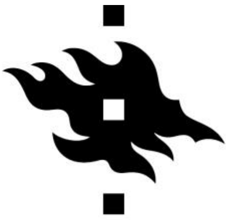

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Text-internal Fictionality in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract:

David Mitchell's 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas* consists of six stories set in different time periods and locations, focusing on six separate main characters. The first five stories are interrupted halfway through by the next story, to be continued in reverse order after the sixth, which is presented without interruption as the middle section of the book. Apart from Adam Ewing, the first story's character-narrator, each of the novel's main characters reads, sees, or in some other way encounters the previous story and experiences the same interruption that the reader does.

In this thesis, I focus on the relationship between Ewing's journal and the subsequent main character Robert Frobisher's letters in which he describes his experience of finding and reading the journal. By having Frobisher express doubts about the journal's veracity, Mitchell invites the reader to notice and investigate what I am calling the *text-internal fictionality* of Ewing's journal. In my analysis, I mainly draw on work by scholars in the field of rhetorical narratology, including contributions to the study of fictionality by James Phelan, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Richard Walsh, as well as Phelan's ideas about unreliable narration. In addition, Kelly Frame's work on intertextuality between stories by Mitchell and Herman Melville is central to my analysis of how the novel's numerous references and parallels to Melville's works enhance the sense of fictionality in Ewing's journal.

I argue that Ewing's unreliability as a narrator provides further clues of text-internal fictionality to the reader, as the kind of unreliable narration he engages in would be improbable in a real nonfictional travel journal, which is what Frobisher first assumes it to be. I further illustrate this point by comparing Ewing's unreliability to Frobisher's letters, which do not appear to be text-internally fictional while still containing unreliable narration. The possible text-internal fictionality of the journal is ultimately not resolved in the novel, allowing Mitchell to highlight the novel's theme of how our narratives about the past, the future and perhaps even the present are always fictional to some degree.

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1 Introduction

"It was all a dream" is a common phrase to describe a dissatisfying resolution to a story, where it is revealed that none of the depicted events "really" happened. This trope has perhaps been parodied and joked about more often than it has actually been employed in a sincere fashion. But why do we feel so cheated by the revelation that a fictional story is fictional also within the fictional world itself? And can this rug-pull be performed in a way that feels satisfying, instead of cheap, to the reader?

In his 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas,*[1] David Mitchell appears to execute a similar trick multiple times but manages to pull the rug so slowly and ambiguously that the reader is unlikely to feel betrayed – especially because an alternative version of the events is not offered. The novel consists of six stories, set in different time periods, written in different styles of prose, and focusing on different main characters. The first five stories get interrupted roughly around their respective halfway points, immediately followed by the next story. After the sixth, which is presented without interruption, the second halves of each preceding story are presented in reverse order, meaning that the first story is the last to reach its conclusion (see Figure 1). Thus, the novel could be read simply as an epic novel spanning centuries, from the mid-19th century to a post-apocalyptic future, using varying writing styles to emulate the linguistic features and technological advancements of each time period.

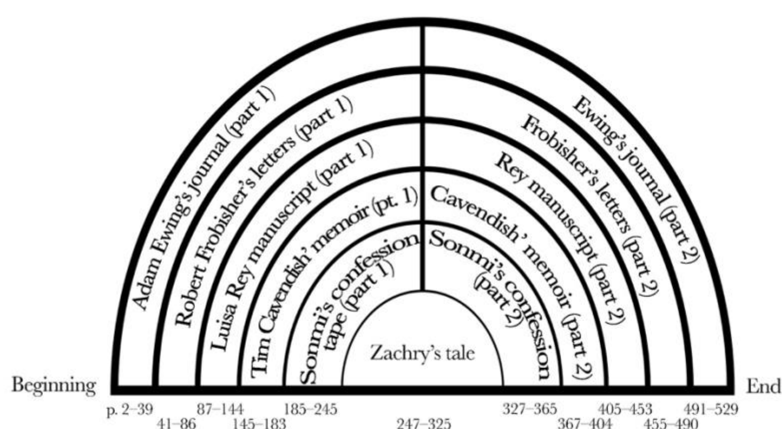

Figure 1. A visual representation of the novel's physical structure.

[1] At times abbreviated "*CA*" from here on. When using this abbreviation, I am referring to the British version of the novel (published by Sceptre). The version published in the US by Random House contains some differences (see Eve 2016) which, while arguably significant on a textual level, are largely irrelevant to my analysis here.

The structure of the novel is more complicated than that, however. Apart from Adam Ewing, the first section's character-narrator, each of the novel's main characters encounters the preceding story fragment in some form – a journal, a batch of letters, a novel manuscript, a film, or a holographic confession video (see Figure 2). Each of them also experiences more or less the same interruption that the reader does – the journal is torn in half, not all of the letters or the whole manuscript are available at first, etc. – before finding the rest of the story in the second half of their own story.

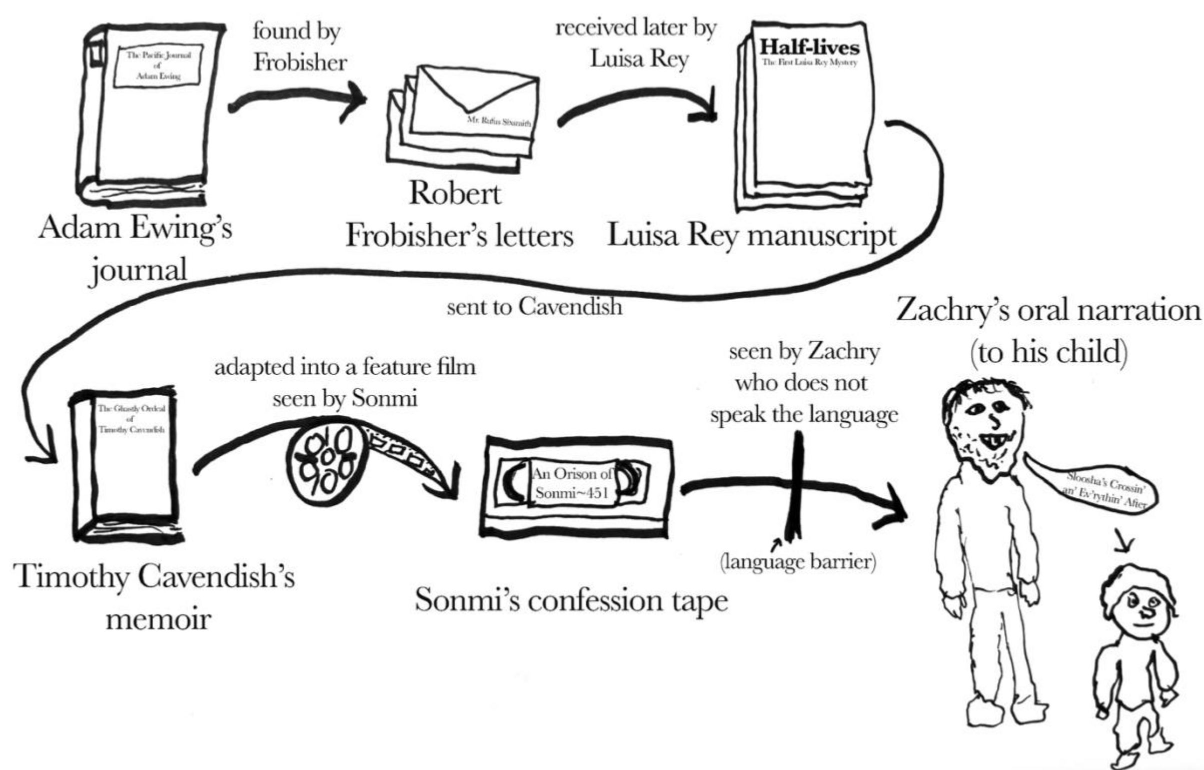

Figure 2. A visual representation of the relations between the different story fragments and the forms they are presented in.

This raises issues that complicate the straightforward reading I described. For one thing, it becomes clear that the different textual styles are not just a matter of stylistic gimmickry by the author – they represent the varying forms of media that the characters encounter (with some exceptions, as seen in Figure 2). As some of these are presented in forms that are usually expected to be fiction (like the novel manuscript), the reader is called to doubt the "authenticity" of the story in question: is it fiction within this fictional world, too, like the clichéd dream sequences mentioned above? And if it is, what does that mean for the earlier stories: if a story "containing" another story is fictional, does it follow that the story within is

fictional too? Calling back to the dream metaphor, it would be a dream within a dream – reminiscent of the ontological structure of the popular 2010 Christopher Nolan film *Inception*.

Another issue is that towards the center of the novel, the formats in which the stories are presented to us no longer match the way that the characters experience those same stories. For example, while we read a memoir written by publisher/editor Timothy Cavendish, in the next story fragment, the clone waitress Sonmi~451 watches a film adaptation of it. Similarly, the reader gets Sonmi's full confession in the form of a written dialogue between her and an interrogator, but post-apocalyptic shepherd Zachry sees it as a holographic video that he does not understand – due both to a language barrier, and to having never encountered that kind of technology before. This failure of communication between the central two layers of the novel is heightened by the fact that Zachry's culture worships Sonmi as a messiah, even as the details of her life story have clearly been either muddled or entirely lost along the way.

Even in the earlier stories, where we appear to read the same text that the characters do, those characters sometimes doubt the veracity of the document (in the case of Ewing's journal) or criticize plot points and other authorial decisions (in the case of the novel manuscript). This is significant, because it is practically impossible for us as readers (at least on the first read-through) to notice these "problems" in the way that these characters do simply because we know we are reading a fictional novel and we naturally assume that everything we read is written the way it is either because the author wanted it to be that way or because that is the best they could do. In the case of Ewing's journal, we as readers are not troubled by the fact that its structure might seem too polished and too convenient to be a real journal – because we are reading a work of fiction to begin with and we are accustomed to expect those features to some extent even in realistic modes of fiction – but Robert Frobisher, the young composer who finds the journal, starts reading it as a nonfictional work, lacking any paratextual information to make him initially assume otherwise.

Similarly, or perhaps conversely, we read the first half of the novel manuscript, a detective thriller starring young journalist Luisa Rey, without knowing that it is an unpublished work, trusting again that what we read is how the story "really happened" (in this fictional universe). But as Cavendish, in his memoir, receives it as a book proposal and starts suggesting editorial changes (while also casually giving instructions for a possible film adaptation of his own memoir), we begin to realize that the multiple, complicated levels of fictionality might be one of the central themes of Mitchell's novel, instead of just an interesting gimmick. In analyzing

these layers of what I am calling *text-internal fictionality* of the novel, I will apply rhetorical theories of fictionality developed by Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh.

