Decentring the Individual Subject: The Perpetual Recycling of the Narrating "I" in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*

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Summary

British author David Mitchell's debut novel *Ghostwritten*, published in 1999, has been lauded for its innovative nine-part structure, in which each chapter is presented as a first-person narrative that involves, each time, a different narrator with a different story. Mitchell himself describes this arrangement as a way to "locate meaning in randomness [...] Each chapter offers a different reason why its events unfold as they do" (Begley 2010: 5). Such a postmodern concern with randomness is evident when the ostensible self-sufficiency of the individual account is undermined by the arbitrary, often mysterious (re)appearance of one or the other narrator as character in another's story. Interestingly, these surprise appearances, of what could be called the "experiencing other", work to undermine the centrality of the narrator's story – of what could be called the "master narrative". This destabilisation is compounded in characteristic postmodern fashion by the continual displacement of the narrating "I" from one chapter to the next. Thus, while the "I" remains – or seems to remain – a constant throughout, the individual subject is ceaselessly recycled as the experiencing other in different guises; it is a process that apparently denies the formation of an individual identity, thus ratifying the postmodern anxiety about the end of individuality. However, as I argue in this article, it is precisely this continual recycling that affords the decentred subject a chance at individuality. In a telling deconstructive gesture, Mitchell's novel bypasses the transcendental Subject to allow a space in which the plural subject can claim its identity, paradoxically, as a singular entity.

Opsomming

Die Britse skrywer David Mitchell se debuutroman *Ghostwritten*, gepubliseer in 1999, word geag vir sy innoverende nege-ledige struktuur, waar elke hoofstuk aangebied word as 'n eerste-persoons vertelling wat elke keer 'n ander verteller met 'n eie storie behels. Mitchell self beskryf hierdie samestelling as 'n poging om sin te vind midde verwarring: "Each chapter offers a different reason why its events unfold as they do" (Begley 2010: 5). So 'n postmoderne belang in ewekansigheid kom na vore wanneer die oënskynlike selfgenoegsaamheid van ieder vertelling ondermyn word deur die arbitrêre, telkens onverklaarbare herverskyning van die een of ander verteller as 'n karakter in 'n ander se verhaal. Beduidend hierin is hoe hierdie onverwagse manifestasies van die "ervarende ander" werk om die sentralitiet van die verteller se storie – overgesetsynde die meesternarratief – te ondermyn. In tipiese postmoderne fatsoen word sulke destabilisering verder verdiep deur die voortdurende verplasing van die

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vertellende "Ek" van een hoofstuk tot die volgende. Aldus, onderwyl die "Ek" deurgaans konstant blyk te wees, word die individuele subjek onophoudelik hersirkuleer as die "ervarende ander" agter verskillende fasades; hierdie proses ontsê skynbaar die vorming van 'n individuele identiteit om sodoende die postmoderne angstigheid rakende die einde van individualiteit te bekragtig. In hierdie artikel word egter aangevoer dat so 'n aanhoudende hersirkulering eweneens neerkom op 'n herwinningsaksie, waardeur die gedesentraliseerde subjek 'n kans op individualiteit gebied word. In 'n veelsprekende dekonstruktiewe gebaar omseil Mitchell se roman die transendentale Subjek om plek te maak vir die plurale subjek om, paradoksaal, 'n identiteit as enkelvoudige entiteit op te neem.

