies assume in *number9dream*, this article proposes to adopt a different approach to it. Taking as my theoretical grounding the theory of Jacques Lacan, I argue that *number9dream* can be interpreted in terms of an individual's journey

into maturity achieved, not by abandoning dreams and fantasies, but by critically assessing them. Far from subordinating fantasies to the ‘reality principle’, as would be the case for more conventional coming-of-age tales, in Mitchell’s twenty-first-century *Bildungsroman*, as in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the notion of ‘reality’ itself comes under scrutiny. Where the *Bildungsroman* typically aims at the hero’s adjustment to the demands of reality, *number9dream*’s aim amounts to a task analogous to what Lacan called *la traversée du fantasme*, the ‘traversing, going-through’ of the fantasy —the subject’s critical engagement with his fantasies premised on the notion that the world that concerns him, rather than being always-already there, always emerges through his own ‘fantasmatic’ activities. Crucial to my argument is the Lacanian triad of the *Imaginary*, *Symbolic*, and *Real*, as well as Lacan’s notion of fantasy as set out in his *Seminars*. Viewed together with the interpretations this conceptual framework has received throughout the work of philosopher Slavoj Žižek, one of the leading contemporary exponents of Lacanian theory, Lacan’s triad and his concept of fantasy provide the main theoretical grounding of this article. Specifically pertinent is Žižek’s elaboration of Lacan’s concept of fantasy. As Žižek has shown, for Lacan fantasy is much more a part of reality than we expect: fantasy is not on the other side of reality but ‘beneath’ reality, sustaining it. In this context, Mitchell’s treatment of the *Bildungsroman* will be seen to follow a distinct (post-)postmodern aesthetic logic. While this logic is addressed only cursorily in most analyses of Mitchell’s fiction so far, Brian McHale’s seminal book on *Postmodernist Fiction* offers a useful beginning in this respect, and his study will constitute the second important theoretical source of this article.

My argument will be developed in two stages. Joining the discussion of Mitchell’s place in the context of twenty-first-century writing, the first part of the analysis will draw on Brian McHale’s well-known theory of postmodernist fiction to reformulate Simpson’s definition of *number9dream* as a postmodern *Bildungsroman*. Key in this task is what will be described here as the novel’s *ontological quest*. The second part of the analysis will then apply Lacan’s and Žižek’s ideas of subject- and reality-formation to a close reading of the novel from the point of view of what I see as its two major areas of ontological concern: ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reality’. Against this background, Mitchell’s aesthetic strategy, loosely describable as a combination of the *Bildungsroman* narrative and more experimental postmodern literary strategies, will emerge in its actual ‘non-reductive’ logic. This logic is neither attributable to the realist paradigm of the traditional *Bildungsroman* based on the ‘naïve’ opposition of fantasy and reality, obviously, nor the “self-evidently bizarre” (Bradford 2007: 67) scenarios of what has recently been labeled (too short-sightedly, I think) “New Postmodernist Fiction”.

1. What world? What Postmodernism?

Mitchell's *Bildungsroman* is organized as a series of thematic and formal explorations, all carried out against the backdrop of Eiji's problematic relationship with the world as he knows it. As Eiji's hunt for his father gains momentum in the novel, the protagonist's various forms of withdrawal from reality that are introduced in the novel's first chapter gradually turn out to be just the visible signs of more complex psychological issues. Moving through a series of twists and turns revolving around Eiji's bungled efforts to find the mysterious man, the ensuing chapters not only see Eiji descending deeper and deeper into the nightmarish underworld of the yakuza, but also burrowing deeper and deeper into the protagonist's own 'underworld'. In the midst of the various physical and psychological trials unfolding in these regions, the unacknowledged, repressed truth of Eiji's identity finally surfaces: we find out both about Eiji's mother (she abused, then abandoned him as a child, succumbing to alcoholism) and his twin sister Anju (she drowned when Eiji was eleven and has haunted her brother's memory ever since). Mixing elements of psychological novel and cyber-espionage thriller among other literary forms, and smoothly segueing between logical plot development and forays into Eiji's memory and dream life, Mitchell's "postmodern *Bildungsroman*", as Simpson has termed it, devotes itself with increasing fervor to the exploration of its protagonist's traumatized mind, though not single-mindedly so: Mitchell is also very much committed to exploring the reality of an inscrutable, implacable, and quite violent postmodern, late capitalist Tokyo, a mass media-infused place teetering between the states of 'real' and 'hyperreal'.