Related, but still separate, is the issue of unreliable narrators. Ewing, as a narrator, is unaware of things that the observant reader notices (an effect that is highlighted by Frobisher pointing out these things in the following section of the novel to the more unobservant readers too). Frobisher, on the other hand, is unreliable in a way that makes it more difficult to detect. In my analysis, I will draw on Phelan's work on the rhetoric and ethics of character narration, especially his classification system for different kinds of unreliability. To Frobisher and ultimately to the reader, too, Ewing's unreliability is a further sign of his journal's fictionality within the world of the novel. This is a recurring motif in *Cloud Atlas:* in addition to being actively engaged with works of fiction, many of the novel's characters directly highlight the (partial) fictionality of ostensibly non-fictional narratives, calling the reader to perceive the work as a sort of self-reflective novel that tries to rouse its reader to contemplate the blurred lines between fiction and nonfiction in all kinds of narratives we encounter in our everyday lives.

The thematic significance of this reading appears to be corroborated by a sort of inner monologue that scientist Isaac Sachs, a supporting character in Luisa Rey's story, writes in his notebook just before his death:

> • *Exposition: the workings of the* actual *past + the* virtual *past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history such as the sinking of the* Titanic. *The disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a* virtual *sinking of the* Titanic*, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever more "truer".* (*CA*, 408, italics in the original)

In this thesis, I argue that Mitchell's unique choice of making his characters double as model readers is the key to understanding one of the novel's central themes, fictionality. I will also explain why the complicated structure with multiple levels of fictionality actually helps Mitchell avoid the dream-sequence problem mentioned earlier, by having each main character only appear on one narrative level, meaning that the possible text-internal fictionality of one or more of these levels does not change a character's story. Even if the reader ends up reading Ewing's journal as a fictional novel within *Cloud Atlas*, it is the only version of his journey offered to the reader. The same is true for Luisa Rey's story, which is unambiguously revealed to be a novel manuscript sent to a publishing agent. The author's goal, in my view, is

not to invite the reader to dismiss half of the novel, but to engage with it on a deeper level by reflecting on its status as a work of fiction.

While *Cloud Atlas* has attracted its fair share of scholarly attention, there has not been much focus on its handling of fictionality. In her recent book *The Poetics of Empowerment in David Mitchell's Novels* (2024), Eva-Maria Windberger approaches the subject from the perspective of reader agency, mentioning that *CA* especially allows readers to feel empowered by "making sense of narrative clues" (238). Robert L. Colson (2020, 587) notes that Mitchell's novels all appear to take place in the same fictional universe, and he touches on the subject of metalepsis, "an intrusion … from one level [of a narrative] into another level" (588), but his argument revolves around how this allows Mitchell to portray the Anthropocene by showing the effects of "slow violence" (589) happening between the novel's sections, especially those set in the future. As Colson notes, *Cloud Atlas* certainly paints a bleak picture of the road our species is traveling at the moment. There are frequent mentions of "the Fall" (e.g., *CA*, 269) – some sort of man-made disaster wiping out civilized society and almost all humans – that takes place between the novel's fifth and sixth sections. Colson is not completely clear, however, about why he thinks it is metalepsis specifically, and not merely the time jumps between sections, that allows Mitchell to successfully create this effect of slow violence. Darlene Labuschagne (2019) focuses on Mitchell's handling of memory, arguing that the novel with its multiple genres can be perceived as "an attempt to account for the archival drive" (10) and even discusses the effects of having characters double as readers, while not touching directly on the subject of fictionality. Kelly Frame's (2015) work on intertextuality in Mitchell's writing, specifically in relation to the works of Herman Melville, is central to my analysis of how intertextual elements in Ewing's journal act as signs of text-internal fictionality.

Before diving into the analysis of *Cloud Atlas* itself, I will introduce the theoretical background I am drawing on in more detail in the following chapter.

2 Theoretical Background

My analysis of the novel will revolve around two theoretical concepts – *fictionality* and *unreliability* – introduced in the two sections of this chapter. Both of these have been contentious topics in literary studies for decades, and the debate around them shows no signs of cooling down in the 21st century. Since Wayne C. Booth introduced the concept of the unreliable narrator, it has been the focus of immense interest from rhetorical narratologists, many of whom have made contributions to refining the term (Nünning 2010). For my work in this thesis, the most important of these are the six different kinds of unreliability proposed by James Phelan (2005), whose contributions to the study of fictionality are also central to my analysis of Mitchell's novel. While fiction as a genre of literature has of course been studied for much longer, fictionality as a phenomenon and the question of how it is created have started to gain more attention in the last century (Gorman 2010). In their introduction to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz call fictionality "one of the most enduring, and most vexing, problems of narrative theory" (2005, 5). Similarly, in his entry to *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* on theories of fiction, David Gorman (2010) notes that despite attempts by literary scholars to find definitive signposts, the qualities they have suggested to indicate fictionality have not been widely accepted to be explicit and unquestionable signals of fictional discourse. A future consensus is unlikely, too, because the position held by prominent narratologists such as Henrik Skov Nielsen, Phelan and Richard Walsh is that the fictionality of all discourse is more dependent on communicative intent than on any given textual feature (Nielsen et al. 2015, 64). Their rhetorical perspective on fictionality will serve as the basis for my analysis of Mitchell's novel.

2.1 Fictionality

According to Phelan, rhetorical narratology views fictionality as "intentionally communicated invention, projection, or other means of directing an audience to imagine nonactual states or sets of events" as opposed to nonfictionality, which is "intentionally communicated reporting, interpreting, evaluating or otherwise engaging with actual states or events" (2023, 301). As noted by Nielsen (2010, 280) and Phelan (2023, 301), our assumption of fictionality or nonfictionality of a narrative we encounter has a sizable effect on how we read it.

2.1.1 Theses About Fictionality

In their article "Ten Theses About Fictionality" (2015), Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh attempt to find common ground and lay a foundation for the study of fictionality, which, as noted, has only started to receive attention relatively recently (62). Because some of the theses proposed by Nielsen et al. relate more directly to my upcoming analysis than others, I will present here only those that are most relevant to this thesis, namely the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh theses.

While fictional and nonfictional discourse are clearly different from each other, according to the second thesis, "the two are closely interrelated in continuous exchange, and so are the ways in which we engage with them" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 64). This means that our views and opinions of real-life events and issues can be affected by fictional portrayals of them (ibid.), like the 1997 James Cameron film *Titanic* has colored the way millions of people imagine the sinking of the real, titular ship, for example.[2]

The third thesis claims that "[t]he rhetoric of fictionality is founded upon a communicative intent" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 64). This means that fictionality or nonfictionality (or a blur between those two) in any discourse depends more on the speaker's intentions than on any specific features of a given text (ibid.). As the speaker's intent can often only be inferred from the discourse itself, miscommunication can occur, which may result in discourse intended as fictive being perceived as nonfictive, or vice versa (65).

Logically, then, the fourth thesis concerns the ways in which the "sender" can mark their fictive intent to avoid misunderstandings:

> A sender can signal fictive intent in various ways: paratextually (*Atonement: A Novel*), metatextually ("Consider this scenario"), through certain uses of the affordances of the medium (in speech, significant changes in one's tone of voice), as well as through foregrounded violations of the conventions of nonfictive discourse. (Nielsen et al. 2015, 65)

This brings us to the fifth thesis – the interpretation of these signals by the receiver. From this perspective, "fictionality is an interpretive assumption about a sender's communicative act" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 66). Accurate interpretation of fictive or nonfictive intent is crucial for effective communication. As Nielsen et al. (2015, 66) note, a receiving party's assumption of

---

[2] A topic that Mitchell's character Isaac Sachs touches on in *Cloud Atlas*, as quoted in the introduction to this thesis.

fictionality can lead to frustration for the speaker if the communication is intended as nonfictive. Conversely, inaccurately ascribing nonfictionality to a message intended as fictional can also lead to misunderstanding and embarrassment.

If it is so crucial to correctly identify communicative intent, are there clear signs that can aid us in recognizing fictionality in any context? The sixth thesis does not offer much hope for this: "No formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 66). The writers view fictionality as a "cultural variable rather than a logical or ontological absolute" – it is always context-dependent (ibid.). They also point out that even though certain literary techniques are much more common in (or even seemingly exclusive to) fictional works, any capable nonfiction author can utilize them in their own work (Nielsen et al. 2015, 67; Phelan 2005, 68). The opposite – using (auto)biographical or historical tropes in fictional works – is an even more obvious scenario, of course, and some writers have gone as far as to try to pass their fictional writings as long-lost memoirs of historical figures, to varying success (see Smith and Watson 2005, 358–361).

Finally, the seventh (and for my purposes, perhaps the most important) thesis by Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh: "Signaling or assuming a fictive communicative intent entails an attitude toward the communicated information that is different from attitudes toward nonfictive discourse" (2015, 67). In other words, "[r]eading with an assumption that characters and events are fictional offers a recognizably different experience than reading with an assumption that they are nonfictional" (Phelan 2023, 301). Sometimes we might be wrong in our initial assumptions of a given work's fictionality, or unable to make an assumption at all due to lack of paratextual information or other factors. This is especially important for my analysis of the first section of *Cloud Atlas* (Adam Ewing's journal) because the real-world reader of the novel approaches it with a different attitude to that of the character reading it in the novel, Robert Frobisher. While both the reader and Frobisher initially assume that Ewing's journal is nonfictional within *CA*, only Frobisher, himself a character contained in the novel, reads it as nonfictional – the reader, on the other hand, thinks of *Cloud Atlas* as a work of fiction from the start.

In order to help literary critics (even if not ordinary readers) think about works situated on different points of the fictionality spectrum, new taxonomies have been proposed that try to accommodate borderline cases better than a black-and-white division between fiction and

nonfiction. While the theses of fictionality proposed by Nielsen et al. describe how fictionality and nonfictionality are formed in communication, these taxonomies attempt to classify literary works based on how prominently these two qualities are present in them.

