

IMAGES OF POST-APOCALYPTIC NATURE IN DAVID MITCHELL'S
CLOUD ATLAS

Lawrence Buell has remarked that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental movement has at its disposal” (*Environmental Imagination* 285). Like other master metaphors such as the web or book, apocalypse has been employed to represent nature in various texts such as the Bible and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. However, this paper is not concerned with apocalypse. Instead I will focus on post-apocalypse and argue that although it is not a master metaphor, various master metaphors are used to describe it. I will discuss how in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* images of post-apocalyptic nature are shaped by cultural memory.

Jan and Aleida Assmann use the term cultural memory to refer to “a fixed stock of media that a society preserves and the messages they convey” (Erll, “Re-writing as re-visioning” 181). Thus, remembering something that is part of the cultural memory means “recalling a shared past, which is understood to be of vital importance to the present community” (Erll, “Re-writing as re-visioning” 181). Cultural memory is expressed through for example rituals, myths, symbols, icons and memorials and is therefore concerned not with the recent past, as is communicative memory, but with events which are only preserved through stories. It has “its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication

(recitation, practice, observance)” (Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity” 129). These figures of memory are defined according to three criteria: relation to place and time (*Raum- und Zeitbezug*); relation to a group (*Gruppenbezug*); and the reconstructiveness of the image (*Rekonstruktivitaet*). In the history of the Jews for instance, the story of Exodus is a figure of memory as it refers to a particular event which defines the identity of a group of people who remember this event through stories and rituals. In this paper, I will argue that the master metaphors employed to describe post-apocalyptic nature in *Cloud Atlas*, are in fact figures of memory and thus rooted in our cultural memory.

Cloud Atlas, published in 2004, is a novel which consists of six narratives. Its structure is that of a Russian doll: each narrative, apart from the sixth and thus middle story, is interrupted halfway through – sometimes in midsentence – to be followed by the next. The six narratives are loosely connected; for example, reference is made in each narrative to the one preceding it, and the six main characters share a physical trait, namely a comet-shaped birthmark. The first story is set in the 19th century and is the diary of a San Francisco notary, Adam Ewing, travelling home from Australia via the Windward Islands. This narrative is followed by a series of letters written by Robert Frobisher, a young British composer, who finds the diary in the library of Vyvyan Ayrs, an aging composer living in Belgium in the early 1930s. The letters which Frobisher writes to his friend, Rufus Sixsmith, are read in the next narrative by Luisa Rey, a reporter in the fictional Californian town Buena Vista. Set in 1975, this narrative is explicitly concerned with nuclear power. Luisa Rey’s narrative – written in the form of a detective – is

subsequently read by Timothy Cavendish, a publisher in contemporary Britain. In the fifth narrative, an interview with Somni-451, a so-called fabricant, reference is made to Cavendish and the prophet-like status which he has acquired in the twenty-second century. The sixth and final narrative, and the only one which is uninterrupted, is the story of Zachry, a tribesman on Hawaii. He lives hundreds of years after Somni, after the Fall, in a time in which humans have lost most of their knowledge and have reverted back to a more primitive society. Both the fifth and sixth narrative are post-apocalyptic. The remainder of this paper will focus on the way in which nature is represented in them and will discuss paradise and wilderness as figures of memory.

The image of nature as paradise is arguably one of the most frequently employed images to represent nature. Its prevalence in myths and other cultural representations also makes it one of the most important nature-related figures of memory. As was discussed above, Assmann defines figures of memory in terms of three criteria: relation to place and time (*Raum- und Zeitbezug*); relation to a group (*Gruppenbezug*); and the reconstructiveness of the image (*Rekonstruktivitaet*). These three criteria can also be applied to paradise. First of all, paradise refers specifically to a certain time and place, even though this place may not be historical. Given the universality of this image, the exact time and place to which the image of paradise refers differs. Thus, there are differences between the Biblical Garden of Eden and the classical Golden Age or the Sumerian image of paradise. This is significant in respect to the second criteria of figures of memory, namely its relation to a certain group. In this sense, like cultural memory in general, figures of

