"Palinodes and Palindromes"

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An interesting phenomenon in contemporary fiction, or at least that strain of it variously called metafiction, surfiction, or postmodernism, and practised by, among others, John Barth, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon, is the proliferation of palinodes and palindromes, both literal and figurative. In *Letters*, for instance, Harold Bray writes that he longs to discover "History's palindrome."[1] In *Snow White*, Paul is said to be "writing a palinode." 'Perhaps it is wrong to have favorites among the forms,' he reflected, 'But retraction has a special allure for me. I would wish to retract everything, if I could, so that the whole written world would be . . ."[2] Certainly, retraction has a special allure for those writers who eschew linear, sequential narrative, what might be called teleological fiction; who reject the notion that language is a window onto the world; who are sensitive to the poststructuralist tenet enunciated by Michel Foucault in "The Discourse on Language" that discourse is not a neutral conduit between reality and its meaning.

Retraction, then, is a way of debunking the whole theory of representation: "We must get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of speech altogether."[3] The palinode and palindrome, in which one ends where one begins, are excellent media of retraction. In them nothing has been displaced; all has been erased, and this without disappearing. In the palinode one writes or says something, then one denies it; in the palindrome one traverses a series of letters only to turn around when one reaches the end of that series in order to return to the beginning. Thus, despite the expenditure of a great deal of energy, the utterance of a great many words, cancellation has occurred in both cases and meaning is deliberately nullified. What is operant here is, of course, antithetical to the notion of return T. S. Eliot articulates near the conclusion of *Four Quartets:*

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[4]

For Eliot circularity involves progression; it entails a quest that may carry the protagonist back to where he began, but that produces added acumen or insight. Retraction is not the allure. Nor is it the attraction for Jerry in Albee's *The Zoo Story* who utters, "Sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly."[5] Again in this case return to the beginning implies a new beginning (even if in Jerry's case that new beginning contributes to the

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[1] John Barth, *Letters* (New York: Putnam's, 1970), p. 328.

[2] Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 13.

[3] Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," *New Literary History* (1978), p. 151.

[4] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 222.

[5] Edward Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story* (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 30.

end of his life). The classical notion of communication, of writing as communication, is still pertinent to the two writers just cited.

Cancellation and retraction are more relevant to a work such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot;* about one incident in the play Beckett has said, "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine: 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape."[6] Indeed, much of *Waiting for Godot,* not merely the anecdotal way in which Vladimir and Estragon debate the merits of the Augustinian condundrum, appears to be structured figuratively as a palinode. There are, for example, Lucky's volubility then his muteness; the conclusion of Act I being recapitulated but reversed in Act II; the giving birth astride the grave at first lingeringly then instantaneously. Even in *Waiting for Godot* specifically and Beckett's work generally, however, the notion of cancellation or erasure is slightly divergent from the Derridean notion of erasure that makes the deployment of palinodes and palindromes so congenial to fiction writers who are in the Borgesian or Nabokovian, that is to say, the metafictive mold.

Beckett's tendency to retract meaning can be captured in the equation, language equals silence. Silence in all of Beckett's works assumes a seminal place, undermining and subsuming words, signalling their futility. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus,* Ihab Hassan aptly summarizes Beckett's engagement with language and silence as follows: "[Beckett] listens endlessly to a solipsist drone. Words appear . . . on the page only to declare themselves invalid. We have crossed some invisible line. Postmodernist literature moves . . . toward the vanishing point."[7] The subliminal desire to escape the prison house of language, to remove oneself from a language that has been overwhelmed by the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century is for Hassan the source not only of Beckett's art, but also of Genet's and Hemingway's.

The impulse to create palinodes or palindromes, though, derives from a greater sense of textuality, of "écriture," from, in other words, a more print-oriented engagement with the world than is acknowledged by those writers, Beckett included, whom Hassan defines as prefiguring postmodernism. For Derrida, "to be is to-be-in-the-book,"[8] to be enmeshed in the "necessary *exchange* of one's existence with or for the letter."[9] At his pithiest he writes, "In the beginning is hermeneutics."[10] Transcendence, mimesis, representation—all are, as varied acolytes of and commentators on Derrida such as Edward Said, J. Hillis Miller, and Richard Rorty have attested, specious and illusory. These concepts are also vitiated by the postmodernists who use palinodes and palindromes.

Just as punning and other forms of language play are staples of Derrida's technique (and are seminal to his antimetaphysical notion of what philosophy can do), so are similar displays of legerdemain central to postmodern fiction. For both poststructuralists and postmodernists, "the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be constituted and reconstituted through poetic inscription or deciphering."[11] Instead

[6] As quoted by Ruby Cohn in *A Casebook on Waiting for Godot,* ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

[7] Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1971), p. 23.

