

PLAYING WITH TIME, SPACE, AND NARRATIVE IN ARTURO PÉREZ REVERTE'S *THE FLANDERS PANEL (LA TABLE DES FLANDRES)*

ANETA KLISZCZ

Instytut Kulturoznawstwa, Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie
Institute of Cultural Studies,
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Cracow
aneta.kliscz@ignatianum.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-2220-0778

Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel (La table des Flandres)* is a masterfully written novel whose structure is based on the 'story within the story' concept. As such, it offers the reader not one but two separate crime stories set in two different timelines (the past murder of Roger d'Arras versus two present time murders of people close to the female protagonist). The two storylines are played out on three different spatial planes: in the real world (both past and present), on the chessboard, and within the eponymous Flanders panel. The timelines (i.e. the timelines of real world crimes) and the spatial planes involved are linked together by the eponymous fictional picture by Pieter Van Huys. These features alone provide a sufficient justification for an attempt at in-depth analysis of Pérez Reverte's novel; yet, one may stress the need of such an endeavor even further by drawing attention to the paratext of *The Flanders Panel* – this paratext provides a reader with an authorial indication of intended contextual background against which *The Flanders Panel* can and should be read.

Certainly, the use of quotation (either as a motto or as a title) can hardly be termed innovative when considering crime fiction¹. Still, it is quite rare to see a motto quote become so deeply integrated into the actual narrative

¹ P.D. James and Ruth Rendell could be evoked as an examples of such a practices.

structure or intrigue of the novel itself². Most frequently, a paratextual quotation offers an additional perspective or hint at a new context independently from the world or the intrigue of the novel³. This, however, seems not to be the case of *The Flanders Panel* – indeed, as I hope to demonstrate below, Reverte's novel remains quite unique (and, indeed, original) in its use of paratextual devices.

The quotation I wish to consider is best understood in Spanish, as it would appear in the original text of the novel; indeed, it is Spanish that best reveals its semantic complexity:

*Dios mueve al jugador, y éste, la pieza
¿Qué Dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza
De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonía?*⁴

One need to note that the noun *trama* which could be translated as 'weft' could also mean 'plot' or 'intrigue' in literary sense or could be sometimes translated even as 'story', the ambiguity best reflected in F.T. Smith's translation:

God moves the player, and he, the piece.
Which god behind God begets the plot
Of dust and time and dream and agonies⁵.

² Joe Alex and Kazimierz Kwaśniewski (both being different crime fiction subgenres incarnations of Maciej Słomczyński) are the only ones to spring to mind. See: A. Kliszcz, *Otwarcie i bez lęku powiem wam, że nie jestem Ajschylosem, czyli o Słomczyńskiego lekturze „Oresteji” i nie tylko*, [in:] *Collectanea Classica Toruniensia XIII. Studia greaco-latina V*, ed. I. Mikołajczyk, Toruń 2007, pp. 81–90. See also: T. Bielak, *Proza Macieja Słomczyńskiego (Joe Alexa)*, Katowice 2008.

³ Reginald Hill's use of Jane Austen's letters in *Pictures of Perfection* provide good example. Another worth mentioning at this point would be Stieg Larsson's novel and its relation to Martin Beck novels written by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö; see among others: M. Tapper, *Swedish Cops: From Sjöwall and Wahlöö to Stieg Larsson*, Bristol 2014, p. 248 and forward.

⁴ J.L. Borges, *Ajedrez*, [in:] idem, *Obras completas 1923–1975*, Barcelona 1974, p. 813.

⁵ J.L. Borges, *Chess*, transl. F.T. Smith, <https://southerncrossreview.org/64/borges-chess.htm> [accessed 9.04.2020]. The translation used in the Vintage edition

