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PARASITES, PLAGIARISTS AND “FICTIONAL” STORIES IN CHARLES PALLISER’S “A NICE TOUCH” AND “THE CATCH”

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Abstract

The present article focuses on Charles Palliser’s *Betrays* (1994) and analyses two of its chapters, “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch”, in order to illustrate how the seemingly random collection of sections that make up the novel constitute variations on the same themes and strategies. By discussing the connections between these two chapters, I intend to throw light on the coherence that emerges from the novel’s undeniable fragmentariness. Central among its recurrent motifs is the theme of betrayal, which the article approaches through an analysis of plagiarism from the perspective of J. Hillis Miller’s logic of the parasite. Drawing on this deconstructionist critic, I show how the undecidability of roles (betrayed-betrayer, plagiariser-plagiarised, host-parasite) in the chapters under consideration is echoed by the narrative’s play with ontological levels and the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. The analysis leads to a final reflection on fragmentary texts that often exploit intertextuality and metafictional techniques as best fitting the contemporary worldview, and it closes with the proposal to consider *Betrays* as one of the harbingers of what has become a prolific trend in twenty-first century literature.

Key words

Charles Palliser; *Betrays*; J. Hillis Miller; plagiarism; parasite; fragmentariness; metafiction

1. Introduction

“A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” constitute, respectively, Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 of Charles Palliser’s third novel, *Betrays* (1994). The writing of this American-born, British-based novelist resists pigeonhole classification. He has been described as “a puzzle”, a bold experimental writer that always tries something different in every book (“Charles Palliser”, web). This is specially the case with his first three novels. His first, *The Quincunx* (1989), is a massive work, a postmodern rewriting of Victorian fiction that bears witness to Palliser’s love of Dickens and nineteenth-century novels in general, his relish for storytelling, his skill in pastiche and parody, and his ability to devise intricate plots. In his fourth and fifth novels – *The Unburied* (1999) and *Rustication* (2013) – he returns to Victorian-era mysteries after his utterly different second and third works. *The Sensationist* (1991) was to Palliser an “antidote”, a reaction to all the process of writing *The Quincunx* (Menegaldo 1998: 278–279). The novel is short and its plot straightforward: a story of alienation in a contemporary setting told in a fragmented and oblique prose. Out of his five

published novels, it is the third one, *Betrayals*, that is the most experimental. The experience of perusing the pages of this complex metafictional text is perhaps the closest one can get to losing one's bearings in the interior of a (textual) labyrinth.¹ This is how a reviewer described *Betrayals* shortly after its publication:

If you think of an Escher print, with all those mad staircases going back to and front and inside out, mix it up with a page from *Where's Wally?*, overlay it with one of Stephen Biesty's Incredible Cross-sections, then situate it within a Piranesi prison, you may be getting towards a visual approximation of Charles Palliser's new novel *Betrayals*. But it would be an over-simple one. Because this novel is also funny: a great send-up of all sorts of ways of writing. (Pavey 1994: 17)

Betrayals begins with a conventional dedication followed by another, less conventional one, which is strangely placed *after* the contents page.² The first chapter takes the form of an obituary and introduces a recurring scorpion motif, which connects the belief that the scorpion stings itself to death with the way in which many of the novel's characters are caught in a trap of their own devising. The chapters that follow appear to be a random collection of arbitrarily ordered texts that differ in terms of genre, narrative voice, characters, setting and style. They can be read as independent stories but, when viewed together, they turn out to be linked and they constitute a whole, however fragmentary and misleading.³ It has been claimed that the fragmentation of many postmodernist works "challenge[s] the literary code that predisposes the reader to look for coherence" (Fokkema 1988: 44) but, as Gerald Graff points out when discussing the strategies of certain experimental fiction, the rejection of a straightforward plot makes a novel much more dependent "on the reader's ability to locate thematic propositions capable of giving [its] disjunctive, fragmentary, and refractory details some [...] meaning or coherence" (qtd in McHale 2007: 221). This is the case with *Betrayals*, which certainly challenges the reader to discover a master-narrative as s/he plots his/her way through the text. In the diegesis, plotting has to do with plot as conspiracy (out of envy or revenge) and also as the outline of events on which stories, told or written by the characters themselves, are based. In both cases the characters are presented as devising plots. Likewise, the reader also engages him/herself in another kind of plotting, one that relates to a different sense of the same word: the drawing of a line that shows some sort of order or evolution, as when one plots a graph or a chart. Only as a plotter, then, can the reader see *Betrayals* as something other than a series of unrelated texts. As an illustration of this dynamics, I will show in what follows the ways in which two specific chapters of the book are connected with each other and with the other sections of the novel. They go back to betrayal as a central theme and to other motifs that recur throughout the novel's chapters, linking them in such a way that the reader can make fragments cohere, but without ceasing to feel how the work flaunts, and even celebrates, its own fragmentariness.

Most of the characters in the novel are diversely connected with stories, which they tell, write (on), listen to, read, review, watch on TV, etc. Quite often, char-

acters betray themselves in the stories they tell or are novelists that use their writings to set a trap to their rivals or take revenge on their enemies, as happens with Drummond Gilchrist and Cyril Pattison in “A Nice Touch” (Chapter 8) or William Henry Ireland and Jeremy Prentice in “The Catch” (Chapter 9). Moreover, most of the conflicts and betrayals between writers involve a mature, well-known novelist (like Pattison and Prentice) and a young one (like Gilchrist and Ireland). The thread becomes more and more entangled as the anxieties of would-be novelists are paralleled by those of established authors, worried about how to maintain their fame and position in a dangerously unproductive phase of their careers. Plagiarism appears in this context as an easy way out for some, or as a means to revenge for others, a fact that ultimately presents the writing world as a battle-ground in which plotter and victim frequently change places and betray their intentions. This interchangeability of roles between betrayer and betrayed explains why one of the main challenges posed by the novel consists in deciding who has actually been betrayed (taken in, plagiarised, murdered, etc.) by whom.