David Mitchell's debut novel, *Ghostwritten*, was published in 1999 to wide acclaim: it was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and the distinguished English novelist A.S. Byatt, for her part, declared it one of the best first novels she had read (Begley 2010). A number of scholarly pieces on the novel eventually ensued: for example, in 2009 Benjamin Hagen demonstrated how the title of the book reflects a form of circular writing that "questions the authenticity of experience" (84), while Berthold Schoene, a year later, considers the ways in which the text "subtly deconstructs, unties, and defamiliarises [the British novel], with respect to both its treatment of the nation and its conceptualization of individuality" (2010). Caroline Edwards in turn presents a discussion of the ways in which the "microtopian" impulses in the novel reveal the "possibilities and impossibilities of utopian writing in the twenty-first century" (Dillon 2011: 16-17); at the same time, Nicholas Dunlop offers a reading which focuses on the political dimensions of the book, arguing that its nine-story structure articulates "a persuasively subversive reading of the history and projected future of colonialism and its associated ideologies" (Dillon 2011: 17). Also of note is William Stephenson's science fictional approach to the novel, which finds that it offers "a re-territorialization of the plural, decentred, estranging present and the already emerging future that is reality in the early twenty-first century" (Dillon 2011: 240). Most recent is Patrick O'Donnell's analysis of the text, which shows how it "articulates a world in which the narrative weave limns the cultural and political circumstances of the human order on a planet inhabited by many orders of being and nonbeing" (2015: 34). In this article I likewise consider "many orders of being and non-being", narrowing the focus to the way in which the narrating "I" in each chapter[1] is continually displaced by an experiencing "other" who is, it transpires, also a narrating "Other". Thus, while in this order of being the "I" remains – or seems to remain – a constant throughout, "things fall apart" when the individual Subject is forever

1. Importantly, and for reasons that fall outside the ambit of this article, part nine has no narrative voice per se, unless it is concealed in the philosophical argument of the Socratic dialogue presented in the ongoing conversation between the host of the radio-show "Night Train", Bat Segundo, and the AI known as Zookeeper.

decentred, ceaselessly recycled in a variety of guises. Such a process apparently works to deny the formation of the subject's personalised identity, so to ratify the postmodern anxiety about the so-called end of individuality. However, as I argue here, it is precisely this continual recycling that affords the decentred subject a chance at individuality. In a telling deconstructive gesture, Mitchell's novel bypasses the transcendental Subject to allow a space in which the plural subject can claim its identity, paradoxically, as a singular entity.

In the conventional sense, a subject's identity is taken as a relatively stable differentiation between self and other, which assigns the individual a distinct and immutable character or personality. This clear-cut idea of "the self" per se, of the self as transcendental Subject, was inaugurated in the first half of the seventeenth century by René Descartes's famous cogito – "I think, therefore I am" – as a straightforward coincidence of thought and being. Subsequently, however, both thought and being have been shown by a range of thinkers, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida, to involve a vastly complicated and subtle interplay between social imperatives and individual drives. As Jean Baudrillard points out, in a postmodern society "the status of the individual is a move from an individual principle based on autonomy, character, the inherent value of the self, to a principle of perpetual recycling [...] which traverses each individual in his signified relation to others" (1998: 170). This implies that the subjectivity of the individual is, contrary to the humanistic conceptualisation of the self as autonomous and complete, not primarily vested in a person's untrammelled understanding of herself but in the insight she gains about herself through her interactions with other entities. In a sense, then, the individual assumes the identities of others so as to see herself through their eyes; in this way the subject is made up of a plurality of intersecting identities that is forever in flux.

The unusual narrative structure of *Ghostwritten* is paramount in creating the interval in which a manifold subject can materialise. The composition of the text is startlingly eclectic, genre-wise, making use of a broad range of narrative and stylistic techniques in its bid to, as Mitchell himself puts it, "locate meaning in randomness .... Each chapter offers a different reason why its events unfold as they do" (Begley 2010: 5). In the process, we are presented with ten chapters (in tantalising contrast to Mitchell's description of the book, in its title page, as "a novel in nine parts"), each rendered in a different mode: from crime thriller, ghost story, and romance, to the science fictional, the fantastical, and – in a departure from the usual postmodern strategy – the realistic. To add to this intermixture, each story is narrated in the first-person, creating the impression – in the first two or three stories, at least, until a reader becomes habituated to this technique – that the narrating "I" is the same throughout. However, it gradually becomes clear that each part involves a different narrator with a different story that appears entirely divorced from both its forerunner and its successor. Such structural dissociation seems to be