By alluding to Borges at the very beginning of the novel, Arturo Pérez Reverte offers his readers a highly interesting hypertext⁶ for several important tropes and motifs of *The Flanders Panel*. These include a chess game, a mystery, a crime, a mirror reflection, an iconographic cipher, a hidden message within literary text or object of art, and – last but certainly not least – a labyrinth. It is worth highlighting that Borges – as John T. Irwin observes in *The Mystery to a Solution* – is obsessed with detective story as it provides „a rational solution and at the same time it conserves a superrational aura of mystery”⁷. Hence, one needs to ask if a function of this Borgesian quotation is purely ornamental or perhaps intended to provide a deeper insight into

of Reverte’s novel was provided by Margaret Jull Costa and unfortunately misses the ambiguity, reading instead: „God moves the player and the player the piece. / But which god behind God begins the weft / of dust and time and sleep and dying?”. The most quoted English translation, i.e. Alastair Reid’s substitutes ‘la trama’ with ‘the round’ – therefore limiting the possible interpretation to the literal chess game (see: „God moves the player, he in turn the piece. / But what god beyond God begins the round / of dust and time and sleep and agonies?”; J.L. Borges, *Selected poems 1923–1967*, ed. N.T. Di Giovanni, New York 1972, p. 123).

⁶ By hypertext I mean – to borrow Ted Nelson term – a „text that branches and allows choices to the reader” (T. Nelson, *Literary Machines*, Sausalito 1987, p. 0/2). Although Ted Nelson had in mind a computer-generated hypertext, he allowed implementation of the term to sequential text (ibidem, p. 0/3) and as Astrid Ensslin observed: „The term ‘hypertext’ is a coinage of the twentieth century, yet the principles of multilineal reading, interrelating, annotating and cross-referencing, and indeed the link, on which hypertext is formally based, are over 1,000 years old. The so-called proto-hypertexts can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages, when the first glosses (annotations) in the Jewish Talmud, the Bible, Canon law and medical texts appeared” (A. Ensslin, *Canonizing Hypertext. Explorations and Constructions*, New York 2007, p. 10). The understanding of hypertext as a series of literary connections and evocations can and should be traced on the one hand to the Genettean concept of ‘hypertextuality’ (G. Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, transl. Ch. Newman, C. Doubinsky, Lincoln – London 1997, p. 9.) and on the other (possibly even more so) to the Barthesian concept of ‘ideal text’ (R. Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. R. Miller, Gateshead 1974, pp. 5–6).

⁷ J.T. Irwing, *The Mystery to a Solution. Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story*, Baltimore 1994, p. 2.

the authorial intent behind *The Flanders Panel*. In addition, interesting as Reverte's use of this quotation is, one may find his omission of another text even more meaningful. Although most source texts evoked by both text and paratext of *The Flanders Panel* are chess or logic riddles on the one hand, and detective stories on the other, no quote, nor even a mention of *The Garden of Branching Paths* appears throughout the work. *The Garden* is certainly known to Pérez Reverte: furthermore, as the ultimate Borgesian crime story with a chess play at the heart of its composition and its allegorical matrix it would appear a perfect choice for this particular novel's hypertextual or paratextual frame. Yet, not even a nod is made in its direction. Hence, one needs to ask oneself if this omission (an omission bound to resonate particularly strongly with the original, Spanish readers) is an actual omission: another, quite attractive interpretative possibility is that what seems an omission is in fact a solution to the puzzle presented by Arturo Pérez Reverte to his readers? I will revisit this question at the end of my paper.

Let us go back to the question of two crime storylines of *The Flanders Panel*. Firstly, one should examine the story concerning the murder of Roger d'Arras, which one may termed an 'ultimately cold case'. To begin with, the main female protagonist finds herself intrigued by the words she uncovers on the painting, i.e. the question *Quis necavit equitem?*; upon discovering that the death of one of the people portrayed in the painting could indeed have been a murder she tries to establish what had really happened and who had actually killed the knight. To find out what happened Julia carefully researches the circumstances surrounding the death of historical Roger d'Arras while being fully aware that she is struggling to unravel the mystery of which the truth had already been discovered (and hidden again) by Pieter van Huys (or, possibly, his employer)⁸. Hence, the reader is following a hero who tries to find the solution of the problem (i.e. murder

⁸ The unraveling mystery which have been already solved is not the invention of Pérez Reverte even if it not the most common occurrence in crime fiction – especially when whole not a part of intrigue was discovered. The most notable exception would probably be Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's *The Laughing Policeman* in which Martin Beck must follow the footsteps of his younger colleague in order to solve the latter's murder, in other words, in order to solve one puzzle, he must solve another, what's more – one which had already been solved entirety.