2.1.2 Taxonomies of Fictionality

In her article "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality" (1997), Marie-Laure Ryan attacks the idea that "postmodern writing practice" (181) and especially certain types of autofiction have resulted in "panfictionality" (165) – meaning that all discourse is on some level fictional. Instead, she proposes a system comprising three categories of fictionality:

> 1. Those texts that overtly say "I am true," asking the reader to accept this claim as criterion of validity. (Biographies, historiography, traditional journalism, scientific discourse.)
>
> 2. Those texts that send a mixed message: I am not true but pretend that I am. (Prototypes: *Madame Bovary*, *War and Peace*, *Jane Eyre*, *Buddenbrooks*)
>
> 3. Those that say "I am not true" through overt makers, and inhibit participation in a textual world. (No full prototype here, but works tending in this direction: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Dans le labyrinthe*, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, *The Unnamable*, *Gravity's Rainbow*). (Ryan 1997, 181)

It is clear from Ryan's examples in the second category that she does not mean "mixed messages" in the sense that, say, a postmodern, metafictional work of autofiction might refer to verifiable facts of the author's life while simultaneously highlighting its partial fictionality. Nor does she mean that the works in this category actually pretend to be nonfictional – on the contrary, it is evident that she is talking about realistic fiction. She makes this more explicit in a later article, with an updated and slightly reordered taxonomy:

> [I]n category 1, strong factuality, authors must adhere strictly to documented facts; in (2), weak factuality, authors assume responsibility for the truth of the story on the global level, but they are allowed to fill in blanks on the local level by using their imagination; in (3), fiction proper, the storyworld is presented for its own sake, as different from the real world. Category 3 encompasses both fictions that project a realistic world, such as *Anna Karenina*, and fantastic genres such as *Lord of the Rings*. (Ryan 2022, 87, italics and inconsistencies in the original)

Both of Ryan's taxonomies appear incomplete, especially in how they do not seem to acknowledge works that mix fiction and nonfiction in creative ways, despite the fact that the threat of "panfictionality" created by postmodernism is precisely what she is responding to in the first place.

Nielsen (2010) duly criticizes Ryan's original 1997 taxonomy for "overemphasiz[ing] the importance of or challenge posed by metafiction" (283). According to him, the only "clear distinction" is "between nonfiction (category 1) and fiction (whether metafictive or not [categories 2 and 3])" (ibid.), making the third category redundant.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that Nielsen goes on to propose a modified version of Ryan's taxonomy with four categories instead of three, dedicating two of them to works whose categorization would be impossible or at least imprecise using a simple dichotomy of fiction vs. nonfiction:

> (1) Fictional texts (prototypes: *Madame Bovary*, *War and Peace*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Unnamable*, etc.).
>
> (2) Underdetermined texts (prototypes: *Les Mots* by Sartre, *A Million Little Pieces* by Frey, etc.). (…)
>
> (3) Overdetermined texts (prototypes: *Fils*, *Lunar Park*, etc.).
>
> (4) Nonfictional texts (biographies, historiography, traditional journalism, scientific discourse). (Nielsen 2010, 284)

By *underdetermined*, Nielsen means texts whose status of fictionality is unclear – they "present themselves as *neither* fiction *nor* nonfiction" (ibid., italics in the original), though it must be noted that his most important example, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, was arguably first marketed as nonfiction and then revealed to be partly fictional (Nielsen 2010, 285–8). This would imply that a completely fictional work could belong to this category as well, as long as it lacks paratextual information and textual cues to signal its fictionality. One well-known example of this would be *Robinson Crusoe* around the time it was first published (Ryan 2013, 378). Conversely, *overdetermined* texts highlight both their fictionality and nonfictionality (Nielsen 2010, 284). In one of Nielsen's examples, *Lunar Park* (2005), the author Bret Easton Ellis achieves this by including easily verifiable references to his own career in a story containing overtly fictional, supernatural elements.[3]

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[3] *Lunar Park* contains some less obviously fictional elements too: a wife, a son, a stepdaughter, and a teaching job at a fictional college in a fictional town. It could be argued that a fictional framing offers Ellis safety to write about struggling with a difficult relationship with his father, as well as addiction, sexual transgressions, and the traumatic public reaction to his earlier novel *American Psycho*. As so much of *Lunar Park* is so obviously fictional, nothing in it can be held against its author – except on aesthetic terms, of course. As such, it is a great example of an overdetermined text.

It should be noted that neither Ryan (1997, 165) nor Nielsen (2010, 285) intend these categories to be absolutely rigid, instead viewing the divide between fiction and nonfiction as a continuum.[4] Nielsen also acknowledges that a fifth category could be added to his taxonomy, for fictional works presented as nonfiction, and vice versa, but he cites the difficulty of finding examples of this as the reason for leaving it out (284–5). This is somewhat puzzling, as both his own example of an underdetermined text (Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*) and the already mentioned *Robinson Crusoe*, not to mention several well-known literary hoaxes (e.g., the Hitler Diaries forged by Konrad Kujau) could be argued to fit a category like this – a point that highlights the inevitable overlaps of any system that tries to categorize levels or types of fictionality.

For the purposes of this thesis, however, the four categories proposed by Nielsen are sufficient. As *Cloud Atlas* belongs quite firmly in the first category, being a work of fiction that does not include overt references to events or people in the real world or to the author himself, I do not intend to analyze its fictionality. Instead, as mentioned in the introduction, I am using these theories of fictionality to discuss what I call the *text-internal fictionality* of certain sections of Mitchell's novel.

2.1.3 Text-internal Fictionality

To the best of my knowledge, the term "text-internal fictionality" is a new coinage. It is meant to cover a conceptual area similar to those of story-within-a-story and metalepsis, but with a different focus: exploring the fictionality of a text within a world depicted in another text. Stories contained in other stories are often portrayed as unambiguously fictional within the main storyworld, like the gangster film *Angels with Filthy Souls* in the 1991 movie Home Alone. It is also quite common for a story contained within another to be presented as "factual" within the main story. These kinds of works do not provide much in the way of a theoretical challenge – it would be simple to apply Nielsen's taxonomy of fictionality to

---

[4] In her later article, Ryan (2022, 87) expresses dissatisfaction with a single continuum between fiction and nonfiction, with no clear division between them. She toys with the idea of "a continuum leading from strong factuality to weak factuality", then crossing over an implied barrier to "weak fictionality, and strong fictionality" (ibid.). But she is not satisfied with this solution either, because "it does not tell us at what point authors are held responsible for truth, and at what point they can freely invent" (ibid.). She then proposes the updated three-part taxonomy quoted earlier, which, in my opinion, does not solve this problem either. As examples like *Lunar Park* prove, some works of literature appear to be written precisely with the intention to flaunt their ability to break theoretical barriers such as these.

Angels with Filthy Souls and declare it a fictional text (or film) within another. A novel like *Cloud Atlas*, however, that invites its reader to try to determine the text-internal fictionality of its multiple narrative levels, can prove to be a more fruitful subject for analysis of this kind.

In the next section of this chapter, I will introduce theories about unreliable narration, which also features in *Cloud Atlas* and will factor into my analysis especially because of how it magnifies the text-internal fictionality of the novel's first story.

2.2 Unreliability

Wayne C. Booth defines the term *unreliable narrator* as a narrator who does not speak "in accord with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)" (1961, 158–9, quoted in Phelan 2005, 33). The *implied author* is a hotly debated concept with slightly varying definitions (Phelan 2005, 38–49), but in simple terms, it is a version of the author of a text that is contained in said text. There has been debate on whether the implied author is the agent that creates the text or an entity created by the text, and on whether the concept is useful at all (ibid.). For the purposes of this thesis, it only matters that the implied author is an entity that can communicate with the reader without the narrator's knowledge, which can create a discrepancy between what the narrator is telling the reader and the full meaning that the reader receives, making the narrator appear unreliable. As Phelan puts it: "a character narrator is 'unreliable' when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer" (2005, 49).

In his book *Living to Tell About It* (2005), Phelan points out some shortcomings in Booth's theories and builds on them. Whereas Booth identifies two areas (or "axes", as Phelan calls them) of unreliability, facts and values, meaning that narrators can be dishonest about events and/or their evaluation of them, Phelan adds a third one: "the axis of knowledge and perception" (2005, 34). This is necessary in order to explain narrators that do not appear to be aware that their portrayal of events is limited in perspective or downright erroneous.

Building on these three axes, and on the assumption that a narrator may also be unintentionally untrustworthy, Phelan goes on to propose that there are "six kinds of unreliability: misreporting, misreading, misevaluating—or what [he] will call

misregarding[5]—and underreporting, underreading, and underregarding" (2005, 51). *Misreporting* is exactly what it sounds like: knowingly reporting incorrect information (2005, 51). *Misreading*, on the other hand, occurs when a narrator is mistaken in their perception of the events or things they are reporting (51). Phelan's original explanation of the difference between misreading and the third kind, *misevaluating*, is somewhat vague, as his examples of both include statements that could be thought of as matters of opinion (or "evaluation"), but the key difference is that misevaluating means making incorrect ethical judgements, which, at least in Phelan's example, the narrator "at some level of consciousness" knows to be false (51). This is made more explicit in Phelan's later book *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (2017):

> [Unreliable] narration along the axis of characters and events is misreporting or underreporting; along the axis of understanding/perception, it is misreading or misinterpreting/underreading or underinterpreting; along the axis of values, it is misregarding or misevaluating/underregarding or underevaluating. (99)

As is clear from the names Phelan has chosen to describe the other three kinds of unreliability, these qualities are similar to the first three, but they concern the act of omitting information instead of presenting misinformation. *Underreporting* "occurs when the narrator tells us less than he or she knows" (2005, 52). As Phelan notes, this does not always result in unreliability, as narrators (and implied authors) can also leave gaps in the narrative that they "expect their respective audiences to be able to fill" (52). I would point out that there are also other innocent reasons to leave facts and details out of a narrative – time, space, and relevance, for example – not all gaps need to be filled. Instead, according to Phelan, underreporting creates unreliability only when the narrator "deliberately guides the narratee to fill in the gap inaccurately" (52). Phelan also sees a distinction between underreporting and what he calls *suppressed narration* – the act of omitting "significant information that the narrative itself otherwise indicates is relevant to the character, situation, or event being reported on, thereby creating either a gap in the text that cannot be filled or a discrepancy between what is reported in one place and not reported in another" (138).

Underreading, which will prove to be central in my upcoming analysis, occurs when the narrator's limitations result in an incomplete picture of what the narrator is describing (2005, 52). Finally, *underevaluating* (or *underregarding*) "occurs when a narrator's ethical judgment

[5] It must be noted that despite promising to use "misregarding" instead of "misevaluating", Phelan goes on to use "misevaluating" only two sentences later.

is moving along the right track but simply does not go far enough" (52). The difference between underreading and underevaluating is similar to the one between misreading and misevaluating, described above.

