Homeric and Platonic Forces in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

This paper analyzes structural and thematic elements of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, a novel complex in form and genre, to show Homeric and Platonic practices of storytelling at work, especially the devices by which these authors highlight their stories' fictiveness. Studies by Rosenmeyer (1956), Gill (1977, 1979, 1993), and Clay (1997, 2000) on the fictive impulses of and structural issues in Plato's account of Atlantis' demise particularly inform this analysis.

Like the *Odyssey*, *Cloud Atlas* begins *in medias res* with a nineteenth-century notary stuck on a Pacific island during his return to America. The notary's story breaks off mid-sentence, yielding to a series of nested stories that move ahead in time toward, and then back from (via ring composition), the central story of an apocalyptic future. Interruption, which is often alluded to, structures the novel as each successive story severs the preceding, yet there is a return to, and completion of, each story. Narrative framing and interruption as devices of, and self-consciously about, fiction originate with Homer's epic (Fenik 1974, de Jong 2001, Rabel 2002).

The nested stories move with generic fluidity from the realism of historical fiction to the dystopian fantasy of science fiction and back again by way of other literary forms, suggesting that *Cloud Atlas* is more than a proverbial yarn such as Odysseus tells and Socrates rejects when Plato introduces the myth of Er (*Rep*. 614b). Several links between the novel and Plato's myth are apparent. The framing device and the stories' interconnections correspond to the concentric whorls and complex movements of Plato's spindle of Necessity (614b-617b). A birthmark linking the novel's main characters over time and incidents of ascending and descending within the stories correspond to the Platonic ideas of reincarnation and the movement of souls. The birthmark is shaped like a comet, just as souls are carried upward toward birth "like shooting

stars" (621b); the "fabricant" Sonmi-451 reads the *Republic* en route to "ascension" (212). Mitchell has invented a world where the formation of the soul is paramount. At the end, the notary learns to regard belief as the source of virtuous acts and is reborn through the decision to devote himself to abolitionism, "a life worth living," despite his privileged social position (507-508). Similarly, Er links the course of one's life to the choices the soul makes, citing Odysseus as an example of the soul's capacity for choosing a better life without regard to power (618a-620d). Socrates observes that a virtuous life follows if one believes the myth of Er (621c).

The notary's transformation shows an awareness of civilization's rise and fall (507), out of which he rejects the cycle of domination afforded by power. His self-reflection looks ahead in time and back structurally to the novel's central story, where all traces of civilization have been obliterated. Here lie traces of Plato's Atlantis, an island empire constructed in concentric circles and destroyed when it abandons virtue. The truth of Mitchell's central story is questioned by the narrator's son at its conclusion (309), much as the claim of familial transmission undermines the truth of the Atlantis myth, even as it affirms it (*Ti*. 21a, 25e). The enduring power of Atlantis resides not only in the contested nature of the account (philosophical fiction v. factual report) but also in its incomplete transmission: it ends mid-sentence (121c), as does the opening frame of the notary's story (Rosenmeyer 1956: 167; Gill 1979: 74; Clay 1997: 52). Plato breaks off the narrative at a point that recalls Zeus' anger over human folly from the start of the *Odyssey* (1.32-43), a literary "return" that Mitchell imitates in his reception of the Homeric undertaking that Plato references.

Bibliography

Clay, Diskin. “The Plan of Plato’s *Critias*.” In *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum*, edited by Tomás Calvo and Luc Brisson. Sankt Augustin: Academia-Verlag, 1997, 49-54.

Clay, Diskin. “Plato’s Atlantis: The Anatomy of a Fiction.” In *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by John J. Cleary and Gary M. Gurtler. Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2000, 1-21.

Fenik, Bernard. *Studies in the Odyssey*. Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1974.

Gill, Christopher. “The Genre of the Atlantis Story.” *CP* 72 (1977) 287-304.

Gill, Christopher. “Plato on Falsehood—Not Fiction.” In *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, edited by Christopher Gill and T. P. Wiseman. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993, 38-87.

Gill, Christopher. “Plato’s Atlantis Story and the Birth of Fiction.” *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979) 64-78.

de Jong, Irene J. F. *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Rabel, Robert J. “Interruption in the *Odyssey*.” *Colby Quarterly* 38 (2002) 77-93.

Rosenmeyer, T. G. “Plato’s Atlantis Myth: *Timaeus* or *Critias*?” *Phoenix* 10 (1956) 163-72.