

**AN OBSESSIVE WRITER'S FORMULA:
SUBTLY VIVID, ENIGMATICALLY ENGAGING,
DISTURBINGLY FUNNY AND CRUEL.
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES PALLISER**

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Charles Palliser was interviewed by Susana Onega in Valladolid on 16 December 1992, in the course of the 16th National Conference of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies, which was inaugurated with Charles Palliser's plenary lecture on "Re-writing the Past, Correcting the Future".*

Q. I have read somewhere that your grandfather was the author of several detective stories. Was your background related to literature in any other ways?

A. Not really, except that my family on my mother's side were quite bookish. My grandmother was a great reader, and so was my mother. My grandfather died when I was less than a year old, so I never knew him.

Q. So he didn't influence you directly?

A. No. I tried reading his books, when I was about twelve or thirteen, and I couldn't. They were much too dull.

Q. But were they published?

A. Oh, yes. He wrote quite a number under three or four pennames. (He had to use pennames because he was in the army). One of them was

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made into a film, which I have never seen, although it is occasionally shown on television.

Q. When did you start thinking about writing and why?

A. I was probably about ten or eleven when I started to think about being a writer. I do not really know why. I suppose I loved reading and I was brought up to feel quite respectful towards books. In fact what I wanted to do before I decided to be a writer was to be a priest. And looking back I think it was because in my mother's family there were two things that were respected, one was to be a priest and the second was to be a writer. But then I lost my religious faith at about eleven.

Q. You have described yourself as an obsessive writer, endlessly revising, changing and polishing. Is this the main reason why you took so many years to write *The Quincunx*?

A. I don't think that is the *main* reason, of the twelve years that I spent writing it I was only polishing it for about the last year and a half and then I really did go over it in great detail. I think the main reason why it took me so long was that it was very ambitious. I mean, it was very long and a complicated plot in a novel of a hundred thousand words is difficult enough. But to construct a complicated plot in a novel five times that length is much more than just five times as difficult, I would say. So a lot of the time I was just working on the plot and I didn't actually start writing the book itself, until I was absolutely certain that every part of the plot was absolutely necessary, because I didn't want to write parts of the book and then, later on, find that they were going to have to be cut or completely changed. And, rather astonishingly, I didn't have to discard very much of the book. I did, in fact, make some fairly extensive cuts, but that was mainly because I wrote Part I of the book before I had any of the rest of it worked out and I found later that quite a lot of it wasn't really relevant. It was like constructing a huge building. I was determined that I had to get the ground plan right, because if I started building and then discovered that there was something wrong with the foundations, everything would go wrong. The whole building would start to tilt. So I was determined to be as sure as I could that it would all stand up and hold together, and I was terrified of finding that there was some sort of inconsistency in the plot. I am not saying I solved all the

problems. There are one or two things I still wish I had been able to do differently. But when you make something as complicated as a novel of that nature, then inevitably there are going to be things that aren't absolutely perfect. So you can be too obsessional about it.

Q. But did you, then, have the idea of the quincunx in mind from the beginning?

A. No, that came fairly late. And it required a lot of rethinking and reordering. It came to me in about 1984 or 85, I think. I knew that there had to be some sort of mathematical figure for the book, but I wasn't sure whether it would be three or four or five or six or what. In fact, I think I was originally thinking of three, which is a very simple number to deal with. And if I had done that the whole thing would have been a lot less complicated, but maybe less interesting, I suppose. I remember trying to make different numbers work and finding that five was the most interesting number because . . . well, for all sorts of reasons.

Q. But were you aware of the cabalistic and archetypal symbolism of the quincunx?

A. No, absolutely not. I knew, when I was first getting involved in numbers, that there was a whole library of books about number symbolism and the cabala and I decided I wouldn't get involved in that because I couldn't take on an extra complication at that late stage. And it also seemed to me that it wasn't going to be relevant. I mean, none of my characters were interested in it. It's not something that I am interested in either, actually. But I also knew that when you deal with numbers, some people will want to find number symbolism. And it turns out that five is a very appropriate number to have chosen.

Q. But your quincunx does function like a cabalistic and archetypal quincunx, with its centre as *umbilicus mundi*.

A. Yes, well, I suppose, the thing is, I do know a bit about the cabala, but not consciously. I mean, I have read about it because it is important in Joyce and Borges and various other writers who interest me. So I suppose I have absorbed quite a lot of it.