In “A Nice Touch” Drummond Gilchrist writes to Cyril Pattison because he needs advice on the new turn that his career is taking. He has already published six war novels and, after some recent flops, he has made up his mind to try his hand at the whodunit. Thus, Gilchrist contacts Pattison, who has published several successful whodunits himself, and asks him for help with his work in progress: he sends Pattison the first chapter of his new novel and awaits for his opinion and advice on how to develop the narrative in the succeeding chapters, which are then sent to him as well. Pattison writes a letter to Gilchrist after reading each instalment and it is these letters that make up “A Nice Touch”.

In “The Catch” William Henry Ireland, an amateur writer with no experience whatsoever in the field of publishing, gets in touch with Jeremy Prentice, a former right-wing politician who has become a best-selling novelist. In his letter, Ireland introduces himself as an admirer in need of advice to find a publisher for his first novel. He sends Prentice the manuscript, which he describes as a “respectful imitation” that, allowing for stylistic differences, could almost be mistaken for one of Prentice’s works (Palliser 1994: 252).⁴ Prentice agrees to help him but this decision will eventually lead to his downfall. “The Catch” consists of the final version of the briefing paper that Prentice has written for his defence team in an attempt to explain why he committed the crime for which he is now awaiting trial. His account of the events is accordingly told in the retrospect and presented as a novel of sorts since this is, he says, the only way he knows to tell a story (*B* 239).

Like a host too proud of what he has got, too willing to show off, Pattison in one story and Prentice in the other are similarly carried away by their own vanity: they let their respective guests in, unaware of the fact that, as J. Hillis Miller points out in his analysis of the logic of the parasite, when an alien enters the close economy of the home s/he may perhaps do so in order to “kill the father of the family, in an act that does not look like parricide, but is” (1977: 440). Drawing on Miller, I will approach the events in “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” from the perspective provided by this logic of the parasite. Miller discussed it when he answered the arguments of critics such as Wayne Booth and M. H. Abrams, who had questioned the methods used by deconstructionists on the basis that the

readings they produce, however witty or provoking, are “plainly and simply parasitical” (Booth’s phrase) on “the obvious or univocal reading” (Abrams’ words) (qtd in Miller 1977: 439). Miller then tried to cast doubt on the relationship between deconstructionist and “obvious” readings by dissolving the opposition host/parasite. What he argues in “The Critic as Host” is that once the logic of the parasite is resorted to, it is practically impossible to decide which of the two elements in the pair is the host and which is the parasite, which is the primary, obvious reading, and which is the secondary one.

The same sort of misleading oscillation and confusion of roles apply to the relationship between the two main characters in the narratives under consideration here. Initially presented as a relationship between a strong and a weak partner, a successful author and an unsuccessful or inexperienced one, this is also a relationship between writers that get involved in plagiarism. Plagiarism is, like parasitism, an activity whose dynamics is at least dialogic and that polarises the roles of the two parties involved—the plagiariser and the plagiarised—much in the same way (and on the same basis) as parasitism may be said to polarise the roles of parasite and host. Just as Miller problematizes the distinction between host and guest in parasitism, so the differences between the characters in “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” turn out to be not so clear as they initially seemed. “Parasite” is, after all, one more of the *para* words of deconstruction, “para” being a double antithetical prefix in that it simultaneously suggests proximity and distance, interiority and exteriority. Opposites relate in such a way here that a thing in “para” not only contains the two poles of the antithesis but can also be regarded as the boundary itself, a permeable membrane that connects inside and outside (Miller 1977: 441). In this novel made of so many stories that examine self-reflectively the process and the tools of storytelling, metafictionality proves itself liminal, in line with Currie’s idea of metafiction as a discourse at the borderline between fiction and criticism, and also between reality and representation (1995: 2). With these ideas in mind, one can approach “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” as illustrating the instability of apparent opposites that affects not only the notion of betrayal (betrayed versus betrayer) in the novel, but also the relationship between fragmentation and coherence, and between the fictional and the real.

2. Dangerous liaisons: The logic of the parasite

As Miller (1977: 442) explains, “parasite” comes from the Greek *parasitos*: beside the grain. This means that the parasite was initially, according to its etymological origins, something positive, a fellow guest with whom the host shared the food, there with him beside the grain. And this is what the relationships Pattison-Gilchrist and Prentice-Ireland seem to be like at the beginning. Pattison is glad to be one of the people “beta-testing” Gilchrist’s novel; he promises to be sincere and not to mince words when it comes to telling him what he thinks of his work since “writing is too important for that” (B 207). Similarly, Prentice receives Ireland’s manuscript and reads it straightaway, despite, he says, his rather busy schedule (B 253).

The positive meaning of the word parasite was soon superseded by the negative one, as happens in the two stories. Thus, a “parasite” became a professional dinner guest, someone who cadged invitations but never entertained in return. From this developed the two main meanings the word has now: the biological and the social (Miller 1977: 442). The initial situation in “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” may appear to be one of symbiotic mutualism,⁵ where the host provides resources and the symbiont also provides some service in return that benefits the host. From the very beginning Pattison and Prentice are described as not the type that gives without taking anything in exchange. Indeed, Gilchrist and Ireland give them a gift of sorts but, playing with the etymology of the word, the original proto-Germanic *geftiz* is also at the origin of the word meaning “poison” (in German, Danish and other languages). As is the case with well-intended gifts, poisoned gifts keep the chain of exchanges in endless motion. This being so, the events recounted in these two stories have both a before and an after that must be borne in mind: it is something that happened in the past that explains why Gilchrist and Ireland contact Pattison and Prentice, respectively, and, similarly, the latter suffering the consequences of the poisoned gifts they receive does not put an end to the interaction but, quite the contrary, keeps it going.

