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NARRATION-PARODY-INTERTEXTUALITY: REWRITING THE PAST IN CHARLES PALLISER'S *THE QUINCUNX* [1]

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> Come with me now, gentle reader, and let us return to the Victorian heyday of the British novel, a time when villains spoke in Cockney accents and escapes were hair's-breath and maidservants were either traitorous or eternally devoted, where heroes were young and plucky and gained something (as opposed, in the contemporary novel, to losing it) in the process of growing up, when plots hinged on stolen wills and a book had only just finished laying the groundwork when it reached page 300. (Walton 1990: H01)

In this way starts a critique of *The Quincunx*, emphasizing what early British and American reviewers of the novel immediately recognized: its striking Victorian quality. Robert Taylor (1990: 38) describes it as "a Victorian three-decker gone back to the future" and a Ballantine executive calls it "a Wilkie Collins or Charles Dickens novel written by Umberto Eco" (Stephenson 1990: E12).

At the end of the twentieth century, in a world experienced as totally contingent and random, and on a level of consciousness that no longer allows us to regard reality as something to be experienced directly and immediately,

art and literature could no longer be a simple reflection of an external ontology, the traditional *speculum vitae* and mirror held up to nature. Thus, the "originality" of present-day art seems to lie, eventually, in the way in which it makes use of second-hand materials. Writing over and against what has been written, subscribing and, simultaneously, questioning other forms, expressing the new through the old..., this is what constitutes the essence of most postmodernist literature, a literature which is both enjoyable and disquieting, playful and serious and, above all, aware of its own palimpsestuous (intertextual) quality.

Such a definition applies perfectly to the novel I intend to analyze in this article. Among other things, what *The Quincunx* illustrates is the fact that literary creation involves both making something up and making it up out of previously existing materials. In the case of Palliser's work, this dialectic, central to postmodernist literature as a whole, is mainly based on the relationship that can be established between the novel, on the one hand, and the texts of nineteenth-century literature and history, on the other.

The Quincunx tells the story of a boy of aristocratic origin and his expectations of inherited wealth. At the beginning of the novel, John Mellamphy and his mother are living in reduced but genteel circumstances in the rural north of England in the 1820s. John soon realizes that his mother, Mary, is hiding from "an enemy" whose effects are felt when Mrs. Mellamphy is lured into investing in a land speculation scheme which proves to be a fraud and reduces them to poverty. Then, discovered by the agents of her enemy, she flees with John to London, where they begin a life of progressive degradation with their pursuers at their heels. Finally, in the vein of melodramatic realism, John discovers that his name is not really Mellamphy, but Huffam and that he is entitled to inherit one of the largest estates in England. This is why he and his mother are constantly sought and threatened with violent death.

The Quincunx has all the ingredients of the traditional realist novel. The settings, character depiction, historical background and even style in which the fabula is set are wonderfully accurate. As we follow John Huffam's quest, we see the horrible squalor in which the poor lived in London in the early nineteenth century as well as the social and political structures and attitudes that made these social conditions possible. The realism and accuracy with which all these elements are displayed reassuringly function to enhance the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief." But, in line with what Linda Hutcheon first termed "historiographic metafiction,"[2] the novel's historical tone is counterbalanced by its overtly fictional status. Thus, the episodes that make up John Huffam's quest simultaneously appear as pastiche-ridden and

openly literary, as they strongly recall similar episodes in well-known Victorian novels. This fact effectively works to undermine the illusion of credibility of the created world and it calls into question the easily taken-for-granted referentiality of the novel, making good Jonathan Culler's words that "whenever [the literary work] seems to be referring to the world one can always argue that this supposed reference is in fact a comment on other texts" (1976: 1391).

The "realistic" element of the novel cannot but be perceived by the reader, who may even feel that the actual protagonist of *The Quincunx* is London and the English countryside as they were during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The vivid and persuasive descriptions that crowd the novel give its centre and ground to what might otherwise have been a melodramatic and more than slightly implausible plot. Thus, *The Quincunx* becomes a window onto nineteenth-century law, social conditions, geography and topography. Each section of the novel is accompanied by a street map[3] which constitutes an essential background to the texture of events. Almost every aspect of pre-Victorian England seems to be present in *The Quincunx*, from the begging and riverbed scavenging tactics of the destitute to the brothel-keeping, grave-robbing and house-breaking trades of the criminal class and the far more elegant schemes of the grasping rich; from the endless, exhausting drudgery of service "below stairs" in a fine house to the credit and speculation scams of bankers and moneylenders. To round this feeling of authenticity, each social group, be it the wealthy gentry in the West End, the criminal classes in the Town or the labouring poor in the country, speaks its own sociolect and so we come across a whole gallery of nineteenth-century spellings and idioms that have changed in today's writing and speech. This constitutes a further illustration of the novel's intertextuality, or, rather, of an aspect of intertextuality focused upon by Mikhail Bakhtin above all others. According to the author of *The Dialogic Imagination,* novels obsessively quote other specific works but, in addition, they simultaneously manifest intertextuality in their display of the enormous variety of discourses used in different historical periods and by disparate social classes (Bakhtin 1981: 46-47, 271).