As will become clear from my analysis of the first two stories in *Cloud Atlas*, not all unreliable narrators exhibit all or even most of the qualities described by Phelan. In fact, it appears that each of the two character-narrators I analyze mostly displays only one type of unreliability, with occasional examples of one or two other types. This is because the types of unreliability that a character-narrator can or will engage in naturally depend on the personality of the character itself – an honest but naïve character like Adam Ewing is not likely to misreport (i.e., lie) or even underreport (that is, omit a piece of information he knows), for example, but he does misread and underread (in other words, misunderstand or fail to understand at all) frequently, as will be shown in chapter 4. As I will argue in my analysis, this heightens the sense of text-internal fictionality in Ewing's journal, because he often encounters events, people and dialogue that he does not understand correctly or completely but still manages to report sufficiently clearly and accurately for the reader to be able to grasp the full meaning. Robert Frobisher misreads, too, but not as frequently, and as I will also show in chapter 4, his most significant misreading is revealed to the reader at the same time as the character realizes his mistake, resulting in a different effect from the one in Ewing's journal.

Before I can show how unreliable narration can sometimes contribute to the story's text-internal fictionality, the next chapter will focus on analyzing other signs of text-internal fictionality that are present in the text.

3 Mapping the Text-Internal Fictionality of *Cloud Atlas*

In this chapter, I will demonstrate the concept of text-internal fictionality with specific examples from *Cloud Atlas*. Of the six stories in the novel, my analysis will focus on cases where the status of text-internal fictionality is most ambiguous. As the idea of a straightforward novel-within-a-novel is not novel by any means (see Allen 2020, 80), focusing on "Half-lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", presented in the book as an unpublished manuscript for a detective novel, might not yield much that has not been said before (though, it must be noted, the relations between *CA*'s stories somewhat complicate its status). That is why it is more fruitful to start from the beginning of the novel, with "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", which follows the eponymous notary's journey from the Chatham Islands, where he meets a murderous impostor calling himself Dr. Henry Goose, to Hawaii, where he is rescued from Dr. Goose's poisonous treatment by a former slave called Autua.

3.1 Is Ewing's Journal a Journal?

While anyone who has read *Cloud Atlas* will have noted that it is a complex work of metafiction, this is not apparent at the start of the novel. Readily available paratextual information does not advertise the novel's metafictionality – the two different versions of the novel's back cover in my possession (and others I have seen) focus instead on how the novel spans multiple time periods and physical locations, and hint at a theme of reincarnating souls – guiding the reader to expect a historical novel of epic proportions, or a work of speculative fiction.

As a result, when reading the novel for the first time, the reader is unlikely to pay attention to any signs of text-internal fictionality in the first half of "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing"[6] – the reader knows that they are reading a work of fiction, after all – even markedly fictional tropes would be accounted for by that fact, and structural and stylistic features resembling fictional works would be attributed to Mitchell emulating a mid-19th century American notary to the best of his abilities. To put it in terms of Nielsen's taxonomy of fictionality (2010, 284), *Cloud Atlas* as a whole and the Journal with it fall neatly into the first group, fictional texts.

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[6] Simply called the Journal from here on.

However, going on to apply Nielsen's system to the layers of texts within Mitchell's novel, at the start the reader has no reason to assume that the Journal is anything other than nonfictional within the world of the *Cloud Atlas*. After all, unless paratextual information informs us otherwise, we tend to think that the implied author of any fictional novel means us to believe that, in this storyworld, the story really happens the way we are told it happens – or, in cases of unreliable narration, the way that we can piece together from the narration despite and, in some ways, because of the narrator's unreliability (Phelan 2005, 49).

Paratextual information about the Journal is scarce, at this point of the novel, at least, but both the title and the formatting (relatively short, dated entries) give the impression of a real journal. The dates do not include a year, which could indicate fictionality, but it could also be because that information is so obvious to the character-narrator Ewing (and the year might have been marked on the cover of the original handwritten journal). In any case, most readers will probably attribute the omission to the global fictionality of the novel.

This lack of paratext is further emphasized by a footnote to one of the entries over half-way through the first part of the Journal, signed by "J.E." (*CA*, 21) and identifying the Journal's writer as their father – it is clear this is meant to be Ewing's son Jackson (5). The note refers to something Jackson has explained in "the Introduction" (21), but there is no introduction in the version of the Journal included in *Cloud Atlas*. Equally, if less obviously, puzzling is the fact that the footnote justifies revealing the approximate location of a holy place by saying that the marginalized Moriori people it belongs to "are a race over extinction's brink" (21). This is not true in our world today[7] – meaning it certainly was not true in the latter half of the 19th century when J.E. would have written his note – which leaves it open to interpretation whether this passing bit of information is (1) a mistake on Mitchell's part, (2) a sign of Jackson Ewing's incomplete knowledge of the world and/or his Western arrogance,[8] (3) true in the world of *Cloud Atlas*, or (4) true in the world of the Journal as a work of fiction within the world of the novel. In any case, it is by no means a very clear sign of internal fictionality, but the mere presence of the footnote can be considered to be the novel's first small step into the world of metafiction, as it highlights the story's possible fictionality by drawing attention

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[7] See Waitangi Tribunal 2001.

[8] Or, perhaps, the Moriori were so near extinction in the late 19th century that in some parts of the world they were indeed thought to be extinct. I have not been able to confirm this.

to the fact that, even if the text was lifted from a journal, it has been edited, and we have not been given all of the available information about it.

All in all, these are very minor signs that everything is not how it seems, and they are easily (dis)missed. When it comes to determining the nature of the Journal's possible text-internal fictionality, the shift in perception occurs, if it occurs at all, only after Ewing's narration is cut off mid-sentence (39) and the novel moves on to its next story-fragment, "Letters from Zedelghem", which contains valuable paratextual information about the Journal and observations from the character-narrator, young composer Robert Frobisher.

3.2 "Now, pay attention…" – Characters as Tour Guides

"Letters from Zedelghem"[9] starts with Frobisher's account of how, fleeing from his debtors in England, he ends up traveling to Belgium to offer his services as an amanuensis to a disease-riddled master composer, Vyvyan Ayrs, who lives in the titular château, outside Bruges (*CA*, 43–51). The Letters, addressed to Frobisher's longtime friend/lover Rufus Sixsmith, are written in a playful, humorous style, with vivid (and often judgmental) descriptions of people and places. They are at times self-deprecating but at others quite pompous – including verbatim French dialogue (e.g., 54, 64, 76–7), a plethora of literary references (e.g., 64, 78, 80) as well as musical terminology (e.g., 43–6, 84) – and they paint the picture of a classically educated young man with quite a large ego.

It is precisely his love of literature, in addition to a terminal lack of funds, that brings Frobisher into contact with Ewing's Journal. He starts going through Zedelghem's vast collection of old books to scour for valuable first editions that he plans to sell to a fishy dealer and finds a torn book without covers (64) – the part of the Journal that the reader has just read. Thus, he is able to give us some information about the physical volume, and his own reading of its contents. Notably, he starts his account of finding the book by instructing Sixsmith (and by extension, the reader) to "pay attention" (64), and expresses his wish that Sixsmith should try to find a complete version of the Journal. As this is the first instance of contact between different stories in the novel, this call to pay attention at what comes next can also be read as the implied Mitchell pointing at the trick he is about to perform. Describing the physical appearance of Ewing's journal, Frobisher solves the mystery of the missing introduction by telling us that "[i]t begins on the 99th page, its covers are gone, its binding

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[9] Referred to as the Letters from this point onwards.

unstitched" (64). This explains why the story (as it is presented to the reader) begins so neatly at Ewing's meeting of Henry Goose in the Chatham Islands, instead of in Sydney at the start of Ewing's voyage back home or indeed at the start of his mission, which would have been the most logical starting point for Ewing himself.[10] Frobisher goes on to help the reader situate the time period by deducing the year to be "1849 or 1850" (64) based on a reference to the California gold rush. He mentions that the Journal appears to have been "published posthumously, by Ewing's son" (64), as the editor's note implies – I read this as the implied Mitchell ensuring that his audience does not miss this detail and its possible implications.

After describing the book's paratextual features, Frobisher offers his reading of its characters and events: "Ewing puts me in mind of Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano in *Benito Cereno*, blind to all conspirators – he hasn't spotted his trusty Doctor Henry Goose (*sic*) is a vampire, fuelling his hypochondria in order to poison him, slowly, for his money" (64, italics and "sic" in the original). The mention of Melville here is significant in multiple ways. In her article "'The Strong Do Eat': David Mitchell and Herman Melville – A Study in Intertextuality", Kelly Frame (2015) does an excellent job of pointing out the many intertextual references and thematic similarities between *Cloud Atlas* and Melville's work, focusing on his 1851 masterpiece *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. Firstly, it is interesting in itself that Mitchell's character compares Ewing to a(n ostensibly) fictional character. What makes this especially notable, however, is the fact that the fictionality of the character chosen as the point of comparison is more complicated than one might assume: while "Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano" (*CA*, 64) in the novella "Benito Cereno" (1856) is a fictional character, Captain Amaso Delano is not only a real historical person, but he experienced a situation very similar to the one depicted in Melville's novella and wrote his own book about it (Delano 1817) – a memoir which serves as the basis for Melville's story (McLamore 1995, 35–6). Melville's Delano is "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms" (Melville 1856, 58), enabling him to miss every clue to the fact that a ship he is visiting has been overrun by slaves. As Frame (2015, 20) notes, Frobisher guides the reader to see Ewing's naïveté as similar to Delano's, but he also spells this out to readers who are not familiar with Melville's story by calling Doctor Henry Goose "a vampire" (*CA,* 64) who is

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[10] While references to the past indicate that Ewing's voyage has not been uneventful before their first encounter, the story that we are presented in the Journal fragment contained in *CA* is very much about Ewing's experience with Goose, which makes it convenient to introduce him right at the start of the narrative.

after Ewing's money, and even disputes Goose's identity – his profession and perhaps his name – simply by writing "(*sic*)" after mentioning him.

If the reader has failed to suspect Goose of duplicity before this – which is entirely possible, as he gives his diagnosis (36) and starts the deadly treatment (37) only a couple of pages before the Journal's first half ends (39) – this is a rather forceful way to make the reader look back on and reevaluate what has come before. If we do precisely that, it is now easy to find examples of Goose's questionable character that Ewing reports while explaining them away or simply discounting them. Following their initial meeting, on the opening pages of the novel, when Ewing finds Goose collecting human teeth on a beach, he is soon eager to get away and records his first impression in his Journal: "I fancy he is a Bedlamite" (4). In the next entry, however, he calls this judgment "unjust & premature" (5), signaling the start of a friendship during which, time and time again, he decides to assume the best even when Goose shows clear signs of amorality.