Q. Like also, perhaps, the idea of the labyrinth?

A. Yes. The idea of the labyrinth . . . well, it's in Joyce and it's in Borges and in Eco.

Q. *The Quincunx* is soon to be published by Penguin with the addition of a fairly long "Author's Afterword" in which you reflect on the making of *The Quincunx* and on your role as novelist. Why do you feel the need to add to a novel that is already 781 pages long?

A. Gosh, that's a point! I suppose partly because when they told me they wanted to reprint it in a new hardback edition at a ridiculously high price I just thought I should give the readers something new. It just seemed to me slightly cheeky to expect anyone to buy the identical book for eighteen pounds or something like that.

Q. In the "Afterword" you give very interesting explanations about the novel, as Eco did, by the way, in his "Postscript" to *The Name of the Rose*

A. I remember that, and I think that was why, as soon as I realised that *The Quincunx* was going to be quite successful, I did start thinking . . . that is, I remembered what Eco wrote. What was it called? "Reflections . . ."?

Q. The "Postscript" to *The Name of the Rose*, I think"

A. I think he used some technical word in Italian which is a medieval Latin word meaning something added on, but I can't remember what it is. But in the English translation it is just called "Reflections". So I suppose it was just vanity, really, that led me to think that I would also write a postscript. Eco's postscript is a brilliant little piece. I wasn't thinking that I would compete with that. But the problem was not to give away too much. I didn't want to explain things that are left open in the novel and leave the reader nothing to do. Somebody, I can't remember who, was a bit disappointed because I didn't spill the beans. But, I mean, why? And in fact I go far enough. I give some heavy hints.

Q. In that "Afterword" you say that *The Quincunx* is not really your first novel, but your second. Why haven't you published the first one and what was it about?

A. Oh, the first one is completely unfinished and completely unpublished and completely unreadable. In fact it is a shame really, because I worked on it for years and there are things in it that I would like to salvage but I don't how I could. It was very autobiographical. It was about a young lecturer going to his first job in the North of England after Oxford, and just having a series of experiences. The experiences were not autobiographical. I mean, it was what had happened to me except that in my case almost nothing did happen. That wouldn't have been interesting, So, it is the same situation but this time lots of strange and interesting things happen. That was the idea. And it was structured around a series of parodies which is the thing that I rather regret not having managed to do successfully. But it all got too complicated.

Q. Was it a comic novel?

A. It was. Well, comic and ironic and sad. That's how I saw it, anyway. But I had more fun writing the parodies than I did writing the book itself.

Q. When were you working on that novel?

A. That was in the late seventies. The middle and late seventies.

Q. Were you at that time interested in the campus novel?

A. Yes. Well, that was a sort of campus novel. I can't think of any campus novel that I really admire with one crucial exception, which is Malamud's *A New Life*. I think it's so good that it almost makes it pointless for anybody ever to write a campus novel again. *The History Man* is actually quite funny, I think. It's quite good. I have read a lot of campus novels. Mary McCarthy wrote one, didn't she? Was it *The Groves of Academe*? And *Pictures from an Institution* by Randall Jarrell, and one by Howard Jakobson. I mean, there's hundreds, I suppose. And I've read quite a lot of them. And I suppose that was one reason why I gave up on the book, because I didn't want people to say, "Oh my God, another campus novel!". That is what I say when I hear about a new one. I think you have to do something so witty and original with the campus novel to justify it

Q. In contrast to *The Quincunx*, your second published novel, *The Sensationist*, is much shorter and apparently very different from its pred-

ecessor. What was the creative impulse behind its writing, and how different do you think both novels really are?

A. I started it when I was about six or seven years into *The Quincunx*. I took a year off writing *The Quincunx* and wrote the first draft of *The Sensationist*, which in fact I didn't alter very much. I added to it. But I didn't actually change it very much. And I did it really because I needed a rest from *The Quincunx*. It was an enormous relief to not to have to worry about a complicated plot, for example. The plot of *The Sensationist* turned out to be complicated in a different way. I mean, what actually happens is simple, but the complication was to convey it as minimally as possible and that was quite difficult, to say very, very little but not so little that the reader didn't know what was happening. I found that quite a challenge and quite interesting. And I wanted to write in a style with which I could do anything I wanted whereas in *The Quincunx* I had to, I had to obey, to some extent, the conventions of Victorian fiction.