On the other hand, there are literally thousands of references and allusions to Dickens' novels and to his life, as well. In this sense, we may agree with Steven Marcus (1990: 24) when he says that *The Quincunx* is in many ways "a novel written by someone who might have been a cross between Dickens and Wilkie Collins, with Dickens the dominant visible 'influence'." A considerable part of the action of the novel takes place in London in the early 1820s, in the area where Dickens worked in a blacking

factory as a twelve-year-old boy. In addition, the central character and main narrator, John Huffam, bears Dickens' middle names (his godfather's first name was Huffam) and, like Dickens, he was born on 7th. February 1812: though the birth year is never explicitly mentioned it can be deduced, as Susana Onega (1993a: 131) has pointed out, from the reference in Huffam's baptism record to the conquest of Ciudad Rodrigo (19th. January 1812) by Sir Arthur Wellesley (i.e. Lord Wellington) a few days before John's birth.[4]

Overt allusions, not only to literary texts (*The Arabian Tales, The Castle of Otranto, The Monk*, etc.) but to non-literary ones (a nineteenth-century popular rhyme (*Q* 514), or the names of such well-known newspapers as *The Spectator, The Tatler, The Rambler*), and also to persons or events of social and political history (the massive migration from Ireland to England after a series of ruined harvests; the enclosure of the common land; the Poor Laws; etc.) may be regarded as evocative links between the text and the intertextual *déjà* (Hebel[5] 1991: 138). However, it is not always an explicit reference that draws the reader's attention to the novel's intertextual relationships. That is the case with Dickens' own biography, as we have already seen, and also with Dickens' works. The intertextual echoes from Dickens' novels are overwhelming in number and make up a good deal of the actual substance of *The Quincunx*, including some of its key episodes. Simplifying a great deal, we may say that *The Quincunx* tells, like most of Dickens' literary production, the story of an orphaned boy who is chased in his terrors through the countryside (*Copperfield*) and the London underworld (*Oliver Twist*) because of greed (all of Dickens), and whose future is governed by a secret (*Great Expectations*) expressed in a legal document (*Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Oliver Twist*), whose heart is broken by a girl and then woman growing colder, more distant (*Expectations*), with excursions into fallen womanhood (*Copperfield, Dorrit, Dombey*), workhouses and graveyards in the midst of the city (*Oliver Twist, Bleak House, A Tale of Two Cities*). Echoes of *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* abound in John's relationship with his fragile mother and in his temporary banishment to one of the notorious Yorkshire "schools," a bleak rewriting at great length of the immortal comic scenes at Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*. As in *Bleak House*, the plot revolves around a complex chancery suit that has dragged on for generations, draining the participants of time, health, resources and hope. The characters' memorable names— Digweed, Umphraville, Vamplew, Sancious, Palphramond, Purviance...— also bring to mind those of Dickens' characters. And the same can be said of very concrete and punctual techniques, like the vivifying of the inanimate, a device we associate with Dickens' children when they are frightened and that

affects things like coffins that chase people or a house (in *Little Dorrit*) that "had always had in its mind to slide down sideways." The version in *The Quincunx* is about an inn that "seemed to lean into the road as if peering sideways for possible customers" (*Q* 38); later, the small windows of a few cottages standing along the road were "like eyes that were narrowed to follow us" (*Q* 446).

All these echoes from Dickens' novels are in turn connected by the inheritance-generational-genealogical-legal plot that winds through everything. This plot, however, is less in tune with Dickens than it is with Wilkie Collins. The general shapes of Dickens' plots, however complicated they may be, are memorable because of the immense symbolic weight they carry and generate —all of them are multi-levelled, complex dramatizations of the state of contemporary English society. The plots of Wilkie Collins' novels are much more intricate and labyrinthine than those of Dickens, and indeed resemble nothing so much as later detective or mystery novels —forms upon which they have had a considerable influence.[6] Accordingly, the plot in *The Quincunx* is unimaginably elaborate and is finally, we are made to understand, about plotting itself, in both senses of the term.

