

Behind the Canvas: The Role of Paintings in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* and Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *The Flanders Panel*

But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me.

E.A. Poe, 'The Oval Portrait'¹

In the essay 'The Guilty Vicarage' included in his acclaimed collection entitled *The Dyer's Hand*,² the British poet W. H. Auden sanctioned a number of categories such as 'the murderer', 'the victim', 'the suspects', 'the human and natural milieus', 'the detective', which asserted the author's conservative views about the features which govern the detective genre. Although his analysis may have appeared legitimate at the time, Auden's essay is now itself a victim of its age by way of both its illustration and its endorsement of the precise formulae which characterised the genre until that moment. The confusion between descriptive and prescriptive theorisation has rendered that article as a model of the hazardous waters confronting the critic who deals with detective fiction today. Auden even goes so far as to emphasise the flourishing of the detective genre in 'predominantly Protestant countries' as a proof of the particular set of mind demanded by the genre. Associating the detective story with a particular religious and cultural background may be a useful reference to describe the roots of the genre, but it would be difficult to enforce the proposal implicit in Auden's tone and in many of his assertions throughout the article, that for the detective story to succeed it has to be restricted to its original forms.

Following a similar line of thought, a number of critics have adopted an extremely reactionary attitude, asserting the need for a formal purity in detective fiction, reminiscent of the three unities—action, time and place—used in neoclassical drama as a resource for achieving verisimilitude. Two of the French masters of detective fiction in the postwar period, Boileau and Narcejac, have also insisted on the subscription of the detective genre to its original forms: 'Le roman policier est précisément un genre littéraire, et un genre dont les traits sont si fortement marqués qu'il n'a pas évolué, depuis Edgar Poe, mais a simplement développé les virtualités qu'il portait en sa nature' ('The detective novel is precisely a literary genre, and a genre in which the

1 Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), pp. 481-4, (p. 482).

2 W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 146-58.

features are so strongly marked that it has not evolved after Edgar Poe. It has simply developed the virtues that it contained in its nature.'³)

The imposition of Boileau-Narcejac's and of Auden's restrictive norms would very likely mean the exclusion from the genre of some postmodern European detective novels such as Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980) and Edouardo Mendoza's *El misterio de la cripta embrujada* (1979) or *El laberinto de las aceitunas* (1982).⁴ Mendoza's novels depart from the canons of detective fiction both by introducing a variety of cultural references at various levels and by proposing a degree of uncertainty as the prevailing outcome of the central search. Similarly, Eco's much discussed novel is an example of a modern work in which quest and detection escape the restricted margins which have so often constrained detective fiction. With a plot such as the search for a text, in this case the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the process of detection parallels that of reading—though this is no news in detective fiction—with the surprising contribution of inviting the reader to carry out a search for those other texts inside the text. Eco's use of conventions from detective fiction makes evident that the limits of the genre are not as clear-cut as it had appeared to some. Another example of a postmodern detective novel is Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) which displays a break in the logical boundaries of time and space, and the possibility of alternative, supernatural realities that challenge the expected closure of the plot. However, logic, still perceived by some as the natural constraint of detective fiction, openly excludes participation in the genre by irrational or magical explanations.

In *Le Roman policier* Boileau and Narcejac express not only a defence of the static features of the genre, but also a rejection of any experimentation with its very logical conventions: 'Le roman policier, parce qu'il se propose d'aller de l'imaginaire au rationnel par le moyen de la logique, s'impose à lui-même des limites qu'il ne peut franchir' (Boileau-Narcejac, p. 121). ('The detective novel, because it proposes to go from the imagination to the realm of reason by means of logic, imposes on itself certain limits that it cannot transgress.') These limitations imposed on the detective novel are sometimes too narrow to be taken seriously. They are often the real absurdity of the genre, as Julian Symons has pointed out:

By the end of the Second World War the reassurances offered by the classical kind of detective story had become very shaky indeed. The social and religious structure of society had changed so much that its assumptions seemed preposterous. The pretence that the world was static could no longer be maintained. The detective story with its closed circle of suspects and its rigid rules had

3 Boileau-Narcejac, *Le roman policier*, 3rd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), pp. 5-6 (my emphasis and translation).