However, while I will discuss how Goose's true, murderous nature and Ewing's blindness to it relate to the text-internal fictionality of the Journal in a later chapter, the last part of Frobisher's analysis needs to be examined first: "Something shifty about the journal's authenticity – seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true – but who would bother forging such a journal, and why?" (64). While Frobisher is clearly familiar with some of Herman Melville's work, it is now his turn to play Captain Delano. Melville's first book *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) is a "a fictionalized version of his real-life experience of jumping ship in 1842 … and living briefly with the Tai Pī people on the island Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas" (Watson 2024, 93) which seems to be a more obvious point of comparison than Captain Delano for Adam Ewing whose story starts among the native people of Chatham Islands (in Polynesia), approximately in 1849. Similarly to "Benito Cereno", much of *Typee* is based on Melville's reading of other people's accounts of Polynesian travels, and his own four-week stay on the island was much shorter than the four months his self-insert main character Tommo spends there in the book (Watson 2024, 94). Alex Watson argues that the "flexible boundary between fiction and fact is an important aspect of *Typee*'s strange Romanticism" (2024, 94). In his book *White Lies: Melville's Narratives of Facts* (1989), John Samson analyzes Melville's whole routine of constructing stories in a most illuminating way:

> Melville's books are vital rewritings of his junky "sources": he reads the narratives in comparison to his experiences, picks out the yarns (or tales, in

> nautical slang) most expressive of their generic and *ideological context*, twists or tropes them to his purposes, then re-presents them closely following the *presprictions of the narrative genre*. (8, emphasis added)

Applying this to Ewing's journal, the suspiciously tidy structure mentioned by Frobisher starts to make sense – Ewing moves from one "yarn" to the next, systematically going through issues and themes one might encounter when traveling from Polynesia to San Francisco (or Honolulu, where the story actually ends) in the mid-19th century, while weaving them all into a cohesive narrative centralized around his attempted murder by a personification of the worst kind of Western man, and his own redemption and growth from a passive observer to an abolitionist by the end of the Journal's second part (*CA*, 528).

This Melvillean reading of the Journal is made even more plausible by the fact that Ewing himself mentions Melville at key moments. In the first part of the Journal, he says the local preacher's spoken account of the history of the Moriori people of Chatham Islands "holds company with the pen of a Defoe or Melville" (*CA*, 10), which is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is in line with the idea that Ewing (or an unnamed fictional author writing about him) and the implied Mitchell are doing precisely what Melville constantly does – taking stories and nonfictional accounts from different sources to build his own fiction – and that they are doing it self-consciously. Secondly, it is quite ironic that Ewing would compare the history of Moriori people to authors of fiction at all, as it is purportedly a true story. While Melville's status as a fiction writer might have been a bit ambiguous at the time of Ewing's journey (as *Typee* was famously based on his own experiences and was probably perceived as more or less a true account by the general public), Defoe was certainly best known for *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a fictional novel about a castaway. As Ryan (2013, 378) notes, though, *Crusoe* was first published without Defoe's name, with a cover proclaiming that it contained the adventures of the titular character "written by himself" (Defoe 1719, n.p.), and a preface claiming that "[t]he Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact" (iii). The mention of Defoe can also be perceived as the implied Mitchell (or the fictional author of the Journal) crediting, in his own way, a reference placed on the Journal's first page: as Labuschagne (2019, 13) also notes, Ewing's description of finding Goose's tracks in the sand (*CA*, 3) is reminiscent of Crusoe encountering Friday's footprints (Defoe 1719, 181). Thus, the presence of these two authors in *Cloud Atlas* appears to point at works with a complicated relationship between fictionality and nonfictionality (Melville) and fictional works posing as nonfictional (Defoe).

As mentioned above, the story that the preacher D'Arnoq tells Ewing, while certainly dramatized, is quite an accurate description of how the Maori colonized Chatham Islands and enslaved the Moriori people in the first half of the 19th century (see Waitangi Tribunal 2001). Mentioning Melville, of course, draws attention to the fact that no one could have accurately recorded such a lengthy tale in writing, with many foreign words, after having heard it once in spoken form – meaning that Ewing, his son, or an unnamed fictional author of the Journal would have needed to use other sources even if they had encountered Maori and Moriori people first hand in the Chatham Islands, precisely like Melville did with *Typee*.

Once we get to the second part of the Journal near the end of Mitchell's novel, Ewing mentions Melville again when leaving the island of Ra'iātea, having witnessed the cruel treatment that natives endure in the hands of Christian missionaries: "I recall the crimes Mr Melville imputes to Pacific missionaries in his recent account of the Typee" (*CA,* 511). The wording implies that Ewing thinks of *Typee* as a work of nonfiction – he does not call it Melville's recent novel *Typee*, but an "account" about "the Typee" which was Melville's way of spelling Tai Pī, the name of the native people amongst whom he lived on Nuku Hiva island. Once again, Melville is mentioned in proximity to Melvillean storytelling where the main character conveniently encounters a real-world issue that represents an "ideological context" that suits the implied author's (be it Ewing, someone else, or Mitchell) purposes. Ewing's literal journey through the Pacific Ocean is littered with moral judgment calls and instances of him witnessing injustice that he is unable to prevent, making it double as a spiritual journey to a point where he is no longer able to stay inactive (*CA*, 528–9).

Returning to Frobisher's comments about the Journal, then: these examples have demonstrated that yes, there is "something shifty about [its] authenticity", and yes, it is certainly "too structured for a genuine diary" (*CA,* 64). Even though I cannot be completely certain what Frobisher is referring to specifically when he says that "its language doesn't ring quite true" (ibid.), there are likely examples: the word "complete" is consistently spelled as "compleat" (see *CA,* 22) despite that spelling being already archaic in 1849, seeming like an overcompensated attempt to make the language feel old, and Ewing uses the word "entropy" (*CA,* 528) almost twenty years before it was invented.[11] As to the questions of "who would

[11] Frobisher could be referring to other textual features that escape my notice, but a comparison between British and American versions of the novel reveals that they each follow the modern conventions of their language variants in matters of punctuation (e.g., "Mr" vs. "Mr."), for example, which means that it is not a question of Ewing, an American notary, writing in British English, at least (see *CA,* 3; Mitchell 2004b, 3).

bother forging such a journal, and why" (64), the mentions of Melville and Defoe provide some clues. For one thing, as the Journal Frobisher finds is missing its covers, we cannot tell if it is indeed a forgery, even if it is not nonfictional, or true, in the world of *Cloud Atlas* – the covers might contain paratextual information confirming that it is a novel written in the form of a journal found by the "author's" son, complete with an introduction by the "son", similarly to how Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) is presented as a memoir written by the main character and containing a foreword by a fictitious editor, while paratextual information (Nabokov's name on the cover, for example) makes it clear that the whole thing is in fact a fictional novel. That would make the Journal a straightforward case of a fictional novel within a fictional novel, fitting the first group of Nielsen's taxonomy (fictional texts), when applied to text-internal fictionality.

It could also be a case of an anonymous author, like the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* – and even if the cover implied that Adam Ewing was the author, the work could still be paratextually presented as a novel instead of a completely nonfictional travelogue. As to why someone would write such a (relatively) realistic novel about injustices in the real world, Frobisher should perhaps ask Melville or Mitchell. On the other hand, there certainly have been many different kinds of literary hoaxes in history, and some of them do not appear to have any other motivation apart from fooling their reader (see Vice 2014), making it possible to read Ewing's journal as a literary hoax within a novel. Nielsen does not really engage with these kinds of hoaxes in his 2010 article (James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which he does discuss, is not a traditional hoax in the sense that only certain elements of its story are fabricated and the author-narrator-character is a real person) and the taxonomy does not have a clear place for literary frauds. But if we were to assume that Ewing's journal is a fiction posing as a completely nonfictional diary (the latter being what Frobisher appears to assume it is at first), it would be a category 1 (fiction) text hiding in category 4 (nonfiction). Perhaps Nielsen should add a fifth category to include these sorts of texts and their inverse, like he is tempted to do (2010, 284) – or, better yet, two separate categories, one for each case.

As I have made clear, however, most of the available evidence seems to point at some sort of Melville-esque story containing fictionalized versions of nonfictional sources and possible first-hand experiences by the fictional author, who might be Adam Ewing, his son, or someone else. As such, applying Nielsen's taxonomy to the text-internal fictionality of the Journal, it would fit most comfortably in the category of underdetermined texts – presenting itself "as *neither* fiction *nor* nonfiction" (Nielsen 2010, 284, italics in the original), very

similarly to Melville's *Typee.* Interestingly, Nielsen rejects including a potential fifth category in his taxonomy on the basis that it would be hard to find examples of "texts that are wholly or partly true, but present themselves as fiction, and texts that are wholly or partly fiction, but attest to the opposite" (2010, 284). *Typee* could be argued to fit the first description, as could any novel where the author is writing a mostly or almost completely nonfictional account of their lived experiences but elects to use fictional names for the characters, for example. Nielsen continues that the fifth category could possibly also include "pseudo-autobiography and pseudo-history" (2010, 285). While there is not enough paratextual information to determine for certain which of these Ewing's journal would be within *CA*'s fictional world, it seems that it could very well belong in this hypothetical fifth category, if it had covers that aligned it more clearly with either fiction or nonfiction.

It must be clarified that while I have, in my argumentation, sought to illustrate how certain details in the Journal point to its text-internal fictionality, it has not been my intention to claim that they constitute definite proof that the Journal is, or is intended to be, completely fictional within the world of *Cloud Atlas*. What I am saying is that it contains clear signs of fictionality that cannot be attributed to the implied Mitchell's failure to write a realistic 19th century travel journal but should instead be seen as the implied author's successful and intentional portrayal of fictional tropes. By having Frobisher react and respond to these features, Mitchell is trying to ensure that the audience receives this intended meaning. This supports my view that the impossibility of creating a concrete border between fictionality and nonfictionality is one of the novel's central themes.

In the next chapter, I will explain how Ewing is an unreliable narrator, and how this can emphasize the feeling of fictionality further. I will also compare his unreliability to Frobisher's.