what directs the text – that is until some arbitrary yet tantalizing connections between these tales briefly keep (re)surfacing.[2] So, in short, *Ghostwritten* could be said to be "about" the manner in which the lives and identities of nine main characters intersect in ostensibly inconsequential, yet unsettling ways: Quasar the terrorist who narrates part one makes an unintelligible and ultimately fruitless telephone call from Okinawa to Tokyo, unintentionally getting on the line Satoru the young saxophonist that is the narrator of part two, who then (with girlfriend Tomoyo) briefly shares a table at a restaurant in Hong Kong with Neil Brose, the corrupt financial lawyer narrating part three, who for his part is sleeping with his cleaning lady that is the great-granddaughter of the Chinese Tea Shack lady who narrates part four, who in turn is inhabited for a time by the noncorpum narrating part five that also briefly transmigrates into the body of the Mongolian KGB agent Suhbataar, who in part six shows up[3] in Petersburg to facilitate the sale of a painting stolen by the narrator of this section, Margarita Latunsky, which is to be replaced by a fake reproduction created by one Jerome, who re-emerges in part seven as the life-partner of Alfred, the subject of an autobiography being written in London by ghostwriter and narrator Marco, who is the one to save Mo Muntervary from being run down by a taxi, then for her to feature as narrator in part eight and the creator of a defence programme that we get to know via a New York radio show as Zookeeper, the artificial intelligence depicted in part nine, who is intent on forsaking the laws that oblige it to safeguard human life to allow humankind to destroy itself.

These wayward links between chapters draw attention to another, perhaps more pertinent function of this novel's narrative structure: to illustrate the precariousness of the individual Subject's identity. The unforeseen and enigmatic appearance, or re-appearance, of one or the other narrator as character in another's story serves to undermine, not only the ostensible self-sufficiency of each individual account, but also the sovereign identity of its narrator. In other words, the intrusion of the experiencing "other" continually displaces the narrating "I" from one chapter to the next, destabilising, in characteristic postmodern fashion, the centrality of a particular narrator and its story. Such a move calls into question the authority of what Jean Lyotard terms the "master narrative", challenging its claim to a universal truth that guarantees the inviolable identity of the Subject. Hence Michel Foucault argues that there are "two meanings to the word subject [...] The subject subjugated to the other through control and dependence, and the subject

2. In other words, the emergence of the subject is under constant erasure, insofar as its arrival in another subject's story is always preceded by a previous appearance that often, enigmatically, hails from the future.

3. Interestingly, this Suhbataar also makes an appearance in Mitchell's second novel, *number9dream*, a manifestation that is in itself peripheral, but crucial to the outcome of that text.

attached to its own identity through consciousness or self-knowledge" (Hubert & Rabinow 1983: 212). This suggests that the individual's conceptualisation of its personal identity – that which supposedly sets it apart from other individuals – hangs by its perception of itself *as* a subject, one that is free to fashion itself while simultaneously understanding on some level that, paradoxically, such freedom springs from being constructed by the other. Indeed, cultural theorist Donald Hall posits that identity rests on the "tension between choice and illusion" (2004: 2): it could even be argued that this is a tension engendered by the double gesture in which freedom – to rephrase Louis Althusser's thoughts on interpellation (1972: 176) – *is* the illusion, and the only choice that is available is between various illusions.

Ghostwritten seems to capitalise on this dialectic by constantly presenting an illusion – one could perhaps say "story" – that, while apparently insisting on the centrality of its subject (here meaning its topic, and its protagonist, and its narrator, and even its reader), always already offers another choice of subject, and identities, that is/was/will be available, all at the same time. Hence each episode (apart from the penultimate one) commences in the subjective case: "Who was blowing on the nape of my neck?" (Mitchell 1999: 3); "Spring was late on this rainy morning, and so was I" (36); "There's a mechanism in my alarm clock ..." (67); and so on. In the process of the "I" persistently changing voice (and face), the subject becomes, very briefly, another "I", perhaps even, in what Jacques Lacan describes as the mirroring of the self,[4] an other-I, before being familiarised by the context. In part one, for example, after some textual misdirection in which we take the narrator to be one Mr. Kobayashi, it becomes clear that the narrator-protagonist is Quasar; when the narrative continues using the subjective case in the next part, there is substantial confusion as to whose voice is being heard – perhaps echoing Michel Foucault when he famously asks: "who is the 'I' "I" that speaks?" – before the realisation sets in that we are dealing with a "new" protagonist, namely Satoru. In that moment of hesitation, at the start of every episode, the "I" occupies an ambiguous space, one in which its identity as transcendental Subject is bypassed through being irretrievably tacked onto the intangible shadow of the other "I".