Q. Would you say, then, that the style in *The Sensationist* is, so to speak, your natural style?

A. I wouldn't really. Actually, it is funny you should say that, because there is this novelist in Scotland who is very respected, called Allan Massie who is the leading fiction reviewer in Scotland. He reviewed *The Quincunx* and he was mostly very enthusiastic about it. But he ended up by saying something like "What is puzzling is, is this a pastiche or is this the real voice of Charles Palliser?" And then, when *The Sensationist* came out I assumed he'd hate it, because he is a very different kind of novelist himself, but in fact he was very flattering about it. But he ended up by saying "the best thing about it is that at last we are hearing the real voice of Charles Palliser". And it made me realise that I just don't accept that notion at all, of having a real voice (I'm wondering what he'll make of the third book, because it's got lots of different voices in it!). And some people seem to imply that there is almost a kind of dishonesty in a writer not revealing his or her "own voice", but I don't understand that. I like writers who conceal themselves and their personalities behind the fiction as much as possible. Joyce is the best example of that. It is impossible to say what his real voice or his real personality is. It is all over the place and yet nowhere. It is an extraordinary achievement.

Q. Yes, of course, I mean, after the “death of the author”. . . .

A. Yes, but some authors aren’t dead, I mean, some authors do reveal themselves and I think it’s a limitation. I mean, I suppose there might be some exceptions to that, but on the whole I think it’s better that the authors use technique to conceal themselves rather than aim at direct exposition. That’s something different, that’s autobiography or journalism, not fiction.

Q. In *The Sensationist* the reader’s understanding is teasingly limited by the use of an external narrative instance whose knowledge is restricted to the perspective of the protagonist. This narration is interwoven with a series of short italicised paragraphs written in the first person recording David’s flashbacks. Why did you choose to follow what appear to be Modernist narrative techniques in this novel?

A. Well, I suppose the thing I wanted above anything else was vividness. I wanted to present the experiences of the central character as powerfully as possible. So I created what I thought was an appropriate narrative style. One which is, I suppose, quite metaphorical and poetic. I mean, in a way the novel almost was a long poem. My Dutch translator said that about it and I think that’s very acute. The trouble is, of course, that people don’t really read poetry, precisely because it’s difficult. I think that many people were very puzzled by the language of *The Sensationist* and probably lost patience with it. But I felt that the ordinary resources of conventional prose were not quite stark enough or punchy enough, or whatever. And I, therefore, wanted to use that sort of language which . . . I don’t quite know what I would call it. It is not stream-of-consciousness, of course, because it is not really the consciousness of the character

Q. But it does work as stream-of-consciousness, I would say

A. Yes, there is an element of that.

Q. And you mentioned minimalism before. Would it be right to describe the style in *The Sensationist* as a combination of stream-of-consciousness and minimalism?

A. Yes. Minimalism was very much my intention, too. I mean, while writing a huge, long, complicated book I thought it would be a very useful

challenge to write a book with as few words as possible, to really pare it down. And the first-person passages came about because I began to feel that we needed to hear this character's voice. And I realised that if we heard him there could be an ironic gap between what he articulates and what the narrative voice is telling us. And I decided that we would gradually hear David's voice in very brief moments and rather enigmatically. The reader wouldn't be sure who is speaking at first, but as the book progresses it becomes clearer and clearer who it is and the passages become longer and more self-revealing.

Q. But why did you decide to help the reader by italicising the paragraphs?

A. I thought that was essential, otherwise I thought the reader would be completely at sea.

Q. The contemporary world of the *The Sensationist*, like the Victorian world of *The Quincunx*, hides and fosters human isolation, betrayal and rottenness both in the literal and in the figurative sense. Are these visions related to your own pessimistic world-view?