4 For extended comments on these novels see Jorge Hernández Martín, *Readers and Labyrinths: Detective Fiction in Borges, Bustos Domecq and Eco* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1995); and Patricia Hart, *The Spanish Sleuth: The Detective in Spanish Fiction* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987). An interesting article by Amy Carder on Mendoza's postmodern detective fiction is 'El laberinto de las aceitunas: Mendoza's Parodic, Postmodern Reworking of "Crisis of Literatures"', *Torre de Papel*, 7:2 (1997), pp. 45-64.

always been a fairy tale, but the point and pleasure of fairy tales is that by exercising the imagination one can believe them to be true. In the postwar world this sort of story changed from a fairy tale to an absurdity.⁵

However, Symons is describing here a different movement: the movement from detective to crime fiction during the crisis-ridden postwar decades. Although still heavily anglocentric in his approach, Symons's acceptance of an interaction between the detective and other fictional forms defies Boileau-Narcejac's too restrictive definitions—and those of many others—and opens up the space for critical discussion about the boundaries of the genre.

In this paper I will analyse two contemporary European novels that exemplify different ways in which the postmodern detective may challenge the traditional conventions of the genre, particularly the manner in which the plot of detection, used as a backbone in both novels, is subverted through the intertextual disposition of the novel. The role of the paintings featuring in both novels is also associated with a challenge to the generic rules of detective fiction. They are, I will maintain, both the motifs which introduce the mysteries in the stories, and also a pretext for the departure from the plot of detection into a self-referential exploration of the status of the work of art. Thus the paintings are the crucial elements that bring together the two, or even three generic subscriptions of these two novels, becoming the very image of their hybridity. This assertion is clearer in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987)⁶ which might be considered by some as an 'improper' detective novel, firstly because it does not reach any logical solution, and secondly due to the use of a rather lyrical magic realism, in tune with the author's earlier detective novel *Hawksmoor*. The act of describing *Chatterton* as a detective novel is therefore a polemical one, and it is related to one of the most remarkable developments in recent decades: the hybridisation of the detective genre.

In both *Chatterton* and *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd provides us with two significant examples of the ways in which a detective story can be successfully incorporated into a fiction that moves beyond the classic structures to discuss the boundaries between a logical-scientific and a magical-narrative knowledge of the world.⁷ This is also recognised by Brian Finney who highlights the play with time and Ackroyd's reputed ventriloquism as the main features of the novel.⁸ However, Finney does not consider the detective aspects of the book: this omission is partly what encouraged me to put together the ideas in this article. Despite the fact that *Chatterton* challenges one of the main conventions of the genre, namely the logical resolution of the mystery, I consider

5 Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Pan Books, 1992), p. 25.

6 Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (London: Penguin, 1987).

7 This is recognised as the fundamental pondering of postmodernity. See Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

8 Brian Finney, 'Peter Ackroyd, Postmodernist Play and *Chatterton*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 38 (1992), 240-61.

the utilisation of a detection plot and the presence of two characters who act as art detectives, to be good enough reasons to analyse it as a detective novel: a novel which, regardless of the outcome of the investigation, is about the process of ascertaining the existence of a mystery.

In *Chatterton* the reader has to trace her way through multifarious patterns to determine a verifiable outcome, however provisional. The novel comprises a series of complex circumferences which are layers of a textual reality built through a carefully calculated process of associating all the circles in the novel. The combination of three different threads or sub-plots in such a palimpsest provokes a clash of temporalities. One of these sub-plots is the fictional reconstruction of the controversial last days of Thomas Chatterton: the eighteenth-century poet died at the age of eighteen, the victim of his own mistake while medicating himself against venereal disease. This version of his death is supported in the novel, although there are still considerable doubts among literary historians about whether he may have committed suicide. In the novel, Chatterton's historical life contrasts with the central mystery: the possibility that the poet faked his own death. Such a hypothesis, at the core of the main plot of detection, may be substantiated by both a densely painted canvas and some papers which contain what seems to be Chatterton's confession. A second temporal thread is set around the painting of Chatterton's death at eighteen by the Victorian painter Henry Wallis. In this stratum, ideas such as artistic representation, objectivity, and reality are discussed by the posing poet Meredith and the painter, contributing to the novel's recurrent comment on mimesis and art. Finally, the third sub-plot is the present time—or rather the time represented as closer to the reader's—where Charles Wychwood investigates the circumstances in which some of the materials circulating in the novel were produced.