However, despite all the echoes and reverberations from other nineteenth-century works that act as intertexts and with which the reader is free to trace relations, we cannot say that Palliser (his name already Trollopean[7]) has created either an innocent imitation of Victorian fiction or a Dickens book, as some critics have defined *The Quincunx* (Lannon 1990: 1L; Hawley 1991: 10). Palliser's novel lacks comic relief or that Dickensian speciality, the punctilious blend of comedy and horror that Colley Cibber synthesized in his influential formula "make 'em cry, make 'em wait, make 'em laugh." On top of that, as Michael Malone (1990: 12) suggests, Palliser seems to be deliberately trying to outdo Dickens rather than imitate him: in *The Quincunx*, the "bad 'uns" are worse, the dangers more dangerous and the periods of relief shorter or practically inexistent. Moreover, he adds, Charles Palliser appears to have set out not merely to write *a* Dickens novel but to write *all* Dickens novels.

This being so, critical readers of *The Quincunx* get engaged in an endless *ars combinatoria* that takes place in what has been variously termed *"musée imaginaire"* (Malraux), *"chambre d'echos"* (Barthes), or *"bibliothéque générale"* (Grivel) (in Plett 1991: 25). Moreover, the configuration of an intertext for the novel is the means by which the text defines itself, since the intertext is presented as that which the novel is not. Ross Chambers (1990: 143) has argued that in proposing itself as "not-X" (where "X" is the intertextual referent), a text claims literary status, but simultaneously

distinguishes itself as a negativity with respect to the discourses that traverse it. This statement corroborates the obvious fact that the relation between a literary text and its intertext is not necessarily one of imitation. Palliser's own comments on the novel are quite illuminating in this respect: he acknowledges having begun the book as a pastiche of Dickens, though he "had the sense to see it as grotesque" and he eventually recommends to read it as "a kind of defamiliarization of Dickens" (Madrigal 1991: 3).

Malone's and Palliser's remarks can be interpreted as pointing to a specific mode of discourse, which is parody. By contrast to imitation, parody marks the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique (Hutcheon 1985: 101), thus replacing what has become "a matter of course" with what now becomes "a matter of discourse" (Stewart 1979: 19). For Bakhtin (1973: 156), who was among the first to underline the dialogical character of each and every utterance, parody appropriates, as object, an existing discourse, but introducing into it an orientation diametrically opposed to the one it originally had. Thus, what is perceived in a parody is the clash of two voices, while, in an imitation, each of them is confused with one another.

In what follows, I will concentrate on one particular aspect of Palliser's work—the use and patterning of narrative voices in the text—as a means of illustrating the (parodic) nature of the relationship between the novel and its Victorian —mainly Dickensian— intertexts. The variety of narrators and the quality of their contributions constitute a kind of reflection *en abyme* of the way in which literary references and historical data are made to blend in the novel, as has already been pointed out. This fact, in turn, will help us to draw some conclusions regarding the work's attitude towards and final comment on its different—or, perhaps, not so different—intertexts: history, on the one hand, and literature, on the other.

When one thinks of nineteenth-century fiction—the context in which the literary narrator flourished fully for the first time—one of the first conventions that comes to mind is surely that of the omniscient narrator. Playing the role of presiding consciousness, continuously present in the text, the narrators of novels like *Vanity Fair* (1848), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), or *Middlemarch* (1871-72), among many others, are invariably defined by their privileged access to the story they narrate, their indiscreet inclusiveness and their lack of individual identity. The main discourse of this fiction is that of an interpreting observer—engaged and distanced at the same time, performing a zig-zag between the "minutiae" of individual minds and the wide embracing awareness of a narrator that coincides with the total mind of mankind (Miller 1979: 88). The omniscient narrator is able to remember all the past perfectly,

to foresee the future course of events, and to penetrate with irresistible insight the most secret crevice in the heart of each man. Characters come and go, but the narrator is a constant: a necessity for the text yet only invisibly present.

In addition to the typical Victorian omniscient narrator, there are cases in which the narrative task falls on a character, who is usually the protagonist. This is the case, for instance, of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, where the main character narrates in the retrospect the earlier course of his life. The texture of both novels is made up of the superimposition of two voices: the *adult* David/Pip re-living his experiences as a *child*. In both novels the older narrator, from the vantage point of a later time, watches his purblind younger self engage more or less naively in relations with other people. Behind this double consciousness may be glimpsed the voice of the (implied) author who is reshaping events to make a novel out of them. From author, to narrator, to youthful protagonists, to other characters, the structure of these novels is also a pattern of harmonized voices.

Novels like *Bleak House* present, in turn, a combination of both methods. Because of the staggering breadth of Dickens' design the selection of a narrative instance is extraordinarily difficult. If the author chooses an omniscient narrator a good deal of emotional charge is lost, particularly if the narrator remains (as he must) sufficiently aloof from the actions and events he describes in order to avoid premature disclosures. On the other hand, a first-person narrator equally suffers from important disabilities. The most immediately obtrusive of these are physical and practical. How can a single character contribute evidence (as opposed to hearsay) of events which take place in London, Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire, sometimes simultaneously? The obvious solution to this dilemma is to have the omniscient and the restricted points of view alternating the narration between them (Donovan 1971: 101-102).