of the man from the painting) while also solving the riddle constructed by someone else (Pieter Van Huys or his employer); she does it by examining clues that are typical in a mystery puzzle (motives or opportunities). Still, even if the murder mystery depicted on canvas is a reflection of an actual crime it is nothing more but its mimetic representation. This mimetic character both of the fictional painting and the chess game within it is further strengthened by the presence of a mirror within the painting plane⁹. In a sense, the painting remains an analogue of true crime genre. In this kind of literature, the author must construct events as a narrative even though s/he relates (or hypothesizes) actual facts. Moreover, the resulting narrative must appeal to potential readers.

Considered against the above outlined fictional world (i.e. the world within the painting), the female protagonist of *The Flanders Panel* appears no different than a reader of a detective story who tries to solve the mystery constructed by an author: her approach (looking for motives and opportunities) means that she chooses to place herself within the fictional world and its laws¹⁰. Another character of the novel – Muñoz – tries a different approach: he focuses on how Van Huys tells his story. The narrative presented by the painter in a visual form of the painting uses chess pieces as a way of communicating actual events; hence, Muñoz tries to reconstruct the course of the chess game portrayed in the panel and, thus, to find the answer for the literal question in the painting: which chess figure eliminated ('killed') the black knight? In order to do so he uses a retrograde analysis: hence, his approach focuses not on the puzzle itself, but on the way in which it is constructed and presented to the viewer. Thus, he stands for the kind of detective story reader (viewer) who focuses on the way in which story is

⁹ This may be seen also as a Borgesian clue as mirror trope is quite important in his works, especially with the context of *The Garden of Branching Paths* and his other detective fiction as observed by John T. Irwin (op. cit, p. 92).

¹⁰ Hence, Julia is at the same time within the painting (as she tries to comprehend the mystery it depicts) and outside it (as she tries to objectively judge people involved). Partially in this aspect she is a reflection of Beatrice of Burgundy who does not participate in the game on the visible chessboard (like Julia), but this time, contrary to Julia, is a key figure – the black queen – in real life past game (unlike Julia).

told and tries to solve the criminal puzzle by using clues provided not from within, but from outside of the fictional world¹¹.

Interestingly, both of these approaches reflect two fundamental observations of Roger Caillois: firstly, his thesis that detective story resembles a movie played in the reverse – from the end to the beginning¹²; secondly, the intellectual function is similar to the intellectual function of games and riddles¹³.

Strikingly, the novel appears to make an explicit allusion to both of these¹⁴:

He returned to his sketch. ‘There’s another way of checking it; in fact, it’s the method to use. It’s called retrograde analysis’. ‘What kind of analysis?’ ‘Retrograde. It involves taking certain position on the board as your starting point and then reconstructing the game backwards in order to work out how it got to that position. A sort of chess in reverse, if you like. It’s all done by induction. You begin with the end result and work backwards to the causes’. ‘Like Sherlock Holmes’, remarked César, visibly interested. ‘Something like that’ (p. 73)¹⁵.

¹¹ The most obvious example of such approach would be every viewer of a police procedural aware of the fact that the suspect arrested at the end of the second act is not the real culprit.

¹² R. Caillois, *Powieść kryminalna, czyli Jak intelekt opuszcza świat, aby oddać się tylko grze, i jak społeczeństwo wprowadza z powrotem swe problemy w igraszki umysłu*, transl. J. Błoński, [in:] idem, *Odpowiedzialność i styl*, Warszawa 1967, pp. 168–169.

The same sentiment is often expressed in metatextual remarks of the Golden Age detective stories (for instance in Agatha Christie’s *Towards Zero*: „I like a good detective story”, he said. ‘But, you know, they begin in the wrong place! They begin with the murder. But the murder is the end. The story begins long before sometimes – with all the causes and events that bring certain people to a certain place at a certain time on a certain day. [...] All converging towards a given spot. [...] And then, when the times comes – over the top! Zero Hour. Yes, all of them converging towards zero...” (A. Christie, *Towards Zero*, London – Glasgow 1961, p. 9) See also: „I seem to have married my only intelligent reader. That’s the way you construct it from the other end, of course. Artistically, it’s absolutely right” (D.L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, London 1987, p. 228).