'Postmodernist' is a term widely used in the nascent Mitchell studies to describe the sheer flamboyance, excess, and heterogeneity of Mitchell's fiction. However, most discussions building on the notion of his fiction as postmodernist have either tended to reduce it to a specific kind of market-oriented, philosophically shallow postmodernism or have underestimated aspects essential to his work. Let me detail this a little. In *The Novel Now*, Richard Bradford discusses David Mitchell, along with Toby Litt, Matt Thorne, Will Self, Ali Smith, John Lanchester, and a number of other present-day novelists as part of a new brand of writers that he names the "New Postmodernists". According to Bradford, various as they may be in their concerns, these writers all have in common a more relaxed and affable relationship with the 'Postmodern Condition' when compared to their academic counterparts. Though, as Bradford underlines, the New Postmodernists, from Amis to Mitchell and Smith, are commonly schooled in the language and methodology of the postmodern theorists, where the likes of Foucault, Jameson, Eagleton, Baudrillard, Lyotard, or Derrida tended to write in a restless and agitated, and, in most cases, jargon-ridden manner about the intellectual and cultural state of nihilism they

believed defines the contemporary condition, the new fiction writers “have seized upon this as a saleable commodity” (2007: 67). Attuning their fiction to the demands of the marketplace, the New Postmodernists, Bradford claims, “create fictional scenarios that are precipitately and self-evidently bizarre and in doing so they both entertain the fashionably accomplished reader and confirm that the actuality of existence outside the novel is by implication reassuringly normal” (2007: 67).

Much as I agree that Mitchell’s fiction, like other recent existing work by emerging novelists around the world, can be seen as part of a ‘new’ form of postmodernism that readers are challenged to name for the twenty-first century—to bring to mind Linda Hutcheon’s challenge in 2002⁶—I would argue that Bradford’s attempt to do so misconstrues the philosophical tenor of, at least, Mitchell’s fiction. To take the example of *number9dream*, rather than “confirm[ing] the actuality of existence outside the novel”, the novel continues what McHale, in his seminal 1987 study of *Postmodernist Fiction*, determined as the “ontological skepticism” characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Simpson, Childs and Green (2011), and also Bayer (2014) have already noted *number9dream*’s concern with ontological issues, i.e. questions of *being* as opposed to questions of *knowing* (or ‘epistemology’) that were by McHale’s definition characteristic of modernist novels.⁷

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A further development of ideas hinted at by these scholars is taken up in this essay: that the crucial touchstone of Mitchell’s maneuver in *number9dream*, i.e. the characteristic ‘postmodernist’ giving of precedence to questions of *being* over questions of knowing, is precisely the ‘quest’ structure itself. This flexible heuristic structure, traditionally organized around such epistemological issues as how the hero establishes knowledge of himself and of a world to which he seeks to conform, is, I argue, reorganized by Mitchell in terms of what might be called an *ontological quest*. As a search for the very ‘being’ of the protagonist’s subjectivity and his life-world, this quest is not confined to investigating (as McHale had believed to be the case with modernist works) “What is there to be known? Who knows it? And to what degree of certainty?”, but, like the postmodernist works under examination in McHale’s study, extends to asking questions such as, “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (in McHale 1987: 10).

Extrapolated from Dick Higgins’ distinction between “cognitivist” and “postcognitivist” art (Higgins 1978), McHale’s theory of postmodernist fiction remains an essential tool in dealing with the ongoing ontological interest of much of present-day writing in general and Mitchell’s fiction in particular. Different as Mitchell’s work may be in content, style, and scope from that of the first-generation postmodernist writers such as Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, Barthelme, or Brooke-Rose, to name but a few of these well-established figures, my contention is that in

terms of its underlying philosophical assumptions, Mitchell's fiction carries further, possibly even outreaches, the ontological project initiated by his postmodern predecessors.

An example of what I have in mind is the exploration of the idea of 'Multiple Reality' that takes place in the first chapter of *number9dream*, named "PanOpticon" after the Tokyo skyscraper in which Eiji's only connection to his father at that stage, the law firm his father is consulting, is situated. In close resemblance to the diegetic world of a video-game that is not 'closed' but multiplied into the plurality of several possible versions of itself, the chapter stages Eiji's imaginative testing of methods for contacting his unknown father, and generates a range of different scenarios with different outcomes of the same basic plot. At the beginning of Chapter one, we witness Eiji sitting in a café across the street from the building where he believes he will find clues about his father, when the narrative suddenly begins to navigate us through what seems like a cyberpunk video game sequence, in which Eiji walks out of the café and shoots his way into the PanOpticon to steal a file on his father. This fantasy is suddenly interrupted by another scene in the café, which demonstrates that the preceding was just a figment of Eiji's imagination. In this next scene, a scenario of biblical proportions is introduced, in which the whole city is submerged in a flood and Eiji dies in a spectacular rescue mission. Another imaginary attack executed by Eiji on the PanOpticon building follows a few pages into the chapter, this time resulting in Eiji tracking his father's lawyer Kat into a movie theatre where she has a rendezvous with him. While all of these scenes are figments of Eiji's tight-strung, hyper-inventive imagination—daydreams in which he indulges as he gazes at the PanOpticon, smoking cigarettes and seeking to summon up the courage to actually walk over to the building—we are deceived each time as to the proper locations of these fantasies, the highly 'unreliable narrative' moving almost seamlessly between the real-life café-setting and the various 'screens' of Eiji's consciousness (whose actual nature is presented as that of a video game's constantly reloading surfaces).