Devised in a similar way, the narrative structure of *The Quincunx* brings to mind that in *Bleak House*, which, in this sense, appears as its most probable intertext among Dickens' novels. Essential for producing suspense is the restricted point of view of the main narrator, John Huffam, who, like Esther Summerson, must give away enough to take hold of the reader's attention but not so much as to do away with the mystery. Like David Copperfield, or like Pip in *Great Expectations*, John Huffam tells the story of his life in the retrospect but keeping the narrowly focalized perspective of the younger, purblind character. Set against John's story we find a series of chapters narrated by Pentecost and Silverlight, two "Punch and Joan" puppeteers who help John round off his account narrating crucial episodes of

the plot to which he could not possibly have had access. These chapters work in a similar way to those told by the omniscient narrator in *Bleak House*, which are equally devised as a complement to Esther's partial account. For some time, as far as chapter 36 exactly, the voice that the reader hears in those sections which are not narrated by John is surrounded by an anonymity that may be misleading. In a review of *The Quincunx*, for instance, John Espey (1990: 3) comments on the complex questions posed by "an omniscient voice that, speaking from time to time, asks: what is the difference between equity and justice?." However, this is not "an omniscient voice" but the voice of the puppeteers. Yet what seems obvious in chapter 36 is not so evident before: the reader finds him/herself with, in all appearance, an impersonal voice that has access to all kinds of places without being physically present. Other features of the narrative technique in these chapters may be linked to what we find in many Victorian novels. One of them has to do with the use of the present tense. A lot has been said about the common Victorian enthusiasm for reading about the present. Conditioned by the common belief, sustained by subtitles and publishers' advertisements, that fiction's primary locale had to be present-day Britain, readers ordinarily opened a new novel expecting it to be indeed a "tale of the times." Even though the story might be set in a time several decades removed from the present, yet it remained topical because it still reflected the ideas, interests, and manners of the time when it was written rather than those of its putative setting and period. But the author could also bring the present as close to the reader as the resources of language permitted. Richard Altick (1991:160) points to the present-tense survey of the fogbound London scene in the opening pages of *Bleak House* as largely responsible for the illusory assumption, sustained by all the chapters narrated in the present tense, that the novel is set in the present. I do not mean with this that the present tense is used for the same purpose in *The Quincunx*, but the fact that it is employed in a considerable number of chapters, with a similar effect and in alternation with John's account in the past tense, strikes a cord in the reader's mind enough for him/her to perceive the intertextual echo. Similarly, other features of the narrative technique in those sections narrated by an initially unknown voice may be regarded as intertextual gestures by the reader. That is the case, for instance, with personal pronouns as they are used in paragraphs like the following:

> For once more *we* are outside Mompesson-house. This time it is
> ablaze with lights for it is one of Lady Mompesson's "Friday
> nights." *You* know the kind of thing: Weipert's band is playing

> quadrilles, the livery-servants are in evening dress. . . . (*Q* 203,
> emphasis added)

The first time the reader comes across these lines s/he may wonder who is behind the "we" and the "you" uttered by the narrator. The reader, perhaps? This would be the obvious answer in a Victorian novel and it is, at least, a probable possibility in a work like *The Quincunx*, which reproduces Victorian techniques with wonderful accuracy. Thackeray's constant use of "we" in addressing his readers was one of the major ways by which he maintained the intimate rapport with them; Meredith also employed the device, and the same goes for Trollope and for most nineteenth-century authors, who ensured in this way the continuity of a convention already parodied in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. This particular kind of relationship established between the Victorian (omniscient) narrator and the reader, thanks to which the latter has direct access to both minds and places, has also been parodied by contemporary writers like John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. But this is not the case in *The Quincunx*. The anonymous voice(s) that narrate(s) some of the sections of the novel stop(s) being so in Part Two. What seemed impersonal and external (heterodiegetic) becomes personal and internal (homodiegetic) as the narrators turn out to be characters in the novel. Thus, the already read must be re-interpreted in a new light.