¹³ R. Caillois, op. cit., p. 191; see also: ibidem, pp. 173–174, 177–178, 181.

¹⁴ All quotations: A. Pérez Reverte, *The Flanders Panel*, transl. M.J. Costa, London 2003.

¹⁵ See: pp. 211–212.

The analogy between the chess game depicted by Van Huys and the 16th century murder is quite simple and straightforward: the black knight was eliminated ('killed') by the queen and the knight Roger d'Arras was killed by the duchess.

On the actual reader's level, the main source of pleasure stems from introducing the concept of different timelines and different spatial planes on which the story is told and the mystery solved: the painting, the chess board, and the real world (both past and present). At this point one may note that – if we are to adopt modern historiography point of view – the past world is also fictional world. Hence, one may assume that *The Flanders Panel* offers to its reader a fictional logical world (i.e. chessboard), a fictional visual world (i.e. painting), and a fictional textual world (i.e. historical world); in all these the same (quite simple) story is told with use of different semiotic systems. These systems, albeit perceptibly corresponding, cannot be perceived as identical. The concept is taken even further by Pérez Reverte in his introduction of the mirror trope and his placing of the reader/viewer in a direct relation to the spatial plane of each medium¹⁶. It is worth highlighting that the author tends to blur the borderlines between different planes:

Before her on the easel, in front of the lady by the window absorbed in her reading, the two chess players were engaged in a game that had been going on now for two centuries, a game depicted by Pieter Van Huys with such rigour and mastery that, like all the other objects in the picture in the picture, the chess pieces seemed to stand out in relief from the surface. The sense of realism was so intense that the painting effortlessly achieved the effect sought by the old Flemish masters: the integration of the spectator into the pictorial whole, persuading him that the space in which he stood was the same as that represented in the painting, as if the picture were

¹⁶ „Everything is merely a phase of the same history, or perhaps the same history constantly repeating itself; I'm not altogether sure about that. And you, my lovely Julia, have you ever stopped to think, when you're standing before our famous painting, just exactly where you are, whether inside it or outside? I'm sure you have, because I know you, Princess. And I know too that you haven't found an answer. [...] And that, when you think about it, is not without its risks. It's like smashing the mirror to find out what lies behind the mercury. Doesn't that, my friends, send a little shiver of fear down your spine?” (pp. 116–117).

a fragment of reality, or reality a fragment of the picture. Adding to this effect were the window on the right-hand side of the composition, showing a landscape beyond the central scene, and a round, convex mirror on the wall to the left, reflecting the foreshortened figures of the players and the chessboard, distorted according to the perspective of the spectator, who would be standing facing the scene. It thus achieved the astonishing feat of integrating three planes – window, room and mirror – into one space. It was, thought Julia, as if the spectator were reflected between the two players, inside the painting. (p. 5–6)¹⁷.

One may observe that Pérez Reverte highlights the lack of barrier between the narrative and its audience (whatever the form of the former) and by that he strongly suggests that the reader (or viewer) projects himself (or herself) into the weft of the narrative (both emotionally and mentally)¹⁸. The introduction of the 20th century timeline mystery highlights this concept even more forcefully: Julia, the self proclaimed spectator of Van Huys's painting, becomes a part of the other mystery in *The Flanders Panel*. In contrast with the 'past' storyline, the narrative of this 'contemporary' mystery is governed not by order of discovery, but by order of events: meanwhile, the question of logic is more often than not substituted with question of psychology. This is the change of narrative which Roger Caillois links to the appearance of hard-boiled fiction¹⁹. Significantly, the latter genre is also explicitly evoked by Pérez Reverte:

Muñoz still said nothing. He merely stood with his hands in his raincoat pockets again, the cigarette hanging from his lips, his inexpressive eyes half closed against the smoke. He looked like a parody of a shabby detective in a black-and-white movie (p. 285).

¹⁷ See: pp. 121–122.