A. Well, I suppose they are, really. But I am not sure that I agree about the pessimism. I think that *The Sensationist* is bleaker than *The Quincunx* because at least in *The Quincunx* John does survive and he maintains a large part of his integrity, if not all of it. Even though, obviously, some bleak things happen to him and to other people. But I don't know that I feel that it is totally reasonable to assume that I take as bleak a view of the world as *The Sensationist* would seem to imply. I mean, that is a very disillusioned look at one particular aspect of human life. It doesn't follow that I think that *all* human relationships are as destructive and cruel as that. I don't think they are. By any means.

Q. Why did you call it *The Sensationist*?

A. Well, I had great difficulty in thinking of a title for it. I thought of that one quite early and then rejected it, partly because friends told me they thought it was much too obvious. That it didn't create any sort of gap between the book and the title that the reader has to bridge, which is what I think a good title should do. But then I changed my mind about that

because, later on, other people found that title puzzling and intriguing. It's a very strange word. Although I think it is in the O.E.D, I have never heard anyone else use it. "Sensationalist" exists and a lot of the newspapers that reviewed *The Quincunx* said that my next book would be called *The Sensationalist*. My answer to that was that if it had been called *The Sensationalist* it would have been about a journalist! So I decided it would be nice to have another rare word following *The Quincunx*. Recently, I racked my brains thinking of another rare word for the third book, but I have decided that's silly. I don't want to tie myself down to always having to have a strange word for the title.

Q. Related to this is the title of your third book, *Betrays*. It also presupposes a negative outlook on life.

A. Yes, I'm afraid so. When you asked me that question I realised that book number three is going to look pessimistic as well. But the difference is that although it's got horrible things in it actually much worse than anything in *The Sensationalist*, or probably even *The Quincunx*, like murder and torture and blackmail I hope people will find it funny. So if you can be funny about those things, it seems to me that you are not really being pessimistic about life because you're saying, these horrors can be controlled and they are only a small part of human life. If I wrote another serious book about murder and betrayal and all the rest of it, then, I think people would have some right to think that I was overly pessimistic. But I'm anxious to find out what people will make of *Betrays*.

Q. Is it a collection of short stories?

A. No. I'm actually going to insist that it be described as a novel. It's made up of ten texts which appear to be unrelated. The first one is an obituary, which I think is quite a nice joke. We get bits of information about how the deceased has met his death in later texts. And in the final text we get a rather disconcerting theory about it. This occurs in a review of a novel which has been written by one of the characters in one of the other texts. That's just to give you an idea of how things are linked in very bizarre ways. And the idea is that the reader will have to learn how to put these different things together. If I don't insist that it is a novel then I think people will see it as a series of separate texts.

Q. Is *Betrays* a historical novel?

A. No, but some of the stories in it are historical. For example, one of the longest is set in the First World War. And another is set in Moorish Spain. I was in the Alhambra recently and there was a guide taking a party of Hungarians around, and I eavesdropped. She was talking in German, and I just thought, well, I'll try to understand this because my German is fairly limited. (I have no idea whether I understood correctly or not, but it doesn't matter.) She told a story, which is a kind of legend, about a particular courtyard which is the basis of the story in *Betrays*. I didn't really see how it fitted in with the other stories until after I had written it. That's how the book evolved. It was fairly late when I realised that there were links between the stories, more links than I had noticed. I was already beginning to explore particular themes long before I consciously looked to see what the parallels and correspondences were. It was only then that I began to look for ideas for related texts and for ways of linking existing texts.

Q. So, do you usually develop the plots from an original idea or from an original image?

A. Sometimes one thing and sometimes the other. Sometimes things start with just a tiny remark. For example, one of the stories, which has turned out to be one of the longest and most complicated came about because of what somebody said to me in a particular place. I go to Belgium a lot, and I was asked to contribute to a collection of pieces being published as one of the events in connection with the fact that Antwerp is European City of Culture in 1993. I was a bit worried about what to write because they give you a theme and it didn't excite me very much. I started writing a rather ponderous essay. But I happened to meet one of the editors while I was in Antwerp and he said: "Why don't you just write a story?" I had been thinking about something that had a connection with Antwerp, and as soon as he said that, an idea for a story crystallised.

Q. In the "Afterword" to *The Quincunx* you say that you also have in mind another project for your fourth novel. Is it too early to talk about it now?