The three sub-plots spin around the figure of Thomas Chatterton, the English poet who gained posthumous acclaim as a creator of forgeries of medieval writings during the eighteenth century. The tension between originality and cultural tradition is the recurring theme behind the many instances of plagiarism present in all the three parts of the novel: Chatterton, Joynson, Wallis, Merk, Harriet Scrope, are all involved in cases of artistic forgery. The dense 'Portrait of an Unknown Man' dating from 1802 supposedly shows Thomas Chatterton at the age of fifty, and if its authenticity and that of the confession were confirmed, Charles Wychwood would be able to prove in his biography of Chatterton the falsity of part of English literary history as we know it. Chatterton would have been not only a plagiarist and the inventor of a fifteenth-century monk, Rowley, but also in Wychwood's own words 'the greatest poet in history' (p. 94) since he would have produced part of what is now considered canonical English poetry, including poems by Blake, Gray, Akenside, Churchill, Collins, and some others.

After Charles's death, his friend Philip Slack tries to find a logical explanation for the controversy between the different versions of Chatterton's life, unveiling the real origins of both the confession and the painting which are not found to be the kind of material suitable for a biography, but for a novel. Philip will prove that Chatterton's confession, according to which he would have staged his own suicide, originates from

what happens to be yet another forged text apparently produced by a Bristol bookseller, Joynson, one of Chatterton's personal enemies. The painting itself is a forgery made out of several layers of painting, also the work of Joynson, ancestor of the present owner, who is in his turn a personal friend of Leno, the bookseller who had given it to Charles. Both manuscript and painting thus become a parallel to other stories of forgery in the novel. Towards the end of the book, the painting, which was undergoing restoration, dissolves, and the manuscript turns out to be the creation of someone who understood art as trade: Joynson, the bookseller. Charles, the 'detective' who wants to write a biography of Chatterton based upon the new evidence found in Bristol, takes fiction for truth and dies; and Philip, who is planning to write a novel with all the material found by Charles, unveils the mystery of the authenticity of the painting, but does not consider the relation between the painting and Charles's death. When we learn that his widow, Vivien, perceives the prospect of the manuscripts being proved a fake as Charles's second death, Philip becomes concerned with the fact that, to Charles, both the confession and the painting were 'real'. He recalls Charles's theory about historical knowledge and art: 'Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge?' (p. 213).

The complex canvas has two main functions: firstly, it can be regarded as an emblem of the novel, reproducing its multi-layered structure. Thus the apocryphal painting reveals a similar structure to that of the novel, which is also created through a series of parallel narratives and intertexts, different texts and different plots that demonstrate a parallel concern for artistic production. Therefore the painting questions the reader's aesthetic position at different levels: by considering the nature of the work of art, which is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, it interrogates us about the possibility of art as the work of different authors, of culture as the 'real' author or, at least, the main premise of art. The forgery of Seymour's paintings by his assistant, Merk, is also meant to be understood in the wider framework of the art trade, as those paintings are going to be sold in Maitland & Cumberland's art gallery. Cumberland, an 'art expert', but also a greedy art trader, explains that 'where there is no tradition, art simply becomes primitive. Artists without any proper language can only draw like children' (p. 110). Susana Omega's description of the paintings appearing in the novel as 'transhistorical palimpsest' summarises well this primary function.⁹ The term is resonant of Brian McHale's 'transhistorical party' which can also be applied to the counter of characters from different periods in *Chatterton*.¹⁰ We are exposed at the beginning and at the end of the novel to the enigmatic, supernatural—out of time—encounters between Charles and some other characters. The creation of a metaphysical 'possible world' in which three young poets meet provides the text with a circular structure:

9 Susana Omega, *Metafiction and Myth in Peter Ackroyd's Novels* (New York: Camden House, 1999), pp. 71–2.

10 Brian McHale *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 17.

And for centuries he watches himself upon an attic bed, with the casement window half-open behind him, the rose plant lingering on the sill, the smoke rising from the candle, as it will always do. I will not wholly die, then. Two others have joined him—the young man who passes him on the stairs and the young man who sits with bowed head by the fountain—and they stand silently beside him. I will live for ever, he tells them. They link hands, and bow towards the sun. (p. 234)

Those two others who have joined Chatterton in this seemingly 'eternal' abode by the end of the book are very possibly Charles and Meredith, both poets themselves, and the setting is a recreation of *Chatterton's Death* by Henry Wallis. This circular reunion of the three temporal lines of the novel contributes to its status as a hybrid between a detective novel and a magic realist thriller.

