

**PALINODES, PALINDROMES AND PALIMPSESTS:  
STRATEGIES OF DELIBERATE  
SELF-CONTRADICTION IN POSTMODERN  
BRITISH FICTION**

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“Words once spoke can never be recall’d” declared Wentworth Dillon in his classical *Art of Poetry* (1680), little thinking that his statement along with many other canonical truisms would be challenged and overturned by postmodernist fiction. To simultaneously say and unsay, tell and untell, assert and negate, propose and retract is precisely the type of paradoxical privilege contemporary literature likes to claim for itself. The consequence of these self-contradictory practices, which is manifestly also its purpose, is a lack of commitment, of selection, of assertiveness, foremost on the narrative level but also and crucially in the aesthetic and ideological fields. It is my contention that if postmodernism has given rise to such polemical definitions and analyses and if it continues to be such a complex cultural phenomenon to grasp, it is in particular because of its paradigmatic association of contradictory statements, modalities, and literary traditions. The logic of self-contradiction stems from what one might call, to transpose Lyotard’s renowned phrase, an incredulity towards all meta-ideologies, or in other words a fundamental political weariness and wariness.

Defined as a song and by extension a text which retracts, negates or contradicts that which has previously been stated, the palinode is, according to Antoine Compagnon (1990: 151), what characterizes postmodernism and its retraction of modernist purity, balance and messianism. Rather than choose one guiding line, contemporary art explores one type of tradition, style or dogma before questioning

it and exploring an opposed tendency. Concretely, palinodes can take two textual forms, one isolated and syntagmatic, the other narrative and structural. In *Ever After*, for example, Graham Swift (1992: 120, 249, 259) uses palinodes as a strikingly repetitive figure of speech: “It’s not the end of the world. It is the end of the world”. “Life goes on. It doesn’t go on”. “It’s not the end of the world. It is. Life goes on. It doesn’t”. “Nothing is meant to be. Everything is meant to be”. Voiced by the wavering, hesitating, suicidal narrator, these antithetical declarations appear initially as a means of self-characterization: Bill Unwin who has lost all certainty stands on “groundless grounds” (55) and nourishes contradictory hopes. The same device is employed again in *Out of this World* and *Shuttlecock* (“The facts of life, my darlings. Your parents fuck. They don’t fuck”, Swift 1988: 139), but it becomes evident however that what is at stake is not merely the depiction of the protagonists, and this is underscored by the fact that retractions can also be found in the structural unfolding. In *Ever After*, the double-layered narrative starts by accounting for the conjugal, albeit provisional, happiness of the two main characters before dwelling on the opposite likelihood, i.e., unfaithfulness and woeful cuckoldry. One state of affairs does not cancel the other: a possibility and its opposite are presented concomitantly, neither being more definitive than the other. The same process is at work in *Shuttlecock* where the initial portrait of the protagonist’s father as a war hero is later retracted and replaced by the description of a traitor and a coward, leaving the reader like the narrator with questions that can never be answered (Swift 1981: 184) and the only revelation that “uncertainty is always better than either certainty or ignorance” (197).

Using palinodes as a mode of narration enables Swift to deconstruct the unicity and dogmatism of traditional finite story lines and to underline the crucial ambiguity distinguishing the perception and reconstruction of any event. Swift’s narratives being set in a specific historical context, the contradictions inscribed therein are meant to express the heterogeneous possibilities of reconstituting historical episodes. The presentation of two opposite accounts is not restricted to the narration, it extends to the aesthetic and ideological fields. In *Ever After*, mainly through the celebration of the transcendental power of love (“*amor vincit omnia*”, 46 and *passim*) and of poetry as a “redeeming balm” (71), the romantic tradition is explored<sup>1</sup> and then discarded in favour of the temptation of nihilism. The sense of exaltation felt on contemplating in man’s artistic creations is replaced by a lack of faith in humanity, the loveliness of literature “which strikes our hearts at such a magic angle” (234) is followed by “an apprehension that the universe holds nothing sacred” (84). What appears fundamental here, is that the novel does not choose between these opposed tendencies but juxtaposes them and suggests, as a result, a striking confrontation of opposites, an oxymoronic synthesis, a definitely postmodern, nihilistic romanticism.