¹⁸ This also could be seen as evoking Borges; see: „In circular, a temporally reflexive, system where the end leads back into the beginning, the end often comes to seem prior to the beginning, as original or more original than the origin. A kind of temporal reversal occurs in which beginning and end seem to change places. In linking his last detective story to Poe's first, Borges meant to create, among other things, a structure of temporal reflexiveness appropriate to a genre whose central theme was a reflexive nature of self-consciousness” (J.T. Irwin, op. cit., p. 428).

¹⁹ R. Caillois, op. cit., p. 202–203, 207–208.

Thus portrayed, Muñoz seems to be an incarnation of the noir detective archetype both in his looks (unattractive and shabby and usually out of place in the places he visits in the line of duty²⁰) and his character (he is forced to play a game in order to save ‘a damsel in distress’, i.e. Julia, the white queen, which he wants and must win against all odds²¹).

Now let us consider if there is any change in the openly acknowledged analogies between characters and chess pieces in the contemporary mystery? At the first glance the analogy seems to be as mechanical as before: Menchu Roch whose very name suggests so represent a rook. But if we are to look closer something changes: although Menchu is supposed to be the rook (hence, a protective figure), she does not behave as such. In fact, she betrays her friend (i.e. the queen) instead of shielding her; hence, she fails to fulfill the role she is supposed to play on the real-life chessboard (for this, she is killed). On the other hand, Muñoz fills the role of the white knight and, contrary to his 16th century counterpart (i.e. Roger d’Arras), meets the expectation against all odds in accordance with the above mentioned noir detective archetype. Thus, one can safely assume that the relation between characters in the 20th century timeline is more complex than that of the 16th century mystery. Yet, even though the chess pieces are suddenly considered from a psychological perspective²², they are nonetheless locked in their original roles²³, while being also determined and limited by their

²⁰ However – in contrast to hard-boiled detective – he is a man of intellect, not a man of action.

²¹ Again in contrast to hard-boiled detective – the reasons for his past loses are internal (he was not interested in a win but in a game itself), not external (in noir usually detective is unable to fulfil his quest for justice because of people of power and money).

²² The Freudian approach to chess is mentioned in the novel (p. 159) and it is also present in Borges’s fiction (see: J. T. Irwin, op. cit., p. 276 and forward).

²³ At this point it is worth mentioning that *The Flanders Panel* contains one more cultural trope – one that I have not mentioned before – namely *commedia dell’arte*. Pérez Reverte draws very strong simile between Julia, Muñoz and César and Lucinda, Octavio and Scaramouche both in paratext (chapter title) and explicitly in the text of the novel (p. 31, 292), even enforcing it with visual images: „In respectful silence and perfect stillness, Octavio, Lucinda and Scaramouche were watching them with painted porcelain eyes from behind the glass of their case.

chess nature²⁴. And while Pérez Reverte consequently follows this approach (as one may observe in remarks about César), he is – as an author – far more interested not in the chess pieces but in the players, or, to be more precise, in the players projecting themselves into the chessboard:

César made a theatrical, eighteen-century gesture with his hand and bowed his head, grateful for the apparent precision of Muñoz's analysis. 'You're absolutely right', he said. 'But tell me, how did you know you were the knight and not the bishop?' 'Thanks to a series of clues, some minor and others more important. The decisive one was symbolic role of the bishop, which, as I mentioned before, is the piece that enjoys the trust of both king and queen. You, César, played an extraordinary role in all this: white bishop disguised as black queen, acting on both sides of the board. And that very condition is what brought about your downfall, in a game which, curiously enough, you started precisely for that reason, to be beaten. And you received the coup de grace from your own hand: the white bishop takes the black queen, Julia's antiquarian friend betrays the identity of the invisible player with his own

César's velvet jacket was dappled with harlequin diamonds of coloured light from the stained-glass window" (p. 87). As the protagonists in Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, characters of *The Flanders Panel* are stereotypical, but it does not in any way diminish the authenticity of their emotions (regardless of their inability to escape their nature or role ascribed to them by Pérez Reverte).

