

# “Everywhere I look, you could frame it”: David Mitchell’s Mission to Describe

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## Abstract

David Mitchell’s novels are often discussed in terms of large themes, but this paper adumbrates a different approach: reading Mitchell as a stylist, tracing the tendencies of his writing at a more local level and probing their implications. Focusing on Mitchell’s debut *Ghostwritten* (1999), the essay explores Mitchell’s persistent penchant for aphorism and for succinct visual description. In the novel’s “Tokyo” chapter we observe the cyclical growth of cherry blossoms as part of the narrator Satoru’s attention to the world. In the “Petersburg” chapter, another narrator, Margarita Latunsky, walks through the city at night, listing vivid visual details, and remarks: “Everywhere I look, you could frame it and just by doing that you’d have a picture.” This attention to detail is redemptive. The same is true of another character, Neal Brose, earlier in the book, who, just before his death is granted a perceptual relief, an ability to see and appreciate more clearly the physical world around him. In all this, Mitchell compares tellingly to the great stylist of the previous generation of British novelists, Martin Amis. The reviewer Adam Mars-Jones observed that “Amis’s originality as a stylist” had been “to detach lyrical language from the lyrical impulse,” writing with exquisite style about degradation. Mitchell inverts this aesthetic, bringing our attention readily to bear on the external world in a spirit of curiosity and care. This connects to Mitchell’s ethical impulse as a writer: his care for words betokens a care for the world.

**Keywords:** Stylist, Lyricism, Aphorism

David Mitchell’s novels are understandably discussed in terms of large themes: global flows, structures of power, the repetitions and ruses of world history. Formally, the intricate architecture of his novels is equally amenable to analysis at a large scale. Yet we read novels line by line, and the quality of Mitchell’s writing also depends on its most molecular levels of prose. This essay thus adumbrates an analysis of Mitchell as a stylist. It also proposes that the micro work of his sentences is connected with the macro work of his themes and convictions. This argument could hold across his work, but the present short discussion primarily demonstrates how it can be traced from Mitchell’s debut *Ghostwritten* (1999).

Mitchell’s style presents a paradox. He is at once a diverse stylist and a consistent one. We admire him because he can write in lots of different ways, setting himself challenges, and meeting them successfully. The journal of Adam Ewing is different from the diary of Jason Taylor – and from the letters of Robert Frobisher or the radio dialogue of Bat Segundo. But we may also admire Mitchell because he seems to do the same things repeatedly, across such different voices. What things are they?

Mitchell’s prose contains a lot of thinking. His novels involve many big ideas, but they are rich and effective also because they are full of little ideas, the thoughts people have about anything and

everything that crosses their paths. Clearly, Mitchell's writing tends this way in part because of his extensive penchant for first-person narrators, people we naturally catch in the act of thinking – some, like Neal Brose or Marco in London, almost offering stream-of-consciousness commentaries on their minds and fields of vision as they go along. These figures naturally tend to be lent some of Mitchell's own wit and perception – a literary tendency for which *Ghostwritten's* noncorpum, inhabiting other minds and lending them direction, is one analogy. So Mitchell's people do not just have vague ideas, they have precisely phrased ideas, even if these have only just swum into view. “There are so many cities in every single city,” says Neal Brose (97). “Sometimes language can't even read the music of meaning,” declares the noncorpum (165). In Tokyo, Satoru tells us, “you have to make your place *inside* your head” (37). In isolation these phrases can tip towards the portentous, but amid the flow of a character's voice they demonstrate one of Mitchell's particular qualities: he is aphoristic. As a writer of epic novels, this may be one of his strongest and most overlooked suits, rather as James Joyce wrote a 700-page book that was actually distinguished not for its copious overflow but for its pointillist precision with words.

Many of Mitchell's big ideas come at us through aphorism, as well as through story arcs and events. But something less ostentatious may be still more fundamental than this to his style. This is description: of objects, scenes, places. Not all Mitchell's figures offer this in quite the same way. But the encounter with visual description is a central part of the experience of reading Mitchell. These scenesetting lines can be isolated, separated by several pages or even chapters. But they recur, pile up, and form part of his stylistic warp. In these pages I shall trace this textual strand through *Ghostwritten*, focusing primarily on just two narrators.