However, ingeniously and elaborately handled though it may be, the unreliability of the narrative in this chapter—epistemological concern par excellence—is not its essential point at all. Even though there are several textual markers of unreliable narration in this chapter, including the computer icons that graphically announce the beginning of each new daydream of Eiji's, as well as Eiji's statements, such as, "I would shoot her but I left my Walther PK in my last fantasy" (Mitchell 2001: 27), all enabling us to discern what is 'really' happening and what occurs only in Eiji's daydreams, it is not even *crucial* to interrogate this chapter for its narrative unreliability. As McHale might argue, the point of this chapter, epitomizing the concern of the novel at large, is arguably that it gives rise to *ontological* questions

instead. Overall, the novel's semantic principle could be said to be to create uncertainty about the very *being* of Eiji's world, which remains even after the epistemological questions, the questions of Eiji's narratorial reliability, have been settled. Regardless of whether the bulk of Chapter one is ultimately revealed as a figment of Eiji's imagination, once we have been navigated through the multitude of worlds Mitchell conjures up for us here (as well as in subsequent parts of the novel) a destabilization concerning what Eiji's reality might be is definitely effected.

In the light of this, it seems that the novel indulges in the specific kind of ontological skepticism that is now urged upon us by recent developments in quantum physics: Žižek has described this as the uncanny sense that there is never only one ontologically constituted reality, never one final version of reality, but that reality itself is split open into a multitude of parallel realities. In his reading of quantum theory's more daring postulates about the nature of our reality, the actuality of our present reality does not mean that other realities are simply cancelled out. On the contrary, these alternative realities supposedly continue to exist somewhere else, haunting and interacting with our present reality.⁸ Applied to *number9dream*, this interaction of different realities is what happens, for example, in the above-quoted scene where Eiji recalls having left his pistol "in another fantasy". It is this notion of reality being irreducibly multiple, this sense of radical ontological openness, that continues to reverberate throughout the whole novel, even after we discern the unreliability of parts of its narrative.

In his review of *number9dream*, Robert MacFarlane wrote about the spirit of Mitchell's book, "This is the mind of postmodern youth, Mitchell seems to be saying, weaned on computer games, movies, online multiverses and habituated to an incorrigible plurality of realities" (2011). The sense of ontological openness radiated by Mitchell's twenty-first-century *Bildungsroman* is well-condensed in these words, and they may be taken to suggest that Mitchell is part of a new generation of postmodernists indeed, albeit one that may be said to supersede the ontological skeptics McHale wrote about in 1987. While the writers discussed in *Postmodernist Fiction* moved to interrogate the ontologies of their (fictional) worlds because, as McHale explains in a footnote in his book, the epistemological skepticism that had been the focus of the preceding, 'modernist' generation was already established as something they could take for granted (1987: 237), Mitchell might be said to write at a point in history where this ontological skepticism itself, in turn, is beginning to be taken for granted. Promulgated even by the natural sciences ('quantum theory'), ideas of ontological skepticism such as the notion of different possible worlds coexisting, which early postmodernist writers were the first to bring into awareness, are now widely disseminated. While any more

scrupulous evaluation of Mitchell's place in contemporary writing begs questions that clearly go beyond the scope of this essay,⁹ future research might begin to engage with them and so to reconsider labels such as "New Postmodernists", inasmuch as, as in Bradford's study, they do not so much point to something 'new' as to a reduced, philosophically shallow manifestation of postmodernism, something that, I would insist, cannot do justice to Mitchell's fiction.

2. The Lacanian triad and the 'precariousness' of reality

In what follows, I would like to use Lacan's theory for a discussion of what I have named *number9dream's ontological quest*, particularly of what I regard as the novel's two main areas of ontological concern— subjectivity and reality. To elucidate the place of these areas in Lacanian theory, I shall briefly outline Lacan's concept of *Imaginary-Symbolic-Real*. A segmentation of human experience into the three registers of these names, Lacan's triad suggests that the world, as we know it, does not simply 'exist' but rather depends on our structuring activity to constitute itself. As elaborated on by Žižek, this proto-poststructuralist notion goes back as far as Kant, who had realized, in Žižek's words, that "reality is non-all, ontologically not fully constituted, so it needs the supplement of the subject's contingent gesture to obtain a semblance of ontological consistency" (2000: 158). In contrast to the pre-Kantian world-view that the world is something that pre-exists the subject, a given environment for the subject to explore—a view implicitly asserted by any traditional *Bildungsroman*— Lacan argued that the world, as we know it, is not without the subject. As Žižek reads Lacan's theory, the world in its 'pure state' is nothing but an ontological chaos, a multitude of undirected potentiality, the utterly unimaginable, protocosmic abyss of undifferentiated matter which Lacan placed under the notion of 'Real'. Far from being—as the term 'Real' and its capitalization in much of contemporary Lacan criticism (Žižek's included) might suggest—the 'true' reality behind our everyday world of symbolic 'appearances', the *Real* in Lacan's (and Žižek's) theory is related to trauma, to the Unconscious, to the uncontrollable contingency of chance and haphazardness, to the incestuous Mother-Thing, as well as to the excess of sensory experience Lacan termed *jouissance*. When or how does something like 'reality' become possible, though?