In as far as Gilchrist is concerned, he offers Pattison a scheme to discredit Morag McCoo, Pattison’s former literary agent whom he replaced by Tarquin Bone. His career then took off while Morag’s went from bad to worse. She gave up agenting and began writing a column in *The Daily Scot* under the pen name Tabby Squeill. She uses this column to speak ill of Pattison, which she does, according to him, out of pure spite (B 214). Thus, as Pattison helps Gilchrist with the plot of his novel, Gilchrist provides him with another plot to help in his revenge on Morag. He suggests faking a story according to which Pattison would have plagiarised his first novel from him. Pattison should not deny it, that is, until Morag accuses him of plagiarism in *The Daily Scot*. Gilchrist will then write to the newspaper’s editor and confirm there is no truth whatsoever in the information published by Morag. Thus, Pattison’s reputation will not be damaged and he will at last be able to sue her for libel.

The dynamics of “The Catch” goes in the same line, developing the theme of plagiarism to a further extent. Through the plot of his first (autobiographical) novel, we learn that Jeremy Prentice had to leave politics after a scandal concerning his involvement in fraudulent business (B 248). Yet he pulled himself together and turned the tables on his enemies of the Left by writing a novel as close to facts as it could be. *For Richer, For Poorer* became “the biggest-selling first novel since *Gone With the Wind*” (B 248). Two more novels followed, cold war spy thrillers not so different from Pattison’s, with whom Prentice also shares literary agent (Tarquin Bone). Prentice’s success earned him literary enemies to be added to his political rivals, writers like Auberon Sackville to whom Prentice admits he would “kill to have written one of your [Sackville’s] books. I’d kill to have written a book that got so-called highbrows in a flutter” (B 242). Prentice is in the middle of a writer’s block when he receives Ireland’s manuscript, *The Twister*, which deeply impresses him. What happens afterwards closely mirrors the events in *The Twister*, where an amateur writer – Thomas Chatterton⁶ – proposes a Cabinet

Minister and successful novelist going through a writer's block – Godfrey Bellamy – to publish his (Chatterton's) first novel as if it were Bellamy's. Bellamy could improve the manuscript's weakest parts, the public would buy the Bellamy brand-name and they would share the profits. Similarly, Prentice proposes to make some changes in the manuscript and publish it as if he were its real author. Ireland agrees and leaves the whole business in Prentice's hands. Yet this is nothing but Ireland's poisoned gift to his host.

As Pattison and Prentice rise to the bait, their role as hosts takes a new tinge. On the one hand, the host and the parasite share the food. On the other, the host is himself the food, the very substance consumed by the parasite. This fact relates the word to another sense of the term, which is yet unconnected etymologically: the host as (sacrificial) victim, therefrom the Host in the Eucharist (Miller 1977: 442). Pattison and Prentice respectively welcome Gilchrist and Ireland into their lives but, in doing so, they become the victims of their guests – the meaning of “guest” oscillating between a cherished presence/friend, on the one hand, and an alien invader/enemy, on the other (442). In the light of what happens afterwards, it is clear that Pattison and Prentice made a mistake when they underestimated his friends/enemies. It is not only that, contrary to appearances, the initially weaker party/the guest (Gilchrist, Ireland) may turn out to be stronger than the other/the host (Pattison, Prentice); it is also that it becomes more and more difficult to determine which character is the guest and which is the host in each story. This confusion of roles should not come as a surprise in the light of Miller's contention that “the words ‘host’ and ‘guest’ go back in fact to the same etymological root: *ghosti*, stranger, guest, host, properly ‘someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.’ [...] A host is a guest, and a guest is a host” (442). Thus, the conventional host-parasite (or host-guest) antithesis is based on a self-subverting rationale. An antithetical relation exists not only between the two words in the pair, but also within each word itself: the host is the sharer of the food and the food/the victim itself, the guest is a friendly presence and an alien invader. Each sense opposes the other and simultaneously subverts the apparently unequivocal relation of polarity on which the whole scheme is grounded. Thus, when it comes to “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch”, it is practically impossible to tell for sure who is the victim and who the parasite, which character feeds off the other, which one has the last word, when the exchange of poisoned gifts began, and how far it will go. One cannot tell, either, whether the stories at a certain diegetic level incorporate elements from the one above or it is the other way round, and, by extension, whether fiction mirrors reality or it is reality that feeds off fiction.

3. “A Nice Touch”

Enough clues are dropped throughout “A Nice Touch” for the reader to realise that Pattison, the successful author apparently helping the less talented Gilchrist, the host entertaining the guest, is also a parasite of sorts himself. According to the Tabby column in *The Daily Scot*, this “smooth-talking Oxonian is notorious for

dropping people who have helped his career, and even going to humiliate and ridicule them". As to his books, they are "flashy, clever-clever, and meretricious in the most literal sense of the word" (B 208). From what Pattison says in one of his letters, it can be inferred that Morag (his former agent and author of the Tabby column) helped him with his first three novels, but she "grossly overestimated her input" (B 219). But did she? Moreover, is there any truth in the story Pattison agrees to plant on Morag about him plagiarising from Gilchrist's work? Pattison argues that nobody who knows them both as writers could believe that (B 234) but, as it turns out, the idea is not so preposterous as Pattison suggests. In all probability, Pattison used, parasite-like, Morag's and Gilchrist's ideas for his novels. Not only did he take all the merit for himself but he also abused them until they decided to give him a dose of his own medicine.

Gilchrist's working title is *The Year of the Talkies*, but he will change it to *The Quintain* when the final version is published. Pattison looks up quintain in the dictionary to find out that it "comes from the Middle Ages when it meant 'the target in jousting-practice which the rider aimed at and which swung round and unseated him if he wasn't clever enough to get out of the way'" (B 236). Pattison cannot see what the title has to do with the novel, but the reader can guess that Gilchrist's work is nothing but the weapon which is about to "unseat" the rider/Pattison: *The Quintain* turns out to be a key piece in the plot devised by Gilchrist and Morag, partners in revenge but also in love.