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Another illustration of postmodern palinodes can be found in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*.<sup>2</sup> In the single chapter dealing with his private life, the narrator repeats as if it were an obsessive conundrum, "we were happy; we were unhappy" (161, 162, 163, 165), unable to decide between the two contrary alternatives. The narrator's uncertainty in the most personal realm reflects his doubts in his field of research: historical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The evidence he has gathered on the subject of Flaubert leads him to construct a euphoric chronology of the French novelist, based on his achievements and successes, which is immediately afterwards questioned and negated by a dysphoric chronology insisting on the frustrations and disasters of his life. The very existence of two contradictory biographical summaries demonstrates Barnes's disavowal of an objective and reliable epistemology, a typically postmodern stance indeed. Again, these microstructural contradictions find echoes on a broader ideological scale.

In a first stage, the postmodern conception of history seems confirmed by the structural organization of the novel which, in keeping with the spirit of its time, proves highly unteleological and aporetic, leading as it does to an epistemological dead end and an absence of revelations. In opposition to this progressivist design, one finds in *Flaubert's Parrot* conservative forces nowhere more evident than in the panegyric of the French realist and the modes of writing. When the chapters do not consist of a collage of quotations by Flaubert, they imitate his style, cite, comment upon, allude to, parody, repeat his ideas and words, so much so that the whole text appears derivative and second hand, as if there were no contemporary stylistic model available. So the structure follows a contemporary pattern and the writing relies on an antiquated paragon, the past is deemed unknowable and yet it becomes a paradigmatic source of inspiration, the ideology is both progressivist and conservative. Here also, I wish to insist, the contradictory parts of the postmodern palinodes do not cancel each other out, nor does one prevail over the other: they add up, combine and merge to make up a form of art which refuses to choose between different traditions of writing and thinking.

In the palindrome transposed onto the narrative level—that is, a narrative progression followed by a symmetrical narrative regression—postmodernism finds another way of circumventing the binary choice. Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* does not really qualify as a palindromic narrative<sup>4</sup> in so far as it consists only of the second part of the palindrome, namely the backwards account: it is a novel which is entirely regressive, telling all the events backwards, presenting the dialogues in the inverted order, showing the hero becoming young, the feces becoming food and the tortured becoming intact; it is a novel that imitates the rewinding of a video tape. What proves fascinating is that in order to make sense of the topsy-turvy unfolding the reader has to reconstitute the second part of the palindrome; as

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Madalena Cropley-Gonzalez rightly remarks, “we have to read twice, the backward narrative forward *and* backward to be able to retrace in our minds the steps in the sequence putting them the *right* way round for us” (Duperray 1996: 124). So *Time’s Arrow* has to be read like a palindrome, and an inverted one at that. The inverted process gives birth to cruelly ironic effects since the civil doctors seem to be damaging their patients and the gestapo officers to be liberating the Jew internees. For the reader, this form of black irony “highlights the absence of cause and effect and thus the senselessness of the hero’s behaviour” (Cropley-Gonzalez 1996: 125). Similarly, the reversal of narrative order throws into relief the inversion of the ethical rules as practised by the protagonist and his Nazi companions. The narrative disorderliness is a metaphor of the chaotic condition of humanity as it appears in this novel. The particular logic of the palindrome is once more deliberately paradoxical: the horrors of the second world war are at one and the same time retraced and undone, the Holocaust is recorded and erased, torture is described and cancelled, as if the inversion of time’s arrow were an attempt to invert the course of history, as if the backward narrative represented a determined refusal to record the actual historical events. *Time’s Arrow* is an acknowledgement and a refusal of the irreversible, the record and the negation of man’s powerlessness, “hope and no-hope, both at the same time” (Amis 1991: 32).