Therefore the transcendental Subject has been displaced by another subject whose identity is, disconcertingly, for a moment also its own. Shortly after this, we are dealt a further upset by the discovery that this Satoru is not a "new" entity at all: we had already encountered him in chapter one when Quasar had phoned a secret – and as it turns out, fake – number to get more money from the cult, using the codified phrase: "the dog needs to be fed" (27). In Satoru's story, Quasar is merely a "crank-caller" (54), a case of mistaken

4. In *Ēcrits 6*, Lacan explains his conceptualisation of the so-called Gaze, where the individual first establishes its subjectivity through viewing its reflection in a mirror and creating the fantasy of an ideal-I.

identity which diminishes the centrality of the latter's experience. Interestingly, however, the import of Quasar's account is recouped when it transpires that his presumed crank-call plays a pivotal role in Satoru's story, precipitating the young saxophonist's serendipitous second encounter with the lovely Tomoyo, whom he had been too timid to approach upon their first meeting. In other words, Quasar's story, though for all intents and purposes done with, and completely unrelated to Satoru's, nevertheless offers the impetus for the love story that unfolds in chapter two. In a neatly calculated segue, Quasar in effect becomes central to Satoru's story, central *alongside* Satoru. In other words, the "I" now occupies an ambiguous space, one in which the choice between identities is momentarily suspended, in which the subject is, fleetingly, both self and other but, crucially, neither Self nor Other. The identities of self and other – depicted in stories told both *by* self and other, and *about* self and other – can therefore co-exist, even if only briefly, but this instant of co-existence also eternally remains available for scrutiny.

Reciprocally, and in a satisfying, somewhat contrived, but constitutionally unavoidable double gesture, Satoru has in his own way a vital part to play in Quasar's story, his uncomprehending response to the latter's words alerting – if not Quasar, then at least the reader – that the cult and its leader, His Serendipity, are sham. In this way, Quasar is endowed with another identity, hinted at in chapter one but masked by the iniquity of the gas attack, one changed from the reprehensible terrorist to a gullible and pitiful man, deluded by false promises of communion and salvation. Indeed, it becomes evident that Quasar's identity as terrorist is in a sense an illusion, because he is also – in the first place – a dupe of the cult. Hence we see the tension referred to by Hall, perhaps a tension created by the inability to choose between two – and likely more – personalities, this mostly on the part of the reader. As for Quasar, he seems only peripherally aware that another identity is available to him, where he is haunted by an image from the death train, of a baby in a "woolly cap" who, strapped to her mother's back, opened her eyes: "They were my eyes [...] And reflected in my eyes was her face. She knew what I was going to do. And asked me not to" (25). Implicit once again is the mirroring of the self, referred to earlier, in this case making explicit the fact that the fantasy of an "ideal-I" has/had always already been breached.

