JOY WANTS ITSELF, WANTS ETERNITY

Danijela Stojkovic

Peter Solonysznyj

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The novel *Cloud Atlas* revolves around the cyclical nature of humanity, where inextinguishable themes like suffering and hope alike are conveyed through interwoven characters and plotlines. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of time echoes this structure of cyclicity with the idea of eternal recurrence, which collapses time onto the singular, present moment (Stambaugh 38). Moreover, this “collapse” happens because time is infinite, and endlessly repetitive, according to eternal recurrence’s principles. With this identical replay of everything, Nietzsche strips life of teleology and thus purpose. In a pointless world, the individual’s importance is questioned, even threatened, as the human condition is innately existential. The Nietzschean approach, however, considers the individual as a microcosm for time, as well as the world itself, where each individual only exists in a present that encompasses the whole of time, and thus, the whole of humanity as well. David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* stresses the importance of the individual within a temporal structure comparable to Nietzsche’s philosophy. This paper will address this philosophical framework through a study of *Cloud Atlas*, to ultimately show that eternal recurrence does not strip the individual of their significance, but in fact affirm the opposite.

A descriptive approach will first be used to address this thesis, by introducing Nietzsche’s notion of the “will to power” and its development, which was highly influenced by ancient Greek society. That section will reference philosophical texts, which include Rebecca Goldstein’s *Plato at the Googleplex*, for the information on classical Athenian culture. This will lead into Nietzsche’s human ideal of the *Ubermensch*, which indicates the direction an individual is meant to take within the temporal framework of eternal recurrence. Eternal recurrence will be explained as theoretical structure, and then further clarified through the metaphor of music. The connection of music and time then serves as a thematic segue from philosophy to literature. David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* will be used as a case study to affirm the position of an individual in Nietzsche’s philosophical precedent. This will be supported by articles, and analysis of the novel itself. The specific analysis of the character Robert Frobisher and his narrative will solidify the thesis, through his ultimate demise.

Nietzsche simplified life to a matter of will to power above all else, even self-preservation, arguing that mere survival, as in just staying alive, is insufficient due to its passiveness (Kauffmann 153). Superseding these primal motives, the will to power transcends the conscious mind and human instinct, at once including and controlling them, so that power extends beyond mere existence, yet remains central within it (Stambaugh 80). Nietzsche distinguished the will to power from what is often perceived as worldly power, that which drives the modern individual to pursue fame, economic prowess or social tyranny. This type of control, that breeds corruption and selfishness, is evil, because it causes the individual to conform to the world’s vices (Kauffmann 157).

Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power stems from two approaches: one, where worldly power dominates human desire, and another, where the will to power accounts for human behaviour and moral phenomenon (Kauffmann 159). Initially, the will to power was not a virtue, but a psychological explanation until Nietzsche made a connection that redefined his philosophy. He correlated the will to power and excellence, interpreting them as synonymous to the ancient Greek concept labeled as the “Ethos of the Extraordinary” in Rebecca Goldstein’s book, *Plato at the Googleplex*. Competition was the epicentre of all Greek culture, which owed its development to rivalry (Kauffmann 165). It did not suffice to be average in ancient Athens, where *kleos* pervaded society. *Kleos* is “the song that ensures glory or fame”– it is glamour, renown and the base of a worthy reputation, and Athens used this as the basis for its own reputation (Goldstein 127). Ancient Greek belief was that an individual required effort in order to give their life any meaning (Goldstein 8), and more than that, a life that was not a product of continuous effort did not have any worth at all. As reputation coexists with excellence, so does *kleos* with *arête*, which is any quality that deserves special notice (Goldstein 139).

The Athenian’s constant pursuit of glory was also a means of coping with the unconquerable nature of mortality. Not only should an Athenian be a hero to his people, but also to ten generations after. It is as if they were so competitive that they refused to be silenced by death, so the goal was to create an immortal image. It was a desire for permanency, for transcendence, and for legacy. This pseudo-god persona was inherently (and inevitably) limited, as it depended on humans to establish its excellence, and thus existence (Goldstein 135). Basically, if nobody was around to remember, these heroes would be rendered insignificant.