4 Is Unreliability a Reliable Sign of Fictionality?

In the previous chapter, I referred to the possibility that Ewing's unreliability as a narrator might play a part in arousing Frobisher's suspicions about the Journal's authenticity. The focus of this chapter will be to analyze that further, and to compare Ewing's unreliability to Frobisher's own. In doing this, I am utilizing Phelan's (2005, 51–52) system of classifying different kinds of unreliability, as explained in chapter 2. By comparing the two characters, I aim to show that while Ewing's unreliability does provide support for reading the Journal as a fictional work within the world of *Cloud Atlas*, Frobisher's unreliability does not have a similar effect on the Letters' status regarding text-internal fictionality. First, I will perform a close reading of the Journal to show and analyze examples of Ewing's unreliability.

4.1 Unreliability in Ewing's Journal

While it is my view that Ewing's unreliability is mostly not that overt in the first half of the journal for anyone reading the novel for the first time, Frobisher's commentary highlights it to such a degree that it is impossible to miss while reading the second part, and it also makes it easier to detect it in the first part on a subsequent rereading, as the following close reading demonstrates.

As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, Ewing's initial impression of his would-be murderer Dr. Henry Goose is a negative one. Goose is collecting human teeth on a beach and happily explains that his reason for doing so is an elaborate revenge scheme against someone who has damaged his reputation five years previously (*CA*, 3–4). The pair meet again the next morning, and Ewing quickly changes his opinion of Goose as they breakfast together (5). No direct dialogue is recorded this time, but with the hindsight provided by a complete knowledge of the novel, it can be assumed that the murderous impostor Goose puts on his charm after letting his mask slip at their first chance encounter. Results quickly follow: Ewing offhandedly mentions that their sprawling conversation touches on his "recent notarial duties in New South Wales" (5), which is later revealed to have given Goose the mostly mistaken impression that Ewing is carrying something very valuable (523–4). Ironically, only a paragraph before recounting how he tells a complete stranger most of his life story and the nature of his current professional errand, Ewing criticizes himself for being too cynical, lamenting that "cynicism can blind one to subtler virtues" (5).

Looking at this through Phelan's kinds of unreliability, Ewing's initial ethical judgment of Goose as a "Bedlamite" (4) is certainly "moving along the right track" – like Phelan (2005, 52) says of the narrator of another novel – but does not reach its destination, which would be to perceive Goose as sinister and vengeful instead of just harmlessly insane, making this a clear case of underevaluating. The result of Ewing's lack of judgment is Goose getting a second chance that nearly ends up being fatal for Ewing, which makes the second evaluation of Goose as "the only other gentleman on this latitude east of Sydney and west of Valparaiso" (5) a clear misevaluation of the doctor's character. Phelan's (2005, 51) example of misevaluation also happens to involve a situation where someone is described as a gentleman despite his questionable morality, but it must be noted that unlike how Phelan suspects that the narrator in his example "at some level of consciousness … knows it is untrue" (ibid.), Ewing appears to be fully committed to his new evaluation of Goose despite the latter's "might is right" worldview constantly leaking through in dialogue recorded by Ewing without much comment (see *CA*, 12, 15, 17). Even Goose's choice of a Bible passage (Ps. 8:6–8 KJV) to recite is about man's dominion over other living things, and Ewing's only comment is a compliment about the sound of the other man's voice (*CA*, 8).

Other people's opinions about Goose do not sway Ewing's judgment either. He records their inn-keeper Mr. Walker calling Goose "Dr Quack" (*CA*, 11), but does not comment on it or pay heed, despite Walker having known Goose for a few weeks (5) and his own acquaintance with the doctor being only four days old at this point. Ewing's low opinion of Walker, stemming from an incident involving a sailor and a sex-worker in Ewing's bed (7), among other things, appears to result in his misreading of Walker's ability as a judge of character – meaning his (quite probably correct) evaluation of Walker's questionable morality makes him erroneously assume that the innkeeper's opinion of Goose is incorrect and illegitimate. At times, Ewing's conviction of Goose's virtue overcomes direct evidence to the contrary. When Captain Molyneux of the *Prophetess*, the ship Ewing is traveling on, has a private consultation with Goose, asking him to accompany them on their voyage to San Francisco, Goose tells Ewing enough about the captain's medical situation for him to deduce that Molyneux is suffering from gout (17–18). Still, Ewing praises Goose's discretion, because the condition was not named aloud, ascribing his discovery of the nature of the captain's illness more to his own skills of deduction than to Goose's loose lips (18).

This is also an example of how Ewing is equally mistaken in his self-judgment. As discussed in the previous chapter, instead of the overblown cynicism he accuses himself of (5), he is

prone to extreme naïveté in his dealings with sailors, missionaries, and Goose. This is a misreading, as opposed to a misevaluation, because it occurs on the axis of facts, or characters and events, (Phelan 2005, 51) – he is not mistaken about his own ethics or values but rather about his own intellectual capabilities, which is of course also a contributing factor to his susceptibility to misreading, misevaluating, underreading, and underevaluating other people.

Ewing's suspicions are not aroused when, only a day after hearing about his mysterious "Ailment" (*CA*, 22), Goose rescinds his decision to decline Cpt. Molyneux's offer and promises that he will start treating Ewing "as soon as [they] are at sea" (23). Apart from a mention of spells of "migraines & dizziness" (36), there is not much textual evidence about the nature of his illness – it is first mentioned (18) before an account of a situation in which Ewing is physically injured by a fall, afraid, and repulsed by the sight of what he suspects is a human heart. He describes feeling the "Ailment stir[ring] in [his] spleen" and then shooting "up [his] spine" (21). To me, these seem like the sort of physical reactions that a completely healthy person might experience in this situation, too, supporting Frobisher's reading that what Ewing is actually suffering from – at this point, at least – is hypochondria (64), and perhaps ordinary migraine, along with the effects of a hot climate.

This soon changes, as Goose diagnoses Ewing with a made-up brain worm called "*Gusano Coco Cervello*"[12] (*CA*, 36) and starts his treatment. The doctor warns his patient that the treatment will make him feel worse before making him better and, under a pretense, implores him not to tell anyone of his condition (37), thus ensuring that no one comes between him and his victim. Ewing's subsequent description of snorting the prescribed medicine and immediately feeling "an incandescent joy", followed by his "senses grow[ing] alert" but his "limbs grow[ing] Lethean"[13] (37) is probably enough to make anyone but the main character himself guess that the powder he is inhaling contains heroin or some other opiate. During the treatment, Ewing's symptoms start getting more severe, and he starts craving for the medicine, imploring Goose to up the dosage, and the request is granted (493).

Ewing's naïve unreliability reaches new heights in the second part of his journal, where most of the treatment takes place. He laments at how life at sea seems to change Rafael, a cabin-

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[12] Instead of actual Latin, this is a mixture of Spanish ("gusano" and "coco") and Italian ("cervello"). Translated to English, it would be "Coconut Brain Worm".

[13] Meaning in this case, I think, completely relaxed and reluctant to move. The literal meaning of the word – "of or like the waters of Lethe; also, inducing forgetfulness" (Webster and McKechnie 1972, 1039) does not make much sense regarding limbs, after all.

boy he has taken an interest in, in a way that he perceives as negative (493). His concern leads to an exchange that highlights his tendency to underread: "I asked Finbar if he thought the boy was 'fitting in well'. Finbar's Delphic reply, 'Fitting *what* in well, Mr Ewing?' left the galley cackling but myself quite in the dark" (*CA*, 493). Even while Ewing himself does not understand the joke or the grim reality behind it, he reports it accurately enough for the reader to grasp the full meaning.

His failure to realize how Finbar's answer relates to the change in Rafael's demeanor has tragic consequences. A few weeks later, Rafael seeks Ewing out to ask him a theological question concerning admission to heaven regardless of one's sins (*CA*, 516). Ewing fails to draw the necessary conclusion, despite seeing "misery distort" the youngster's face, and assures him that "the Almighty's mercy is indeed infinite" (516). Later that evening, Ewing finds Rafael passed out from drinking (517) and lets the ship's first mate Boerhaave carry the boy off, writing: "to keep him out of harm's way, I trust" (518). Ewing has no reason to trust Boerhaave, whom he compares to the devil only a sentence earlier (517), and the comment is thus perhaps intended as partly sarcastic, but he is still underevaluating: he simply cannot imagine the sort of harm that Boerhaave might inflict on Rafael. Ewing is forced to confront his own failure when Rafael hangs himself during the night, and Goose reveals that Boerhaave and some other men have been sexually assaulting the boy for weeks (518). There is a strong implication that Goose, along with Finbar and many others, already knew of this before Rafael's suicide, but Ewing does not comment on that directly.

Meanwhile, Ewing's own health deteriorates at a fast pace, and the ship's crew start to notice. Confronting Boerhaave about what he did to Rafael, he asks if the first mate and his men intend to do the same to him.

> He showed his fangs, and in a voice laden with venom and hatred, issued this warning: "The stink of decay is on you, Quillcock[14], no man of mine would touch you lest he contract it. You'll die soon of your 'low fever'."[15] (*CA*, 519)

Ewing misreads this for a death threat (519), despite the direct reference to his illness – to him, Boerhaave is as good as a murderer, which makes him blind to the possibility that the

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[14] The crew's nickname for Ewing.

[15] To explain Ewing's poor health, Goose tells the crew he is suffering from a "low fever caused by the clime" (*CA*, 37).

first mate is simply making an acute observation about the trajectory of his health and drawing the reasonable conclusion that Ewing is about to die soon.

4.2 Unreliability as a Signal of (Text-Internal) Fictionality

While I agree with James Phelan (2005, 68) that classifying literary works into the categories of fiction and nonfiction cannot be done based on the narrative techniques they utilize (e.g., an unreliable narrator), and that "[a]s soon as such techniques get identified, some narrative artist will use them for unanticipated effects" (68), there are some logical limitations to what can be done with certain techniques. It is, of course, arguably possible to write a nonfictional memoir with a narrator similar to Adam Ewing, using knowledge and wisdom the author has acquired later to construct a more complete picture of earlier events than the author/narrator would have been able to give around the time they happened – including events and dialogue that the narrator does not understand but the reader will – without making the memoir any more fictional in the process.

What is not possible or probable, however, is nonfictional unreliable narration in near real time, which is what Ewing would be doing with his daily or nearly daily journal entries. The following statements cannot logically all be true at once: (1) Ewing is the author of the journal, constantly communicating with the reader behind the narrator's back; (2) while also being the character-narrator oblivious to being drugged and poisoned, among other things; and (3) the Journal is a work of nonfiction (within the world of *Cloud Atlas*), written while Ewing's journey was still in progress, as the text itself and the available paratextual information seem to claim. In fact, I would argue that the last statement cannot be completely correct in any case, as the amount of information Ewing manages to unwittingly convey to the reader is so improbably high – giving the impression that the text must have at least been crafted after the fact. This seems to support the idea presented in the previous chapter that Ewing (or possibly an unnamed author who uses Ewing as a self-insert character, like Melville's Tommo in *Typee*) could have constructed the narrative based on both his own experiences and accounts written by others (again, similarly to Melville) and used the journal structure as a dramatic device.