After a number of chapters, some of them retrospectively narrated by John and others by this initially anonymous voice that always speaks in the present tense, the reader comes across two new characters: Mr. Pentecost and Mr. Silverlight, two puppeteers that live and work together, though they hold rather different views on life, society, literature, etc. In one of their endless discussions they start toying with the idea of writing a novel. For Pentecost, the only thing that matters is the plot itself, what the characters do, while for Silverlight action is meaningless without the motives that would help the reader draw the overall design underlining the characters' actions. As Miss Quilliam, Henrietta's ex-governess, comments, Pentecost's and Silverlight's views on fiction are complementary rather than in conflict, and she suggests that they should work together:

> "So perhaps you should collaborate. Mr. Silverlight could take re-
> sponsibility for describing the motives of the characters
> (particularly, of course, in the upper ranks) while you, Mr.
> Pentecost, could concentre [sic] your talents upon the elements of
> plotting and intrigue." (*Q* 364)

Immediately, the reader is struck by two facts: the "anonymous" voice of previous chapters, and some of those still to come, is now revealed as belonging to the puppeteers. In addition, Silverlight, Pentecost, and John as well, are not only the first-level narrators but also the authors of a novel written in collaboration, the very novel we have in our hands. In the light of all this, the reader may start interpreting some data that can help him/her be more precise with regard to the identity of the "unknown" narrators. Thus, when Silverlight meets John and warns him against "the vulgar error of confusing Law and Equity" the reader should be reminded of the characters introduced by the narrative voice in chapter 1, two characters allegorically called, precisely, Law and Equity. Pentecost's view that only actions and not motives are relevant leads to a similar identification of the narrator in those sections where we find remarks like the one in chapter 14: "Though I shall, of course, not speculate on his motives, it seems that Mr. Sancious now believed that . . ." (Q 107). Accordingly, in those chapters narrated by Pentecost the narration concentrates on the things the characters have done, are doing or propose to do, without ever attempting to "speculate" on the motives behind their actions. In a different way, Silverlight uses allegorical names in an attempt to reveal what is most important for him: the abstract principles that motivate the characters' behaviour (Onega 1993a: 136). Sancious, an attorney, becomes "Law"; Barbellion, the Mompesson's solicitor and town agent, "Equity"; Sir Percival Mompesson, "Wealth"; his wife, "Arrogance"; etc. Also useful to identify the narrator(s) (sometimes only one of the puppeteers, other times both of them) are some of their typical remarks, and so, for example, the expletive "Fiddlesticks!" is linked to Pentecost while references to Ireland as "our sad sister-island" are connected with Silverlight.

The alternating quality of John's and the puppeteers' role as narrators is rounded by the fact that the narratees of those sections narrated by John turn out to be Silverlight and Pentecost (John addresses them directly on two occasions: Q 1089 and 1178), just as John is ultimately presented as the narratee of the chapters narrated by the puppeteers (this is most clearly seen when the latter are about to end their contribution and give John some advice for the future, though, as could be expected, they also disagree about the kind of advice to give: Q 1108 and 1151-2).

In more than one sense, the novel can be said to play with the reader's expectations. The realist-enhancing mechanisms, the narrative instance that can be taken and, in fact, has been taken (Bargreen 1990: L7; Espey 1991: 3) for an omniscient voice, the reader's feeling that such a voice seems to address him/her directly from time to time (Hellmuth 1991: F8), etc., provide

an apparently solid basis for the reader to draw some conclusions with regard to the generic quality of the text. At this initial stage, The Quincunx is not only seen as a novel but as a particular kind of novel, a work that resembles nineteenth-century fiction in all except in the time of production, "a book that Dickens himself might have written" (Lannon 1990: 1L). Talking about archtextuality—one of the five subcategories of what he terms "transtextuality"—Genette (1989: 13) points out that the text is in no way obliged to acknowledge its generic quality explicitly. It is the reader who has to determine it and, I would add, it is also the reader who runs the risk of doing it wrongly. In the case of The Quincunx, the novel plays with that possibility. If, as Kristeva (1980: 66) has put it, intertextuality involves not merely the absorption but also the transformation of (an)other text(s), the reader of The Quincunx is led to perceive first the absorption, and only that, and then the transformation. From chapter 36 onwards both processes are seen to work simultaneously and, as things become clear, the contrast between the technique of an omniscient narrative instance and the one used by Silverlight and Pentecost appears more evident than ever: the puppeteers reconstruct the events as they might have happened and reveal nothing about the characters' motives (Q 973), following Pentecost's belief that only facts are important and that, consequently, speculation is completely irrelevant. The overpowering certainty of the nineteenth-century heterodiegetic narrator becomes a consciously flaunted insecurity with regard to the events in the story as told by the puppeteers, two homodiegetic narrators that, in addition, not only tell but also write the novel in collaboration with the autodiegetic narrator, John Huffam. Such a gap between Silverlight and Pentecost's narrative method and that of the nineteenth-century omniscient voice ultimately presents the puppeteers' contribution as a deliberate critique of the everywhere present and always infallible Victorian narrator.