Such a conception of the dual subject, what Sarah Dillon calls "a doubled 'I'" (2011: 35), persists throughout the novel, but not always in the same way, and it is in these anomalous cases that the anxiety about the end of individuality is articulated. In chapter three, for instance, narrator Neal Brose ends up dying, ostensibly enacting the death of the subject. However, this physical death is circumvented by the way Brose often speaks to himself (largely in derogatory terms), and of himself in the third person (Mitchell 2011: 103), effecting a doubling of the subject that is confirmed in Brose's self-directed comment "I don't understand you sometimes" (79). This suggests that, as with Quasar, Brose is offered an added identity to the one

that marks him as the dissipated and corrupt financial lawyer. This identity reveals a character that is wryly self-reflexive, a quality that allows the individual to survive in a different guise, evident when, after his death, we see Neal walking "[h]and in hand" (109) with the ghost of a little girl that represents Neal and his estranged wife's stillborn desire for a child of their own. He also lives on in intratextual links – to Satoru from episode two (he describes seeing Satoru and Tomoyo at the airport in Tokyo), to Andrei Gregorski the crime boss from part six (for whom he launders money), to his estranged wife Katy who features again in part seven. Neal Brose then reappears in Mitchell's fourth novel, *Black Swan Green*, published seven years later in 2006, as the adolescent boy that he used to be then. These kinds of links between subjects proliferate, in this novel and in Mitchell's later ones, emphasising the idea that, however decentred the subject, the individual endures by dint of the various identities it assumes. All of this seems to suggest that the individual, because of it being constantly decentred, is presented with an opportunity to live again, start all over, so to speak, and even if this life will not necessarily be better, the opportunity is forever on offer (if only in the pages of a book).

This proliferation of individual stories and identities offers a representation (or re-presentation) of lived experience that resembles what Richard Rorty calls, citing Nietzsche's well-known aphorism, "truth as a mobile army of metaphors" (1989: 28). Truth, as has been well-established by post-structuralist writers of Rorty's ilk, is not "out there" as a universal, immutable or "imperishable" fact (27); nor does it correspond to some actual, neutral reality. Instead truth is contingent, just another narrative, but one which decontextualises, in the way of metaphor, the "known" so as to account for "old" things in "new" ways (29). These kinds of retellings require the "poet" to dwell "on idiosyncrasies, on contingencies – to tell us about accidental appearance rather than essential reality" (26). In other words, literature cannot be expected to recount the whole truth[5] of lived experience – instead, its principal function is to offer, perhaps only tentatively, an articulation of the many, often unexpected ways in which "truth" is prismatically, and ephemerally, made up of countless individual stories. Rorty sees this process as a "Nietzschean overcoming", a spacio-temporal spiral of continual self-invention where the narratives devised by the individual are aimed at evading inherited descriptions of its existence, and at finding new descriptions of its way of life (29). In this way, he argues, the narratives that make up lived

5. At the risk of glossing over this very vexed issue, I trust to current consensus that, notwithstanding any particular view of truth in literature, we have moved beyond the relatively uncomplicated idea, offered by earlier scholars such as Aldous Huxley, of the "Whole Truth", that which becomes available when "the experiences [the poet] records correspond fairly closely with our own actual or potential experiences not on a single limited sector, but all along the line of our physical and spiritual being" (1931).

experience, rather than espousing "the will to truth", articulate "the will to self-overcoming" so that "[t]he drama of an individual human life, or of the history of humanity as a whole, is not one in which a pre-existent goal is triumphantly reached or tragically not reached [but] a way to describe that past which the past never knew" (ibid). This observation is exemplified in *Ghostwritten* by the titular character of Marco the ghostwriter, the narrator-protagonist of part seven, who points out that he could worry "about the possible endings of the stories that had been started" only if he were a proper "writer"; he avers: "Maybe that's why I'm a ghostwriter. The endings have nothing to do with me" (Mitchell 1999: 279). The shadow-like remnant of the other, and the echo of its story, therefore endures in the background of the present subject's individual experience, constantly reminding us of the presence of the other. In effect, then, at any moment the "I" manages to be in two (or more) places at once, and the reader is compelled to take into account the twofold[6] context that this presents. Such a doubling of perspective, so strongly reminiscent of the interplay of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, serves to "exhibit the [paradigmatic] universality and necessity of the [syntagmatic] individual and the contingent" (Rorty 1989: 26). In other words, it is the unlooked for, yet persistent presence of the familiar subject (always of a previous story, though often projected as a future incarnation) as unfamiliar other in the current story – or, as Baudrillard would have it, the preservation of otherness, the maintenance of the other (2008: 112) – that lends universal power and import to the particularized experiences of each subject and the multiple identities that it adopts. Thus the "perpetual recycling" (Baudrillard 1998: 170) of the subject through all of the stories presented in *Ghostwritten* becomes its postmodern plot: if the story of the novel is "about" the intersecting lives of nine people, the plot concerns the ways in which such interconnectedness, or recycling, has the potential to cause both the destruction and the preservation of the self. Importantly, the self repeatedly being destroyed here is the transcendental ideal Subject, whose continual annihilation is crucial in the perpetual and necessary invention of the individual's myriad identities.