In any case, I believe this is a major part of what Frobisher is reacting to when he notes that there is "[s]omething shifty about the journal's authenticity – seems too structured for a genuine diary" (*CA*, 64). Ewing's unreliability is largely what gives the reader the sense of a thought-out structure, as it allows the implied author to foreshadow events that Ewing himself

does not see coming. As Frobisher and Ewing are both fictional characters and subject to the implied author's will, it appears that the implied Mitchell is using Frobisher to point at Ewing's unreliability and the Journal's fabricated nature. By doing so, he spoils the reveal of Goose's villainous nature almost 460 pages before it happens (*CA*, 523), but at the same time, he might be signaling that the "twist" and the suspense over Ewing's own fate are not the most important aspects of that story.

4.3 Unreliability in Text-Internal Nonfiction

Frobisher casting doubt on the authenticity of the Journal also has the additional effect of juxtaposing two different kinds of life writing – Ewing's edited diary against Frobisher's own letters to Sixsmith. The available paratextual information about the Letters is much more unambiguous than is the case with the Journal. In "Half-lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", the eponymous journalist Rey acquires the first batch of letters after Sixsmith's death, from the hotel where he died, and later receives the second batch from his daughter – there is no question about their authenticity.[16] Having read the first batch, she tracks down a recording of *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, Frobisher's masterpiece, and learns that the young composer "died just as he got going" (120). The Letters can thus safely be assumed to be real in the world of "Half-lives", at least. Within the world of *Cloud Atlas*, if it can be considered a single fictional world at all, it might be a different story, as "Half-lives" itself is later revealed to be a novel manuscript sent to a publishing agent who naturally assumes it to be a work of fiction (158). It could, of course, be simply posing as a work of fiction – not much is revealed about its mysterious author Hilary V. Hush, after all – but that is outside the scope of this thesis. For now, the important thing is that unlike the Journal and Adam Ewing, the status of the Letters as actual letters sent by a person to another and the existence of their author Robert Frobisher are not under any doubt within "Half-lives".

In my view, this makes Frobisher's unreliability more interesting – it becomes a simulated case of the sort of "unanticipated effects" Phelan (2005, 68) predicts creative writers of nonfiction narratives will experiment with as soon as new techniques are introduced. After all, can one be an unreliable narrator while writing letters? If the author and narrator are one and the same, who is communicating with the reader behind whose back? These questions

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[16] Rufus Sixsmith is the only character to appear in more than one of the six stories in *Cloud Atlas.* In addition to being the addressee of Frobisher's letters and coming to Bruges to search for him, he encounters Luisa Rey in "Half-lives".

highlight the limitations of the traditional rhetorical view of unreliability and of the concept of the implied author. As Ansgar Nünning – in his attempt to reconcile rhetorical and cognitive theories of unreliability – argues, unreliability is not simply a textual feature but depends on "the conceptual frameworks readers bring to it" (2005, 95). Similarly, Gunther Martens (2015) is on the right track in his argument that unreliability is too often perceived only as a trait of the narrator rather than a feature of the interaction between reader and text (155–7) and that there does not appear to be much basis for the common assumption that unreliability is only possible in fictional texts (159–60).[17] Mitchell's novel brings this interaction into full view, incorporating it into the text itself by having characters act as readers, guiding the reader through them to detect unreliability.

It must be noted that when simply considering Frobisher's letters as what they are – a pastiche of an epistolary novel and a part of the globally fictional *Cloud Atlas* – they do not create any complications for traditional rhetorical models. Frobisher is simply the character-narrator, and if the reader detects any messages that the narrator appears to convey unknowingly, they can be attributed to the implied Mitchell. Things become complicated only when reading the letters as what they represent within the world of the novel: direct, nonfictional communication from one person to another. Such a reading is worthwhile because it can shed light on cases of unreliable narration in similar real-world communication: as I will demonstrate, there is nothing so inherently fictional in Frobisher's unreliability that something similar could not occur in the real world.

As noted earlier, Frobisher's letters address his long-time friend (and, it appears, at least one-time lover) Rufus Sixsmith. The relationship between the two young men appears to be as close as can be, to the point that in their confessional tone the Letters sometimes resemble diary entries. For example, despite the probably romantic nature of their relationship, Frobisher has no qualms about mentioning a casual sexual encounter with someone else (*CA*, 46), a long-term extramarital affair (69), and even a more serious infatuation (472). This is significant because it is evidence that Frobisher has no discernible motivation to consciously lie to Sixsmith about (almost) anything. Thus, if the addressee Sixsmith or the reader senses that the factual state of affairs differs from Frobisher's account, it makes him an unreliable

[17] In his attempt to draw scholarly focus from the narrator to the addressee's role in how unreliability is created, Martens proposes using the term "unreliable addressee" (2015). In my view, this would be misleading and misguided, as it is not the addressee who is being unreliable, even if they are a factor in how unreliability is created.

narrator, not a liar, because it can be presumed that his account matches his own perception of the situation – in Phelan's terms, he would be misreading or underreading instead of misreporting or underreporting.

This becomes most apparent in the second batch of the Letters, in a sequence of events that starts with Frobisher misreading what Eva, Ayrs' teenage daughter, tells him (469), and ends with his suicide (487–90). In a letter dated October 21st, 1931, Frobisher describes ending up alone in a Bruges clock-tower with Eva, with whom he has had a contentious relationship before her recent trip abroad, and asking her why the trip appears to have changed her mood and attitude, both generally and towards him (469).

> She began to say something several times. In the end, she said (blushing!), "I was missing a certain young man I met this June."
> You're surprised? Imagine *my* feelings! Yet I was every inch the gentleman you know me for. Instead of flirting back, I said, "And your first impression of this young man? Was it not wholly negative?" (*CA*, 469)

Frobisher immediately jumps to the conclusion that he is the "certain young man" in question, misreading Eva's embarrassment at speaking about matters of the heart to a man she does not know very well, perceiving it to be further evidence that Eva has feelings for him (in addition to the coincidence that they also first met at the end of June). While the reader, at this point, has no particular reason to assume he is mistaken in his overall assessment of the situation, it is notable that there are overt signs of unreliability present. Frobisher denies "flirting back", but the things he recounts himself saying to Eva prove otherwise. After she replies that her first impression of the young man was "partly negative" (469), he confidently fishes for a confirmation that they are talking about him:

> "He's a tall, dark, handsome, musical foreigner?"
> She snorted. "He *is*… tall, yes; dark, quite; handsome, not so much as he thinks, but let us say he can catch the eye; musical, prodigiously; a foreigner, to his core. Remarkable that you know so much about him! Are you spying on him too, as he passes through Minnewater Park?" (*CA*, 469)

Despite perhaps being somewhat surprised at both Eva's perceived confession of feelings towards Frobisher and the speed at which he jumps to a conclusion, the reader is very strongly guided towards accepting this as fact. Frobisher's mistaken reading of the situation colors the way he recounts it to Sixsmith, and the reader has no particular reason to doubt Frobisher's assessment that the only reason the romantic encounter does not develop further is that they are interrupted by American tourists (469). When it is later revealed that Eva is in fact talking about another person (484), the unreliability of Frobisher's narration of the clock-tower

incident becomes apparent, but due to his extreme confidence in his reading of the situation, it is somewhat complicated to piece together a more neutral version of events. To me, two scenarios appear possible.

First of these is that Eva becomes aware of Frobisher's misreading as it happens (by his leading question about a musical foreigner) and decides to toy with him. To her, the assumption that she is in love with this self-assured foreigner could be a slight that deserves punishment. She does not, however, have any reason to assume that Frobisher is in love with her – because their acquaintance until this point has not been an amiable one – which makes misleading him appear relatively harmless. On the other hand, this could arguably make this scenario more improbable at the same time: it is difficult to toy with someone's feelings if they do not have strong feelings to begin with, after all. The second (and to me, more plausible) scenario is that Eva thinks Frobisher's question about a musical foreigner is genuinely a joke (and not flirtation disguised as a joke). She does not assume that he could really think she might be in love with him – after all, until very recently, they have not gotten along at all. Thus, her snort and the subsequent answer that does not definitively rule out Frobisher are probably a result of her thinking that they are both in on the joke.[18]

Even before his reading of the clock-tower incident is revealed to be incorrect, Frobisher starts displaying signs of mental instability. Two very short letters, one dated three days after the clock-tower letter and the other five days later, portray him at diametrically opposed moods. The first, filled with anger and frustration, follows a stream of consciousness from blaming Sixsmith for a lack of response, to accusing his own father of ruining him, then to blaming the whole country of Belgium for the death of his brother, and then, finally, to insinuating that his mentor and employer Ayrs is stealing his music (*CA*, 471). The second page-long letter, though addressed to Sixsmith like all the others, is in essence a love letter to (or at least about) Eva (472). It moves fluidly from his fantasies ("Because I dream of creeping through the velvet folds to her room, where I let myself in, hum her a tune so – so – *so* softly, she stands with her naked feet on mine, her ear to my heart and we waltz like string-

[18] It must be noted that in *Black Swan Green* (2006), Mitchell's next novel after *Cloud Atlas*, an elderly Eva offers some support for the idea that she was toying with Frobisher's feelings (201–2), but she could be referring to the days following the incident, and/or suffering from survivor's guilt. In any case, it can be questioned whether anything said in a separate novel has bearing on analyzing *Cloud Atlas*, despite every Mitchell novel apparently taking place in the same fictional world (see Colson 2020, 587).

puppets") to listing things that appear to have actually happened ("Because we listened to nightjars").

The effect of these two letters is to alert the reader to the fact that Frobisher's perception of the people and things around him is heavily influenced by his overall mood (which, to some extent, is not that uncommon in people in general, of course), and that his mood is violently changeable. Sixsmith appears to be alarmed, too, which creates a fascinating feedback loop that highlights Frobisher's unreliability to the reader. While only Frobisher's letters are included in the novel, they sometimes contain references to things said by Sixsmith, as in this case:

> P.S. – Thanks for your anxious letter dated November 5th, but why the clucking Mother Goose? Yes, of *course* I'm fine – apart from the consequences of described contretemps with V.A. Am more than fine, to tell the truth. My mind is capable of any creative task it can conceive. Composing the best work of my life; of all lives. (*CA*, 478)

Here, the reader is informed that Frobisher's closest friend is worried after the short letters discussed above, giving further cause to suspect that Frobisher is misreading (or misreporting) his own mental state. Misreading is more probable here, I would argue, as the last two sentences of the quote indicate a high level of hubris (even if he is correct about composing the best work of his life), supporting the assumption that he really believes (or very much wants to believe) that he is fine.