A. Yes, I haven't decided what I'm going to write after *Betrays* actually. I've got about three or four projects, in fact, because I always work

on a number of things at once and then, at a certain point, I drop all the others and just concentrate on one. So I really haven't decided yet. That'll be one of the things I'll do in the course of next year. I'll work on the different projects and find out which one really excites me.

Q. Are you a good observer? I mean, do you tend to incorporate everyday occurrences into your stories?

A. I don't know if I am a good observer but, I like, well, literally observing. Also I read newspapers a lot and quite often I pick up trashy newspapers on the train because they report all sorts of lurid happenings that respectable newspapers like *The Guardian* don't report and sometimes those stimulate ideas. Nothing has ever come out of that as far as I can remember, but I have whole files of possible ideas. Things I have read or people have told me which might at some point become stories or novels. Far more than I could write in the rest of my life, in fact.

Q. Would you say that *The Sensationist* is a realistic novel. Do you believe in the existence of people like David?

A. Yes, I think its technique is obviously not what you'd actually call realist, but I think it's a picture of the real world.

Q. Do you acknowledge any major indebtedness to other writers apart from Dickens?

A. Oh! Good heavens, yes. I mean, I wouldn't have thought Dickens would even be —apart from the part that I was sort of imitating him in *The Quincunx*— actually an influence. I think you can admire a writer without actually wanting to do anything similar. There are probably dozens of writers whom I admire and who have probably influenced me. Some of the writers who I think are technically amazing are Joyce and Faulkner and Conrad. All of them interest me because of the things they do with time and perspective and style itself. Joyce did everything that anybody has ever done in fiction. Nobody could set out to imitate Joyce but, at the same time, no serious writer can afford not to know what Joyce was doing. And, I think he is probably the key writer, certainly for any English-speaking writer. But there are others. Hemingway, for example, is an amazing writer. I don't think there is anything I could take from Hemingway, because he is doing

something remote from the things I want to do. That astonishing simplicity, or what looks like simplicity, but which is, in fact, extraordinarily carefully achieved. And his narrational style based on a version of colloquial speech is astonishing. But I could list dozens of writers I admire. I'm a great admirer of Jane Austen, Borges —I'm giving random names— Zola, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, James, Stendhal, Waugh, Constant, Hardy, Proust.

Q. What about present-day writers?

A. Bellow is a huge idol of mine. Nobody has written funnier or more moving, vivid prose in English for the last thirty years, I would think. Except possibly Updike. Those two are astonishing. And then there are Roth and Malamud. So, those four major American novelists. I read Bellow and Faulkner and Malamud in particular at quite a crucial period, in my late teens and early twenties and I was very, very keen on them.

Q. What do you like of Faulkner?

A. *As I Lay Dying* is an amazing book. One of my few academic articles—in fact, two of my few academic articles—are on *As I Lay Dying* which is a poem really. The language is so dense and metaphorical. Absolutely Shakespearian, I would say, in its profundity. I don't think it is nearly as much appreciated as it should be. I think it probably is his best book.

Q. Better than *Absalom, Absalom*?

A. Yes. But the other one of his that I admire hugely is *Light in August*, which I think is, although not so completely successful as *As I Lay Dying*, an extraordinary achievement technically. If I remember correctly, each of the first five chapters seems to be completely unrelated to anything that has come before, so the reader seems to start five completely separate novels. Then the reader gradually begins to put things together. That's very much a Conrad device. In *The Secret Agent* he does rather the same sort of thing. But Faulkner does even more amazing things with language than Conrad did, of course. It's partly the extraordinary way in which he uses language for his uneducated characters, which is very uneducated and illiterate but often very beautiful, astonishingly beautiful, and at the other extreme a very highly inflated and very intellectual and abstract kind of language with the

most amazingly complicated syntax. Sometimes that just becomes a little wilful, but when it works, it's extraordinarily effective.

Q. There has been a striking proliferation of historical novels in Britain over the last decade. Do you see yourself related in any way to writers like John Fowles, Lawrence Durrell, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes or Alasdair Gray?

