

“An Open Mind”, or, the Art of Killing in Jest: Postmodern Detection, Comic Parody and Rhizomatic Labyrinths in Charles Palliser’s *Betrays*

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Abstract

The present article deals with the most experimental of Charles Palliser’s novels to date: *Betrays* (1994). In the first part, I explain a typology of labyrinths and books, following Eco as well as Deleuze and Guattari, and I introduce *Betrays* as a labyrinthine novel that fits the features of the rhizome/the rhizomatic maze. Then, I focus on “An Open Mind” — the novel’s seventh chapter — in order to analyze its comic playfulness, its use of parody and its postmodern subversion of the detective formula. The analysis also considers the recurrence of certain themes, motifs and narrative strategies, in an attempt to throw light on *Betrays* as a whole by focusing on one of its sections and its connections with the overarching architecture of the narrative.

Keywords: *Palliser, experimentation, rhizome, parody, detective fiction*

Novels are a tool for making discoveries. At least, this is how Charles Palliser sees it: like Houdini, you face a challenge that you yourself have created; like Houdini, you have to go on taking risks and making things difficult to yourself.¹ In addition to his fascination with Victorian fiction, Palliser acknowledges having always been attracted by those twentieth-century writers who tried to innovate, to push forward the limits of the novel, writers like Conrad, Joyce, Faulkner, Vargas Llosa, Borges or Calvino.² Palliser’s fiction shares in this experimental thrust but, out of his five published novels, it is *Betrays* that best illustrates it.³ This is how a reviewer described it shortly after its publication in 1994:

¹ Charles Palliser, “Author’s Afterword,” in *The Quincunx: The Inheritance of John Huffam* (London: Viking, 1993), 1206.

² Gilles Menegaldo, “Entretien avec Charles Palliser,” *La Licorne* 44 (1998): 280.

³ Palliser’s first novel was *The Quincunx* (1989). It already showed his love of Dickens and nineteenth-century fiction in general, his relish in story-telling, his skill in pastiche and parody and his ability to devise intricate plots and formal structures. There followed *The Sensationist* (1991), a contemporary story of urban alienation that recalls modernist fiction and that is disturbing in its vividness and minimalism. After the publication of *Betrays* (1994), the author returned to the Victorian past in *The Unburied* (1999) — a multi-layered, ambitious intellectual mystery — just as he does in his most recent novel. *Rustication* (2013) is also a Victorian mystery, presented as a historical true-crime in the form of a 1863 diary kept by a young man who finds himself “rusticated” — expelled — from Cambridge for an offence whose details will be gradually revealed over the course of a puzzling and convoluted story, one of Palliser’s trademarks.

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.⁴

Betrayals is an exercise in ventriloquism, which Palliser's other novels can also be said to be, but here the ventriloquist changes voices from one section to the next. Despite the compartmentalized appearance of the novel, the chapters that make it up constitute an over-ambitious puzzle which the reader is challenged to solve — encouraged by the way in which events, characters, themes and motifs reappear in different guises throughout the work and connect its different sections — even if s/he may soon discover that everything in it is too convoluted and misleading to be clarified in the end.

The book opens with a conventional dedication and another, less conventional one, in which some characters are thanked for their unwitting help. These characters' names are written between inverted commas and half of them are the (fictional) authors of some of the novel's chapters. It is as if whoever was responsible for these lines had taken what these (and other) characters have written and put it together in what we are about to read. Even more puzzlingly, the second dedication contains not only the names of fictional characters but also those of other people that are real acquaintances of Charles Palliser. From its first pages, then, the work plays with the separation between inside and outside, fictional and extra-fictional worlds.

The novel is made up of ten chapters, followed by an "Appendix" and an "Index of Names" that seems to proffer help but turns out to be as misleading as the rest of the narrative. Building on established features of fictional and non-fictional genres alike, the first chapter is an obituary and the last one a newspaper review of a recently published novel. In between, there are, among other things, a series of travellers' tales involving unsolved murders and hidden secrets; an editor's review of a hospital romance; a young academic's defence of a world-famous philosopher, psychoanalyst and literary critic; a Moorish tale in the tradition of *The Arabian Nights*; the diary of a prudish bookshop assistant who becomes a serial killer and which includes, in turn, scattered summaries of two television series, a soap and a cop show; a number of letters from only one correspondent; the briefing paper of a best-selling novelist charged with murder; etc. Moreover, the distorting effects of parody, which add to the general confusion, affect the style of most chapters and also underpin the portraits of several characters, not least in caricatures of well-known (fictional and non-fictional) figures like Jack the Ripper, Sherlock Holmes, Paul de Man, Allan Massie and Jeffrey Archer, among others.

Reading this complex novel amounts to weaving an intra- and inter-textual net that links characters, stories, works, genres, and worlds. Each chapter is full of echoes that send the reader back to previous, already-read passages, while simultaneously pulling him/her into a whirl of embedded stories that follow, transform and subvert different sets of generic conventions. While all these features contribute to the

⁴ Ruth Pavey, "Pivk 'n Mix 'n Match: *Betrayals* by Charles Palliser," *The Observer* (March 27, 1994): 17.

labyrinthine quality of the novel, the reader's fortune in front of this labyrinth of paper and ink is far from that of the classical labyrinth-walker: Theseus, the hero that entered the maze, killed the beast-man, and re-emerged physically and morally triumphant. Just as happens with the quincunxial design in Palliser's first work, the maze of *Betrayals* gradually unfolds as the novel advances but can never be entirely unravelled in/by the reading process.