According to Riffaterre (1987: 381), intertextual cross-references turn each reading into a re-reading, a revised interpretation of a preceding text or generic convention. From this point of view, the reader's perception of the above mentioned gap between narrative techniques leads him/her to reconsider the convention of the omniscient narrator, thus reacting to what can be interpreted as a covert form of literary criticism, a commentary, or even a metatextual relationship, behind the intertextual (or transtextual, if we follow Genette's terminology) gesture. The convention under scrutiny may then appear paradoxically at odds with the philosophy underlying the kind of fiction that gave it such a relevant role. Nineteenth-century literary realism was based on the creation of an utterly convincing illusion of reality, truth and objectivity. But, then, one wonders, what can be more unreal than the figure

of the omniscient narrator? His powers look more divine than human, he enjoys the absolute perfection of knowledge traditionally ascribed to God, and he is even superior to God in the sense that, as J. Hillis Miller (1990: 65) explains, while God's knowledge is of a world and of human souls which He himself has made, the omniscient narrators of Victorian fiction have a perfect knowledge of a world they *have not* made. By contrast to their Victorian counterparts, the two puppeteers display their knowledge of a world that, in important respects, has been "created" by them, as in the process of reconstructing the events that make up the story they are revealed to be both narrators and authors. This being so, Silverlight and Pentecost's account is somehow more realistic, precisely because it is more openly fictitious.

The puppeteers' frequent discussions and their conversations with John, who very soon becomes their pupil, provide a great deal of information about the characters behind such unusual names, rich in metaphorical connotations. Pentecost, the fiery reactionary, is a convinced Hobbesian and Utilitarian and, as John comments, regards society as "a spiderly, cannibalistic, irrational pursuit of self-interest" (*Q* 341). In his view, all social and economic life is governed by the Law of Necessity, and competition makes warfare between individuals and between classes absolutely inevitable since everyone hunts and preys upon everyone else. Far from condemning inequality, he manifests himself against charity, from the State or other sources, since men need the fear of starvation to make them work. These being his basic ideological principles, he sees life as random and arbitrary, hiding no overall meaning: all life is a risk in which there is no order or rationality. Silverlight, on the other hand, is a Deist and a Radical Democrat and so believes in reason as the ordering principle of society. For him, the notion that ideas are determined by economic circumstances is utterly wrong. On the contrary, one must start with abstract principles—Justice, Equality—and condemn society if it falls short when it is measured against them. Only in a society founded upon the Law of Reason, not that of Necessity, can Justice for all be won and society improved to the point of perfection. He defends the argument of a Design as proof of the existence of a Supreme Spirit of Reason, and, accordingly, he believes that there is a pattern in all that exists if only one has the wit to find it. The ideological principles that the puppeteers defend can always be found behind their respective accounts. In this sense, their divergent worldviews are all the more interesting on account of the fact that they include and, in many ways, determine a particular position towards art which explains most of the differences between the chapters narrated by Silverlight and those narrated by Pentecost. As has already been mentioned, Silverlight agrees not to speculate, though not without protest, and gives allegorical

names to the characters as an alternative way of revealing the motives behind their actions. He often feels himself tempted to digress (*Q* 203) and his prose can be more eloquent and vivid than his colleague's (*Q* 789). Pentecost calls the characters by their own names and his narration is more matter-of-fact and distant than that of Silverlight, who sometimes allows himself to express sympathy for some characters (*Q* 1107) or indignation, particularly with regard to the egoism and opulence of the upper classes (*Q* 1101).

However, in spite of the differences, Silverlight's and Pentecost's accounts must be considered as the complementary halves of a whole and should be analyzed in relation to John's narration in order to understand what constitutes one of the key points of the novel: the blurring of ontological boundaries, specifically between history and literature. We have already seen that the novel includes real historical data about the early nineteenth century and also openly literary episodes which enhance the novel's self-reflexive quality, and that, as a consequence, the reader's disbelief is alternatively suspended and re-awakened. The juxtaposition of John's and the puppeteers' accounts has a similar effect on the reader due to the respectively "historical" and "literary" quality of their contributions.[8] While John retrospectively tells events he himself has lived, the puppeteers' account is an overtly fictional reconstruction of the past in which the present tense verbs often point to the fact that they are telling not "what happened" but "what might have happened." It is enough to read the first lines of the novel to realize what their method is going to be like:

> It *must have been* late autumn of that year, and *probably* it was towards dusk for the sake of being less conspicuous. . . . Let us *imagine*, then, how Law *might have waited* upon Equity. (*Q* 3, emphasis added)