As Prentice's letters succeed one another, Gilchrist's narrative emerges as a kind of caterpillar that progressively takes different forms in the reader's eyes. Like a caterpillar, it should be read as a promise of something else. One should decipher the story as one does with an indirect satire: the novel's settings, characters and events should be interpreted as a cover that hides the real target. The cover is double, though: first, there is the version Pattison reads – *The Year of the Talkies* – set in Los Angeles Chinatown and dealing with the lives and intrigues of a series of characters connected with the world of Hollywood at the time of the first talkies. Then, there is *The Quintain* as a final version of the working manuscript, where the action is transferred to contemporary Glasgow to deal with novel writers, agents and literature, rather than script-writers, producers and cinema. *The Daily Scot* Tabby column announces the (still unpublished) novel as "a wonderfully readable and witty thriller with an extraordinary real-life story of malice and deceit *behind it*" (B 236, emphasis added). Thus, what the novel is actually about, the "real-life story", is still to be found under the cover that *The Quintain* constitutes: unaware of it, Pattison is actually reading a story about himself and people known to him. Removing the layers of Gilchrist's narrative is accordingly one of the challenges facing the reader, since most of what s/he has access to in this chapter relates to the outer cover – *The Year of the Talkies* – as referred to by Pattison in his letters. These are the main correspondences:

| <i>The Year of the Talkies</i> | <i>The Quintain</i> | "A Nice Touch" |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Los Angeles in the 1920s | Contemporary Glasgow | Contemporary Glasgow |
| The Hollywood movie industry | The Scottish literary scene | The Scottish literary scene |
| Chartres Pettifer (and Zadonsky, Mr Big, and Stetson) | Chalmers Pettitson | Cyril Pattison |
| Blacker (and Jones, and Faquhar) | Ringan Gilhaize | Drummond Gilchrist |
| Mo-Lak | Moirra | Morag |
| Taw-Kwee | Torquil | Tarquin Bone |

Table 1. Narratives and correspondences in "A Nice Touch" (Chapter 8 of *Betrayals*)

This table is a simplification, firstly, because there are more characters in *The Year of the Talkies* than in "A Nice Touch", even if they often represent different sides of the characters they actually stand for; secondly, the table has three columns but it could as well have four, since there are indeed further correspondences which expand the parallelisms to the world outside the text. It would be perhaps more appropriate to say "outside", because what these correspondences ultimately do is problematize the distinction between inside and outside, thus turning the narrative into a hymeneal membrane like that inherent in all words in "para".

If it is difficult not to notice the resemblance between the names of Chartres Pettifer, Chalmers Pettitson and Cyril Pattison (all C. P.), it is equally difficult not to connect them, eventually, with that of the novel's author: Charles Palliser (C. P., as well). Moreover, the titles of Pattison's first three novels are *The Quintessence*, *The Sensation-Seeker* and *The Finger Man*. The first two, at least, are as close as they could be to Palliser's *The Quincunx* and *The Sensationist*. Pattison published the three works with Cowgate, Palliser with Cannongate. Pattison's success was followed by his decision to abandon his Scottish agent, Morag McCoo, and change her for the London-based Tarquin Bone. When *The Quincunx* became a best-seller Palliser also dropped his agent in Scotland and took up a new one in London. Pattison wrote *The Quintessence* while he was still teaching full-time (B 214), and Palliser wrote *The Quincunx* while working as a lecturer in Strathclyde University. After the novel's success, he gave up teaching to become a full-time writer, as Pattison seems to have done. Moreover, if the Oxonian Cyril Pattison is a version or a caricature, rather, of Palliser himself, who also studied at Oxford University, so can the Scottish literary mafia in *The Quintain* and in "A Nice Touch" be viewed as a caricature of the Scottish literary world that Palliser is presumably well-acquainted with. Thus, although there are some clues that caution the reader against assuming a real-life origin for the events/characters in this and other sections of *Betrayals*, so are there other clues that encourage him/her to do so. The effect of all these contradictory signals is to disorient the reader and, more specifically, to disorient him/her as to the relationship between fiction and reality. If "A Nice Touch" is an indirect satire, is it so *only* within the diegesis, its target being characters and events that belong to the (made-up) world

of *Betrayals*? Or rather, does the invective affect not one but two different (or perhaps not so different) ontological levels, namely, that of the fictional Cyril Pattison and that of the real Charles Palliser? This confusion on the reader's part is related to a kind of discourse which Gary Saul Morson refers to as "metaparody" and whose dynamics he explains in the following terms:

We reserved the term "parody" for those double-voiced texts or utterances that clearly indicate which of their conflicting voices is to be regarded as authoritative. The audience of a parody – that is, the readers who identify a text as a parody – knows for sure with which voice they are expected to agree. We may consider a class of texts that are designed so that readers do *not* know. In texts of this type, each voice may be taken to be parodic of the other; readers are invited to entertain each of the resulting contradictory interpretations in potentially endless succession. In this sense, such texts remain fundamentally open, and if readers should choose either interpretation as definitive, they are likely to discover that this choice has been anticipated and is itself the target of parody. Caught between contradictory hermeneutic directives [...] readers may witness the alternation of statement and counterstatement, interpretation and antithetical interpretation, up to a conclusion which fails, often ostentatiously, to resolve their hermeneutic perplexity. (Morson 1989: 81)

Introducing this explanation with a quotation from Borges, Morson relates metaparody to the works written by the inhabitants of Tlön, in the sense that these books "invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete" (qtd in Morson 1989: 81). Readers of metaparody should accordingly approach the metaparodic work not as the compromise between book and counterbook, but "as their ultimately inconclusive dialogue" (81).