Betrayals: The Labyrinth and the Novel

According to Umberto Eco, there exist three kinds of labyrinth.⁵ First, there is the classical one, that of Knossos. It needs a Minotaur to make it dangerous, since this labyrinth is "one-way [*unicursale*]: as soon as one enters it, one cannot but reach the center (and from the center one cannot but find one's way out)."⁶ It is in the second type of labyrinth — the mannerist maze or *Irrweg* — where you can easily get lost. If one could unravel this labyrinth, the result would not be a thread, as is the case with the first type, but a tree with many branches representing a system of binary options in which only one ramification leads to the exit. Though more complicated than the first, this second labyrinth is not radically different from it. It may be harder to find the right way out, but there *is* a way out.

By contrast, the third type of labyrinth is a net which has neither exterior nor interior. Every path can be connected with every other one and all options are equally right or equally wrong. This labyrinth is infinite, either literally so or in the sense that it can be endlessly expanded by adding more and more corridors. They increase in this way the number of possible connections, while simultaneously altering the ones that have been made so far. The structure of this maze can then change beyond limit with the peculiarity that each change, each new path, demands from the walker to alter his/her view of a particular zone as well as the hypothetical image that supposedly represents the global structure of the net (without ever managing to do so, actually). Eco relates this third type of labyrinth to Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome".⁷ The term as such comes from botany, where it refers to a kind of root. Yet Deleuze and Guattari use it in a similarly titled study as part of a tripartite classification of neither plants nor labyrinths, but books, as explained below.⁸

The classification begins with the "root-book", which is the most direct expression of a binary logic: the book imitates the world just as art imitates nature. Here the law of the book is the law of reflection or repetition according to which the One derives into two, as in Chomsky's syntagmatic tree. In order to reach the double, one

⁵ Umberto Eco, "Antiporphyry," in *Weak Thought*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (New York: SUNY Press), 95-98.

⁶ Eco, "Antiporphyry," 96.

⁷ Eco, "Antiporphyry," 97.

⁸ The concept of rhizome is not restricted to books, though. On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari approach it from different perspectives throughout their work. Rhizomes evoke a kind of open system that opposes totalizing models, based, by contrast, on binary logic and fixed, hierarchical structures. The latter can be found everywhere, from biology to linguistics, to culture as a whole. All those areas are then susceptible to become rhizomatic, and the same goes for literature.

needs to presuppose a strong principal unity, a pivot that supports all the secondary roots.⁹

The second figure of the book is that of the “fascicular root” or “radicle system”: the main root has given way to a multiplicity of little roots (radicles), but “the root’s unity subsists as past or yet to come, as possible.”¹⁰ Though the world has become chaotic, the book is still an image, a reflection of the world. Moreover, the most fragmentary book can still invite the reader to believe that there is unity at a higher level, that there exists, after all, a superior dimension where everything coheres. Unity is thus a supplement to the multiple, as the recourse to myth and epiphanic experiences suggests in many modernist works.

Just as the second type of labyrinth in Eco’s scheme is a complication but not a subversion of the first, the second type of book in Deleuze and Guattari’s typology does not do away with the dualism on which the root-book is based. The defining feature of both kinds of books is their arborescent structure, their inextricable link with the tree as a symbol (in the context of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory) of hierarchical organization and linear thinking.

In the light of all this, *Betrayals* can be seen to have most of the characteristics of the rhizome, as explained at length by Deleuze and Guattari¹¹ and summarized by Eco¹² as the third category of their tripartite classification. As in the rhizome, there is heterogeneity among the book’s different sections but also interrelatedness to the extent that any point can be connected with almost any other in the novel. These connections constantly redefine the relationship between the different chapters and, by extension, the novel as a whole. It is practically impossible to codify this whole, to fix it, and, as is the case with the rhizome, it can only be consistent as a series of multiplicities more predisposed to contradiction than coherence. One can enter it at any point, interrupt it at any point, and reconstruct it from there. The way in which connections proliferate and closure is deliberately ruled out makes the reader feel that the novel, like the rhizome, could be endlessly expanded by adding more chapters or more stories within each chapter. Though it is possible to try and delineate a map of the novel, this map does not reproduce any model, it is open, changeable, crisscrossed by infinite lines. As in the rhizome, this openness refers to the way in which *Betrayals* questions the separability of an inside and an outside and also to the dynamics of the work as such. The logic of *Betrayals*, like that of the rhizome, is the logic of a net whose fabric is the conjunction “and”. This “and” links contradictory elements or explanations, thus leaving many of the novel’s questions open. Just as in the rhizome the hierarchical organization of the tree is overcome by a series of interrelated *plateaux* to the point that there seems to be no clear beginning, end, or sense of direction, so each of the novel’s chapters is a *plateau* connected with the others to form a whole that never lets the reader see where s/he is going, a whole that might have begun and ended differently.¹³

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” 5.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” 7-25.

¹² Eco, “Antiporphyry,” 97.

¹³ *Plateau* is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as “any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (“Introduction: Rhizome”, 2). It is precisely these connections that force us to approach a *plateau* — part of a rhizome or section of

Though Deleuze and Guattari's study seems to be aimed at distinguishing rhizomatic structures from root-tree structures, they significantly conclude their analysis by explaining how these two models do not exclude one another. Thus, they construct a binary and end up by deconstructing the opposition, just as they do, for example, with the pair psychoanalysis-schizoanalysis in *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972). They subvert binary logic by employing binary constructions, even though such dualisms are precisely what they try to escape. Accordingly, the binary tree-rhizome is pushed to its ultimate limit, where the opposition is finally done away with. In this sense, the reader is informed that a non-rhizomatic root can at some point adopt the form of a rhizome, and the same may happen with the branch of a tree. Conversely, a rhizome may contain sections that adopt a root or tree shape.¹⁴ The two structures may inhabit the same space, one seeking unity and coherence, a stable meaning, a model, an origin, a centre, and the other destroying them. It is because the two pairs of the binary do not exclude one another that the reader of Palliser's novel may still hope to find a way through it. As Peter Brooks puts it, in more experimental novels the reader has to abandon certain expectations of coherence and meaning which these texts refuse to fulfil, but there is a meaning that can stand on fragments and, above all, there is always the enigma and the exploration of the conditions of narrative meaning.¹⁵

With these ideas in mind, I will approach, in what follows, one of the novel's sections in an attempt to illustrate through it the workings of a rhizomatic novel which would be hard to explain as a whole in the short length of a scholarly article. I have chosen Chapter 7, "An Open Mind", for several reasons, the first being that it is the clearest parody of the detective fiction genre, whose certainties are subverted throughout the novel. As Richard Dyer puts it, "[t]here are many stories in *Betrayals*, but they all come from within the same murderous matrix."¹⁶ Thus, it could be said that, among the literary conventions parodied and variously rewritten in *Betrayals*, it is those of detective fiction that play a central role.