Moreover, in the Athenian context, the general obsession of extraordinariness posed a risk in the way that it could lead to “antinomian individualism” (Goldstein 156). Too much exceptionality would rupture the collective stance of excellence that Athens espoused; with one individual rising beyond the reach of the whole, and importantly, of the state. The Platonic political structure isolated the elite as the most excellent, distinct from the commonplace individuals, who were meant to follow the advice of the gifted few: the philosopher kings (Goldstein 187). Plato’s notion of excellence differed from stereotypical *kleos*; he preferred intellectual and philosophical *arête*. In Plato’s ideal *polis*, this elitism served the state as well as the individual, allowing every person to fulfill their potential in the role that inherently suits them best. Even under this system, an individual is compelled to excellence, as the hierarchy was fluid to adapt to the people, rather than vice versa, so a child born outside of the elite could ascend if they possessed the natural (albeit rare) ability.

The ancient Greek model introduced Nietzsche to the positive potential of the will to power, and although his philosophy greatly differs from Athenian ideals, they were catalytic in its formation. The basis of the will to power lies in the independent valuation of the individual. Nietzsche expressed this in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “I teach you the superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man?” (Goldstein 238). Goldstein quotes Nietzsche in reference to Alcibiades, who in Athenian society at once represented what they worshipped as well as what they dreaded. As previously mentioned, no one could be so excellent as to overtake the reputation game, yet Alcibiades did just that, embodying *kleos* to live the ultimate life worth telling (Goldstein 233). His charisma ultimately gave him political and social power, despite his manipulative, narcissistic and biased behaviour. In his own opinion, he was the *Ubermensch*, yet his self-assertion was not the type of power Nietzsche propounded (Goldstein 238), and here is one of the distinctions Nietzsche made from Plato’s philosophy as well as Greek culture. Like Plato, Nietzsche set an ideal to be pursued, one that had not been reached, unlike what Alcibiades believed. Power was neither hierarchical nor solely self-oriented, in Nietzschean philosophy, thus deviating from Plato’s notion of the philosopher king and Alcibiades’ notion of himself, one that Nietzsche would have amounted to worldly power.

Opposed to the notion of popular or worldly power, the will to power involves overcoming oneself, which includes resisting temptation and controlling one’s passions (Kauffmann 271). Therefore, the superman’s (the *Ubermensch*’s) value is intrinsic, which makes his worth a foremostly personal attribute. It is independent from external evaluation, and this kind of excellence is what constitutes true humanness (Kauffmann 271). The *Ubermensch* embodies what every individual strives to be, and society is not its purpose, but rather its impediment by means of conformity (Kauffmann 272). The *Ubermensch* is not meant to be useful.

Despite this aim attributed to each individual, Nietzsche scorned the notion of progress, on a temporal level as well. He considered the ancient Greeks, amongst others, to outshine his contemporaries, lending the belief that humanity’s high points were scattered throughout time, instead of being continually incipient (Kauffmann 276). Yet, if humans are not improving over time, and the epitome of man does not serve any particular function in society, Nietzsche’s philosophy seems bleak through its lack of teleology.

The crux of the matter is in the aspect of time, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which expounded the *Ubermensch*, serves as a prelude to Nietzsche’s notion of Eternal Recurrence (Stambaugh 17). Before elaborating upon eternal recurrence, it is important to note that this theory’s value is not dependent on its reality or provability. It was not presented as a scientific revelation, and Nietzsche never performed any experiments or any math to prove this approach to time (Stambaugh 45). It resides purely in thought; however, its impact is not diminished in the least. Eternal recurrence is significant in its impression on the individual, as such an outlook pushes the individual to betterment, therefore making the theory a reality in its effect. In Nietzsche’s writing, the focus is more so on the endurance of the *idea* of eternal recurrence, the “awakening consciousness”, not reoccurrence itself, further emphasising that its possibility in reality does not define its value (Stambaugh 55).

Given that stance, eternal recurrence is the theory that time is cyclical, where everything and everyone will happen again in an identical manner throughout infinity. Here, it is time that is infinite, not the things in it, the “concrete bodies” (Kauffmann 273), thus infinity is produced by the recurring pattern of ephemeral entities, and this is the only way that anything can endure in an impermanent world (Stambaugh 13). Within this temporal, cyclical infinity, there is a significant difference between “circularity” and “cyclicality”. Circularity is linear and bound to a directive, whereas cyclicality can be understood in both directions, and in the context of time, this means that the past and the future are only relative terms (Higgins 175). The past and the future are one and the same: they collapse into one another (Higgins 175). The only moment the individual can actually be involved in is the present, and so Nietzsche’s philosophy revolves around the importance of the current moment. The present initially seems pointless as it too is only part of the unchangeable series of repetition, yet this does not strip it of its uniqueness. Again, the “now” is the only thing an individual has any control over – the future is not yet, and the past has been.