The difference between John's and the puppeteers' accounts ultimately recalls Aristotle's distinction between the historian, who tells events as they actually took place, and the poet, who is concerned not with reality but with probability. In *The Quincunx*, however, these two approaches are not presented as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of John's "historical" and the puppeteers' "literary" versions, and their intended complementarity, suggests the blurring of boundaries between history and literature and their levelling to the same—fictional—status, a fact that aligns *The Quincunx* with other postmodernist historiographic metafictions like John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *A Maggot*, Umberto Eco's *Il nome de la rosa*, Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*, A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Rose Tremain's *Restoration*, etc. As Susana Onega (1993a: 133)

> Perhaps if the old lady [Miss Lydia] had lived I might have asked
> her about the words she had attributed to her Aunt Anna, but proba-
> bly not. For I understood now that I could continue for ever to hear
> new and more complicated versions of the past without ever attain-
> ing to a final truth. (*Q* 1029)

The reader of *The Quincunx* is left exactly with the same feeling of uncer-
tainty after going through a novel with such a complicated plot and in which
the different versions of the past do not cohere in the end. The reader tries to
relate these versions in order to find, like John Huffam, the pattern that leads
to a sort of definite meaning. But that final truth, like the central part of the
quincunxes[9] formed by the lozenges of the Old Hall, seems to recede as one
approaches it.

What John Huffam learns about the unattainability of one definite truth,
paralleled by what the reader interprets after reading and, perhaps, re-reading
the novel, constitutes one of the basic tenets of Postmodernism and its con-
cern with truth or, rather, with the dispersion and multiplication of truths. In
Palliser's novel, such a dispersion of truths relies not only on the juxtaposi-
tion and intended complementarity of John's and the puppeters' accounts, but
also on the proliferation of narrative instances. The novel combines chapters
narrated by five—a quincunx—main narrators: John, the puppeteers, and
then, engulfed within John's narration, there are those sections narrated by
Mary (mainly through her diary), Miss Quilliam (in the form of a retrospec-
tive "confession" addressed to Mary and overheard by John) and Mr. Escreet
(another retrospective "confession" with John as narratee). To the complex
pattern constituted by these five narrative instances, one should add the ac-
counts of many other characters that contribute to John's quest with the nar-
ration of episodes of their own life-stories. From Miss Lydia to Mr. Nolloth,
a whole gallery of characters mention these words at some point: "I will tell
you my story." Such a proliferation of narrators that contribute with their
versions of the past to the gradual unravelling of a design and the clearing
out of a mystery acts perhaps as a reminder of the method used in one of the
novel's intertexts, *The Woman in White*, except that in *The Quincunx* the
result is just the opposite. There are eleven different narrators in Wilkie
Collins' novel. The main one, Walter Hartright, explains in these terms the
narrative method that is going to be used:

> When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright by
> name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the
> incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person.
> When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of

narrator; and his task will be continued . . . by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge. (Collins 1955: 1)

Such a method is explicitly compared with a trial in which a number of witnesses are called to give evidence, thus reinforcing the truthfulness of each and every account. Different narrators contribute, then, in order to offer a version of events as complete and objective as possible. The truth can be apprehended and presented "in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" (1955: 1) and, in the end, the accounts produced by the several narrative instances fit like the pieces of a puzzle, the mysteries of the past are cleared out and a happy future opens before the protagonists at the end.

In opposition to such a smooth and straightforward rendering of events, *The Quincunx* offers a view which is far from the Victorian illusion of a complete world. The reader of Palliser's novel is forced to face, as John Huffam does at the diegetic level, the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge. As a child, John was already filled with a desire to belong, to have roots, to know of a time before he was born (*Q* 50). Throughout the novel, he listens to the stories of people who lived the events he is interested in and tries to put them together in order to produce, like the historian, a coherent account of the past. But he cannot; he proves to be unable to separate what is true from what is false, perhaps because all versions are equally true or equally false. Accordingly, the puppeteers' reconstruction of events is as truthful/fictional as John's or any of the other characters' accounts, and the historical data that the novel includes are as literary as those episodes related to other fictional works. In this sense, the novel can be seen as governed by Pentecost's assertion that "there is more truth in the silliest romance than in the most elevated history" (*Q* 363), a view with which Silverlight agrees and which has implications that link *The Quincunx* to contemporary novels like *Famous Last Words, Legs, Waterland, Shame, Hawksmoor, The Passion* and numberless other historiographic metafictions in which the intertexts of history and those of literature are invariably placed at the same—fictional—level.

We can conclude, then, that even if Palliser uses the techniques and conventions of Victorian fiction in general and of Dickens' novels in particular, he does so in order to express ideas and concerns which are not associated with those forms, thus introducing the critical distance required by parody. Palliser himself pointed out that he "wanted to let readers almost think that they were reading a Victorian novel, but then find internal reasons why it couldn't be" (in Onega 1993b: 281). The fact that the novel is crowded with intertextual echoes is, needless to say, relevant, but still more relevant is to

decide what attitude the text takes towards the prior literary corpus which it designates as its intertext. It is then that the reader must find the "internal reasons," as Palliser calls them, why *The Quincunx* cannot be a mere imitation of nineteenth-century literary tradition.