In the light of Morson's views, it could be argued that the undecidability affecting the reader's (conflicting) interpretations of "A Nice Touch" actually stems from the fact that the chapter can be read as a metaparody of the mechanisms associated with indirect satire. The reader may feel impelled to trace the target to the outside of the text but, in keeping with the contradictory nature of metaparody, the impulse to find links which connect the fictional world with Palliser's own is counterbalanced by the text's warnings against taking such a course of action. There is no compromise between the two hermeneutic strategies, but only an inconclusive dialogue that places the reader in a quandary. None of the two possibilities can be excluded in favour the other, looked down as secondary to, or parasitical on the right, effective interpretation.

This permeability and confusion between interpretations and realms eventually lead the reader to look into Pattison's role beyond the events recounted in "A Nice Touch". It can be inferred that the letters he wrote (and we are reading) have been included by Gilchrist in his book, which accounts for the last message Pattison leaves on Gilchrist's answering machine: if there is anything worth reading in the latter's work that is, Pattison says, what he himself has written. May it

be coincidental that it is *only* his letters that make up this chapter of *Betrayals*? Besides, to Pattison *A Nice Touch* was a much better title than *The Quintain*, and “A Nice Touch” is the title of *Betrayal*’s eighth chapter. If the dynamics of betrayal and revenge – like the exchange of poisoned gifts – constitutes a never-ending chain, then it would not be farfetched to think that Pattison managed to turn the tables on his enemies: he guessed what was going on and pretended he had not while planning his own revenge. A nice touch, indeed. Moreover, as the reader meets Cyril Pattison in this section and reflects on the connections between him and Charles Palliser, s/he cannot but think of the novel’s second dedication (see footnote 2). On perusing the book’s first pages, the reader’s initial assumption that this second dedication, in as far as it *is* a dedication, must have been written by the author gives way to a view of the figure responsible for these words as someone who is and is not Palliser: it is Palliser because he addresses some of the author’s acquaintances; it is not him because he addresses some of the novel’s characters as if they were at the same ontological level as himself. It can be argued that, if Palliser is one half of this hybrid, the other half is Pattison, thanking Gilchrist, Prentice, Saville, and others by their “unwitting” help because he has used their stories, or their writings, to make up this novel. He is the author, in a sense, and Palliser is the author, too, both fused under the initials C.P. This hesitation – real/fictional, diegetic/extradiegetic – is but the threshold to the text’s duplicity and to the polyvalence of many of the elements that recur throughout the sections of the novel, as explained here in connection with two of them.

4. “The Catch”

“The Catch” is a polished version of a letter written Jeremy Prentice while he is in jail and later used as a briefing paper by his defence team. The letter’s addressee, referred to as simply “you” (B 239), turns out to be a writer since Prentice mentions that the prison library “is surprisingly good, and has almost all the novels of yours truly” (B 284). It is more than probable that the addressee is Pattison himself, who had referred to the Prentice-Ireland affair in “A Nice Touch” and who would accordingly have used Prentice’s self-justifying letter to him for his literary bricolage. It is interesting that Prentice, who chooses Pattison to give him his version of events, does not rely on him to the point of using the real names of the people involved in the story he is about to tell. Thus, when introducing Aubrey Sackville, he makes it clear that it “is a pseudoname, of course. You undoubtedly know his real name, but our absurd libel laws prevent me from giving it here” (B 240). One should not be worried about libel laws unless one is considering the possibility that what one is writing may be published. Aubrey Sackville is in fact Auberon Saville, the chief fiction reviewer of *The Daily Scot*. Moreover, if one rises to the novel’s game of mirrors, this Auberon Saville, who belongs in Pattison and Prentice’s world, turns out to be reminiscent of someone in Palliser’s world at the time he wrote the novel: Allan Massie, lead fiction reviewer of *The Scotsman* and a columnist and reviewer for publications like *The Daily Telegraph*. Prentice envies Sackville for his reputation as a writer of quality novels and for

the literary prizes he has won. This also applies to Massie, a highly respected author, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and winner of awards like the Frederick Niven Literary Award (in 1981) and the Saltire Society/Scotsman Book of the Year Award (in 1989). Other writers whom Prentice mentions in passing also have their counterparts in the world outside the diegesis. Their names play on those of renowned authors of spy thrillers in the line of those written by Pattison and Prentice themselves. Thus, for instance, Robert Forsyth stands for Frederick Forsyth and Frederick Ludlum for Robert Ludlum, whose *The Bourne Ultimatum* (1990) becomes *The Hauptmann Ultimatum* in Prentice's conversation with Sackville (B 242, 243). Even Jeremy Prentice himself bears a markedly close resemblance to another writer: Jeffrey Archer.

Before being a best-selling author, Jeffrey Archer went into politics and became a Member of Parliament in 1969, but he resigned in 1974 after getting involved in a financial scandal. It was then that he began writing: in 1976 he re-entered public life with *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less*, which was based on his business experiences. His success as a writer was no obstacle when he decided to return to politics. On the contrary, he shook hands and signed books on the constituency party circuit to boost Tory coffers and in September 1985 a grateful Margaret Thatcher appointed him Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. In October 1986, though, he resigned after the press spread the news that he had paid £2,000 to sleep with a prostitute. Yet Archer put himself together once again and successfully sued *The Daily Star* for libel, being awarded £500,000 in damages. In 1992 he received a peerage from John Major in recognition of his fund-raising work for displaced Kurds but he was soon involved in another scandal. As no charges were eventually brought against him, he concentrated on a new political project: becoming Mayor of London. After a long personal campaign in 1999, he did in fact win the Tory candidacy but he was then charged with perjury and sentenced to four years' imprisonment (Jeffery 2001, web).