[8] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1978), p. 76.

[9] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* p. 70.

[10] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* p. 73.

[11] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* p. 76.

of referentiality or transparency, one is left with cryptograms, with language games. In the case of postmodern fiction, one is also left with the grin of Nabokov's cheshire cat which, Ross Wetzsteon writes in his memoir of Nabokov as teacher, the Russian emigre drew in his lectures to mock and subvert the thematic approach to literature. By subjecting various words to "erasure," Derrida seeks to rid them of their metaphysical significance; by constructing their fiction along the lines of palinodes and palindromes, postmodernists aspire to the same goals.

By positing two contradictory endings, John Fowles creates a palinodic structure in *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* Julio Cortazar constructs *Hopscotch* similarly—he provides a chapter grid in his Author's Note by which the reader can "hopscotch" through the novel (Chapter 73 to Chapter 1 to Chapter 2 and so forth) in defiance of the linear chapter sequence; in that way, Cortazar produces two novels both of which cancel one another. The Möbius strip which John Barth uses to frame *Lost in the Funhouse* has a palindromic quality, returning the reader to the beginning and thereby keeping him from progressing through the stories. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* can be read as a sustained palinode, erasure, as Bruce Morrissette and other explicators of the novel have written, being at work deconstructing both detective thriller and Oedipus myth. Robbe-Grillet uses much the same method in *In The Labyrinth:* he begins the novel with the sentences, "I am alone here now, under cover. Outside it is raining," only to write in the following sentence, "Outside the sun is shining."[12] In short stories such as "The Babysitter" and "The Elevator," Robert Coover projects then cancels numerous storylines, this device being the dominant element in those stories. A more convoluted use of a palinodic structure can be seen in Thomas Pynchon's fiction: in *The Crying of Lot 49,* Oedipa Maas is given the problem of solving the labyrinthine dealings of Pierce Inverarity, a name the lineage of which is inverse rarity. Also, Metzger, an early accomplice, and Oedipa watch on television a film, *Cashiered,* in which some of the reels are played in reverse order; in *Gravity's Rainbow* the novel, replete with rocket detonations and landings at the beginning, ends with the rocket launching that refers one back to the first sentence in which, "A screaming comes across the sky."[13]

Even Joseph Heller, regarded as far more traditional than most of the above-mentioned writers, employs methods I have defined as palinodic. In *Catch-22,* there is Yossarian's stint in the hospital in which he works as a censor, playfully blacking out or deleting words in the letters of others until whole pages are obliterated. In *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold,* though, Heller maintains the motif of cancellation thematically, while he begins to work it more deftly into the plot framework of these two novels which are much less episodic than *Catch-22.* Nothing tumultuous happens in *Something Happened* until the narrator, so steeled for something eventful to happen, *makes* it happen out of nothing. In *Good as Gold,* Heller uses the palinodic technique extensively. Meeting his stepmother for the first time the narrator, Bruce Gold, engages in the following dialogue with her:

> "And what," he said in his most courtly manner, "would you like us to call you?"
> "I would like you to treat me as my own children do," Gussie Gold replied with graciousness equal to his own. "I would like to think of you all as my very own children. Please call me Mother."
> "Very well, Mother," Gold agreed. "Welcome to the family."
> "I'm not your mother," she snapped.[14]

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[12] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels,* trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 141.

[13] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 3.

[14] Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 27.

Most of the conversations, especially those between Gold and Ralph Newsome, who is on the staff of the President, proceed with deliberate and consistent cancellation of meaning. After Gold tells Newsome that he cannot be bought, the latter responds, "We wouldn't want you if you could be, Bruce. . . . This President doesn't want yes-men. What we want are independent men of integrity who will agree with all our decisions after we make them. You'll be entirely on your own."[15] In addition, *Good as Gold* concludes with Gold speculating on where he could begin to write the book on Jewish life in America which has already been written and in which he has been featured.

Harold Bray wants to discover a world as highly structured as a palindrome, what might be called history's palindrome; in seeking the key to the whole cryptogram, he searches for the master plan to the whole prison house of language. As long as such epical keys are regarded as elusive, if not nonexistent, postmodernist fiction makers cultivate aesthetic pleasure by creating cryptogrammic forms such as palinodes and palindromes which allow them to write both something and nothing, simultaneously to construct and deconstruct. At the same time they deny any totalizing engagement with what Derrida calls the structurality of structure: ". . . the structurality of structure . . . has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was . . . above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what might be called the *freeplay* of the structure."[16] Palinodes and palindromes are, like puns, manifestations of freeplay, not 'les regles de jeu,' the rules of the game.

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[15] Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold*, p. 53.

[16] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy*, eds. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972), pp. 247-48.