memory influence the identity of a group. Therefore, a group of people that connects the image of paradise to the Biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden will have a different perception of paradise than the Sumerians. As John Armstrong has noted, “Sumerian myth also has, like Genesis, its earthly paradise, the ‘bright land of Dilmun’, watered by the sun-god, where there is abundance of grain, where there is neither sickness nor death, and the wolf is at peace with the lamb” (*Paradise Myth* 10), but there is no story of temptation and expulsion. Armstrong argues that the difference here lies in the representation of the deity or deities; however, the differences in these two narratives also imply different perceptions of nature. Thus, precisely the expulsion from the garden of Eden signals the fact that humans are incapable – for whatever reason – to live in close harmony with nature, whereas the absence of a story of temptation and expulsion implies at least the possibility of return. Finally, paradise is a figure of memory as it is an image that can be reconstructed. In this respect, the image of paradise continues to shape the way we view nature and is at the same time influenced by our relationship with nature.

Although the image of paradise is used in several narratives in the novel, my focus will be on its role in the fifth narrative. This narrative has the shape of an interview with Somni, a so-called fabricant created to work in a McDonald’s style diner called Papa Song’s. The servers at this diner are rewarded with stars that are placed in their collars. After twelve years, when the server has earned twelve stars, she receives the ultimate reward: Xultation. As Somni describes:

At the Star Sermon on New Year's morning, our twelvestarred sisters made the sign of the dollar, genuflected, then left by the Exit for the voyage aboard Papa Song's golden Ark. On 3D we saw them again as they embarked for Hawaii; later their arrival at Xultation; soon after, their transformation into busy, well-dressed consumers. Their collars were gone; they showed us their topaz Souls in their fingers; they waved from a world beyond our lexicon. Boutiques, hairdressers, dineries; green seas, rose skies; wildflowers, rainbows, lace, ponies, cottages, footpaths, butterflies.

(Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 190)

Xultation is paradise for the servers because there they are like other people – consumers – and the surroundings are radically different to both their surroundings in the diner as well as nature outside of it.

However, like the Christian paradise, Xultation is too good to be true. After her so-called 'Ascension' – during which Somni has become more human – she visits the Papa Song boat which the fabricants board in order to be brought to Hawaii. There, the fabricants undergo a procedure which will remove their collar, and therefore make them like other consumers. Somni describes how the fabricants enter the room one-by-one and are fitted with a helmet. What follows dispels all thoughts of paradise:

... the server slumped, her eyeballs rolled backwards; the cabled spine connecting the helmet mechanism to the monorail stiffened; the helmet rose; the server sat upright; was lifted off her feet into the air. Her corpse tapdanced; the xcited smile frozen in death tautened as her facial skin took some of the load. One worker hoovered bloodloss from

the plastic chair; another wiped it clean. The monorailed-helmet conveyed its cargo ... through a flap and into the next chamber. A new helmet lowered itself over the plastic stool, where the three Aides were already seating the next excited server.

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Paradise, Xultation, is nothing more than a computer-generated fairytale. As Somni remarks,

In the real Hawaiian archipelago, there is no such location. You know, during my final weeks at Papa Song's, it seemed that scenes of life in Xultation were repeating themselves. The same Hwa-Soon ran down the same sandy path to the same rockpool.

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As I mentioned earlier, Xultation forms a stark contrast to the state of nature outside of the diner. As Somni learns, whole areas of the world have become inhabitable – deadlanded, as she calls it. The former inhabitants of these areas have fled to the slums to escape from “malaria, flooding, drought ... encroaching deadlands” (332). In fact,

[the country] is poisoning itself to death. Its soil is polluted, its rivers lifeless, its air toxloaded, its food supplies riddled with rogue genes.... Melanoma and malarial belts advance northwards at forty kilometres per year. Those Production Zones of Africa and Indonesia that supply Consumer Zones' demands are sixty per cent uninhabitable. (341)

Although this brings up images of environmental apocalypse reminiscent of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and other toxic discourses (see Buell, *Writing*

for an *Endangered World* 30ff), the post-apocalyptic state in which Somni lives has not been brought on by environmental disaster, but by the Skirmish which was followed by Corporacy – a state revolving around consumerism. In this respect, *Cloud Atlas* shares resemblances with earlier post-apocalyptic narratives such as William Morris' *News from Nowhere* and Richard Jefferies' *After London*. Also, like other apocalypse narratives, Somni's narrative employs contrasts: the contrast between paradise – although fictional – and the reality of the deadlands; the contrast between fabricants and consumers who are free to go where they want to; and, as it is a narrative set in our future, the contrast between the present and that which may happen in the future.