The Jeremy Prentice of "The Catch" is also a right-winged politician and former Member of Parliament under Thatcher. His first published novel – *For Richer, For Poorer* – was an autobiographical account giving his own version of a business scandal that had forced him to give up politics. Sackville mentions the crime he committed – embezzlement – which he significantly relates to the widely spread belief that Prentice does not write his novels himself. The rumour that he parasitically uses what others have written is quite credible because, according to Sackville, this crime is in literary terms what embezzlement is in the field of business (B 252). However, Prentice maintains that he was just "naive" and "unfortunate" in his choice of business partner (B 250) and argues that, after all, no charges were brought against him.⁷ This being so, he has not discarded the idea of returning to politics, just as Archer did. He boasts that he has kept in touch with influential political leaders and even with the Prime Minister herself, who still regards him as a valuable collaborator. For the time being, though, he will keep to novel-writing, an activity that has earned him large sums of money but not the reputation and prestige that Sackville has and Prentice envies so much.

In 1988, Archer published a short-story collection entitled *A Twist in the Tale*. The novels within "The Catch" are *The Twister* (Ireland's manuscript) and *The*

Sting in the Tail (that is how Prentice intends to publish Ireland's work to make it coincide with the title of his first unpublished novel). Ireland's novel-to-be consists of a story that reflects *en abyme* the encounter and ensuing deal between the two characters. In this story (at the second diegetic level, then), the title of the manuscript that the amateur novelist sends to the best-selling author is *The Sting in the Tale*, which is, in its final version, changed to *The Twister*. Despite the dizziness, one thing is clear, namely, that all the titles go back to Archer's *A Twist in the Tale*.

The parallelism that exists between Jeremy Prentice and Jeffrey Archer is counterbalanced by the correspondences between the first-level story "The Catch" and the stories within that main narrative (Prentice's and Ireland's manuscripts and the stories within them). Accordingly, the reader may establish links between Prentice and a real author, which reinforce the connection between textual and extratextual reality but, at the same time, this movement outwards is ballasted with a movement inwards: the image in the mirror that is supposed to reflect reality (distortions included) is in turn reflected by other mirrors at the second and third diegetic levels. The parallelism with Archer makes for a realist illusion, while the correspondences with the stories within the main story strengthen the feeling of fictionality.

The stories in "The Catch" expand as far as a third diegetic level. The three narratives tell strikingly similar versions of the same events, each narrative reproducing *en abyme* the story that contains it in what constitutes a clear illustration of a Chinese-box dynamics. To concentrate on the basic facts, a would-be author sends to a best-selling novelist, also involved in politics, the manuscript of his first novel in the hope that the latter can suggest some improvements and give advice as to its possible publication. The best-selling novelist, who is going through an unproductive phase in his career, is impressed by the work, which turns out to be quite similar to the first novel he wrote, many years before. This first novel was rejected by a publishing house and never saw light as a consequence. The best-selling novelist arranges to meet the author of the manuscript and makes a deal with him: he will publish the work as if it were his own, which will secure its success, and he will then share the profits with its real author. The latter initially agrees to the plan but he then tries to blackmail the best-selling novelist, who has nonetheless foreseen the catch and has therefore taken measures to protect himself. Thus, he has changed the work's title, the characters' names and other small details in order to make the final version of the manuscript resemble that first work he never published, this close resemblance being enough to exonerate him were he to be accused of plagiarism. The story ends with the blackmailer being murdered, either by the best-selling novelist – first and third diegetic levels (*B* 283, 262) – or by another character – second diegetic level (*B* 270). The plagiarist thus manages to go away with his crime(s), "his" novel earning him success in the market and respect in the highest literary circles.

The following table intends to be a first-aid chart:

| | 1st diegetic level: (Prentice's) "The Catch" | 2nd diegetic level: (Ireland's) The Twister | 3rd diegetic level: (Chatterton's) The Sting in the Tale |
|--|---|--|---|
| The would-be author | Ireland | Chatterton | Wise |
| The best-selling novelist | Prentice | Bellamy | Honeyford |
| The manuscript by the would-be author | <i>The Twister</i> | <i>The Sting in the Tale</i> | a political thriller (no title mentioned) |
| The final version by the best-selling novelist | <i>The Sting in the Tail</i> | <i>The Twister</i> | (no title mentioned) |
| The unpublished novel by the best-selling novelist | <i>The Sting in the Tail</i> | <i>The Twister</i> | (no title mentioned) |

Table 2. Narratives and correspondences in "The Catch" (Chapter 9 of *Betrayals*)

If we envision this structure as a series of Chinese boxes, as suggested above, we could in all logic say that each box duplicates the one in which it is contained, that is to say, that each story duplicates the story at the diegetic level above: Chatterton's *The Sting in the Tale* reproduces *en abyme* Ireland's *The Twister*, and Ireland's *The Twister* reproduces *en abyme* Prentice's "The Catch". If a story Y reproduces another story X, within which Y is contained, it might be logically concluded that Y is secondary to X. Consequently, Chatterton's novel (*The Sting in the Tale*) is secondary to Ireland's, just as Ireland's work (*The Twister*) is secondary to Prentice's narrative in "The Catch". And yet, despite the reasonableness of such a statement, it is also possible to question the secondary character of each narrative with regard to the one that contains it, in much the same way that Derrida (1976: 54) questioned the supposedly parasitic quality of what comes "after" – when considering the contended dependence of writing on speech – and Miller developed Derrida's insight by problematizing the relationship of the parasite to its host.