Detective fiction reflects the belief in the ability of human reason to keep disorder, ambiguity and uncertainty at bay. By contrast, the twentieth century became more and more suspicious of these closing, convincing and reassuring detective possibilities. Detective fiction is still read nowadays but, as the destabilizing admission of mystery and non-solution came to play an increasingly central role in postmodernist literature, it seems to be no accident that, as William Spanos explains, the postmodern literary imagination discovered its "paradigmatic literary archetype [in] the anti-detective story (and its antipsychological analogue), the formal purpose of which is the impulse to "detect" (or to psychoanalyze) — to track down the secret cause — in order to violently frustrate this impulse by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis)."¹⁷ The experimentalism of *Betrayals* has much to do with the frustration of this impulse, which is but a mark of the postmodern ethos, taken to the limit in the

the novel — as a multiplicity: by being open, by generating "lines of flight" (9) that link it with other *plateaux*, the latter become part of it and ultimately turn it into many.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," 15.

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 315-16.

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, "Twisted Tales, Ingeniously Knotted," *Boston Globe*, April 11, 1995, 58.

¹⁷ William Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," in *Repetitions. The Postmodern Occasion in Literature and Culture* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 24-25.

novel as a whole and in Chapter 7 in particular.

Another reason for focusing on “An Open Mind” is that this chapter can be regarded as an inflection point in the novel. Even the remarks on the dust-jacket refer to Chapter 7 as the section in which “everything comes together”, which is perhaps too much to say if one interprets the foregoing assertion as actually meaning that all the pieces of the puzzle eventually fall into place. This does not seem to be the case, but it is true that “An Open Mind” abounds in (often clarifying) references to practically all the previous chapters and contains as well allusions to some of the issues dealt with in the following sections. Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality that characterizes the work as a whole is particularly highlighted here, and it is this, together with the numerous links with other episodes in the novel, that may account for the view that “everything comes together” in “An Open Mind”.

A Plateau in the Rhizome: “An Open Mind”

“An Open Mind” is a section of a diary written by a prudish bachelor, Sholto MacTweed, who works in a small Glasgow bookshop unaware that his boss, Jerry, sells pornography under the counter. Sholto’s monotonous life changes considerably when he meets Horatio Quaife. He has read and enjoyed Quaife’s *The Right Lines*, a novel based on the Killiecrankie Mystery, although he did not realise that the book provided a fictional rewriting rather than a historical account of the events already told in the second chapter of *Betrayals*.¹⁸ When Horatio walks into the bookshop one day an unlikely friendship is formed, which is reminiscent of other well-known partnerships in traditional detective tales. Sholto feels rather excited at the prospect of seeing Horatio again and enjoying the company of someone who not only writes books but also teaches philosophy at the University of Glasgow, and who is to him as awe-inspiring as Dupin is to the narrator of Poe’s tales. Sholto is surprised at Horatio’s behaviour sometimes: wearing a Holmes-like deer-stalker, going to the pub, drinking whisky in his armchair until he falls asleep, watching TV soaps and formulating strange theories, etc. However, he soon falls into his *bizarrieries* just as Poe’s narrator falls into Dupin’s. He goes to the pub with Horatio and, taking them for real-life stories, he also gets hooked on the two TV series Horatio is most fond of: *Gargunock Braes*, a Scottish soap set in a rural village, and *Biggert*, a Glaswegian cop show. He joins Horatio in his walks around Glasgow while they talk about famous murder cases or murder, in general.¹⁹ He carefully listens to Horatio’s complex theories and formulations, and, even if he does not understand (or misunderstands) them, he tries to reproduce Horatio’s thoughts in his diary.

In spite of the fact that the relationship between Horatio and Sholto is presented from the very beginning as a version of recognizable literary partnerships — Dupin and the narrator, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Hercules Poirot and Hastings, as well as

¹⁸ The Killiecrankie Mystery is a real unsolved murder in nineteenth-century Scotland. Sholto claims to have a blood relation to one of the people involved in the case. This and his fascination with true crime stories lead him to a book entitled *Scotch Mysteries*, published in 1938. It contains an account of the events on the night of the Killiecrankie murder, which Sholto describes in a way that helps the reader identify the said account with Chapter 2 of *Betrayals*.

¹⁹ Sholto and Horatio’s conversations embark the reader on a “murder tour” of sorts, which includes not only Jack the Ripper, but also Bible John, Madeleine Smith, Burke and Hare, John Reginald Christie, the Wallace case and the Croydon poisonings, among others.

others beyond the field of detective fiction, like Don Quixote and Sancho, Hamlet and Horatio, Mr Pickwick and Sam Weller, etc. — the rationale governing this parallelism will turn out to be the same as the one that emerges from the relationship between a Paris library and a trashy bookshop selling pornography in contemporary Glasgow. Where Poe's characters first set eyes on each other in a Paris library while searching for the same book, Horatio and Sholto meet in a disreputable bookshop. In the case of Dupin and the narrator, books function as a powerful emblem of human knowledge and intellect, which is what the detective stands for. In fact, the classical sleuth is typically above things like love, sex and any other concern that is not directly related to his extraordinary mental faculties. By contrast, Horatio entering Jerry's bookshop may suggest certain interests on the character's part which are not what one would call "intellectual". Horatio and Sholto's meeting place is thus the first mark of the parody at work all through the chapter. This being so, it does not come as a surprise that Horatio should turn out to be anything but an intellectual genius. Much in the same way, Sholto fails to fit the role of the ordinary, naive but utterly inoffensive man, faithful friend and eternal admirer of his witty companion. And so, Sholto becomes a murderer himself, while Horatio ends up as one of his victims.