The second function of the painting has to do with its introduction into the text of a degree of uncertainty about the status of the present in its relation with history. As with the canvas representing a young woman in Poe's 'Oval Portrait', the Gothic likeness of the 'Portrait of an Unknown Man' invades the present space with its unsettling effect. Merk—another forger and painter appearing in the novel—describes the canvas thus:

The painting contained the residue of several different images, painted at various times: the flesh tint of the hands had faded but that of the face was still bright, the white lead of the candle flame had become slate-coloured while that used for the titles of the books had retained its tone. The face itself seemed to have acquired the characteristic of three or four different images: he assumed that this was why it had such an unsettling effect and why the eyes, in particular, had depth but not brightness. (p. 205)

Charles's investigation into the authenticity of the portrait, and into the sources of Chatterton's confession of having faked his death, will lead him to his own demise. And this 'death by portrait', a pale imitation of Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, constitutes what I consider as one of the unsolved mysteries of the novel.

The novel's self-referentiality, with the built-in parallelisms of characters and of plots, and the constant citation, constitutes the text's contribution to a postmodern detective, or as Linda Hutcheon has put it: *Chatterton* offers a good example of a postmodern novel whose form and context denaturalise representation in both visual and verbal media in such a way as to illustrate well the deconstructive potential of parody—in other words, its politics.¹¹

The non-resolution of Charles's death, and the possible connection with the painting, which is fully an unresolved mystery only to the reader's eyes, is central to the two recurring debates present in the novel: the nature of art and the limits of historical knowledge. Stemming from the inquiry into the nature of art, a number of questions arise: what is forgery, imitation, authorship, originality. The text *Chatterton* becomes also a partial forgery through the use of quotation and pastiche. In a palimpsest various writings from different periods merge, and the last text, in this case the novel itself, is built upon all the rest. As a piece of detective fiction, the novel challenges the pre-

11 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 95.

scription imposed by the tradition of critics reviewed earlier, by incorporating aspects which should be considered in the wider framework of postmodernist fiction. Ackroyd endorses here a particular understanding of the real world, and of the creation of possible worlds, which becomes the main preoccupation for some of the characters, impregnating thus the whole text.

The novel's metaphysical conclusion suggests the existence of limits to the physical world different to the ones usually accepted in detective fiction. Thus, without answering them, the book interrogates us with some of the questions pointed out by Brian McHale: 'What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured?' (McHale, p. 10). The mixing of concepts such as 'real' and 'fictional' inside the narration provokes a further cynical reflection on what is real, what is a world, or what is the world we know as real.

The fabrication of interrelated stories exposes the fragile boundaries of time, and also the impossibility of it being presented or accounted for at once, given that language, unlike visual perception, is temporal rather than spatial, as the narrating voice in Borges's story reminds us before going into a description of the Aleph: 'Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo, pero lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es.' ('What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write is successive, because language is successive.')

Michel Foucault has re-elaborated Borges's ideas in many of his essays, and he seems to be echoing the narrator of 'El Aleph' when he analyses the disconcerting gap between language and the painted image in his comment on Velázquez's 'Las Meninas': 'The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.'

The relation between language and painting, time and space, is also explored through the iconic abyss of a canvas in Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *La Tabla de Flandes* (1990).¹⁴ Although the plot apparently does not deviate from the conventions of the genre in as far as it subscribes to an apparently logical solution, Pérez-Reverte incorporates into the novel ideas about the limits of reality and its representation in art which

12 Jorge Luis Borges, 'El Aleph' in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957), pp. 151-69, (p. 164). For the translation see: *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, ed. and trans. by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970), pp. 15-30 (p. 26).

13 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 9.