Going back to the host-guest tandem, each story could be said to act as host to the one it contains *en abyme*, which enters the narrative as a guest enters the host's house: each Chinese box is a guest to the box that contains it. However, there is a difference between a set of Chinese boxes and a series of narratives arranged on a *mise en abyme* pattern. The relationship between a Chinese box and the one inside can only be discovered once the latter has been seen, that is, after we have opened the bigger box and taken out the one inside. Similarly, we can only conclude that a story reproduces *en abyme* the story that contains it after we have finished the outer narrative. Yet the process is not the same. In as far as the Chinese boxes are concerned, we see first the outer box in its entirety and then, when we open it, we find out about the one inside. When it comes to narrative, though, we cannot apprehend the outer story in its entirety (as we do with the

outer box) without having read the story *en abyme* first. In as far as reading is concerned, then, the order in which we reach the outcome of each story (from the lowest to the highest diegetic level, in a countdown of sorts) reverses the order in which we handle each box (from the biggest to the smallest one). Thus, for instance, the story that *The Twister* tells, at the second diegetic level, is read as a whole *before* we complete the story in “The Catch”, at the first diegetic level. Consequently, it is not at all clear that *The Twister* comes after “The Catch”, that it is secondary to “The Catch”, and the same can be said of the relationship between *The Twister* and *The Sting in the Tale*. Once the secondary character of what comes “after” stops being certain, because “after” in narrative does not mean the same as “after” in a set of Chinese boxes, more arguments can be resorted to which ultimately problematize the relationship of guest to host, of each story to the one that, being at a superior diegetic level, cannot yet be regarded as superior in the sense of primary.

In fact, it is the story at the third diegetic level that determines, in important respects, what happens in the other two. The main difference between *The Sting in the Tale* and the plot of the novel that contains it – *The Twister* – is that in *The Sting in the Tale* the best-selling novelist (Honeyford) has not taken measures against a possible blackmail and decides to murder the would-be author (Wise) when the latter actually asks him for money in exchange of his silence. Honeyford meets Wise at a seaside village and invites him to spend the afternoon sailing as he has his yacht at the port nearby. Before getting on board, Honeyford manages to leave a faked suicide note in Wise’s car. Wise, who knows nothing at all about boats and sailing, gets frightened at the rough sea but he is advised by Honeyford on which is the safest place on the deck. He is thus taken in and, as Honeyford had planned, Wise is eventually pitched overboard. Honeyford commits the perfect murder and goes on to publish his best and most successful novel, which is in fact the political thriller that Wise had written. Prentice likes this much more than the ending of *The Twister*, where the best-selling novelist (Bellamy) commits suicide when he realises that he has been deluded by the would-be author (Chatterton). Accordingly, he decides to change the manuscript’s ending to make the outer narrative resemble the one inside it in its final (and so later) version. A good point in *The Twister*, though, is that Bellamy adapts the manuscript he is reading to make it a closer version of his first unpublished novel. These two elements are *then* imitated by Prentice, in the light of what he tells in “The Catch”: he takes measures against the blackmail and he murders his enemy on board his yacht. In a word, the events in each story (are made to) resemble those in the story they contain *en abyme* and, in that sense at least, each story is secondary to the one at the diegetic level not above but below. The host is secondary to, dependent on, the guest; the host is the guest and the guest is the host.

If origins become problematic when it comes to the events in each of the stories, confusion is also what arises from the reader’s attempt to determine who is really the author of the story in the manuscript that Ireland sends to Prentice. Ireland first appears as the weaker partner in the pair, the guest that takes advantage of what the host may offer: Prentice’s advice, his help with publishing matters, etc. Yet it soon becomes clear that it is Prentice that maliciously intends to take

advantage of Ireland. His plan is to plagiarise Ireland's work, which means that the roles change and that Prentice is the parasite, the guest to Ireland as host. Then, all turns out to be a trap set for Prentice, who is now not the victimiser but the victim of a revengeful Ireland: Ireland is the reader that rejected Prentice's manuscript of his first, still unpublished novel, and he lost his job for that reason as Prentice put his dismissal as a condition to publish his second novel with Chatto and Warburg. Just as in the previous chapter Drummond allies himself with Morag, who is also his lover, in order to take revenge on Pattison by means of a carefully devised plan, so does Ireland ally himself with Sackville, who is his lover as well, in order to definitely ruin Prentice. Ireland, whom the reader had for the author of the manuscript, has not written it, though. This was Sackville's part, which means that Prentice is not after all plagiarising Ireland but Sackville. Sackville had met Prentice before the events and when Prentice mentioned he had a first unpublished novel, Sackville "seemed very interested in this story and asked me several questions about it" (B 249). Prentice was surely flattered by Sackville's keen interest but he did not tell him everything, afraid that Sackville could use the material to his own advantage. And this is, after all, what Sackville does. Who is feeding off whom, then? Prentice intends to plagiarise a manuscript that Sackville wrote and Sackville wrote it by using Prentice's ideas for his first novel. Though the resemblance is part of the catch, it nonetheless makes for problematizing the question of origins, the relationship between victimiser and victim, plagiariser and plagiarised, parasite and host, etc. As in the host-guest relationship, the antithesis dissolves as the two parties involved change places time and again, which makes it impossible to conclude who is who. The host is the guest and the guest is the host.

What destabilises Ireland and Sackville's revenge is the fact that Prentice has not planned to murder Ireland as in the latter's manuscript. Ireland, who does indeed know about sailing even if he has led Prentice to believe he does not, is ready to outwit his potential murderer when they are on board the yacht. What Ireland does not suspect is that Prentice has changed the murder method in his final version: he needs poison because poison is mentioned in the letter that the publishing house sent him when they rejected his novel, and he may have to use this letter in the future as proof. If Prentice has fallen into a trap (there are cameras filming what is going on) so has Ireland, who is poisoned by his enemy, thus becoming the victim of his own victim. The fact that Prentice resorts to poison and Ireland dies by it at the end of the "The Catch" disquietingly suggests that the events in these characters' world imitate the events in the fictions *below* the ontological level which is reality to them (even if it is not so for the reader). If the idea of subordination is questioned all throughout, if what initially appeared to be dependent on something else turns out not to be so, it is little wonder that fiction as well should turn the tables on that to which it is supposedly secondary. The outcome, then, not only problematizes the view that reality is above fiction but, going one step further, it also suggests that reality imitates fiction.