If duality is a key element in all detective stories — detective/admiring satellite, detective/criminal, murderer/victim, story of the crime/story of the investigation²⁰ — this duality actually begins with the detective figure itself, as Poe suggests when he has the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) refer to "the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul" and "the fancy of a double Dupin — the creative and the resolvent."²¹ The "creative" Dupin thinks so intensely of the crime-puzzle to be solved as to obliterate his usual personality. He "empties" himself to be able to receive and reconstruct the origins of the mystery, setting aside his own psyche and allowing in something outside himself: the nature of the criminal. This is the first, "creative" stage in the process of detection, which is then followed by the "resolvent" phase, where Dupin connects and pieces together all the apparently disparate clues.

There is something of this duality about the character of Horatio Quaife as well. He writes novels and is also a philosopher. In fact, at the time of the story in Chapter 7, he is writing a sequel to *The Right Lines* and another book about murder-matrixes (which Sholto transcribes as "murder-mattresses" in his diary) based on his conviction that a murder investigation is an exercise in logic. He has even devised a points system to test murderers' skill. Thus, just as Poe himself participated in his own philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul by writing "The Raven" (1845) and then explaining/rationalizing his creative process in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), so does Horatio write whodunits and then explains the genre in what will be a monograph entitled *The Detective Novel as Philosophy*.

All this seems to suggest that Horatio would be the ideal person to solve a crime but, as is shown by the events he gets involved in, he is far from being so. Like Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), "An Open Mind" tells, among other things, the story of a

²⁰ The plot of the classical detective tale/novel comprises these two basically separate stories. The first story (the crime) happened in the past and is hidden; the second story (the investigation) happens in the present and tells about the process by which the detective reconstructs the first story. For more on this, see Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 42-52.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway (London: Penguin, 1988), 194.

detective writer who plays the detective only to prove that the relief and the comfort provided by the stories he writes is a kind of utopia, an untenable ideal of triumphing rationality. This is the message conveyed by many postmodernist rewritings of the classical detective tale in something which has been called the “anti-detective story” or, alternatively, the “metaphysical detective story”.²² The disorienting, unsolved/unsolvable mystery can be considered to be, according to Spanos, the literary paradigm of a postmodern, decentred world in which the *Logos* has become *logoi*. Anti-detective fiction is thus the postmodern genre *par excellence* in that it reflects better than any other genre what postmodernity no longer has: a solid, monolithic certainty that experience, either historical or personal, can be approached as a version of the Aristotelian well-made plot, a plot that is always intelligible on account of its being grounded in an utterly comforting cause-effect logic.²³

Some anti-detective stories adopt a serious tone to carry out the project that Spanos relates to the anti-detective genre, as is the case with the one mentioned above by Paul Auster. But what works like *City of Glass* (and *The New York Trilogy* as a whole) parody with a shiver, others do with a laugh, as happens in *Betrays*. As Flieger explains in her study on the use of the comic by late twentieth-century writers, the comic mode can be approached as “the means by which a certain “post” text elicits and effects its own transgression, speaking with a comic chatter that imposes silence on [a final] meaning.”²⁴ Flieger relates the psychoanalytic concept of the comic as symptom and the postmodern concept of the text as an effect of desire. Just as desire transforms the jokework/dreamwork into a kind of textplay that embraces the uncertainties of discourse, so do postmodernist texts self-consciously highlight the gap that haunts language, a gap in the sense of the Lacanian *béance*,²⁵ a “yawning hole” between human need, which may be fulfilled, and human desire, to and for which we speak/write without any hope for final fulfilment. In this light, the postmodern comic mode comes close to what Maurice Blanchot refers to as the “absent/unworked” work, which could be seen as characteristic of the postmodern era. By contrast with the traditional masterwork, which takes itself and its accomplishments very seriously, the absent/unworked work produces pleasure from the exposure of its own shortcomings. It wilfully relies on a playful double-talk which Blanchot variously refers to as plural/literary/fragmentary speech and which, rather than seeking to hide its duplicity, exploits it to wreak its dispersive/disseminating effect.²⁶ The language of understanding and reason must hide or patch up its faults, its slips and derogations, if it is to work and

²² The former term is used by William Spanos, Dennis Porter, and Stefano Tani, while the latter is the one preferred by William Holquist, and Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. See full entries in the References section.

²³ Spanos, “The Detective and the Boundary,” 14-15, 24-25.

²⁴ Jerry Aline Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line. Freud’s Comic Theory and the Postmodern Text* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 52.

²⁵ The French *béance* is an antiquated literary term that means “a large hole or opening” as well as a medical term to denote the opening of the larynx. Lacan uses it in several ways throughout his work: as a gap between man and nature which is evident in his discussion of the mirror stage (*Le Séminaire. Livre II*), as a hole that remains open in the relation between the sexes (*Le Séminaire. Livre IV*), as the fracture between self and Other and the essential division that marks the constitution of the subject (*Le Séminaire. Livre XI*), etc. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 72-73.