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Angela Carter is another specialist in inverted processes where “things uncreated themselves” (1968: 29). “Reflections”, a fantastico-philosophico-mythico-allegorical short story, relates the tale of a wanderer who finds a shell whose “spirals were reversed” (1974: 83), who is arrested by a powerful woman and her dog and is then led to an old lady weaving an endless yarn. Having destroyed the initial harmony, the wanderer has to kiss a magic mirror, “the symbolic matrix of this and that, hither and thither, outside and inside” (92), for things to revert to their original order: the yarn is then unwoven, the shell returns to its place and the captive walks backwards towards his freedom. The whole piece revolves around the palindromic woman called Anna “because she can go both ways” (89) and possesses “an absolute symmetry” (94), and her aunt-uncle, a hermaphrodite, an entity that David Lodge (1981: 13) describes as “one of the most powerful emblems of contradiction, defying the most fundamental binary system of all”. When the prosaic protagonist, who proves unable to cope with the contradictions at work in this ambiguous world, ultimately kills the old lady, “the synthesis in person” (101), he also destroys her work, a fatal destruction implicitly condemned by the short story.<sup>5</sup> The universe of contradictions (including Carter’s universe) is revealed as *creative* and the representative of literal-mindedness as *reductive*. What is artfully put forward then in this palindromic piece is the fruitful synthesis of male and female identities, of destruction and creation, of realism and the fantastic.

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In *Several Perceptions*, Carter starts by scattering her narrative with arresting palindromic images, like that of a new-born “who took one look at the world and returned immediately into his mother’s womb (38) and that of “woolen clothes gone back to fleece of friendly sheep” (29). She then unravels a tale where the end seems to undo the beginning, in the typical process of inverted symmetry: the hero who tried to commit suicide is reconciled with life, his limping neighbour is uncrippled and walks again, the ageing prostitute becomes a virgin figure and is reunited with her old lover, and the old tramp who had lost his violin retrieves it miraculously. The opening scene of death, desolation and despair in contemporary society is mirrored by the closing scene of a carnivalesque Christmas nativity where a joyous counterforce and counterculture are made possible.<sup>6</sup> Here again, a hopeless portrait of society and humanity is associated with a buoyant suggestion of regeneration; here again, the two concepts of life have to be combined and not opposed, hyphenated and not separated. Such is postmodernism’s peculiarly contradictory *Weltanschauung*.

The ambiguity of contemporary fiction, which Genette (1997: 398) calls “duplicity”, “can be represented”, according to the French critic, “by the old analogy of the palimpsest”, a superimposition of one text upon another or several others. The ambiguity may be “caused by the fact that a hypertext can be read both for itself and in its relation to its hypotext” (Genette 1997: 397), it may also stem from the conflicting nature of the various textual layers. The latter case is exemplified in D.M. Thomas’s revisionist novel, *Charlotte: The final journey of Jane Eyre*, a triple-layered narrative where a contemporary account is grafted onto a nineteenth-century text which is itself a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë’s canonical novel. It could even be argued that this palimpsest includes a fourth stratum since Jean Rhys’s earlier revision of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), is acknowledged, exploited and played with. In this conflation of texts several opposed versions and visions of the facts are presented to the reader. The opening chapters constitute a copy and a counterfeit, an imitation and a refutation of Brontë’s novel: in fact, a rewriting in the form of a palinode. *Charlotte* starts by plagiarizing *Jane Eyre*, literally reproducing the account of the heroine’s marriage. Plagiarism is then replaced by pastiche where the narrator describes her life with Rochester. Soon though, alternative Jane Eyre interrupts her narrative and confides: “Reader, this is a very different picture of my marriage from that which you were presented with in what I would call my ‘romantic’ version” (Thomas 2000: 44). What follows is an utter refutation of Brontë’s novel not only in the letter (there is no offspring, Rochester proves impotent, the marriage is a disaster) but also in the spirit: religious and imperialistic values are rejected and what is celebrated is exotic sensuality —precisely what Brontë implicitly condemned as a token of insanity and a destructive threat to Victorian conventions. Besides its