14 Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *La Tabla de Flandes* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1990). English translations are from *The Flanders Panel*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: HarperCollins, 1994). This novel was awarded the Grand Prix Annual de Littérature Policière in France, and has been adapted for the cinema by Jim MacBride.

are resonant of those discussed in Ackroyd's novel. Here, the traditional structure of the 'whodunit' is textually subverted by a number of epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, and by the coda which recreates the last days of Beatrix of Burgundy, one of the characters represented in the fifteenth-century panel at the centre of the novel. The first epigraph of the novel, a quotation from Borges's poem 'El ajedrez', opens up the range of interpretations about the influences of the painting and of chess upon the rest of reality:

Dios mueve al jugador y éste, la pieza.
¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza
De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonía?¹⁵

Such a reference at the outset of the narration hints at one of the themes developed throughout the novel around the motif of the painting: the interconnection between different levels of reality. Following the classical structure of Chinese boxes, Pérez-Reverte suggests in his novel a complex relation between past and present which is articulated through the game of chess painted in the Flanders panel. Another epigraph which suggests an interminable relation between reality and representation is taken from Douglas R. Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*¹⁶ and it refers to being 'inside a picture' and to 'the picture-inside-a-picture' (p. 152). The ideas suggested by these two epigraphs are an index to the experimentation to which the detective is subjected here, but as with Ackroyd's novel, an invitation into the role of the painting in the book will reveal more clearly the departure from the 'logical' conventions of the genre.

In the opening pages of *La tabla de Flandes* we encounter Julia, a young art restorer, becoming acquainted with an inscription in Latin concealed under the paint of an apocryphal fifteenth-century Flemish panel called 'The Game of Chess'. The question 'Quis necavit equitem' ('Who killed the knight?') unveils the existence of a murder committed in the fifteenth century, that of Roger de Arras, the solution of which might be provided by a correct interpretation of the game of chess displayed in the painting. From the start, one of the qualities attributed by the characters to 'The Game of Chess' is that of integrating its viewers into the complexities represented in it. Julia observes the painting by the fictional Meister Pieter Van Huys, and considers that:

La sensación de realismo era tan intensa que conseguía plenamente el efecto buscado por los viejos maestros flamencos: la integración del espectador en el conjunto pictórico persuadiéndolo de que el espacio desde donde contemplaba la pintura era el mismo que el contenido en el interior de ésta; como si el cuadro fuese un fragmento de la realidad, o la realidad un fragmento del cuadro. (p. 16)

15 '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?' From the collection of poems *El Hacedor* (Madrid: Alianza, 1972), p. 81.

16 Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

(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 a fragment of reality, or reality a fragment of the picture.) (p. 5)

When looking at it, both Julia, the restorer-cum-detective, and César, the art-trader-cum-murderer, feel the presence of other levels of reality in the painting. This multifaceted view of the painting is the key to ascertaining the authorship of the past and present murders occurring in the two consecutive sub-plots. In the first case, Julia searches for a solution to the historical mystery hidden in the picture: who killed Roger de Arras? In the second, she and the people who surround her become the pieces on the chessboard. For the solution to the first mystery, Julia consults her former lover and teacher, Alvaro Ortega, an art historian who provides her with some feasible answers. But it is at this stage that the events commence to entangle Julia into the contemporary plot of murders. Once Alvaro and another character, Menchu, are killed, and the events around Julia become coded in the jargon of chess, she will need the help of an expert in that field, Muñoz. In this second part, a battle between opposing forces takes the shape of a virtual chessboard: the characters become pieces of the game, cards with chess notations are left next to the victims, and the process of detection turns into the complex anticipation of moves characteristic of that game.¹⁷

Pérez-Reverte has not invested his heroine with sufficient abilities to solve by herself either the fifteenth-century mystery or the present murders around the Flanders panel. Against the assertion of critic Carmen de Urioste who sees in her 'la mujer detective que rompe con la tradición de este género' ('the female detective who breaks with the traditions of the genre'), Julia accompanies a main male detective, first Alvaro and then Muñoz, as a sort of female Watson.¹⁸ Although it is these two men who find a way around the puzzles posed by the painting, Julia's assistance is necessary for the development of the dialogic structure of the narration, and also because she is ultimately the victim of the moral tale designed behind the killings. Pérez-Reverte's characterisation is neither as progressive nor as original as Urioste wants to present it, but rather conventional and at times even flat. Muñoz, 'a hero *malgré lui*' (p. 185) who looked 'like a parody of a shabby detective in a black and white movie' (p. 285), is in tune with a host of other characters by Pérez-Reverte, as José Belmonte Serrano has suggested in his work *Los héroes cansados*.¹⁹ Finally, the choice of a male homosexual