In *Seminar VII*, in the section "On Creation Ex Nihilo", Lacan suggests that a certain blockage, a certain repression of the pre-ontological Real must occur before the world, as we know it, can begin to constitute itself. An act must take place which introduces an emptiness into the Real, a void that allows for the binary play of presence and absence of signification which we perceive as 'reality' to take

place.¹⁰ For Lacan, this act of ‘voiding’, of ‘repressing’ the Real (which he baptizes the “Thing” with an eye toward both Heidegger’s ‘empty’ vase from which he takes his cue and the Freudian ‘lost’ Mother-Thing), simultaneously marks the birth of the subject. It is the very gesture by which the subject ‘attains itself’, by which it ‘posits itself’ as an object distinct from its surroundings. By evacuating the Real/Thing from its life-world, Lacan argues, the subject creates the very place from which it can initially appear to itself as distinct from itself; it attains the inner distance towards itself that allows for self-awareness, for ‘consciousness’ of itself which defines it as a subject. Thus, no longer associated with the subordination under the symbolic Law as in other parts of Lacan’s teachings, the subject in Lacan’s *Seminar VII* emerges as the “first signifier”, as the stroke of creation that by grounding itself, ‘ex nihilo’, via the introduction of a void into the Real, simultaneously grounds the ontological order that it perceives as reality. With reference to the full Lacanian triad, both the subject and what it perceives as reality can be said to be henceforth organized, beginning with that foundational moment, through a complex interplay between the orders of the Imaginary (the order of images and semblances with which we identify and through which we desire) and the Symbolic (the discursive network of cultural meaning, or the ‘big Other’, as Žižek refers to it, which structures our social practices and defines our symbolic identity), while the *Real* is what is necessarily kept at bay by the other two orders for our experience of reality (and of ourselves as ‘subjects’) to be sustained.

Lacan’s doctrine of the creation of reality ‘ex nihilo’, via the evacuation of the Real, besides asserting the active, creative role of the subject which conventional approaches to Lacan’s theory usually overlook, is also illuminating with regard to what is perhaps the crucial point about Lacan’s understanding of *reality*: the assertion of its “precarious status”, as Lacan termed it (1997: 30). According to Žižek, for Lacan, reality is inherently fragile. Because Lacan conceives of reality as something that is based on the exclusion of the Real, reality itself, for him, is marked by a central impossibility, a central void at its heart, which renders it ‘non-all’, ‘perforated’, and ‘inconsistent’ from the beginning. And, as Žižek has repeatedly shown, this is where fantasy comes in: formally indicated as the ‘frame’ of the triad of Imaginary-Symbolic-Real, fantasy is what acts as reality’s ‘support’, its fundamental ‘supplement’. It obfuscates, ‘veils’ the void around which reality is organized and so enables reality to be perceived as a consistent whole. “As soon as we renounce fiction and illusion,” Žižek says, “we lose reality itself; *the moment we subtract fictions from reality, reality itself loses its discursive-logical consistency*” (2003: 88-9; emphasis in the original). It is here, then, that the Lacanian Real displays its affinity, indeed its synonymy, with the term *trauma*: according to Lacan, our entire experience of reality ultimately turns on the repression of the Real and on how something conforms to our fantasies, images and symbolic codes,

an ‘encounter with the Real’ is one of the privileged names in Lacanian (and Žižekian) theory for a traumatic event, an event outside the range of usual human experience, which cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe and persists as the ‘hard kernel’ of the Real on which our reality ‘chokes’.¹¹

3. The Real as pre-ontological multitude and trauma in *number9dream*

This arguably provides the background for conceiving of Mitchell’s *ontological quest* in both its subject-oriented and world-oriented dimensions (if they can be thus separated at all). Returning to the previously discussed ontological openness of Eiji’s life-world depicted in Chapter one, this surely can now be seen in its analogy to the Lacanian idea of a ‘pre-ontological Real’, of a reality that is not yet fully determined, but, as Žižek once pointedly suggested in the context of a discussion of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s films, a reality which exists as a “primordial, pre-symbolic, inchoate ‘stuff’”, as the neutral medium that has not yet attained its definite version (cf. 2001: 95). Fittingly, Mitchell, in this chapter borrows from the diegetic logic of multiple reality video games as well as from the aesthetic of surrealist films to articulate the vision of an unformed proto-reality of the Real, of a reality that never pre-exists our fantasy-frames but is always found to emerge through them. As testified by this chapter, the formal heterogeneity of *number9dream* thus does not at all amount to the domesticated, consumer-friendly play with the vocabulary and methodology of postmodernism that Bradford had considered it to be. Placed in the context of what I have called Mitchell’s *ontological quest*, the various narrative and reality frameworks employed throughout the novel clearly work to display (and explore) both the questing individual and the world he must deal with in their radical contingency, plurality and potentiality, in their constant process of being determined, realized, performed, and re-enacted through various fantasmatic activities.