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anti-Victorian iconoclasm, this revision of *Jane Eyre* does however preserve the notion of personal fulfilment through love since in its politically correct conclusion Jane is seen blissfully, though briefly, united with the Creole son of Bertha Mason. In the superimposed narrative of the contemporary heroine, no such gratification seems attainable. Depression, disenchantment, loss of orientation and possibly of sanity are ruling the end-of-millennium world of the English protagonist, Miranda Stevenson, a figure manifestly parallel to, if not a reembodyment of, the Victorian heroine. The opposing outlooks of the two texts can be seen nowhere better than in Miranda's relationships with Creole men which echo Jane's symmetrical love encounter. In the contemporary layer, the celebration of complementarity is substituted for by a cynical record of sexual transactions yielding neither betterment nor solace.<sup>7</sup> Also taking part in Miranda's post-ethnic universe is her father who, not exactly in tune with the ideological consensus of the times, insists on his right to "tickle [his granddaughter's] little pussy" (Thomas 2000: 145).

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A great mistake in comprehending a novel such as D.M. Thomas's would be to associate the contemporary narrative with a contemporary vision of the world and the Victorian pastiche with a criticism of a bygone ethos. The postmodern text is the sum of the various sub-texts and their ideologies; it superimposes the contemporary, the mock-Victorian and the Victorian texts in order to combine their perspectives and messages and to take stock of both anarchy and harmony, to suggest both disorientation and sources of plenitude, to voice at the same time the hopelessness and the hopefulness of human relations. The heterogeneous quality of the various textual strata making up Thomas's novel represents very aptly the composite nature of postmodernism's axiology.

"Morpho Eugenia", the first of the two novellas composing A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*, provides our final example of a multi-layered narration propounding the inconsistency of its various arguments. Here is a text displaying numerous Victorian fragments produced by characters with very different outlooks. These passages reproducing Victorian language and preoccupations are all pastiche which, as Genette (1997: 399) aptly reminds us, automatically designate literature as a palimpsest. In addition to these Victorian passages, one finds a narrative voice whose task it is to account for the main diegetic events and whose modernity is established from the outset by its breach of decorum in sexual matters. Clearly a confrontation between two epochs is thus again called for—and this all the more so since the addressee necessarily belongs to an epoch that is not the mid-nineteenth century.

What do the Victorian documents testify to? In the extracts from his theological essay, Sir Harald Alabaster is seen striving to reconcile the existence of God's

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design with the reality of worldly affairs. Entomologist William Adamson, on the other hand, adopts an explicitly Darwinian position, using in his diaries and biological tale examples and quotations from the famous Victorian scientist, and arguing against the concept of man as a divine creation. To complete this “survey” of Victorian conceptions of life, the reader is offered Matty Campton’s tale tracing the links between human behaviour and mythological patterns. And what is the world picture conveyed by the modern voice? Astonishing though it may seem, it abstains from any ideological, philosophical or metaphysical remark. The guiding instance restricts itself to orchestrating the narrative revelations and piecing together the various arguments of the main characters. The system of characterization proves crucial in the determination of the narrator’s preference and it seems evident in that respect that the three Victorian witnesses are depicted as benign and knowledgeable. If none of the textual fragments can therefore be deemed redundant, it is, once more, because contemporary ideology refuses to choose between different visions and insists on offering a plurality of possibilities. The Victorian excerpts uphold a religious, scientific or mythological conception of life and humanity, the (post-)modern text fuses the three accounts and presents this patchwork as the only viable explanation of the world. This pluralistic solution does not, or perhaps does not merely, spring from a lack of commitment or conviction, it is simply the expression of a defiance in the face of singular and definitive explanations.