²⁴ The fact that a manner of playing is strictly related to a person's character and nature is stressed throughout whole novel – for instance: „Every person plays chess according to who he is. I believe I explained that once before" (p. 142; see also: p. 102, 154). It is also worth pointing out that one of the characters of *The Flanders Panel* – none other than César – stresses the analogy between murder and chess („I would say that chess has more to do with the art of murder than it does with the art of war"; p. 158). Furthermore, the presence of the murderer – player analogy in crime fiction has been noticed and remarked upon already by Roger Caillois in his previously mentioned essay on detective fiction (R. Caillois, op. cit., p. 179–180). The best illustration of successful use of this analogy would be Agatha Christie's *Cards on the Table*, in which one may find following remarks of Poirot: „They [bridge scores – A.K.] are illuminating, do you not think? What do we want in this case? A clue to character. And a clue not to one character, but to four characters. And this is where we are most likely to find it – in these scribbled figures" (A. Christie, *Cards on the Table*, New York 1984, p. 38; see: *ibidem*, pp. 52–54, 221–222).

game, like the scorpion stinging itself with its own tail. I can assure you that it's the first time in my life I've ever witnessed a suicide on the chessboard carried out to such perfection' (p. 260)²⁵.

At this point, it should be noted that 20th century timeline narrative, although seemingly derived from the 16th century timeline, does not constitute its mimetic representation, but rather its paraphrase and transformation of its tropes. For instance, the character may adopt double roles (César being both white bishop and black queen) or double role from the past may be split (César and Julia represent different aspects of Beatrice of Burgundy, while Julia is also taking on the role of white king which formerly belonged to Ferdinand).

The correspondence between the blurred borders separating the painting and the chessboard and the blurred border between the painting and the world of protagonist is quite obvious. Yet, there is one thing that is not so obvious: Arturo Pérez Reverte made an effort to blur the distinction between the cause and the effect. Effectively, the reader is actually never given an outright answer to the question whether the 20th century murder would have ever taken place if there was no Van Huys's painting, or, to phrase it differently, if the 'Zero Hour' was truly inevitable²⁶ and Van Huys's painting only influenced the way in which the murder was committed. The issue of solving the ancient 'chicken or the egg' problem in terms of storylines within the novel is even explicitly addressed by Pérez Reverte speaking through one of his characters:

'The other day, after you and your chess-playing friend visited me, I was thinking about the Van Huys. Do you remember our discussion about the system being necessary in order to understand another system and that both would need a superior system, and so on indefinitely? And the Borges poem about chess and which god beyond God moves the player who moves the chess

²⁵ See the description of both César's avatars: pp. 260–261.

²⁶ However, the impossibility of preventing a murder is often mentioned in crime fiction; here one may refer to Agatha Christie Poirot's valiant efforts to prevent the inescapable in the *Death on the Nile* (A. Christie, *Death on the Nile*, New York 1965, pp. 72, 101–102; see also: *ibidem*, p. 308). The only example of truly successful preemption of a planned murder that springs to my mind is Agatha Christie's *Wasp's Nest*.

pieces? Well, I think there is something of that in this painting. Something that both contains itself and repeats itself, taking you continually back to the starting point. In my opinion, the real key to interpreting *The Game of Chess* doesn't follow a straight line, a progression that sets out from one beginning. Instead, this painting seems to go back and again, as if turned it upon itself. Do you understand what I mean?' Julia nodded, listening intently to his words. What she'd just heard was a confirmation of her own intuition, but expressed in logical terms and spoken out loud. She remembered the list she had made, amended by Muñoz to six levels containing each other²⁷, of the eternal return to the starting point, of the painting within the painting. 'I understand better than you might think', she said. 'It's as if the painting were accusing itself' (p. 204).

It is worth highlighting at this point that a confusion of cause and effect or inability to distinguish one from the other is one of the most basic logical fallacies and since the detective story is presented by Pérez Reverte as a logical puzzle²⁸ (in accordance with the manner it was perceived in the Golden Age of detective fiction²⁹). Thus, it would seem that the capacity for logical

²⁷ The levels evoked here are listed in *The Flanders Panel* as follows: 1. Julia; 2. The scene within the painting. A floor in the form of a chessboard on which people are placed; 3. The people in the painting: Ferdinand, Beatrice, Roger; 4. The chessboard on which two people are playing the game; 5. The chess pieces that symbolize the three people in the painting (and now also real people); 6. The mirror that reflects a reverse image of the game and the people (p. 161).