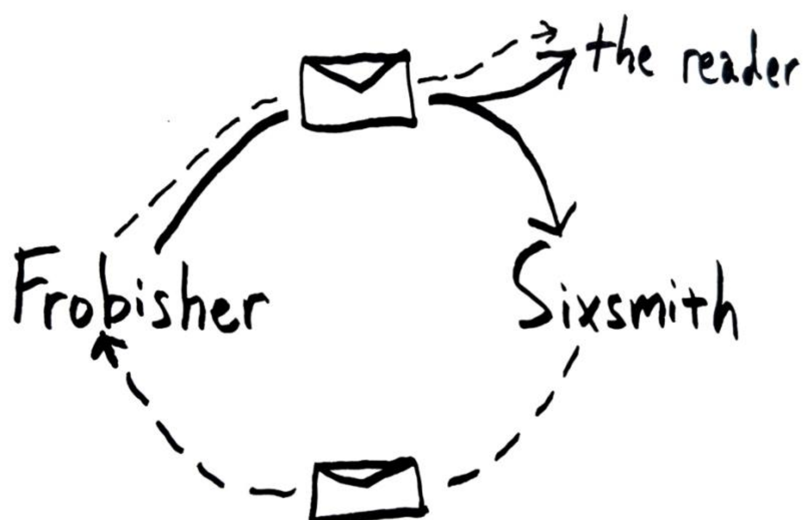

Figure 3. The feedback loop between Frobisher and Sixsmith, allowing the reader to get some sense of the content of the latter's letters by seeing how the former reacts and refers to them.

The mechanism creating this sign of unreliability is unique to one-sided representations of interpersonal communication – without the reassurance directed at Sixsmith, the reader would not become aware of his concern (see Figure 3). When reading this post-script, the reader is also already aware of the "contretemps" with Vyvyan Ayrs that makes Frobisher's situation even more precarious than it is at the point where Sixsmith expresses his anxiety, as he no longer has an employer or a roof over his head. Frobisher's next letter, where he describes talking to himself while working on his music in a Bruges hotel, and an attempt to get into Eva's school to see her (480), acts as a confirmation for the reader that Sixsmith's worries are not unfounded, but the reader might still believe that the infatuation between Frobisher and Eva is mutual and that the only obstacle in their path is Frobisher's rift with her father. This is resolved only when Frobisher finally manages to confront Eva and finds out she is engaged to another man (482–4).

4.4 Last Words on Fictionality

Why is Frobisher's unreliability not a sign of text-internal fictionality, then, if Ewing's is? While Ewing's unreliability is in many cases quite overt and can often be detected in real-time (especially in the second half of the Journal, after Frobisher points it out – but not only because of that), giving an air of structuredness that would be implausible in a genuine diary, Frobisher's unreliability is only revealed after the fact (e.g. in the case of the clock-tower incident), or gradually (by his mental state growing more visibly unstable as the Letters progress), or prompted by an external agent (Sixsmith). In other words, there is no constant sense of communication happening between the reader and the implied author (be it Mitchell, in our world, or Frobisher, in the fictional one) behind the narrator's back from the start, like there is in Ewing's journal, but it gradually creeps in during the narrative, in delayed disclosures and the narrator's changing mental state. Frobisher's unreliability is still a result of the implied Mitchell's choices, of course, but it is constructed in a way that is plausible enough that something similar could conceivably occur in real-world correspondence. To put it in other words, while Frobisher's kind of unreliability is certainly possible in fiction (this novel is fictional, after all), it is not *only* possible in fiction: a misreading similar to the clock-tower incident could occur in real life and be depicted in letters or other forms of life writing both before and after the misunderstanding is resolved, which would produce the same effect as the novel's simulated example. In contrast, Ewing's unreliability is structured in a way that would be difficult to imagine being achievable in the kind of nonfictional journal that the narrative purports to be, as discussed earlier.

As opposed to the Journal, the Letters also lack any other overt textual signs of text-internal fictionality, and according to the sixth thesis of fictionality by Nielsen et al. (2015, 66), any textual feature by itself is not enough to determine whether a text is fictional or nonfictional. Naturally, this includes unreliability – its presence alone is not enough to make a real-world work of nonfiction fictional or, in this case, a part of a fictional novel text-internally fictional. Conversely, I would argue that similarly to how unreliability is not required for a text to be fictional, it is not a compulsory feature of text-internal fictionality either – it is simply a quality that, if present, can contribute to it, as it does in the case of the Journal.

Another point worth mentioning even at the risk of invoking authorial intention, is that, unlike the Journal, the veracity of the Letters is not questioned in the story they are embedded in ("Half-lives"). This means that at least the implied author of *Cloud Atlas* does not overtly invite us to investigate the text-internal fictionality or factuality of the Letters themselves. Ultimately, the status of their possible text-internal fictionality might depend not on textual features of the Letters or even "Half-lives", but on the fact that the latter is a presumably fictional novel manuscript in the next text within *Cloud Atlas*: "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish".

But even that does not settle the issue conclusively, since the different narrative layers of *Cloud Atlas* are not in fact textually embedded within each other. For example, Luisa Rey reads Frobisher's letters, but the text of the Letters themselves is not contained within the detective story – in purely physical terms, it is actually the other way around, with the two parts of "Half-lives" being closer to the middle of the volume than the Letters are (see Figure 1). Thus, while the different narratives interact and can highlight or even create text-internal fictionality in each other, it is possible to perceive the texts as essentially separate from (or parallel to) each other while still portraying the same storyworld through different mediums. Some of the narratives might be more text-internally fictional than others, while still possibly telling stories that are on some level "true" in the world of the novel.

One of the things that makes this possible is the fact that while Frobisher might cast doubt on the Journal's authenticity or Cavendish might criticize narrative choices made in "Half-lives", none of the narratives directly contradict each other, because they take place in different time periods and locations, and mostly focus on different people. The only character to appear in person in more than one of the narratives, Sixsmith, is very clearly the same character in both narratives. This is why the implied Mitchell can gently poke the reader to doubt Ewing's

Journal without risking the “it was all a dream” effect and disappointing his readers – even if Ewing’s story was (wholly or partly) text-internally fictional, it still stands on its own as a story, and no alternative version of the events is offered. While casting doubt on the veracity of parts of the novel might set the reader up to expect a plot twist that reveals a “real” version of the same events, Mitchell does not give us that. Instead, he raises these uncertainties as a thematic point, calling the reader to not only question the text-internal nonfictionality of certain segments of his novel, but also consider the presence of fictionality in all narratives and in history itself.

5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have proposed the term *text-internal fictionality* to describe situations where a narrative contained within a fictional text can be considered to be fictional within the world that the work is portraying. While there are numerous clear-cut examples of this in various kinds of fiction, I find that using existing theories of fictionality proposed by Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh to analyze borderline cases like *Cloud Atlas*, where the text-internal fictionality of at least some of its parts is ambiguous, can be most fruitful and provide new ways of looking at both the concept itself and the work. It can also provide artificial examples of the kind of borderline cases that could conceivably exist in the real world (e.g., literary hoaxes), giving us new insight on how to analyze them.

Using “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” as an example, I have shown how certain textual features and narrative structures can create a sense of fictionality, which is in this case foregrounded by the way that the character who reads the Journal, Robert Frobisher, reacts to it. I showed how Ewing’s naïve brand of unreliability allows foreshadowing the upcoming developments despite Ewing ostensibly being unaware of them at the time of writing, which heightens the appearance of fictionality. On the other hand, my analysis has shown how Frobisher himself is also an unreliable narrator, without that unreliability being a clear sign of text-internal fictionality in itself, because his narrative does not contain a similar sense of structuredness, and perhaps most importantly, it lacks the sense of awareness of future events that appears to be present in Ewing’s journal, as well as any other signals of fictionality. In comparing these two narrators, I have demonstrated how unreliable narration can act as an additional sign of text-internal fictionality, but also that the two concepts can appear independently: the presence of unreliability in a text does not mean that it has to be fictional (internally or not), nor does text-internal fictionality always require unreliable narration.

While these examples provide a clear sense of how the issue of text-internal fictionality is present in the first two narratives of *Cloud Atlas*, a study of larger scope could include the four other main characters of the novel, too, and examine how the differences in the forms that the final three stories are presented to the reader to the forms in which the other characters encounter those stories might or might not create a sense of text-internal fictionality or at least an ambiguity about how much a fictional adaptation process, in the case of Cavendish’s memoir, for example, might have affected the story presented to Sonmi. And while my analysis here focused on the presence of allusions to Melville and Defoe in Ewing’s

Journal, further studies might examine how Mitchell's abundant use of intertextuality – both in reference to his own work and to that of others – relates to text-internal fictionality in his other works (and other parts of *Cloud Atlas*).

Another obvious course of further study would be to analyze works by other authors through this lens – *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan, for example, with its central twist being that most of the book is a partly fictional novel within the novel, or its 2007 film adaptation, which handles the ending and its ethical implications somewhat differently. Film adaptations of literary works containing text-internal fictionality could also benefit from further inquiry – for example, the film versions of both *Cloud Atlas* and *Poor Things*, a 1992 metafictional novel by Alasdair Gray, completely leave out the novels' metafictional aspects and text-internal fictionality in favor of a more straightforward telling, arguably losing much of what makes the original works work.

In the introduction to this thesis, I said that it is possible to read *Cloud Atlas* simply as a centuries-spanning novel that makes use of different types of prose to portray the various time periods depicted within it.[19] I then pointed out that the situation is more complicated than that, due to the interaction between the multiple narratives of the novel highlighting instances of text-internal fictionality and creating doubt as to what is "real" in the storyworld and what is not, making the novel a highly self-reflective piece of metafiction that thematizes its own fictionality. In the end, the trick that Mitchell pulls is that both readings are possible and even justifiable, at the same time.

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[19] This is certainly how I read it on my first read-through, back in 2009. I wish to thank my dear cousin, Dr. Aku Rouhe, for making me read this novel back then, and for the subsequent fifteen-year (and counting) loan of *number9dream*, another Mitchell novel. I finally read (and enjoyed) it while writing this thesis. You can have it back now!

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