17 Complex, but not profound, according to Edgar Allan Poe: 'The complexity of the mental processes behind a game of chess are often mistaken for an apparent profundity: the elaborate frivolity of chess. In this latter, where the pieces have different and *bizarre* motions, with various and variable values, what is only complex is mistaken (a not unusual error) for what is profound.' (In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', pp. 397-431 [p. 397].)

18 Carmen de Urioste, 'Totalización del gusto cultural: Dos novelas de Arturo Pérez-Reverte', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 50 (1997), pp. 403-14, (p. 407).

19 José Belmonte Serrano, *Los héroes cansados* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1995).

as a duplicitous murderer only confirms the patriarchal design from which Pérez-Reverte does not intend to depart at any stage of his narration.

César, the homosexual art trader who is at the same time Julia's apparent ally and the murderer of Alvaro and Menchu, cunningly hides his knowledge of chess throughout the story. With the help of Muñoz, Julia finally learns the reasons behind the two murders: a moral teaching has motivated César's violent irruption into her life. At the conclusion of the story we find that the two main characters have been guided to the solution by the artful machinations of César who has been using a computer to play against them. César has followed up with the moves in the game of chess portrayed in the canvas, and he has turned Julia's close relations into the prey of his severe and embittered lesson about good and evil. The idea of the computer as the actual designer of the game posits again Borges's question in the opening epigraph about the player behind the player, thus contributing to the aesthetic and spiritual reflections on the status of reality as a repetitive series of concentric circles.²⁰

In the classic drawing-room scene where the complex chess moves that have articulated the plot thus far are revealed to be the work of César, Julia's old friend and protector, he confesses how the painting inspired his behaviour:

'No se trataba sólo de ajedrez—continuó—. Sino de la sensación personal, profunda, de ese juego como lazo con la vida y la muerte, entre la realidad y el ensueño... Y mientras tú, Julia, hablabas de pigmentos y barnices, yo escuchaba a penas, sorprendido por el estremecimiento de placer y de exquisita angustia que me recorría el cuerpo, sentido junto a ti en el sofá, mirando no lo que Pieter van Huys pintó sobre la tabla flameante, sino lo que aquel hombre, aquel maestro genial, tenía en la mente mientras pintaba.' (p. 378-9)

('It wasn't just a matter of chess,' he continued, 'but a deep, personal sense of the game as a link between life and death, between reality and dream. And while you, Julia, were talking about pigments and varnishes, I was barely listening, surprised by the tremor of pleasure and exquisite anguish running through my body as I sat next to you on the sofa and looked not at what Pieter Van Huys had painted on that Flemish panel but at what that man, that genius, had in mind while he was painting.') (p. 269)

César is also the oblique white bishop on the chessboard who has plotted a game of chess with the people who surround both Julia and the Flanders panel. Convinced of his paternal role, namely to introduce Julia to the uncertainties of real life, César has designed a complex game in which she would feel threatened but never physically harmed. With the disclosure of information at the end of the novel, he confesses his intention of teaching Julia a moral lesson before his certain death by AIDS. However, his duplicitous behaviour throughout the novel reveals his defiance of absolute moral truths: 'Todos los escaques son grises, hija mía, matizados por la conciencia del Mal como resultado de la experiencia; del conocimiento de lo estéril y a menudo pasivamente injusto que puede llegar a ser lo que llamamos Bien' (p. 393). ('All the squares, my dear, are grey, tinged by the awareness of Evil that we all acquire with

20 The dénouement of the story reveals a reverse structure to the mystery of Poe's *Maelzel's Chess-Player*, as Carmen de Urioste has also suggested (p. 409).

experience, an awareness of how sterile and often abjectly unjust what we call Good can turn out to be.' [p. 279]) This cynical end to Julia's eye-opening experience puts forward an unrepentant message of challenge to the established moral dogmas. If the canonical detective narrative had to conclude with a return to a stable and logical order, the postmodern detective reasserts the need to deconstruct that order.