A. When you were asking me about present-day writers I didn't have time to say that Gray's *Lanark* is a most amazing book. James Kelman, I think, is astonishing. Ishiguro is technically extraordinary. Paul Auster and Toni Morrison are the two American novelists who I think are at the moment the most interesting. The English writer Jim Crace is very interesting also. As for historical novels. Well, I read *The French Lieutenant's Woman* soon after it appeared. I have written lectures on it and given conference papers on it. In about the mid-seventies. And then I stopped reading it while I was writing *The Quincunx*. I didn't read Fowles or Dickens all that period, which I think was probably because I realised that there was a danger that I would imitate them if I re-read them, or maybe that I'd be discouraged by thinking about what they had done. I'm sure *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is one of those seeds that germinated. But at the same time, there are huge differences. For one thing, it doesn't actually imitate a Victorian novel. What it does is, almost in a Brechtian way, to deconstruct a Victorian novel in front of us. Fowles half gives us a Hardy novel, but at the same time keeps intervening, commenting on it and altering it in ways that a Victorian novelist wouldn't have done. Showing us the workings of it, which is a very interesting technique, but is not at all what I was doing in *The Quincunx* where I wanted to let readers almost think that they were reading a Victorian novel, but then find internal reasons why it couldn't be. I think the problem with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is, although it is a very clever, witty book, that there is too much of Fowles coming and explaining and there are times when you really want him to leave the reader alone with the characters for a bit, please.

Q. On the other hand, in *The Quincunx* you play with five different narrative instances in a very sophisticated way, fostering the impression that there is an all-controlling author "behind or beyond or above his handi-

work”, as Joyce would say, or a puppeteer behind the puppeteers, in the novel’s own terms.

A. Some of the games that I played with the narration were intended to let the reader work out the implications of the prejudices and class assumptions and the chronological gap between us and the nineteenth-century novel. Fowles actually explains them to the reader himself, but I wanted those things to be acted out as experiences for the reader. That’s how I see fiction, that it’s an experience that is different from any other. It’s not expository, it’s actually experiential. You are not told things. You are actually made to feel them.

Q. But then, do you have a very clever reader in mind when you write?

A. Well, I wanted *The Quincunx* to be enjoyed both by a fairly naïve reader, who would miss a lot of things and by a much more sophisticated reader who would notice a lot more. One of the things that has surprised me about the reception of the book is that it has worked for unsophisticated readers to a much greater extent than I expected which, obviously, is very gratifying. A lot of people told me how much they had enjoyed it but said they knew nothing about the Victorian novel and I really hadn’t thought that it would be of interest to people like that. Many readers have enjoyed it as pure narrative and I am delighted that they have. But I knew that *The Sensationist* would only appeal to a very small percentage of the book-reading population. There was just no way that it was likely to appeal to the general reader. So my one fear really was that people who had enjoyed *The Quincunx* would see that it was by me, and would buy it and then would be disappointed. And in fact that certainly did happen. I mean, people have told me exactly that. The publishers all put “by the author of *The Quincunx*” on the cover, but I suppose it was because, obviously, they wanted to make money out of it. But, at the same time, the book looks so different from *The Quincunx* that I don’t think anybody could have bought it thinking that it would be another good read like *The Quincunx*, honestly. They really couldn’t. In fact, it seems to have been more successful again than I really expected it would be. Nothing like the success of *The Quincunx* in terms of numbers sold, but very respectable numbers. I am waiting in fear and trembling to know what people are going to make of *Betrayals*. I think it’ll have more popular appeal than *The Sensationist*, but I don’t know. I mean, the thing

about comedy is that it is so subjective. In a way you need to be much braver, it's much more a risk to be funny than serious. If you write about a small boy whose mother suffers terrible humiliations and then dies of TB in front of him, then even if people are not moved by it, nobody can say "that's not a moving subject". They can't fault my judgement. What they can say is, "well, you didn't do it very well" or "lots of other people have done it". Whereas with comedy, if they don't find funny something that I obviously intended to be funny, they can say "well, you must have a very strange sense of humour" or even "you have a warped mind". They can reject the initial premise. So, that's a bit more alarming. I really don't know whether the rather darkly comic view of the world offered in that book—which is not my view of the world generally, it's just rather a particular sector of it—will strike other people as funny. So far, a few people have read bits of it and they have been very kind. They have said it is quite funny, but not all of them have said that all of it is funny. And some of it frankly is quite nasty, quite disturbingly nasty and quite cruel. So I don't know what will happen.

Q. We'll soon see, I hope. Well, thank you very much for your patience.