It is in the present that eternal recurrence is reconciled with the will to power, which inherently abhors its inability to reshape the past and the future, a fact further emphasised by the synonymy of past and future within the doctrine. Thus, an individual can only exercise their will to power in the immediate present and this is an effort that should be invested, to avoid being bound to a miserable state of being for eternity. The idea is that everyone’s “pattern” involves their employment of their will, and that it is inevitable as humans are not static beings. As naturally active creatures, we are in the continual process of Becoming (Nietzsche 1067). The will to power thrives in the principle of eternal recurrence, because it views the present as a means to attaining one’s goals, of self-improvement and fulfillment, and invests itself full force therein (Higgins 181). This perspective is proactive, where our goals direct us within a present that does not stand idly, as something for us to drown ourselves in (Higgins 183). The will to power is essentially about return, because “you force all things to and into yourself that they may flow back out of your well as the gifts of your love… Power is she, this new virtue; a dominant thought she is” (Stambaugh 16).

Nietzsche stresses the link between love and eternal recurrence, to reconcile the distress that may arise from his apparently nihilistic philosophy. The will to power is fuelled by the pursuit of joy and self-affirmation. This is *amor fati*, (Higgins 184) or the love of one’s fate, which incites the love of one’s eternal recurrence, directly linking the entirety of time with the individual in a microcosmic fashion. The individual who strives to perfect themselves experiences an extreme joy that obviates all concern with the justification of life; affirming it forwards, backwards and thereby accounting for the entire expanse of eternity (Kauffmann 279). Loving one’s eternal recurrence involves loving the necessity of the negative aspects of life as well, as “Pain, too, is a joy…Have you ever said Yes to a single joy?...then you said Yes, too, to all woe […] oh, then you *loved* the world” (Kauffmann 277). Love of the world amounts to love of oneself, thus self-affirmation, and in typical Nietzschean cyclicality, the *Ubermensch* would realise how inextricably their existence was connected to the totality of eternity – through self-affirmation, they are affirming the entire scope of time (Kauffmann 276).

Nietzsche also related art as an affirmation of human existence (Stambaugh 82), rendering creation as an internal process, as well as an external manifestation. The artist experiences life at an elevated level, and artistic activity (the experience itself) supersedes the artistic product (Stambaugh 82). This again places the individual in the spotlight. Music is often used as a metaphor for Nietzsche’s philosophy of eternal recurrence, with Nietzsche himself saying that music is experienced physically, as well as audibly. We listen with our muscles, so that we are affected by music as inherently as we are by time (Schmidt 200). Time is the silent version of music (Schmidt 199), and the same way past and future contribute to the present, a tone’s meaning is ascertained by the tones that surround it, without displacing its own importance. Basically, it is important not in what it connects to, but in its act of connecting (Higgins 181). This does not isolate the present from the past or the future, since the present is established by the past, the same way tempo is counted. At the same time, music is not experienced through memory, but by recognizing the current tone, while memorizing a melody kills its effect (Higgins 182). In this sense, music parallels the Nietzschean conception of understanding the present. Like the present, music also carries expectation to that which “can never be present” (Higgins 182) and in this sense it gives direction, in the form of awareness, not prophecy. This is the approach to the future in eternal recurrence: continual growth without the limitation of specific purpose. *Amor fati* is embodied in how music is enjoyed:

“Our delight, like our musical concentration, is not contingent on our sense that some clear progress is being made. On the contrary, we enjoy great music because of its circuitousness, its ingenuity at taking devious paths towards its evident aims […] We enjoy the fullness of the present musical moment, even if it is dissonant, not for its efficiency in moving toward the evident musical goal, but for its own surprising presence” (Higgins 184)

Music captures the dynamic of human beings and time, and it is because of this dynamic that such a profound relation with oneself is possible (Schmidt 200). It allows the will to power to bring joy in every moment, so that eternity’s cycle is not a curse.