²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *L’entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), *passim*.

be taken seriously; literary or plural language must *play* to work, and it does so by resorting to a kind of "sic" humour which keeps the dead end of *le mot juste* at bay.²⁷

It is this "sic" humour which governs much of Chapter 7 and of the novel as whole, and it does so at different levels and in a variety of ways. Most obviously, *le mot juste* is literally replaced in "An Open Mind" by some misspelling or other, aposiopesis and grammatically incorrect structures.²⁸ All this contributes to delineating the character of Sholto MacTweed as a caricature and comic exaggeration of the familiar Watson-type ignorance and naivety, but the fact that he is so dull and, at best, semi-literate, also works to highlight the comic potential implicit in misunderstanding and misconception. Sholto's mistakes go from writing the wrong word to killing the wrong person, but all his "errors" amount to barely the same thing: it is because Sholto's clumsiness has made us smile/laugh all throughout that not only his more innocent mistakes and misunderstandings but also his murders are eventually absorbed in the spiral of the comic. Murder turns out to be murder in jest here. His inability to write "*le mot juste*" becomes one with his incompetence to kill "*la personne juste*", as it were. Both kinds of failure are but forms of an impossible coincidence that is foregrounded and exploited to produce a pleasure, the pleasure of the comic, which is nonetheless based on the infeasibility of a comforting fusion: of a word with its referent, of signifier and signified, of the subject with the object of desire, of a murderer with the perfect crime.

As Horatio puts it, the perfect murder is the signifier ("Sidney Fire", in Sholto's words) of desire for everyone involved, something always aimed at and always in a flight.²⁹ To him, a perfect crime must meet some requisites which make it appear as something closer to a work of art, consequently turning the murderer into an artist. One of the requisites in Horatio's points system is that the murderer must disguise his/her crime so that "nobody notices or realises is a murder." (B 140) But a murderer who seeks perfection and regards what s/he does as art always wants recognition, acclaim, praise. To see the "perfection" of a murder one must see it as a murder first, but to be aware of a murder *qua* murder prevents it from being perfect. It is in this sense that the perfect murder is connected with Lacanian desire in that it is like a hope that is never given up despite the fact that it is impossible to fulfil.

These remarks on murder and perfection follow the lead of what Horatio and Sholto talk about whenever they meet. Their conversations bring to mind Thomas De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827), which also provides a context for the events in which they get involved:

He [Horatio] was going on and on about something he claimed I'd said — or he'd thought I'd said — the other day. Seems he had misunderstood my use of the word "artist" the first time I said it and that had given him a "brilliant" idea. [...] It was something about Jack [the Ripper] as the culmination of the great romantic artist, but a frustrated artist. Art for art's sake. [...] And then Jack as the counterpart of Oscar Wilde. He had no motive except to commit an elegant murder. (B 129)

²⁷ Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line*, 167.

²⁸ Aposiopesis refers to the activity of communicating by silence, implying some content by banishing or deferring it. What Tristram Shandy does in Sterne's novel by means of a wide range of typographical tricks comes very close to Sholto's writing dynamics in his diary.

²⁹ Charles Palliser, *Betrayals* (London: Cape, 1994), 111. Hereafter quotations from *Betrayals* will be identified as B, followed by page number, in the body of the text.

What Sholto had tried to suggest is that Jack the Ripper was probably an artist, a painter, but Horatio misunderstands him and interprets the word “artist” in a broader sense. Everything is simpler to Sholto, but Horatio is a thinker, a philosopher and, for that matter, a poststructuralist, a follower of Henri Galvanauskas (the protagonist of Chapter 4, “The Medicine Man”, and whose theories are further discussed in the “Appendix” as part of the novel’s invective on poststructuralism, to which the characterization of Horatio Quaife also contributes).³⁰ It is this clash between the darkly intellectual and the crazily down-to-earth that provides a constant source of laughter, all the more so when the rationale of the Holmes-Watson partnership is turned on its head. Events are presented in a way that corroborates the doctor’s opinion in Chapter 6 that lucky murderers, however stupid, succeed in carrying it off, while unlucky ones, however brilliant, do not (B 86).

When trying to solve the series of crimes that precede his own death, Horatio fails to accomplish that emptying of himself to let the nature of the murderer in, related above to the Dupin-like detective’s creative side. The kind of murderer that Horatio figures out coincides not so much with the actual murderer but with *his* idea of what a murder should be like: logical and artistic. Horatio is logical enough to conclude in distress that everything points to him as the most likely suspect, but his resolute powers are utterly worthless if he fails, as he actually does, in the previous, creative phase. When he is personally involved, he forgets something that he had noticed about other crimes: that it is not only the criminal’s wit but also his/her “unpredictable stupidity” that can be the key to his/her success (B 149). Sholto MacTweed is an accidental serial killer, a mock-murderer. This being so, he unconsciously introduces an element of randomness that condemns to failure and/or equivocation all attempts to explain rationally the enigma posed by a series of murders which follow no pattern, no logic, and which are the result of the murderer’s clumsiness rather than of his clever mind and/or perverse soul.

When writing his story of the crime, that is, when murdering his victims, Sholto imitates rather than creates his own method, which is just in tune with the novel’s context: is not a copycat killer much more “postmodern” than one that tries to be original and exploit his creative powers to the full? If serial killers are like viruses in that there always appear new mutations of previous murderers, Sholto can then be approached as a “mutation” of Jack the Ripper, whom he considers as the serial killer *par excellence*.

Given their imitative nature, the murders of copycat killers have a dialogical character. In literary terms, what these killers do amounts to that kind of pastiche which Roger Fowler defines as serious, respectful, seeking to recreate the manner of an admired writer in a way that “tends to eliminate tensions, to produce a more highly polished effect, picking out and reiterating favourite stylistic mannerisms and welding them into a new whole.” There is, says Fowler, another kind of pastiche that is “not reverential and appreciative, but disrespectful and sometimes deflationary.”³¹ There is

³⁰ For more on Galvanauskas in terms of the novel’s parodic representation of poststructuralism and its leading theorists, see María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro, “A Most (Un-)Ethical Stance: Reading Satire in Charles Palliser’s “The Medicine Man,”” in *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English*, eds. Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 86-103.