We have analyzed the defamiliarizing effects of parody in relation to the novel's narrative instances and the way in which they are characterized and combined in the text. What at first might be taken for an echo of the Victorian omniscient narrator turns out to be a parodic rewriting of such a convention, which ultimately presents reliability, truth and certainty as unattainable, a mere fiction in a world in which nothing, not even history, can be taken for granted. Thus, even if the book is a conscious homage to Dickens and to Victorian fiction in general, it is also, as the author himself has acknowledged, "a totally different way of seeing the world" (in Baldwin 1990: A30). Many other aspects of the novel support this remark, as is the case with the absence of a final closure, the moral ambiguity of the main character, the complex dialectics established not only between history and literature, but also between order and chaos, freedom and determinism, pattern and randomness, reality and fiction.... Thus, the openly fictional, inconclusive and plurivocal view of the world offered by *The Quincunx* should be interpreted, despite the novel's Victorian appearance, as a reflection of the ambivalent nature of the postmodernist ethos. If, as Patricia Waugh (1984: 67) has pointed out, literature has never been free and cannot be original, Palliser's novel constitutes a remarkable example of the complex dialectics by which the literature of the past can be turned into a wonderful vehicle to express the concerns of the present, forever replenishing, in this way, the apparently exhausted forms.❦

NOTES

2. She uses the phrase to describe "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5).

3. It is the first real map to show individual houses in London. It was done by a single man and it took fifteen years. The cartographer engraved and printed this map, which is on twenty two sheets, but then went bankrupt and died in poverty (Madrigal 1991: 3).

4. *The Quincunx* 508. Hereafter the abbreviation *Q* will be used in parenthetical references.

5. Hebel's approach argues for an understanding of allusions—to both literary and non-literary points of reference—as metonymic fragments of the (poststructuralist) *texte général*.

6. In this sense, it may be interesting to recall that Palliser's third novel, *Betrayals* (1994), is a parody of detective fiction and that, as the author has himself explained, he is at present "immersed in the next novel which will be a thriller whodunnit!" (Letter to Susana Onega, Sept. 3 1994). I am grateful to Susana Onega for letting me quote from an unpublished letter.

7. It brings to mind Trollope's *Palliser Novels*.

8. This combination of history and literature appears, then, at many levels within the novel. The reader should not miss the relevance of apparently innocent data, as is the case with John's comments on some of his favourite readings. These include, on the one hand, *The Arabian Tales* and some of the main titles of Gothic fiction, and, on the other hand, much more matter-of-fact accounts of reality like Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Goldsmith's *History of Greece and Rome*. These contrasts are finally synthesized in Sir Walter Scott's romances, "those works in which narrative and history are so adroitly blended and made to change places" (*Q* 49). Such a remark could perfectly be applied to *The Quincunx* itself and supports the metafictional fact that John is the co-author of the novel as well as its protagonist and autodiegetic narrator.

9. The quincunx is not only the title of the book, it is also an important element of the plot that keeps on appearing throughout the story (thus, for instance, different versions of the quincunx of roses constitute the coats of arms of the *five* branches of the Huffam family). Moreover, the quincunx is the pattern that governs the novel's formal structure. For a detailed explanation of the way in which the work's twenty five books (five times five) are arranged as well as of the symbolic dimension of the quincunx, see Onega 1993a.

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SUBJECT CLAUSES IN OLD ENGLISH:

DO THEY REALLY EXIST?*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent accounts of Old and Middle English syntax (e.g. Traugott 1992: 234; Fischer 1992: 312-3), the existence of complement clauses in subject function has been denied, basically on the grounds that, in these early periods, complement clauses failed to occur in sentence-initial position.[1] Accordingly, clauses which could on the basis of their Present-day English (PDE) counterparts be regarded as subjects have been provided with alternative analyses. In this paper, I will first raise my objections to the alternative analyses put forward in the literature. Secondly, I will show that there are indeed certain complement types in Old English (OE) which are best analysed as subjects. And, finally, I will argue that position is not a valid criterion for subjecthood in this early period. The examples which will be presented in the course of this discussion have been primarily drawn from a corpus of OE prose comprising ca. 100,000 words from King Alfred's *Cura Pastoralis* (*CP*) and Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* (*ÆLS*) (Méndez Naya 1995).[2] The *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. Diachronic and Dialectal* (Rissanen *et al.* 1991) has also been used as a source for additional material.