David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* presents this cyclical nature of existence both through structure and content, with six novellas styled like a Russian doll – each story interrupted halfway by the succeeding one until the sixth, after which the second halves of the first five are presented in reverse order. This allows for the future of the world in the novel to play out before actually completing each narrative, which span through 1850 New Zealand to a post-apocalyptic Korea. The first is the journal of an American attorney stuck on the Polynesian Islands while the boat he is travelling on is under repairs. This is followed by a musical prodigy’s attempt at getting his life together by becoming the amanuensis of a renowned but sickly composer. After that, the sections are composed of a journalist’s attempt at exposing a nuclear power company’s corruption, an aging publisher’s involuntary commitment to a nursing home, a Korean clone’s rebellion against a dystopian state, and Zachry’s account of a primitive Hawaiian community in the aftermath of a global nuclear crisis (Hicks 1). The entire novel is woven together by countless reoccurring details that imbricate stories from different plotlines.

This echoes Nietzsche’s conception of eternal return through the main characters’ common birthmark: a comet-shaped mark that they inexplicably and unknowingly share over the span of centuries. More generally, the chiasmic structure of the novel collapses past and future on each other, where the first story is as much the beginning as it is the end, capturing the entire existence of this world in one moment: the book itself. This is reminiscent of the Nietzschean concept of time: neither linear, nor circular. This cyclicality reappears constantly, from the clone Sonmi-451’s commentary on violence and fear as “a cycle as old as tribalism” (Mitchell 344), to the palindromic name Autua.

Even so, the novel’s frequent use of cyclicality does not undermine or lessen the severity of heavier topics, such as mortality, brutality and misery, which are equally inescapable in this novel as well as in life. In reference to Nietzsche, there are three things that “belong indissolubly together: life, suffering, and the circle” (Stambaugh 54). In the novel, the cycles themselves also extend to more menacing themes, like slavery, predation and dehumanization. Sonmi-451’s interview symbolically portrays how the soul is under constant attack, where identity is stored on a microchip and clones are slaughtered at the end of their term of service so that their bodies are used to feed other fabricants as well as humans (Hicks 1). *Cloud Atlas* emphasises the importance of the individual through a brutal depiction of reality, which basically is the series of “nows”. Hope is the weapon of the main characters, who persist throughout their independent tales, as well as over time, and these sentiments are the most resilient and powerful forces. Nietzsche likewise argued that joy, and its pursuit, was the greatest power, as “all joy wants eternity – wants deep, wants deep eternity” (Kauffmann 277). In an eternity of agony and strife, the *Ubermensch*, who pursues love above all else, is what will rise above and persist, by nature of himself, and of the cycle, which are one and the same. The main characters of *Cloud Atlas* are defined by their insistent strength, as they love life as a whole despite the vulnerability that such perseverance comes with – and this in Nietzschean terms is true humanness. This also constitutes human excellence, as loving one’s life amounts to loving oneself, which involves loving the present moment and the scope of time that it encompasses, returning ultimately to the *Ubermensch* mentality. Although the *Ubermensch* is not bound by external purpose, his/her self-improvement is inevitably influential. Basically, reaching for true humanness, and thus true excellence, is a personal cause with outward effects, so loving life is just that: loving all of life. This universal love concordantly reaches unsavory aspects of life as well, as was discussed with *amor fati*. It is not so much a notion of balance, of good and bad, but their consolidation and inextricability, and this is one of the struggles faced in *Cloud Atlas*, namely by the musical prodigy, Robert Frobisher.

“Letters from Zedelghem” is Robert Frobisher’s description of his experience as the transcriber to composer Vyvyan Ayrs, whose syphilis has led to illness and his blindness. Frobisher is recently disowned by his family, and is no longer in college; desperate, essentially, and Ayrs is his only hope. Frobisher’s letters to his love Sixsmith reveal his arrogant, witty and entitled personality. Frobisher is shamelessly vain and detached. He only focuses on the individual but not in the *Ubermensch*’s manner. Yet Frobisher is a product of Nietzschean doctrine, admitting that he felt “Nietzsche was reading [Frobisher], not [Frobisher] [Nietzsche]” upon delving into *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is also “Ayrs’s bible” (Mitchell 63). Ayrs is constantly referred to in Nietzsche-like prose, both reflecting on Ayrs’s character, as well as Frobisher’s mindset. Ayrs is the only musical influence Frobisher will accept, and he describes Ayrs’s style as two-sided: “One Ayrs looks back to Romanticism’s deathbed, the other looks to the future” (Mitchell 61). Past and future are reconciled under a singular musical style, and this is emphasised by Ayrs’s current musical project, called *Eternal Recurrence*.