### Tokyo

Satoru, the record store clerk early in *Ghostwritten*, is one figure who allows Mitchell to show us the physical world. He is adrift in his own yearnings, but also an observer of what's around him:

I went outside for a moment, to feel the rain on my skin. It was like being breathed on. A delivery van braked sharply and beeped at an old lady pushing a trolley who glared back and wove her hands in the air like she was casting a spell. The van beeped again like an irritated muppet. A mink-coated leggy woman who considered herself extremely attractive and who obviously kept a rich husband strode by with a flopsy dog. A huge tongue lolled between its white teeth. (39-40)

In one of Mitchell's recurrences, that woman and her dog are echoed later in London (273). One thing that Mitchell's details can do is draw patterns across a novel, as though that will twine it together. But details can also be compelling in their contingency. The unrepeated, unique, fleeting moment of Satoru's reaction to the rain is as important as any secret bigger picture – important to the novel's slowly building texture, its responsiveness to weather and place. Satoru, who has a highly developed sense of Tokyo's particularity, is a great appreciator of these things. His observations of the cherry blossom form a rhythm, a sort of prose punctuation, through his chapter. First:

The cherry trees lining the backstreet were still winter trees, craggy, pocked, and dripping. (35)

A little shower of adjectives, but a plain account.

The cherry trees were budding. Maroon tips sprouted and swelled through the sealed bark. Pigeons ruffled and prilled. I wish I knew more about pigeons. Were they strutting about like that for mating purposes, or just because they were strutting birds? ... The air outside was warmer and damp. Being outside was like being in a tent. A jackhammer was pounding into concrete a few doors down. (43)

This blooms a little more: the flat simile for being outside, the alliteration of “sprouted and swelled,” the keenness of observation in that line – for Satoru is looking for something that has not quite happened yet; the trees have not yet presented the world a spectacle. The pigeons also introduce the meandering thought process that I have already suggested is typical of Mitchell’s narrators: it often brings a sort of bathos.

The cherry blossoms were suddenly there. Magic, frothing and bubbling and there just above our heads filling the air with colour too delicate for words like “pink” or “white.” How had such grim trees created something so otherworldly in a backstreet with no agreed-upon name? An annual miracle, beyond my understanding. (50)

As the noncorpum will say, language sometimes feels inadequate. This passage is different from the others, bursting out into rapture, admitting its love of nature’s visual bounty. But it is modest too, stressing the imprecision of words and the limits of Satoru’s capacity. It is a moment of gratitude and reverence.

The cherry blossoms had come and almost gone. New green leaves, still silky and floppy, were drying on the trees lining the back street. Living and light as mandolins and zithers. The commuters streamed by. Not a coat in sight. Some had come out without their jackets. No denying it, spring was old news. (56)

Mitchell can be curt. “Living and light as mandolins and zithers,” like “Not a coat in sight,” is a verbless sentence: a form that is quite characteristic of him, working for quick notation that can be vivid yet takes up little space, makes few claims to grandeur. Among major contemporaries, one prolific employer of such lines is Iain Sinclair: this is one possible route between these rather different writers.

In Satoru’s chapter of nearly 30 pages, this descriptive material only adds up to a few lines, under a page. It does not predominate over Satoru’s emotional journey or even his feeling for jazz. But it is an important counterpoint to those things. It grants his story a sense of place, but in a quite different way from his general statements about Tokyo. It makes place a matter of the small furnishings of the street, of color and contingency rather than any larger social tendency. William Carlos Williams counselled “no ideas but in things,” meaning that poetry should cleave to objects, think its way through them rather than in cloudy generalities. In these moments of Mitchell there are no places but in things, though elsewhere, to be sure, he also entertains complex ideas of places which are less anchored to them.

Satoru is a romantic. Near the end of the chapter, talking to Koji on the telephone, he tries to remember why he and Tomoyo have not consummated their relationship, and drifts into a list of memories – “I remember her body wrapped inside my dufflecoat as we walked along, sharing the same umbrella. ... I remember lying on the blanket in Ueno Park as the cherry blossom fell onto our faces. ... I remember her asleep on my shoulder on the night bus” (57). That is a generic way of thinking, like lovers do: but we can take from it a hint that details, observations, can be connected to love. No wonder Satoru remembers these things, for we have already seen him watching the world around him even without Tomoyo’s presence to inspire him.