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If I have concentrated on palinodes, palindromes and palimpsests, it is because their common prefix indicates a backward movement, a retroaction, an operation in reverse, which seem to crystallize the main strategy of contemporary British fiction. Just as postmodern novels retract, unsay or contradict what they stated earlier, so do they go back on and revisit earlier literary traditions. Naturally, the literatures of the past spring from very dissimilar aesthetic tenets, ideological principles and political assumptions, and the fiction which decides to recycle them *in toto* inevitably and deliberately opts for heterogeneity and indiscriminate. So the contradictions conveyed in the form of palinodes, palindromes and palimpsests constitute the mere textual expression of wider cultural and axiological contradictions. Adopting concepts from both romanticism and nihilism, mixing lyricism and slang, exploiting the avant-garde and realism, imitating and subverting the canon, harnessing the commodification of art and challenging capitalistic liberalism, “Janus-like”<sup>8</sup> postmodernism displays contradiction as the central motif of its poetics and politics. Eclecticism might be another way of identifying the contradictory plurality of contemporary fiction, but it need not signify, as Lyotard is renowned for claiming, “the degree zero of contemporary general culture”, it need not mean that “anything goes” and that “the epoch is one of slackening” (1983: 334-335). Admittedly, certain artistic combinations

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may prove jarring and a hybrid methodology may prove superficial in philosophy (which is probably what influenced Lyotard, a philosopher), but artistic eclecticism cannot be intrinsically nefarious, as is convincingly demonstrated by the multifarious works of Carter, Swift, Barnes, Amis and Rushdie, and many others before them.

Postmodernism's foregrounding of contradictions is straightforwardly expressed by one of Rushdie's narrators: "I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile" (Rushdie 1983: 242). What is the explanation of this tendency? One type of explanation may reside in the referential function of art, postmodern fiction reflecting the cultural reality of its epoch which joyously and indiscriminately mingles very dissimilar influences with very dissimilar ideological implications. The syncretism of contemporary fiction could then be read as an illustration of the syncretism of contemporary society. More importantly, it seems to me, the systematic combination of contraries enables postmodern art to eschew the monolithic. Taking stock of the failure of the dominant ideologies, contemporary fiction has made the choice of becoming "politically ambidextrous" thus rendering "unlikely the possible extremes of both political quietism and radical revolution" (Hutcheon 1988: 207-209). So postmodern British literature refuses to commit itself to any determined ideology, and in that sense it heralds the relinquishment of ideology and politics<sup>9</sup>—even though, as Brecht had predicted, "the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology".<sup>10</sup> By favouring combination and contradiction rather than selection and identification, postmodernism, as illustrated by contemporary British fiction, shuns fixed artistic traditions and schools of thought and celebrates a pan-aesthetic and pan-political form of art. Ultimately, contradictions are mainly contra-doxas.

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## Notes

1. For the traces of romanticism in *Ever After*, see also Germanos Thomas (Duperray 1994: 214-215) and Gutleben (2001: 150-151).

2. Martin Amis resorts to palinodes in order to highlight undecidability in yet another field, namely ontology:

"When I awoke, Martin was still in the room, and still talking.

When I awoke, Martin was gone and there was no sound anywhere" (1984: 349).  
"It happens - it doesn't happen" (1991: 149)

3. As Vanessa Guignery rightly remarks, Julian Barnes also employs palinodes in *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* in the chapter entitled 'Parenthesis' where he contradicts what he previously asserted about the working of History (2001: 469).

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<sup>4</sup>. The idea of a narrative palindrome is voiced by Michel Morel in "Time's Arrow ou le récit palindrome". Interestingly, Morel's (1995: 51) analysis also ends up taking stock of the fundamental contradiction lying at the heart of Amis's system of signification.

<sup>5</sup>. See Marina Warner's analysis in "Angela Carter: Bottle Blond, Double Drag" (1994: 252).

<sup>6</sup>. For an interpretation of the final scene as carnivalesque counterculture see Marc O'Day's paper "'Mutability is Having a Field Day': The Sixties Aura of Angela Carter's Bristol Trilogy" (1994: 44-45).

<sup>7</sup>. See for example pp.81, 83, 126-127 (Thomas 2000).

<sup>8</sup>. It is Lance Olsen's main contention that postmodernism produces Janus-texts (1990: 71, 146 and *passim*).

<sup>9</sup>. On the evidence of postmodern British literature, one simply cannot agree with Hans Bertens when he asserts that postmodernism has "effectuated a welcome, if rather haphazard, repoliticization of contemporary art" (Bertens 1995: 247).

<sup>10</sup>. Quoted in Hutcheon (1988: 203).

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