³¹ Roger Fowler, ed., *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 138-39.

no doubt that Sholto conceives his “work” more in the line of the former use of pastiche, but it cannot be denied either that the result comes closer to the latter. He is not a second Ripper but rather a caricature of the original and, as such, his crimes are funny rather than hair-raising, grotesque rather than sublime.

During the time of the Ripper murders, both the police and the press were bombarded with letters from people claiming to be the killer. Most of them were hoaxes but it is possible that at least a few were actually written by the Ripper. This is the one known as the “Dear Boss” letter:

Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they wont fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. [...] I am down on whores and shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. [...] The next job I shall clip the ladys ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly wouldn't you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work, then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good luck.

Yours truly

Jack the Ripper

Dont mind me giving the trade name

PS Wasnt good enough to post it before I got all the red ink off my hands curse it No luck yet. They say I'm a doctor now. ha ha³²

Rather ominously, Horatio seems to have been inspired by this letter in selecting the titles to his two novels. What in the letter appears as “the right track” becomes Horatio’s *The Right Lines* (his novel on the Killiecrankie Mystery, and “The Wrong Tracks” is the title of Chapter 2, on the same murder case). If the Ripper declares himself to be “down on whores”, *Down on Whores* is Horatio’s second novel, which is published posthumously. The Ripper says in the letter that he will “clip the ladys ears off”, “the lady” being his next victim. Significantly, there is a lot about cut ears in Chapter 5, “The Trap”, but this is also the wound that Sholto inflicts on Graham Speculand in Chapter 7, as he mistakes him for his intended victim.³³

One of Horatio’s theories is that “murder is itself a form of confession”: a murderer always wants to be caught (*B* 125). This is not only Horatio’s view, actually. A murderer always leaves traces which ultimately function like a Freudian slip. Thus, Sholto also leaves his signature on the site of the crime but, given the comic tone of the whole episode, it is little wonder that this signature should be a shoddy plastic scorpion. He gets them from the BrannyBrekkers, the cereals he has for breakfast, the shopkeeper letting him look into the packet so as to make sure he gets the animal he wants. His

³² “Ripper Letters,” Casebook: Jack the Ripper, accessed February 16, 2014, http://www.casebook.org/ripper_letters/

³³ Graham Speculand, a professor of English literature at the University of Glasgow, is the author of Chapter 4 as well as of the novel’s “Appendix”, which are part of his work on Galvanauskas’ philosophy. His name evokes both speculation (from the Latin *speculatio*) and mirrors (*speculum* in Latin). Incidentally, mirror reflections are a key element in the novel as a whole and in Chapter 5 in particular. It narrates the story of a Sultan whose palace is built around a courtyard containing pools of crystalline waters where he sees what would otherwise be out of his sight. This story is in turn connected with that analyzed by Galvanauskas in the essay that Speculand summarizes in the novel’s “Appendix”.

killings are thus carried out with the same playfulness with which one may collect plastic animals launched by a branch of breakfast cereals. Yet it is through the signature of this “cereal killer” that the scorpion, ubiquitous in the novel, makes its appearance once again, thus linking Sholto’s deeds with other episodes in other chapters, and in this same chapter, as well.

The Ripper was believed by some Ripperologists to have struck from behind, scorpion-like, when his victims (prostitutes) were bent forwards, awaiting to engage in anal sex. This is also the method of all the Ripper figures in *Betrayals*. In addition to the surgeon in Lavinia Armitage’s novelette (reviewed in Chapter 3), the Major in Quaiife’s *The Right Lines* also kills Mrs Armytage from behind, apparently inspired by Jack the Ripper. Moreover, one of the few things that can be made out of the complicated plot of *Biggert*, embedded in “An Open Mind”, is that the cop show features a serial killer whose murders are being investigated by the series eponymous character — Detective Inspector Biggert — as well as by the Glasgow police. They nickname the murderer “the Scorpion Killer” — apparently because he “stings from behind.” (B 125) There is another serial killer, at a different diegetic level, in the play within the series — *The Importance of Being Jack* — who also murders his victims in the same way.

To Sholto, there is little doubt that killing from behind was the real Ripper’s *modus operandi*, which accounts for the fact that he managed to kill his victims without getting covered in blood. Sholto concludes, then, that “the Scorpion Killer” in *Biggert* proves his theories on the Ripper, while simultaneously pairing a Scottish killer with the (supposedly) English murderer he so much admires. It is when he discovers that *Biggert* is all made up that he decides to turn into a “Scorpion Killer” himself and, of course, he adopts the same technique for his killings.³⁴

Killing from behind, which links this murder method with the novel’s motifs of betrayal and the scorpion, can be said to participate in a by now familiar kind of mirror game, according to which more and more versions of a character, an event, a story, etc., appear in the same or in different chapters and at the same or at different diegetic levels. But what is the case on other occasions when such a mirror-like dynamics is at work also holds good for these “scorpion killings”, in the sense that they ultimately duplicate an elusive and ever slippery original. In fact, there are strong arguments against this being the Ripper’s real *modus operandi*, since the murderer is now believed to have stood facing his victims.³⁵ Accordingly, Sholto’s method is far from being a faithful replica of the Ripper’s and emerges rather as one more misconception which has to be added to a long list of mistakes that ultimately deflate Sholto and make him a laughable murderer.

The police are helpless when faced with the Scorpion’s murders, just as they were in the Ripper’s case and still are in most detective stories, where a recurrent motif is the incompetence of the police as opposed to the creative and resolute wit of the Great Detective. This being so, it is just apposite that the subversion of the formula should be grounded, quite often, in the failure of the detective to clear out the mystery. Even when he succeeds in doing so, the rational process leading to the solution is eventually proved wrong, mistaken, as it is chance rather than reason/logic that accounts for the discovery

³⁴ The plastic replica of a scorpion, with which Sholto signs his crimes, is also reproduced on the pages of his diary and, consequently, on the pages of *Betrayals*. This drawing replaces all explicit references to the killings and appears every time Sholto commits a murder (or tries to).