The Real, in its other sense of ‘trauma’, plays a crucial role in understanding the specifically subject-focused dimension of *number9dream* —the actual coming-of-age narrative centering on Eiji’s development, which is the objective of the remainder of this analysis. Defining this dimension as Eiji’s journey towards accepting his sister’s death and coming to terms with his parents, Simpson has called into question the success of this journey, interpreting the frequent and continual overlapping of fantasy and reality that characterize it as signals of Eiji’s escapism and self-deception, and ultimately decrying Eiji’s dreams as counter-productive to his journey towards self-knowledge and understanding (cf. 2011: 69).

By contrast, I would contend that fantasy plays a constitutive role in Eiji's process towards achieving these goals, because "[i]t is through such alternative forms of speech that trauma finds a way to be heard" (Bayer 2014: 132). A consideration of Eiji's voyage from the point of view of the *ontological quest* and the Lacanian Real shows how both his success in attaining maturity and recovering from his traumas effectively rely on Eiji's fantasmatic activities. At the beginning of the novel, Eiji's psychological stance may be described as 'escapism', indeed, as the running away from past traumatic events, such as the painful details surrounding his twin sister Anju's death, for which Eiji has held himself responsible ever since, as well as the fact and circumstances of his father's absence, which, as is recounted in Chapter two, so deeply traumatized his unstable mother that she attempted to kill her son by throwing him over the balcony when he once cried 'Daddy' as a child. In "Lost Property," Eiji describes his familial relations in the following words:

I'm used to my mother being out there, somewhere, but not too near. Things are painless that way. If I move anything, I'm afraid it will start all over again. [...] If this is a cop-out then, okay, a rubber-stamped 'Cop-Out' is my official response. It is my father's 'nowhere' that I can handle, not my mother's 'somewhere'. (Mitchell 2001: 75)

As suggested by this quote, Eiji has learned to cope with his parental issues by keeping them at a 'safe distance' from his immediate reality. However, from a Lacanian point of view, the function of this 'strategy of avoidance' is more complex than that: when taking into consideration Lacan's reality/Real distinction the strategy of turning away from the subject of his parents cannot so easily be identified as a 'cop-out', a form of simply 'disconnecting from reality', on the part of Eiji. On the contrary, given what Lacan referred to as the 'precariousness' of reality in its relation to the Real, Eiji's very experience of reality can be seen to depend on the fact that issues surrounding his parents are in some way suppressed or made irrelevant: in so far as they resist proper assimilation into Eiji's symbolic universe, his parents emerge as traumatic 'kernels of the Real' that impede his very (symbolic) access to reality. This same structure of the Real resisting symbolization and affecting the perception of reality is key to understanding the position of his dead sister in Eiji's memory. Once Eiji reflects that in his memories, "Parts of Anju are too bright, parts of Anju are so dark she isn't even [t]here" (Mitchell 2001: 47), which clearly suggests that his sister, having acquired the status of Real through her death, no longer fits into the allotted space of Eiji's 'normal', symbolized memories and instead persists either in the strange, uncanny mode of 'too real' or as a disturbing void in Eiji's symbolic universe.

If the Real is what has no place in the 'reality' of the symbolic, working to 'derealize' it, it is not surprising that the privileged scene of its occurrence is the 'unreality' of dreams, as Lacan famously suggested in his section on trauma in

Seminar XI, “Tuché and Automaton”. In it, Lacan argues that a traumatic encounter with the Real experienced in ‘reality’, which is essentially a *missed* encounter in the first instance, not fully grasped when it occurred, inevitably returns to haunt us later on, erupting in terrible scenarios in our dreams and nightmares, so that, in one of Lacan’s famous quips, we awaken into reality as an escape from the Real, to escape the horror of the trauma we encountered in the dream.¹² Mitchell explores this theme of the return of the traumatic Real in the dream throughout the numerous dreams Eiji has of his sister, in which various scenarios of her death and its circumstances are repeatedly enacted, prompting Eiji to awaken precisely before the dreaded moment of her death is about to (re)occur.

The theme of nightmares returning us to our repressed psychic truths is taken up in a different way in the chapter entitled “Reclaimed Land”, where Eiji, kidnapped by a yakuza gang, learns from one of the yakuza members that nightmares are “our wilder ancestors returning to reclaim land, [...] sent by who, or what, we *really* are, underneath” (Mitchell 2011: 190). This idea of our *real* being having a ghastly, traumatic character, spelled out to us by our nightmares, strictly corresponds to the Lacanian assertion of our waking reality being merely a ‘cloak’ beneath which lurks the Real of our being that was covered over for our (social) reality to emerge, the repressed Real-Thing of our pre-linguistic existence which, like all things repressed, makes its return as trauma, ‘speaking itself’ in the netherworld of our fantasies and dreams. The theme of our repressed origin in the Real as trauma is fully developed in the novel’s subsequent chapter, “Study of Tales”, where Eiji is shown to awaken after his nightmarish spree with the yakuza in the house of a writer of fantastic tales. One of these tales, which Eiji finds and reads as he recovers in the writer’s house, metonymically relates both to Eiji’s quest for his origins and the trauma of his sister’s death. This surrealistic tale describes the search of an anthropomorphic “Goatwriter” for the “truly untold tale”, and ends with Goatwriter’s drowning in a pool where he was told he would find the source of the tale. Recognizing the fable of Goatwriter as a tale about the search for origins, Simpson has suggested that “Goatwriter’s obsessive quest for the originary ‘truly untold tale’ acts as a warning [to Eiji] that to pursue a quest for origins to the limits is actually to embrace death; death is the only truly untold tale, a tale only fully understood by an experience that cannot be narrated” (2011: 59).