The future is precisely what is lacking in the final narrative of *Cloud Atlas* – “Sloosha's Crossin an' Ev'rythin' After” – which is the only narrative not interrupted half-way through. The main character of this narrative is Zachry, a young tribesman living on Hawaii after the fall of the civilized world. Meronym, a visitor from another island, Prescient, tells him about the world outside of Hawaii. The Fall, she says, was brought on by human hunger which poisoned the soil, created plagues, caused birth defects, turned states into barbaric tribes and then brought about the end of the civilized days (286). On their voyages to other parts of the world, the Prescients found nothing but “dead-rubble cities, jungle-choked cities, plague-rotted cities” (285) but no signs of life. Eventually they hit on Hawaii, the last bit of human life apart from their own island, where they want to continue civilization before what they call “the plague” (310) makes these people extinct as well. Zachry's narrative,

thus, implies the end of the human race, which is why it is the last narrative of the six in the novel: there is no future.

In Somni's narrative, Hawaii is presented as paradise, yet in Zachry's time it is no such thing and has instead turned into a wilderness. As Leo Marx has argued in *The Machine in the Garden* the images of paradise and wilderness are closely related. Both images – ecological images as Marx calls them – have been used to describe so-called untouched or not yet colonised lands. However, whereas the garden implies abundance and the sufficiency of nature and is to a certain extent a utopian view of nature, wilderness is much more threatening, unpredictable and hostile. However, far more interesting in the context of the current paper is the dualism inherent to the image of wilderness.

As Garrard notes, “the very earliest documents of Western Eurasian civilization, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, depict wilderness as a threat, and by the time the Judaic scriptures were written it is viewed with ambivalence at best. After the ejection from Eden, the wilderness is the place of exile” (*Ecocriticism* 61). However, wilderness is not only a place of exile in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also a place of freedom, redemption and purity making it a refuge in early monastic traditions. The dualism in the image of wilderness is also created by a shift in associations. Up until the eighteenth century, the word wilderness carried negative connotations. However, this had changed by the end of the nineteenth century, when Thoreau said wilderness to be the preservation of the world (Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” 71). Also, wilderness was no longer perceived as the opposite of paradise.

Remarkably, it was frequently linked to Eden itself (Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” 72).

When exploring the use of the image of wilderness in Zachry’s narrative in *Cloud Atlas*, it becomes apparent that it is used in its older sense, tapping into our cultural memory and recalling the role of wilderness as the darker side after expulsion from paradise. In no sense is the wilderness in which Zachry and his people live idealised. Throughout Zachry’s narrative wilderness is not merely represented in terms of the natural environment – the plants, the wind, the brooks and rocks – but especially by the marked absence of human life and the loss of civilization. On Zachry and Meronym’s trek up a mountain they come across an open and flat expanse, with just a few trees. This “wondersome’n’wild” (284) place as Zachry calls it, is a deserted airport, which is no longer in use because the knowledge of airplanes has been lost. Similarly, they find an observatory at the top of the mountain. The equipment there is an eerie relic of the knowledge and civilization that have been lost – which is stressed when they find a dead old man, the chief astronomer, perfectly preserved in the sealed room.

At the end of the narrative the Prescients’ hopes of finding paradise and thus survival for the human race are dashed when all communication with their ship has been lost. The plague, which only one in two hundred people survives, has reached Prescient Isle. This is a poignant reminder of the fact that there is no paradise left for humans. Cronon remarks that “in virtually all its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history” (79). However, in *Cloud Atlas*, wilderness is used in the most bleakest sense and denotes that there is no escape from history.

Mitchell has said that *Cloud Atlas* is different from his earlier works in that it has more of a conscience. As he says, “I need the world to last another century and a half, not just see me to happy old age” (*Washington Post*). In this sense he touches on remarks made by Buell, Garrard and others who have noted that in the environmental tradition, apocalypse functions as a warning. The same can be said about some of the images of post-apocalyptic nature in *Cloud Atlas*. However, as I have argued throughout this paper, part of the force of these images is in their history. Thus cultural memory explores the tension between old images and current or future situations. By doing so, we are confronted not only with our perceptions of nature but also with the fact that these are based on ancient images which may no longer apply.