5. Conclusion

The word “betrayal” has two main meanings: treachery and revelation. One may betray somebody by being disloyal to him/her. The second meaning, however, refers to the action of making known, of unveiling something which was intended to remain hidden. It is in this sense that one can betray him/herself (and/or his/her feelings, intentions, etc.). Yet it is not always easy to keep these two meanings apart: betraying oneself implies a kind of treachery in which subject and object coincide, while betraying somebody else also reveals (betrays) something about the betrayer.

Betrayal, in both senses of the term, constitutes a recurrent motif in the novel, as illustrated by “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch”. The characters devise careful plots to deceive or take revenge on others, but they also betray themselves: more often than not, the character who sets the trap falls into it himself, and so, the plotters end up by being caught in their own machinations while the victims eventually victimise those that had initially plotted against them. Like the novel itself, the action referred to by the title echoes the winding structure of the labyrinth, moving now forwards now backwards as plotter and victim change places. In this complex game, which follows the logic of the parasite as explained by Miller, (apparently) polar notions cease to be mutually exclusive. As happens with the two sections analysed here once they are seen in connection, the others in the novel can also be said to constitute variations on the same themes.

In “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch” the motif of betrayal is explicitly connected with treason/revenge between writers, or between writers and literary agents. Plagiarism emerges here as a suitable question in a novel that is highly concerned with writing, and with the exploration of some conflicting areas in the worlds of literature and the academy at the end of the twentieth century—a time marked by poststructuralist attitudes to language, literature and history. “The history of English literature,” Peter Ackroyd has said, “is really the history of plagiarism. I discovered that when I was doing [a biography of] T.S. Eliot. He was a great plagiarist [...]. I see nothing wrong with it” (Smith 1987: 60). And yet, all contemporary suspicion regarding the “new” and “original” work of art coexists with both aesthetic and legal categories of plagiarism. Plagiarism in the novel works simultaneously as an excuse for laughter and an invitation to reflect on serious issues, an instrument for personal revenge based on the importance of originality and a means of producing stories out of stories, different but ultimately related to one another in the novel.

As I hope to have convincingly argued, *Betrays*' fragmentary nature is counterbalanced by the many lines that connect the work's sections and that make it a coherent, albeit fragmentary whole. Brian Richardson, among others, has referred to fragmentary fictions like *Betrays* as “unnatural narratives”, texts that “contain significant antimimetic events, characters, settings, or frames” and that “violate mimetic expectations and practices of realism” (2015: 3). As we have seen, though, things can easily turn into what seemed to be their opposite, so it is worth considering whether the fragmentariness of *Betrays*, its multiple layers of interrelatedness and its metafictional games illustrate, after all, a more realistic

way of depicting the world. As Struzziero explains, these ingredients sometimes have the effect of evoking “the polymorphous and chaotic essence of modern life, which, in its complexity, resists full comprehension and does not yield to a conventional narrative” (2019: 95). Does then *Betrayals* point to a fragmentary realism of sorts that has bloomed in the last years? I think so. Thus, even if post-modernism has been declared dead and “over” (Hutcheon 2002: 165), the kind of fragmented narrative that, like *Betrayals*, exploits sprawling but dexterously controlled metafictional and intertextual games has taken hold and proliferated in the 21st century. In “The Rise of the Fragmented Novel” (2013), Ted Goia discusses the resurgence of fragmentary literature, with works like Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (2011), and Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012) cited by the author as examples of texts that develop, adapt and transcend their postmodernist predecessors’ experiments with fragmentary narratives as a means to telling about our contemporary world. *Betrayals* is certainly among those predecessors. Its complexity, dealt with here through the analysis of “A Nice Touch” and “The Catch”, may deter as much as attract readers but, given the increasing number and relevance of novels that build on similar techniques and strategies as best fitting our present (post-postmodern) times, Palliser’s work should be considered among the harbingers of what has started to be seen (Edwards 2019, Guignery and Drag 2019) as a distinct trend in twenty-first century literary fiction.

Notes

- ¹ For an approach to *Betrayals* as a labyrinthine novel that fits the features of the rhizome/the rhizomatic maze, see Martínez-Alfaro (2014).
- ² The dedicatees here combine, in separate paragraphs, the names of people known to Palliser (in roman type) and the names of some of the novel’s characters (in italics). The latter are thanked for their “unwitting” help with this novel and are also warned to read their chapters “in the right order and then decide who has been betrayed by whom”. Thus, the same instance addresses both people and characters, which eventually suggests a figure that can be simultaneously related to Charles Palliser and to someone in the diegetic world. From the very beginning, then, the novel plays with ontological hesitation.
- ³ The obituary in Chapter I is followed by such diverse narratives as a mini-Decameron in which passengers on a snowbound train tell tales to kill time; a reader’s report on a manuscript that blends hospital romance with serial murder; a scholarly introduction to a book of critical theory; a collection of letters; a convict’s written account of the events that led him to commit the crime he has been charged with; a Moorish tale in the tradition of *The Arabian Nights*; a review published in a newspaper; a critical essay; etc.
- ⁴ Hereafter the abbreviation *B* will be used in parenthetical references for quotations from the novel.
- ⁵ “Mutualism” is one of several types of symbiosis. The term “symbiosis” has traditionally been used to describe mutually beneficial associations, but symbiotic interactions have proved to be more complex than this definition suggests. As Leung and Poulin point out, although mutualists and parasites “are from opposite lines

of the spectrum in reality the lines are blurred” and associations can easily “switch
6 between mutualism and parasitism” in a sort of ever-changing dynamics (2008: 107).
7 A significant name when it comes to literary fraud.
The plot of Archer’s *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less* is not very different from
Prentice’s version of the story. The novel has often been read as a fictionalised
revenge on the rogues who duped and bankrupted Archer in the Canadian company
scam that ruined his (first) political career.

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