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4. The ‘Ninth Dream’ and the traversing of the fantasy

On a brighter note, it is important to note that the finding of the ‘truly untold tale’ is something close to what Lacan called *la traversée du fantasme*, the ‘going-through, traversing of the fantasy’, which, as remains to be shown, epitomizes the

thematic core of the novel as a whole. In Lacan's theory, the traversing of the fantasy is the painful road the analysand must travel in order to reach the 'psychoanalytic cure'. It is a process in which the subject's fantasies, which regulated his access to reality, are brought to their zero-point by being traced to their unassimilable point of reference, to the void (of the Real) around which they were fundamentally organized. For Lacan, this traumatic experience of the void that effectively lies at the heart of the subject's entire symbolic reality, the void of the Real no longer veiled by fantasmatic formations (an experience, which indeed equals "subjective destitution", the momentary disintegration of the subject's identity), is crucial for therapeutic change: in order for the subject to reconstitute his fantasy-frame —the implication here being that, *even after* the psychoanalytic process, fantasy will remain the subject's only access to reality, though analysis can help him attain a 'sunder' fantasy-frame than the one previously available to him— he must first pass through his fantasies and experience that there is nothing behind them, nothing but the traumatic Real —the 'truly untold tale', as it were, that is present only as the radical absence of all symbolic meaning. It is only when the subject has thus 'exposed', and, by implication, transcended, his fantasmatic network, only when he is momentarily 'awakened' from the fantasies that had sustained his experience of reality up to that point, that the slate is clean for the actual therapeutic work, for the reconstitution of his fantasy-frame that allows the subject to regain access to reality on new terms.¹³

The closest the novel comes to effectively spelling out the idea of the 'traverse of the fantasy' that is its structural anchor is at the end of Chapter eight, when the 'meaning' of the '*ninth dream*' is finally revealed: in the novel, Eiji learns it from John Lennon himself. In a cameo appearance in one of Eiji's final dreams, the musician explains to Eiji the meaning of the title of his song "#9dream" with the words: "The ninth dream begins after every ending" (2001: 398). Implicitly, the 'ninth dream' —when read with Lacan as the therapeutic watershed that follows after the traverse of one's fantasy— figures at various pivotal points in the novel, each time indicating the momentary disintegration and subsequent reconfiguration of Eiji's fantasy-frame. Regarding the fantasy-frame sustaining Eiji's melancholic attachment to his dead sister, which Eiji comes to 'substitute' with his inchoate romance with Ai (the waitress in the café he met upon his arrival in Tokyo, a girl that in many ways resembles his sister), the moment of the 'ninth dream' is effected by a revealing dream Eiji has of his sister and Ai, which makes him realize that it is now time to let Anju go in favor of exploring his romantic feelings for his friend (see Mitchell 2011: 402-404).¹⁴ It is crucial that Eiji himself decodes his dream in this way, even discussing its meaning with Ai, demonstrating that he has now 'made conscious' and, thus, 'transcended' his fantasmatic attachment to his sister. Only now, this raises the question of whether he is ready to move on, not to some

‘true’ reality but rather to a new fantasy-network that will coordinate the way he desires his new ‘object’. Clearly, the step toward this new fantasy-frame is pivotal for Eiji’s coming-of-age experience, as it indicates that Eiji is thus moving away from a sense of self premised on loss and melancholic attachment and toward realizing his potential as a subject separate from his ‘twinned self’, as a young adult who is capable of forming intimate relationships beyond his family context. Simpson has argued this point in a similar way (2011: 50).

In regard to Eiji’s other major task of tackling and transcending the fantasy-frame through which he conceived of his parents (and so to overcome his feelings of loss and resentment), the main ‘analytic’ part of this work is arguably accomplished in the immersive realm of cyberspace, where Eiji’s quest takes him in the Chapter “Video Games”. This chapter sees Eiji playing several interactive virtual reality games with electronic versions of his parents, in which he has fights and conversations with his parents, mysteries surrounding his parentage are unravelled, and, as Simpson has perspicaciously noted, “Eiji plays out his anxieties, loss and guilt” (2011: 65). From a Lacanian point of view, Eiji’s engagement with his parental issues through the medium of cyberspace can thus, again, be seen as a process coextensive with the ‘going-through’ of fantasy: the cyberspace games enable Eiji not only to externalize his unconscious fantasies and aggressions, and so to experience and respond to conflicts and emotions with which he never had the opportunity to deal in reality (in the sense of what Freud called ‘working through’), but in playing out his fantasies, in literally treating them in a playful, self-ironic way, he achieves a minimum of reflective distance towards them; he becomes *aware* of his fantasies *as he stages them*, thus, effectively undermining the hold they exert over him.¹⁵