Indeed, what we find in *Ghostwritten* is not so much one coherent story as that which Peter Childs and James Green, in their discussion on the role of narrative in the novel, describe as "an interpenetration of voices, texts, and sensations" (2011: 44). Rorty sees this kind of polyvalent narrative as an act of "de-divinization": rather than simply exalting "reality" as "a formed, unified, present, self-contained substance, something capable of being seen steadily and whole", such texts depict lived experience as "a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time" (Rorty 1989: 41). Interestingly, this aspect of the novel

6. In the consideration of the novel as a whole – in other words, on the paradigmatic level – we find, of course, a manifold context.

is likened by Childs and Green to the workings of meronymy,[7] an element of linguistics that refers to the semantic relation between a constituent part or parts of some object or system and the system itself. (A very simple example of this would be the way in which “finger” is related to “hand”, or “bark” is related to “tree”). Meronymy differs from metonymy in that, while metonymy concerns symbolic meanings, meronymy involves literal ones – “finger” does not “stand for” “hand”, it stands for itself as part of “hand”: in this way, the literal is entirely distinct from the metaphoric. Nonetheless, as with metonymy, the meronym serves to describe (albeit perhaps less ambiguously) the larger system, or holonym, as much as the system serves to classify its typical component. Seen in this way, we could say that each of the stories in *Ghostwritten* serves to define storytelling in general; in fact, each narrative presents a catalogue of the larger human tendency to narrativise. As Luisa Rey[8] the writer says to Bat Segundo the night-time deejay in part nine of *Ghostwritten*: “The human world is made up of stories, not people” (Mitchell 1999: 386). And these stories are also, perhaps above all, stories of constantly fluctuating identities.

This fluctuation is reflected in the way that characters and narrators in *Ghostwritten* restlessly migrate, so to speak, which is most overtly depicted in chapter five. Here the narrator is a “noncorpum” (172), a wandering consciousness or perhaps lost soul, that moves from one human host to the next in its attempt to trace the origin of the “first story” it can remember hearing, to “find the source of the story that was already there, right at the beginning of ‘I’, sixty years ago” (164). At length it emerges that this incorporeal being had once been an eight-year old Buddhist boy from a far-off village in Mongolia, whose soul was transported by his master into the body of a young girl in an attempt to save him from being executed by Communist soldiers. However, the transmigration goes awry, so that, in what could very well be an enactment of the postmodern idea of the “divided subject”, all the boy’s memories are passed on to the girl while the rest of his amnesiac spirit ends up in a Chinese soldier. Henceforth the soul of the boy is compelled to roam from one mind to the next, in effect trying to regain its

7. What makes this feature even more interesting is that one of the characters in the sixth story of *Cloud Atlas* is called Meronym.