Frobisher, on the contrary, is at first obsessed with the future. It is the futuristic aspect of Ayrs’s music that he draws inspiration from, for example. Even more importantly, Frobisher is constantly designing his life around what it will be – it is in the future that he will see Sixsmith again and repay the money that was lent to him. It is where he envisions his masterpiece: “In sketches, in my skull, in my gut, Ayrs. In my future” (Mitchell 80). In the process of escaping his past he loses sight of the present, and like with time and with music, this disproportion renders him unbalanced. Nietzschean philosophy equates past and future, so in a sense, Frobisher’s plight is futile as he is escaping that which he pursues. Both the past and the future are states of inexistence, thus it is illogical to place one’s own value in such a void. Likewise, by missing the present, he is forgetting himself.

Towards the middle of his story, Vyvyan Ayrs’s illness worsens, and Frobisher has time alone to invest on his own music. He designs a song composed exactly like the structure of the novel, and names it the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. The Sextet soon becomes the focus of his life, and in Nietzschean form, launches into existential angst amidst the surge of creativity. Nietzsche’s claim that art was affirmation of human existence excludes the assumption that this is a wholly delightful endeavour – the human condition, like time itself, contains distressing facets. Frobisher, through his music, is facing himself, and thus his failures. The philosophy he drew from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of the *Ubermensch*, reveals itself in his art, and he is forced to cope with his insufficiency. It is poetic, also, that Frobisher is devoted to music, the art form that bears resemblance to eternal recurrence, yet he is unable to properly grasp the concept. He fails as the *Ubermensch*, he does not live in the present and he does not love the world for all its vices because he cannot love himself. He cannot love himself because he keeps placing his value in the beyond, and away from the past, and thus even his misery is cyclical.

If his self-worth lives in the future, then his weaknesses dwell in the past. Frobisher evades the present even further when he grows pensive and nostalgic near the end of the novel. Frobisher’s narrative is conveyed through letter form, indicating a consistent delay between the story’s events and the reader’s knowledge of them. As it is read, the immediate plotline has already happened, and the story’s “present” is what will follow in the next chapter. This structure too plays with time in Nietzschean style, but also mirrors Frobisher’s difficulty at the Nietzschean doctrine of living in the present. This struggle is symbolized when his peaceful drive down a country highway is interrupted by a bird hitting the car, disrupting his memories of his late brother. He describes the disturbance as that he had “run out of infinity” (Mitchell 442).

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra lapses into nihilism at the revelation of eternal recurrence, because he is confronting it as a teleological solution (Higgins 196). This amounts to looking for meaning in a meaningless doctrine, and he is informed that meaning can only be found through self-affirmation, and joy, which are products of the present. Frobisher is the uninformed Zarathustra, and remains so when Ayrs banishes him from Castle Zedelghem, to when he completes the Sextet in a hotel room that would soon after become the setting for his suicide. Frobisher dies because his pinnacle was reached, his art was completed and through it, and he spent himself. “Cloud Atlas Sextet holds my life, is my life, now I’m a spent firework; but at least I’ve been a firework” (Mitchell 470). Frobisher, in his last letter, confesses he would prefer to be music rather than a mess of fluids and organs (Mitchell 470), and since everything will recur, he is not perishing for good. This is his reconciliation for his calmly organized suicide: that his death will only spit him back into being so that he can relive the good parts of his life. He kills himself when the future loses its promise, after the future became present before passing away into history. Frobisher, in his distress, assumed a passive role, which in a Nietzschean outlook is lethal.

Frobisher’s tragic mistake is his inability to see himself as music, or as time, or as human, since Nietzsche would argue that the three function on identical principles; cyclical as ever. Nihilism is the sentiment of the failed *Ubermensch*, who frantically attributes meaning in voids, and misses the only concrete reality: the present moment. The *Ubermensch* ideal provides a means of coping with the entirety of life and its pointlessness by placing value in the individual, whose existence relies on the present. The totality of time finds itself in the present, in the only place an individual can exist, and thus in the individual themselves. The significance of the individual comes from their ability to recognize this and act according to this Nietzschean truth, maximizing their time and themselves simultaneously. Therefore, repeating the process is not a condemnation, because the negative parts do not discount eternity-seeking joy, so the whole remains loved. David Mitchell’s characters all endure the stubborn tendency to hope, and although this cannot change eternity, it does not make hope useless (Hildebrand 3). As the *Ubermensch* is not designed for a purpose, nor is the world, and nor is time, and searching for meaning destroys the only space in which it can be found (the present) along with consequently destroying the searcher.

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