With the ‘analytic’ part of his process towards working out his parental issues thus largely accomplished, it is quite appropriate that the actual meeting with his parents pending in the novel takes an utterly unspectacular, anticlimactic form when it does occur: the chance meeting with his father, via what is described as “a cart trick that Tokyo has performed” (Mitchell 2001: 370), lasts a mere page of text and involves Eiji’s recognition that he is no longer interested in getting to know the man, which signifies, as Boulter has aptly remarked, “the end of the fantasmatic idea of the father” (2011: 129); and the meeting with his mother, effected by Eiji in an attempt at reconciliation, soon results in both agreeing on a new relationship beyond the realm of traditional family ties, suggesting that Eiji has, by that point, abandoned the dysfunctional mother-son framework previously in place (as has his mother, apparently).¹⁶

The ‘ninth dream’, the point at which all fantasy and potential chance for a new beginning ends, is last and most powerfully in evidence just prior to the novel’s

conclusion, when, in a final twist of plot, a catastrophic ‘intrusion of the Real’ throws Eiji’s entire symbolic universe out of joint, brutally awakening him from his dreams and plunging him into the gaping hole of traumatic nothingness. Eiji, back in his island home at the end of the novel, in the midst of dreaming a creationist dream which interweaves the mythic origins of Japan with the death of his sister, is abruptly awakened by a radio announcement that a massive earthquake has struck the Tokyo region. Faced with the terrible Real of the natural disaster, Eiji is thus awakened to a reality in which, as *number9dream*’s Lennon puts it, apropos of the ‘ninth dream’ in the Random House edition of the book, “all dreams and all meanings appear to be dead and gone”. This is where Eiji’s imagination takes him, in the novel’s final passage:

I would give anything to be dreaming right now. Anything. Are the airwaves and cables jammed because half the phone users in the country are trying to call the capital, or because Tokyo is now a landscape of rubble under clouds of cement dust? [...] I imagine a pane of glass exploding next to Ai’s face, or a steel girder crashing through her piano. I imagine a thousand things. I grab my bag, slide down the hallway, scrunch my feet into my trainers, and scrape open the stubborn door. And I begin running. (Mitchell 2001: 418)

As this final passage suggests, Eiji, at the end of his coming-of-age journey, is not only finally awake to his identity as an adult who now needs to reach out and help others, but he is likewise alerted to how fantasy is the ultimate support and horizon of his sense of reality: thrown back to the zero-point of his symbolic universe by the intrusion of the contingent, traumatic Real, which momentarily disrupts the orderly flow of symbolization and causes his very sense of reality to snap, Eiji implicitly understands the ‘ontological’ lesson of Lacanian theory: fantasy ensures our access to reality; it is a world-making, reality-generating practice, enabling us to escape/tame the excessive nature of the ‘raw’ Real that would otherwise overwhelm us. This is testified by Eiji’s desperate, self-aware attempts to ‘picture’, to actively ‘imagine’ the situation in Tokyo before uttering his final words, “And I begin running”. Indeed, Eiji’s “running” at this point may well indicate his first steps toward reconstituting his fantasy-frame to cope with the Real of the catastrophe. However, how this new ‘world-making’ quest may be accomplished by Eiji is left for the reader to imagine; Mitchell chooses to end the narrative at the point of the protagonist’s ‘ninth dream’, the space of a momentarily absent or suspended fantasy-frame, represented typographically by the blank pages that constitute the ninth and last chapter of the novel.

In *number9dream*, Mitchell both relies on the literary form of the *Bildungsroman* and at the same time transforms it. By ‘ontologizing’ the quest, Mitchell moves the nineteenth-century genre away from its traditional preoccupation with depicting subjects in the process of acquiring knowledge of worlds (to which they

seek to adjust) and toward becoming a space for exploring practices of *making* subjects and worlds, a space in which the creative potential of fantasy, far from being reducible to postmodernist linguistic play, is taken as seriously as it is in the work of Lacan and Žižek. In an article in the *New Statesman*, the latter stated that, “[t]o choose between ‘either accepting reality or choosing fantasy’ is wrong: if we really want to change or escape our social reality, the first thing to do is change our fantasies that make us fit this reality” (2010). Žižek’s witty inversion of the classic Marxist doctrine that social change can only be made possible through a change of the material conditions is, indeed, perhaps a fitting starting point from which to readdress/reformulate the final question raised by *number9dream*: from the vantage point of the analysis undertaken here, if we assume that fantasy is the very basis of social and individual reality (rather than their embellishment) and, thus, the very starting point of every change, then the question apropos of Eiji’s success in passing from youth to manhood is not “whether Eiji can or will ever stop dreaming,” as Simpson had suggested, but rather how he will continue dreaming: how, having ‘traversed’ the fantasies that sustained his life as he knew it, Eiji will go on re-fashioning his dreams and fantasies so as to make them sustain and, indeed, open the door to his new identity as a rational and responsible adult. The future may be unwritten for Eiji, as Mitchell’s blank ninth chapter obviously suggests, but as far as Mitchell is concerned, from a Žižekian point of view, his ‘transformation’ of the *Bildungsroman*, of the art form *par excellence* of dealing with social reality, suggests that he is well on the way to establishing himself as a ‘writer who is transforming the world’, as he was called in his *Time 100* profile.