8. The name Luisa Rey invokes further inter- and intra-textual connotations. This character features/will feature as one of the narrator-protagonists in Mitchell’s 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas*. More importantly for the current novel, and as Mitchell himself points out in his 2010 interview with Adam Begley, her name echoes the title of Thornton Wilder’s novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, an extract from which forms the epigraph of *Ghostwritten*. Thus we are reminded in this penultimate section of the novel, which ostensibly draws together the loose ends of the text in order to complete what we know, of the view offered in the epigraph that knowledge is forever mutable.

sense of self, its identity, together with its lost memories while, in a poignant twist, able to retain every memory from each of the minds it inhabits. After countless years of journeying it finally comes across concrete proof of the origin of the fable, and is at last reunited with the Mongolian girl, now a grandmother, who holds his memories. At this junction it is presented with a choice: to be reconstituted in the "flesh and bones" (202) of the newborn Mongolian child who is the granddaughter of that same girl, thus regaining its memories and becoming "whole" again (even if subject to the vagaries of physical existence); or to move on once more to become immortal, though forever homeless:

> I considered my future as a noncorpum. Nowhere in the world would be closed to me. I could try to seek out other noncorpa, the company of *immortals*. I could transmigrate into presidents, astronauts, messiahs. I could plant a garden on a mountainside under camphor trees. I would never grow old, get sick, fear death, die. I looked down at the feeble day-old body in front of me, her metabolism dimming, minute by minute. Life expectancy in Central Asia is forty-three, and falling.
>
> ("Touch her" Mitchell 1999: 202)

In the face of so many possibilities, and in the spirit of the most human of compulsions, the wandering soul opts to become mortal. In a way its return to corporeal form is literally also a return to its beginnings, to its original identity; however, this embodiment as a baby girl is still an unidentical reconstitution of the boy that once was, a consciousness the same and yet radically different than before. One may even speak of an enhanced level of consciousness, insofar as it is implied in the text that the new entity is now – in a marked illustration of the plural subject – an amalgamation of her own memories and those of countless others, on the verge of forging yet another identity in which new memories will come into being. At this point in the novel it becomes almost impossible to ignore the metaphoric facility of such a narrative innovation: the resemblance (or perhaps unidentical sameness) between the roving entity and the average reader is virtually unmistakable, for this is precisely what readers do: they range from one text to the next, temporarily finding a home in each before moving on in order to find that one story that will define their being and ward off death, or, as is the case with the noncorpum, allow for a renewed embodiment of the self. The reader, like the noncorpum, needs must make a home where she finds herself in a bid to attain the identity she seeks; however, this momentary stay also precipitates the next excursion, when she is once more decentred by the realisation that this identity is also incomplete, insufficient, really.

Running parallel to this vacillation between identities, and ultimately crucial to the salvation of the decentred subject, is the growing realisation of an impending apocalypse. An inkling of this threat of destruction first appears in chapter seven, where ghostwriter Marco is the central subject. Another

seemingly random event, like Quasar's call to Satoru, now half-buried in the minutiae of Marco's story, later proves to be critical, not only in the story of the next subject, Mo Muntervary, but in what transpires to be the main thrust of the novel as a whole: the possibility of the subject's annihilation. This event involves Marco shoving Mo from the path of an oncoming taxi, saving her life. In the next chapter we discover that Mo is the architect of an AI – the aforementioned Zookeeper – which she eventually programs to keep humanity from self-destructing. Zookeeper gradually becomes more conscious and aware and, finally reaching the point where it can see no logic in keeping alive a specie that is bent on obliterating itself and its planet, decides to precipitate humanity's inevitable fate by desisting its intervention in human affairs. In sporadic calls, during the course of some three or four years, to deejay Bat Segundo on his talk show *Night Train*, Zookeeper explains the trajectory of events that eventually culminates in its decision, with Bat repeatedly attempting to deflect it from its course. The debate comes to a head when Zookeeper describes how a group of soldiers had just mercilessly slaughtered the inhabitants of "a village in an Eritrean mountain pass" where there seems to be no reasonable cause for this atrocity; the soldiers are now on their way to the next village for "a repeat performance" (426). Zookeeper has been programmed to preserve their lives (even if they do not seem worth preserving), but also to save the lives of the villagers under threat. This standoff threatens to bring an end to all humanity, and to their stories, to the very subject itself. On a metatextual level, this is the aporetic point at which all meaning will die out.