### Petersburg

Mama-san in Tokyo sees the trees too, and asks: “aren’t the cherry blossoms outside a picture?” (52). That opens a discreet passage through the novel to another character, for whom pictures are a job but also, as we shall see, become a metaphor for seeing better. Margarita Latunsky is a profoundly different character from Satoru: a criminal rather than a shop assistant, she is also as deluded as he is clear-eyed. But they do have one thing in common: love. Both are romantics, Satoru with chaste yearning, Latunsky with kitsch, painfully misguided fantasies about her villainous lover. And Latunsky also elaborates on the idea of description, of seeing one’s surroundings, more fully than anyone else in *Ghostwritten*. The passage where she and Tatyana, the new colleague who is in fact an undercover agent, walk through St Petersburg at night arrives near the middle of the book, and might be considered aesthetically central to it too. Latunsky tells us:

The streets were filled with shadows and brightness and footsteps and candy-colours and tramlines and swallows. I’ve never noticed the windows above the Glinka Capella, how graceful they are. What are those things called? Jerome would know. Flying buttresses? The stars are not quite there tonight. A light is moving amongst them. A comet, or an angel, or the last decrepit Soviet space-station falling down to earth? (230)

This is a woman who is usually only rapturous about her fantasies, and who cannot wait to escape from St. Petersburg to Switzerland; but the passage announces sudden rapture in her environment, in its rushing first line with its incongruous items – footsteps are auditory, candy-colors are more a quality than an object, while swallows swoop into the end of the line from nowhere. Margarita Latunsky is a deeply flawed narrator not least for the arrogance with which she dismisses all those around her save her opportunistic lover; her delusions are painfully, maybe excessively visible to the reader. So it is noteworthy that she is noticing, looking outward and admiring, rather than dismissing. Note her curiosity also as she wonders about the name of an object (Jerome, who would know, is an English art forger): questions, as well as descriptions, are part of an attention to the world – something she shares with Satoru and his unknown pigeons. Here she comes again, as her attention widens:

Everywhere I look, you could frame it and just by doing that you’d have a picture. Not a Jerome picture. A real picture, more real than the ones we steal. Even they are just copies. Jerome’s are copies of copies. That boy’s head. The wishing well. All those girls in green eyeshadow and apricot blusher, being herded into the back of the police van ... The firecrackers going off in a distant quarter, or might they be gunshots? That would

be a good picture. The car with bricks for wheels. The shape of the factory roof, and the chimney, sooty bricks, a picture made of sooty bricks. The horse running down an alley, how did the horse get off its pedestal? A boy with dinosaur fin-hair sways past on roller-blades. A tramp with his bag of newspapers for a pillow on the bench. Tourists in their bright “mug me” shirts, the canals and the domes and the crosses and the sickles and, ah .. Even the mud by the river .... (231)

Not just the mud by the river: even of a police boat, this criminal tells us a moment later to conclude her peroration: “Its red and blue lights are beautiful” (231).

What is this passage doing in *Ghostwritten*? Why enter it in the midst of Latunsky’s tale of failed art theft? It does not necessarily tell us much about global causality, flows of capital or the novel’s other large interests. It is mimetic of the confused, amnesiac renewals of perception that drunkenness can induce, and Mitchell is good at taking the trouble to render such familiar states in prose, one line at a time. But it has another role, for which it indeed needs to stand slightly apart from more grandly world-historical themes. In a word, it is redemptive. Latunsky has been granted a couple of pages off the road to disaster: and through the accidental chemistry of alcohol, her love for Rudi and her fascination with Tatyana, she has gained the ability, or the readiness, to see her world and wonder. She perhaps shares this new capacity with Neal Brose earlier in the book, wondering about Satoru and Tomoyo as he sees them across a cafe, wondering whether the Cookie Monster’s teeth will fall out (105). Brose’s flashes of insight into his surroundings are brief, rationed between dialogue, aphorisms and stories of his past. But the sense is that, late in life, he is looking anew: “I was wrong about the sky. It’s not dreary white ... when you look you see ivory. You can see a glow, there, above the mountain where the sun polishes it pearly and wafer thin” (78). A little later, “Alchemy was changing the sky. The sun was burnishing the leaden dullness to silver. In turn the silver was shrouding blue” (87). Brose parallels Latunsky in being granted a kind of perceptual redemption shortly before he dies, in the form of a synaesthetic receptivity to the sound of an aeroplane “skinning the afternoon with its jagged blade of noise” (102) or “A common dirt-coloured bird that sang in emerald and opal” (85). Both characters, of course, have been taken over by Mitchell, who wants to use their eyes and voices to see and announce these things: again one glimpses how the novelist hit on the idea of the noncorpum directing its human host. In fact Latunsky does not only have this ability momentarily: 25 pages later, another paragraph catalogs the details she walks by in the street, and concludes: “It’s all made of little things that you don’t ordinarily notice” (256). *It* being the walk, St Petersburg, or life in general: or also a novel.