Notes

¹. Implicitly, this relies on the notion that “the journey is one of the most common metaphors for individual maturation”, as has been argued by Franco Moretti in his seminal study of the *Bildungsroman*, *The Way of the World* (1987: 93).

². For readings and reviews of *number9dream* as a *Bildungsroman*, see especially Simpson’s essay and also Roe’s and McFarlane’s reviews of *number9dream*.

³. Here, I take my cue from Simpson’s definition of Eiji’s quest (2011: 51).

⁴. The volume *David Mitchell: Critical Essays* (2011) resulted from the first Mitchell Conference which took place at the University of St Andrews in 2009.

⁵. Simpson here refers to Hutcheon’s article “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism”, in which Hutcheon proposed that postmodern forms “use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways” (1987: 10).

⁶. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon writes that as “the postmodern moment has passed”, “[p]ost-postmodernism needs a new label of its own and [she] challenge[s] readers to find it—and name it for the twenty-first century” (2002: 181; in Boxall 2007: 59).

⁷. Simpson discerns in *number9dream* “a sense of ontological uncertainty” (2011: 53), but her analysis goes on to focus on the novel’s epistemological concerns, such as Eiji’s unreliability as a narrator, the self-reflective status that storytelling takes on in the narrative, and the meaning of structures of doubling and substitution for Eiji’s quest. In a similar fashion, Childs and Green refer to *number9dream* in terms of “a model of ontological instability where multiple imaginary dimensions interpenetrate each other” (2011: 41), but choose not to pursue this idea any further. An interesting additional perspective on this issue is introduced by Gerd Bayer, who draws on Geoffrey Hartman

to argue that the omnipresence of invented realities in *number9dream* leads to something that Hartman describes as “a general weakening of the sense of reality” (in Bayer 2014: 130). Tellingly, Bayer points out that this “derealization” is used in *number9dream* as a potential strategy to engage with traumatic experience—something that effectively links *number9dream* to the broader context of post-postmodern literature dealing with questions of trauma. Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s notion of “traumatic realism” as detailed in his book of the same name (see Bayer 2014: 131), Bayer’s approach shares with my own the view that the various modes of ‘derealization’ used in *number9dream*, such as the encroaching of virtual game realities on Eiji’s actual reality, the dreamlike return of Eiji’s lost memories, and the manifold fantasies in which he indulges throughout the novel, fit better with the fact of traumatic extremity than any conventionally realistic form of representation might. I will return to this point in the part of this essay discussing the role of trauma in *number9dream* through the theories of Lacan and Žižek.

⁸. Preferably applied by Žižek to cinema, ideas of quantum theory pervade his work. See particularly his 2001 book on Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski (and the debate *Between Theory and Post-Theory* in recent film studies), *The Fright of Real Tears*, to which my understanding of quantum theory is largely indebted.

⁹. The first sustained engagements with the characteristics and concerns of the fiction of the new millennium of which Mitchell is part are offered by Peter Boxall’s book on *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013) and the volume of essays on *Twenty-First Century Fiction* edited by Siân Adishesia and Rupert Hildyard (2013).

¹⁰. Lacan here takes the vase in Heidegger’s essay “Das Ding” as the prototype of such creation ‘ex nihilo’, a vase defined as an object “created around [...] emptiness” (Lacan 1997: 121).

¹¹. See Lacan's famous definition of the "encounter with the Real" which "in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter" presents itself to psychoanalytic practice "in the form of the trauma" (1998: 55).

¹². See Lacan 1998: 55 ff.

¹³. For Lacan's notion of the traverse of fantasy see his *Seminar XI* (1998: 273).

¹⁴. See Simpson (2011) for a detailed discussion of the complex processes of duplication and substitution in the novel between Anju and Ai.

¹⁵. For more detailed engagements with the psychoanalytical-philosophical implications of cyberspace on which my

argument here relies see Žižek's essays "The Cyberspace Real" and "Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?" (1999).

¹⁶. Discussing Eiji's growing willingness to move beyond the family narrative from the point of view of Freud's concept of the 'family romance', Bayer (2014) has offered a compelling analysis of the importance —and potential threat— of patriarchal hierarchies for Eiji's process of maturation. Bayer perceptively shows in his essay how these hierarchies are present in *number9dream* both in Eiji's core family and at the national level of a historical Japan which Eiji's great-uncle, as Eiji finds out in the chapter Kai Ten, had died for in a suicide mission during World World II.

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