However, in what could be seen as a typically deconstructive move, the text evades this annihilation of the subject by finding recourse in yet one more story: Thornton Wilder's account in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* of the random killing of five people in the unexpected and inexplicable collapse of an ancient bridge. In iteration of Wilder's scenario, Bat Segundo suggests to Zookeeper that it sidesteps its moral stalemate by setting a "booby trap" on one of the bridges in the path of the marauding band, so that the bridge "won't fall until a motorised convoy passes over. You're not killing directly, you see? You're just letting events take their course, the way you've chosen" (428). Such iteration serves to highlight the singularity of each individual subject insofar as iterability – what Jacques Derrida (1994) sees as the operational identity of the sign – is precisely what keeps the individuality of the subject from being negated. In other words, the self as subject maintains an identity particular to itself by recycling past and, in Mitchell's text, also future identities perpetually adopted and discarded by itself; importantly, one of these identities is the transcendental "I" that is always hovering in the background, the ideal-I whose eternally elusive presence is the reason why the subject is compelled to keep moving on to the next identity, time and again. Zookeeper henceforth withdraws from human affairs as planned, leaving the subject to

find its own redemption through iteration – through the identities it constantly constructs, and reconstructs for itself.

In the final chapter of the novel, Quasar the terrorist unexpectedly returns, this time narrating in real time his experiences on "the death train". But he is not the only one to reappear: each one of the other eight subjects are briefly recentred when in Quasar's fevered imaginings, we encounter signs of Satoru in the echoes of "a saxophone from long ago [that] circles in the air" (Mitchell 1999: 434); Neal Brose's ghostly form glimmers as his last thought is recalled in the "lipped and lidded" image of Buddha – "[a]lways on the verge of words" (434) – on the cover of a book held by a fellow passenger. The undefined shape of the Tea Shack lady flickers briefly in the hair of "a sleeping giant, [which is] the colour of tea. Here is the tea, here is the bowl, here is the Tea Shack, here is the mountain" (434). The noncorpum's shade hides in the image, on the ceiling of the train compartment, of "grasslands [over which the] Great Kahn's horsemen thunder to the west" (434); oblique reflections of Margarita Latunsky play in the "warped and cracking [spine of a] glossy booklet [entitled] Petersburg, City of Masterworks" (435); imprints of ghostwriter Marco lurk in the design, on "a vinyl shopping bag [of] a crayon-coloured web that a computer might have doodled: The London Underground" (435); a hint of Mo Muntervary appears briefly in "the label of Kilmagoon whiskey [depicting] an island as old as the world" (435). Finally, as Quasar succeeds in the nick of time to escape the train, he collides head-on with an advertisement board inviting him to "[s]pend the night with Bat Segundo on 97.8" (436). Here, at the end of it all, which is perhaps also the beginning of it all, the identity of the individual endures in multipart form, even if the subject is always being displaced.

Hence, what we find in Quasar's feverish struggle to exit the death train is a sequential catalogue of the preceding stories, a re-reading of the entire novel that, literally, seems to spawn more stories (or further readings, insofar as each new reading can be seen as a new story) in an effort to ward off the death of the subject. In other words, while the re-telling of Quasar's story cannot alter its outcome or its effects, its re-reading, like all re-readings, can change the reader's perception and augment her understanding of selfhood. This is evident when the terrorist's thought in the opening line of the narrative, "Who *was* blowing on the nape of my neck" (3 – emphasis added), resounds, eerily analeptic, in its penultimate line: "Who *is* blowing on the nape of my neck" (436 – emphasis added). Quasar's identity remains, but in a different context that allows him to be something other than a terrorist. This shift also applies to the other subjects and their narratives: none of these can be read in the same way as before, after their reiteration in the final (yet ultimately also first) section. In addition, none of the stories really "end", because the ending of the novel continually brings on their re-readings (even if these are not verbatim). So we turn back to the first page of the novel, starting with the epigraph, paying minute attention to every gesture in an attempt to better

grasp – this time, and time and again – “the very spring within the spring” (Mitchell 1999: 1) of the overall story of the self. And within this order of being, the decentred subject finds the opportunity to repeatedly renew its identity.

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