²⁸ „Do you read detective novels?’ ‘No. Although the books I do read are somewhat like that’. ‘What for example?’ ‘Books on chess, of course. As well as books on mathematical puzzles, logic problems, things like that’” (p. 137; see also: p. 98).

²⁹ Significantly S.S. Van Dine opens his famous *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* with following statement: „The detective story is a game. It is more – it is a sporting event. And the author must play fair with the reader. He can no more resort to trickeries and deceptions and still retain his honesty than if he cheated in a bridge game. He must outwit the reader, and hold the reader's interest, through sheer ingenuity. For the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws – unwritten, perhaps, but none the less binding: and every respectable and self-respecting concocter of literary mysteries lives up to them” (<http://www.thrillingdetective.com/trivia/triv288.html> [accessed 9.04.2020]). See above evoked observations of Roger Caillois (note 12).

reasoning is identified with the ability to solve murder mysteries or, in other words, with the ability to fulfill the role of reader of a detective story. The top level of this complex construction is Julia, the spectator of the painting: thus, if one were to substitute Pieter Van Huys's *The Game of Chess* (the hypertext within the novel's universe) with Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel* (in other words his 'game of chess') the top level would be the actual reader of the novel. This reader is the person who can be linked to every level of the novel's universe (Van Huys's painting, the mystery behind the painting, the story of its restoration, the murder mystery behind the restoration of the painting, the chess game and its retrograde analysis, the composition of the novel etc.) and who, in order to comprehend the novel (or to puzzle it out), must go back and forth between different semiotic systems used by Pérez Reverte³⁰. Furthermore, the relation between Van Huys's murder mystery and 20th-century timeline murders may also be seen as a relation between murder and detective story – however, this is a relation á rebours: the murder depicted on the Van Huys's canvas (which, even though it had taken place in the past universe of the novel, was not a part of real life experience of the protagonists) is perpetuated and brought into the novel's present by its villain. In other words, what for Julia and Muñoz had been only a story, albeit an extremely captivating one, becomes a part of their existential experience, becomes real to them, through the agency of the murderer:

It was as if everything had been foreseen long before, and each of them had conscientiously performed the role assigned in the play that had finished on the chessboard at that exact hour, five centuries after the first act, with the mathematical precision of the black queen's final move (p. 292).

Clearly, *The Flanders Panel* constructs crime fiction and, simultaneously, deconstructs it by going back and forth between different planes of fiction and reality within the framework of the novel, but at the same time it taunts the reader with the possibility that, as the Van Huys's painting

³⁰ See: „I don't think so', he said at last. 'Because the general laws of logic are the same for everything. Music, like chess, follows rules. It's all a question of working away at it until you isolate a symbol, a key'. One half of his mouth seemed to twist into a smile. 'Like the Egyptologists' Rosetta Stone. Once you have that, it's just a question of hard work and method. And time'" (p. 168).

was brought to life in Julia's actual experience³¹, the same fate may await the reader of Arturo Pérez Reverte's novel.

At this point let us revisit the question of Borgesian hypertext. Let me remind that the first motto is the already cited quote from *The Game of Chess*. Even more importantly, the fictional eponymous painting of *The Flanders Panel* is referred in the novel as *The Game of Chess*, the very title of the poem. Thus, Borges' work should be perceived not only as its integral part and important clue to the interpretation of the novel but also, possibly more instructively, as a clue to its actual composition dominant. Also, it may provide a clue to other components of Borgesian hypertext. The most important component of this hypertext would be, naturally enough, *The Garden of Branching Paths*, even if this text is neither quoted or mentioned in *The Flanders Panel*³². After all, the reader of Borges' *The Garden of Branching Paths* is presented with the real murder puzzle (a detective story as Borges himself describes it) which concentrates around the mysterious manuscript which is both a text and a maze³³ with distorted timeline reflecting the distorted timeline

³¹ It is important to keep in mind the already quoted description of the painting that Pérez Reverte provides; see: pp. 6–7 (quote from pp. 5–6).