³⁵ “Introduction to the Case,” Casebook: Jack the Ripper, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://www.casebook.org/intro.html>.

of the murderer’s identity (as happens, for instance, in Umberto Eco’s [“Echo”, to Sholto] *The Name of the Rose*). The Dupin or Holmes figure in “An Open Mind” is Horatio, whose failure is inextricably linked with the success of the second “story” written by MacTweed, the first being the murders themselves.

Sholto writes a first story — his crimes — and, like all murderers, he then rewrites that story in order to make his murders pass for something other than they are. The two stories — the real story of the crime and the misleading plot to frame Horatio — are written (in a literal sense, now) in Sholto’s diary. Thus, the fact that the reader knows all that is to be known about the murderer in Chapter 7 contributes to lessening Horatio’s figure in his/her eyes. Clumsy as Sholto is as a serial killer, Horatio’s failure as a detective is even more conspicuous: he not only fails to detect the criminal and solve the mystery, but also collaborates with Sholto in the latter’s plan to incriminate him. He does so unconsciously, of course, but he gives MacTweed all he needs to carry out his murders and then construct a phoney version of the events. Much in the same way as Lönnrot, the detective protagonist in Borges’s “Death and the Compass”, constructs a pattern to the murderer’s killings and places himself at the very spot where Scharlach has planned to kill him, it is no other than Horatio who provides Sholto with all the following:

- A challenge, put forward by Horatio’s points system, which will be Sholto’s referent when it comes to determining the quality of his “work”.
- Food for thought on the Ripper’s method, imitated by the character of the Major in Horatio’s novel and also discussed at length by him during his meetings with Sholto.
- Victims: Horatio’s enemies at the University of Glasgow, and eventually Horatio himself.
- Clues that mislead those responsible for solving the case: Horatio’s deer-stalker, which he drops on one of the murder sites; the note that is taken for a suicide note, where Horatio supposedly confesses to the crimes, and which is, after all, a note that he had previously sent to Sholto for completely different reasons; the manuscript of his second novel, which Sholto gets when Horatio leaves him alone in his flat and which he uses in his plan to frame the latter.
- And, finally, a scapegoat, the guilty party that the authorities, the press and the inhabitants of Glasgow need.

As is the case with so many other pairs throughout the novel, the weaker partner manages to turn the tables on his opponent in such a way that the relationship between victimizer and victim, betrayer and betrayed, proves to be unfixed. Whatever the reader’s reaction to Horatio’s fate may be, s/he should not fail to take into account the fact that Horatio’s friendship with Sholto was never disinterested. Horatio may be seen as betrayed by his friend, but that outcome should not make us forget that Horatio had not played fair with him in the first place, that is to say, that he had betrayed before being betrayed. Only in that way does the dynamics of betrayal as dealt with in other chapters of the novel make sense also when it comes to the relationship between Horatio and Sholto.

To the philosophy don, Sholto is a rare specimen whose oddities he finds “inspiring”. Horatio considers his theories ridiculous, but he needs ideas for a new novel and Sholto provides him with them. From what we know about Horatio’s first novel, it is clear that his (fictional) works are based on other (non-fictional) stories, which he has read or which he has got involved with in a more direct way. When Sholto finds out, his opinion of Horatio changes drastically: he is not a wonderful researcher

that has uncovered new material on the Killiecrankie case, but a fraud, a plagiarizer from reality. One first laughs at what makes Sholto reach this conclusion: his gullibility, his being time and again taken in by fictional accounts (be it books or TV serials) which he thinks to be real, thus misinterpreting them in hilarious ways. Then, one also sees the irony of it all because if Horatio plagiarizes from reality, what does Sholto do when he imitates (what he is convinced to be) the Ripper's method? If we applied to him his own standards of judgment, we would have to conclude that he is nothing but a plagiarist of the Ripper's "work". To begin with, this would perfectly fit within the chapter's overall approach to crime and murder, more aesthetic than moral, more playful than serious and, all in all, most in line with De Quincey's views. Beyond that, and however farfetched Sholto's comments on Horatio's work may be, there is also a thought-provoking side to the idea that reality can be "plagiarized" in fiction.

In our poststructuralist times, it is impossible to ignore reality's discursive nature: there is no reality outside discourse, the world is a text. If texts can be plagiarized and reality is a text, then reality can also be plagiarized. Or not? Though Sholto's idea is not unthinkable in a context in which the real (history, the subject, etc.) is so often spoken/written about as if it were a text (the "real"), Sholto's views stem from certain premises which clash rather than blend with poststructuralist theories. The notion of plagiarism is grounded in the idea that the work has an author, who, when plagiarized, is robbed of something s/he owns. Poststructuralism has decentred the author and welcomed the writer, who appears to have less solid claims on what s/he writes now that texts can be seen as simply borrowed from, rewritten, parodied, etc., in a universe in which intertextuality is sovereign. Unfortunately, things are not that clear-cut nor the theoretical distinction between author and writer so tenable when it comes to the practice and to legal and other wrangles over authorship and originating creativity. Thus, Sholto's views on plagiarism can be said to introduce, even if under the veil of an absurd argument, a subject that constitutes a controversial point in poststructuralist theory and that is the focus of the following chapters of *Betrayals*.