Furthermore, while the climax at the end would be the closure of the traditional detective narrative, the presence of a scene out of time as an end to *La tabla de Flandes* opens up the number of interpretations of the text, as it does in *Chatterton*. In the latter it suggests the existence of other levels of reality which are not among the range usually expected of a detective novel, whereas in *La tabla de Flandes* it reinforces the prevalent sense of *mise en abyme* and circularity on which the novel rests.

In both novels the paintings occupy the centre of the plot of detection, and they become a guide to ascertaining the level of subscription to the conventions of the genre. Unlike the 'Portrait of an Unknown Man', 'The Game of Chess' does not conceal a story of plagiarism nor does it ask for an investigation into its authenticity, but both function as mirrors on which different times coalesce.

Ackroyd's apocryphal version of Chatterton's life is construed around a number of different texts which create a distortion of the 'official' version of reality, of history, becoming the pre-text to establish a whole series of inquiries on the nature of the 'real' and the representation of reality. The meditation on the nature of fiction, on the writing of history, and on the transmission of texts bears the signs of postmodern anxieties about the manner in which we come to know about the past. Thus in *Chatterton* the plot of detection is used to delve into the sense of uncertainty about cultural constructs: texts and paintings; while in *La tabla de Flandes* it explores the ambiguous moral principles of postmodernity. In both postmodern novels, such an alteration of the logical-positivistic categories supported in the classical forms of detective fiction is at the service of introducing uncertainty as the preferable although exhausting condition of human knowledge.

Heather Mawhinney

Death by Jigsaw: *La Vie mode d'emploi* by Georges Perec

La Vie mode d'emploi is set in the moments in which two stories converge: the final moments of the story of a crime coincide with the equivalent to the story of an investigation.¹ As in the (classical) detective story, the story of the investigation is used to reveal and conceal essential elements of the story of the crime; and Perec applies the classic methods of the detective-story writer for revealing and concealing essential clues (the conjuring trick, word-play, the inventory, separation of parts of a clue) in magnified form, that is also to say with even greater demands on the reader's memory. And in *Vme* the investigation story is used to distract the reader's attention from the story of the crime. By this means Perec is able to reconcile the notion of an extremely brief time-span with the time required for a linear reading of the novel's six hundred pages (not counting the one hundred pages of appendices), and for telling the story of a crime which extends over a period of fifty years.

To achieve this, Perec puts the reader in the position of detective and leads him to believe (until the dénouement in the final chapter) that the novel is, or may be, the description of a painting. He makes the story of the investigation the story of the painting that Serge Valène would like to paint (rather than one he has already painted), a painting which exists already in Valène's imagination (or dreams). The painting that he imagines is of all the rooms in the apartment block where he lives, including all the people who live and have lived there, their histories/stories, and their possessions, as described room by room in *Vme* itself. As each room and other parts of the apartment block (the different flights of stairs, the cellars, for example) are visited (described) in turn, the present activity or action of whoever of the current occupants (or visitors) is in that particular room (if anyone is) is described once (and sometimes mentioned again elsewhere when a related character's current activity is described).

The dual narrative structure of the (classical) detective story was described in 1939 by the practitioner Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958) in a newspaper article which, incidentally, Raymond Chandler kept in his notebook and referred to.² But the later and better-known source of this approach to the narrative strategy of detective fiction is

1 Georges Perec, *La Vie mode d'emploi. Romans* (Paris: Hachette, 1978). Page references use the abbreviation *Vme*. Page numbers following translated passages from *Vme* refer to Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual. Fictions*, trans. by David Bellos (London: Collins Harvill, 1987; repr. 1988). Where no page number follows, the translation is my own.

2 'Mary Roberts Rinehart on the Crime Novel', in *The Notebooks of Raymond Chandler*, ed. by Frank MacShane (New York: Ecco Press, 1976), pp. 42-3 (p. 42) first published in *Saturday Evening Post*, 11 March 1939. See also Raymond Chandler, 'Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel (Written in 1949)', in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (London: Hamilton, 1962), pp. 63-70 (p. 68).