³² I am convinced that in *The Garden of Branching Paths* one may find explanation for this omission in the following passage of Borges's novel: „Philosophical argument usurps a good part of his novel. I know that of all quandaries, none so troubled or exercised him as the fathomless quandary of time. But, then, time is the only problem that does not appear in the pages of his Garden. He does not even use the word that means »time«. How do you explain this deliberate omission? I put forward several suggestions, all inadequate. We discussed them. 'In a riddle about chess', Stephen Albert concluded, 'what is the one forbidden word?' I thought for a moment and replied, 'The word »chess«. 'Exactly', said Albert. '*The Garden of Branching Paths* is a vast riddle, or parable, about time. This is the hidden reason that prevents Ts'ui Pên from using the word. To omit a particular word in all instances, to resort to clumsy metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is probably the surest way of calling attention to it'" (J.L. Borges, *The Garden of Branching Paths*, transl. N.T. Di Giovanni, <https://archive.org/details/TheGardenOfBranchingPaths/mode/2up> [accessed 9.04.2020], pp. 95–96).

³³ See: „The publication was pointless. The book is an indecisive pile of contradictory drafts. I have examined it on a couple of occasions. In the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive. As for Ts'ui Pên's other enterprise, his labyrinth – 'Here

of 'fictional within fiction' Ts'ui Pên's manuscript. The victim of *The Garden of Branching Path* is the person who solved the riddle of the manuscript and the maze: therefore the unlocking past mystery becomes the present mystery. *The Flanders Panel* is a rendition of this concept – it should be read as Arturo Pérez Reverte's attempt to create his own Borgesian detective story which also – as in its hypertext – includes the maze (both real and textual); the simile between chessboard and a labyrinth³⁴; the simile between chess and detective story; playing with timeline³⁵ and space – and most importantly of all – playing with the reader. I may only add that in my eyes it constitutes a particularly successful attempt.

it is', Dr Albert said, pointing to a high, lacquered writing cabinet. 'An ivory labyrinth!' I exclaimed. 'A miniature labyrinth'. 'A labyrinth of symbols', he corrected. 'An invisible labyrinth of time. It has been granted to me, a barbarous Englishman, to unravel this delicate mystery. After more than a hundred years, the details are irrecoverable, but it is not difficult to surmise what took place. Ts'ui Pên may once have said, »I am retiring to write a book«. And on another occasion, »I am retiring to build a maze«. Everyone imagined these to be two works; nobody thought that book and labyrinth were one and the same" (p. 92; see also: p. 94).

³⁴ This simile is explicitly evoked in the novel: „A few words from Muñoz were all it took to make a corner of the board, apparently static and unimportant, suddenly fill with infinite possibilities. There was something truly magical about his ability to guide other people through the complex black-and-white labyrinth to which he possessed the hidden keys. It was as if he were able to orient himself by means of a network of connections flowing beneath the board and giving rise to impossible, unsuspected combinations which he had only to mention for them to come to life, to become so obvious that you were amazed not to have noticed them before" (p. 128).

³⁵ The only other example of crime fiction novel which uses two timeline planes as mutually explaining themselves (or rather unable to exist without each other) seems to be 2004 Ian Caldwell's and Dustin Thomason's *The Rule of Four* in which the hypertext is Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; however, the main focus seems to be the paradigm shift between early modernity and romanticism (and the relation of both of them to postmodernism) than formal construction of verbal labyrinth of *Hypnerotomachia* or complex composition of *Frankenstein*.

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Playing with Time, Space, and Narrative in Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel (La table des Flandres)*

The article discusses hypertextuality as a composition dominant of Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Flanders Panel (La table des Flandres)*. To achieve this aim it focuses on the relation between the novel and Borges's oeuvre, but also its relation to crime fiction as such (in considering its involvement with different types of crime story). Also addressed is the question of impact of introducing different timelines and spatial planes on the composition of the novel .

Keywords: Arturo Pérez Reverte, Jorge Luis Borges, crime fiction, narrative, chess in literature, story within the story, intertextuality, hypertextuality