What Sholto finds really outrageous about Horatio's "plagiarism" is not so much related to a privileging of what is original over what is not, but rather to his conviction that the real is robbed of its reality when it is used in a fictional work. He would not have been so upset if Horatio had been inspired by someone else's fiction instead of using real facts to write his novels. His crime, to Sholto, is that he has mixed the fictional and the real, thus raising them, as sometimes happens in postmodernist novels, to the same — fictional — status. For this to be humorous it has to be even more exaggerated and distorted. Thus, Sholto definitely flies into a rage when he discovers that *he* appears in Horatio's novel *Down on Whores*. What this means is that he, also, is now deprived of reality, that Horatio has turned him into a fictional character, that, in a word, he has been "imagined out of existence" (B 186). He has to do something to show him that he is real, he has to take from Horatio what he has robbed him of, and so, he kills him after framing him for his own murders. In the end, murder becomes to Sholto an exciting enterprise which he begins for other reasons but to which he eventually resorts in order to experience himself as real. And yet, although Sholto succeeds in his killings, the "reality" he gets from them is only the mark of a temporary triumph. I have been using literary terms to refer to Sholto's deeds — his crimes are the *story* he *writes*, and which he then *rewrites* to frame Horatio; he conceives this story as a (respectful) *pastiche* of the Ripper's murders, though it is rather a *comic parody*, or, according to his own standards, he can even be said to *plagiarize* the latter's method; killing becomes a

way of *writing* himself into existence, after Horatio has written him out of it; etc. But there is still something else in Sholto’s above-mentioned temporary triumph that makes his adventure reminiscent of a literary enterprise. If desire is the driving force in all language, and desire is constantly deferred, literature does at least manage to make of this deferral an occasion for aesthetic creation. This is, like Sholto’s, a temporary triumph, since it is achieved at the cost of abandoning all pretence to closure, all illusion of finality. Similarly, if Sholto kills to feel real again, reality is not what he eventually gets. However real he may feel after killing the man that has written him out of existence, the reader knows that the space in which Sholto has written about his “victory” is the mark of his defeat: his diary appears, after all, in a fictional work and, as the novel’s acknowledgements make clear — where the names of fictional characters are written between inverted commas — he is “Sholto MacTweed”, no longer real but, at most, “real”.

To sum up, Sholto lifts his *modus operandi* from the Ripper, Horatio lifts him from reality, and he lifts his reality (back) from Horatio, then his diary is lifted from him and included in a novel, and the reader laughs, perhaps because much in this apparently never-ending process comes close to Freud’s view of joking as the circulation of an always purloined punch line, lifted from another human subject, and told to be lifted and repeated again. This is, as pointed out earlier, where Flieger sees a connection between the strategy of the comic and postmodernist literature, which often seems “to require the comic mode for its “faltering”, “plural”, and reiterated expression.”³⁶ Thus, many postmodernist texts, especially those of a more experimental nature, exploit the distance between the words on the page and the designated world to generate multiple meanings, to play with repetition and excess in such a way that the literary text, like the joke, becomes “a prolonged game of volley that postpones the final gratification (the scoring of the “point”) that would halt the *jeu de plaisir* (Lyotard’s term)” in a process whose outcome is “a bizarrely unsatisfying text, [which] yet [fulfils] a quotient of desire by the game of unworking itself, *le plaisir du jeu*.”³⁷ As is the case with the addressee of a joke or pun, what may prevent the reader from enjoying a text of this kind is his/her inability to approach it with “an open mind”, looking for seriousness and closure where there is none.

There is no quiescence either in “An Open Mind” or in the novel, no comforting conclusion, only the challenge of the lines of flight that connect this chapter, this *plateau* of the rhizome, with the other chapters, the other *plateaux* of the labyrinth-book. It is somewhat amazing to realize how many narratives can emerge from the re-working of the same motifs: the unexplained death, the venomous scorpion, the poisoned trap which is also a poisoned discourse against an enemy, the dynamics of revenge and retaliation, betrayal and self-betrayal, the instability of the roles played by the characters, now victims, now evil plotters, plagiarizers or plagiarized... Many of the chapters are connected with framing, in more than one sense. Characters may frame other characters for the wrong they themselves did, but their words reveal their secret while simultaneously hiding and distorting the truth. At the core of the novel, then, the reader discovers the tell-tale heart that beats in the words we utter and that proves language to be the greatest betrayer of all. And yet, despite the many ways in which the

³⁶ Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line*, 35.

³⁷ Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line*, 191-92.

reader is made to feel the treacherous and slippery nature of language, s/he ends up hooked on the intricate stories that make up this novel, where clever experimentation — sometimes, like its characters, too clever by half — combines with relish in storytelling and a whole gamut of ingredients that bring about reflection on how narrative works and how conventions evolve, but also on reading habits, genre expectations and assumptions about intelligibility. *Betrays* plunges you into an experience of the novel as labyrinth and also as experiment and game, engaging, maddening, playfully disturbing.³⁸

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³⁸ The research carried out for the writing of this article was financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2012-32719). The author is also thankful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (H05).

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“O minte deschisă”, sau, arta de a ucide în glumă: romanul polițist postmodern, parodia comică și labirinturile rizomatice în *Betrays* [Trădări] de Charles Palliser

Articolul se concentrează asupra celui mai experimental roman al lui Charles Palliser, scris până acum: *Betrays* [Trădări] (1994). În prima parte, se prezintă explicația tipologiei labirintului și a cărților prin demersurile critice ale lui Eco, precum și Deleuze și Guattari; *Betrays* constituie un roman labirintic care corespunde structurii alambicate a rizomului. În partea a doua, în prim-plan apare cel de-a șaptelea capitol, “O minte deschisă”, care este analizat din punctul de vedere al comicului de situație, al utilizării parodiei și al subminării postmoderne prin formula de roman polițist. Demersul critic ia în calcul și recurența anumitor teme, motive și strategii narative, în încercarea de a pune în lumină romanul *Betrays* ca întreg, prin detalierea uneia dintre secțiunile sale și a conexiunii acesteia cu arhitectura narativă care o înconjoară.