### The Ethics of Observation

One could continue this process of looking at looking, through the rest of the novel – notably Marco in London – and through Mitchell’s other books, not least the budding writer Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* seeing the “Brittle thistles and fluffy grass” (107), how “The melony sun dripped steamy brightness” (102), or how in a field of daisies, “Petalled stars and dandelion comets streak the green universe” (100): a moment’s figurative reprise for the image of the comet which seems to streak across Mitchell’s body of work. But this short investigation will conclude by asking more about what Mitchell’s attention to the world means.

In the generation before Mitchell, the novelist most often acclaimed as the greatest stylist was Martin Amis. Mitchell's ability to structure a novel shows just how poor Amis has long been at it, and how flawed macro-novelistic form was not the inevitable result of living at the turn of the millennium. If, as many observers have remarked, such large-scale structures are not Amis's strongest suit, his ability to form individual phrases and sentences has nonetheless been exceptional (Brooker 9-12). Yet his style tends in a different direction from Mitchell, in an illuminating way. In a review of Amis's 1995 novel *The Information*, Adam Mars-Jones observed: "Amis's originality as a stylist has been to separate verbal beauty from the cause it has traditionally served, to detach lyrical language from the lyrical impulse. Why should intense verbal music be the privilege of those who love life in however contrary a fashion, the Nabokovs, the Updikes?" (155). Amis, Mars-Jones acutely saw, had made a career of bringing lyricism to bear on ugliness, and making intense verbal music in the service of a cynical, malodorous, entropic view of human life. That, Amis has often announced, is the necessary vocation of the contemporary writer: our post-nuclear and post-moral world has grown ugly, so the writer should no longer hope to find unpoisoned springs of beauty.

One of Mitchell's boldest strokes, though perhaps never intended as such, is his inversion of this aesthetic: his disobedience of Amis's implicit or explicit injunctions. He brings his attention, and thus ours, readily to bear on beauty, or on things that might not be beautiful but have simply gone unnoticed, and whose quiddity or mere existence he wants to register. Mitchell's way of doing so, we have seen, is often terse and succinct: verbless sentences, two-line paragraphs punctuating a narrative that is on its way somewhere else. But his gaze rarely denigrates the world. His stories show structures of oppression, imaginations of disaster: the Sonmi and Zachry episodes of *Cloud Atlas* are perhaps the most extreme instances, and show that Mitchell's lack of cynicism does not simply result from an inability to conceive of people acting badly. Even the bullies in *Black Swan Green* are a smaller-scale version of that collective human cruelty. But unlike Amis, Mitchell never lets this potential take over his own vision, or become an excuse for his own writing to grow nihilistic. It is as though for him that would itself be unethical, a surrender to the forces his fiction opposes with bold explicitness.

His thin but insistent layer of descriptive lyricism is thus discreetly linked to his ethical intuition, or his sense of responsibility as a writer. Mitchell has said of words: "language is to the human experience what spectography is to light ... although a writer must sometimes pretend to use language lightly, he should never actually do so – the stuff is near sacred" ("Q&A"). (It is a delicate irony, of the sort that William Empson appreciated, that the word "light" casually carries two different meanings in the course of this reflection on the delicacy of words.) Words are to be handled with care; and the logic of the novels is that people, places, and things should be treated with analogous tenderness. By the end of *Ghostwritten*, as by the middle of *Cloud Atlas*, what is at stake is little less than the future of the world and the fate of the human species. What Mitchell wants seems youthfully optimistic: for us to care for the world, find a better way, start again. Those hopes may be condemned to failure, a risk that hopes are bound to run; but as fully dramatized in his fiction, they seem no less wise than Amis's strangely already-defeated outlook, in which the world has been ruined not by specific political agencies but by a general trend downwards. Mitchell's fiction tries to insist that other choices are possible, and they always start with something,

someone or somewhere in particular. This care for the world intuitively underpins the care with which he attends to things, places, climates; cherry blossoms, or clouds. He sketches them swiftly but surely: treats them as aspects of a place – the whole world – that we cannot afford to give up on or to lose. If the world is worth noticing, it might be worth saving.

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