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John Dickson Carr's Early Detective Novels and the Gothic Convention

ABSTRACT

Even if the Gothic romance may be considered as one of the predecessors of detective fiction, the world model proposed by the latter seems to exclude what was the essence of the former: the irrational underlying the proposed world model. However, some of detective novel writers deploy Gothic conventions in their texts, thus questioning the rational order of the reality presented there. Such a genological syncretism is typical – among others – of the novels by John Dickson Carr. The paper is an analysis of Gothic conventions and their functions in four earliest novels by Carr, featuring a French detective-protagonist, Henri Bencolin. It concentrates on elements of Gothic horror, on the atmosphere of terror as well as the motif of the past intruding the present.

Keywords: Carr, John Dickson; detective fiction; Gothic fiction; Grand Guignol

1. Introduction

It is customary to think of broadside ballads, 18th century pamphlets describing actual crimes, “Newgate” novels drawing themes from crime chronicles or sensational novels of the 50s and the 60s of the nineteenth century as the predecessors of English detective fiction, but the Gothic roots of this genre seem to be equally obvious (Ostrowski, 1980, pp. 90-91; Ascari, 2007; Cook, 2014). Already in the pre-Romantic Gothic romances the intrusion of ghosts and spectres into the world of the living was most often provoked by some crimes committed in the past – one may say that the objective was exactly the same as in detective fiction: to unmask the culprit and bring them to justice. Also the nineteenth century penny dreadfuls commonly combined criminal plots with horror resulting both from the intervention of the supernatural and from the macabre aspect of the crimes themselves. The slums of London were modelled there after the conventions of Gothic fiction, where the dark and labyrinthine streets in forbidden districts performed the function of a Gothic castle, and their degenerated inhabitants – that

of ghosts and Gothic villains (Mighall, 1999, pp. 27-77). The sensational novels from the second half of the nineteenth century did not shun the atmosphere of terror and the sense of mystery either, even if the final explanation rarely involved the supernatural (though, for example, in Wilkie Collins's *The Haunted Hotel* [1878] it is the intervention of supernatural forces that makes the murderess admit her crimes).

It might seem that the new genre (detective fiction) practically eliminated the irrational from the presented reality, resigning of the conventions of Gothic fiction, especially of any intimations of the supernatural. In the detective stories and novels, especially those written in the inter-war period, the mimetic order of the world dominates: a crime is a puzzle that demands to be solved. An investigation based on rational premises is foregrounded; the supernatural element is relegated both from the sphere of the detective's activities ("The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means" [Van Dine, 1946, p. 190]) and from the sphere of the crime ("All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course" [Knox, 1946, p. 194]).

Moreover, as Dorothy Sayers notices in her introduction to the second series of *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1931), detective fiction underwent significant changes in the first decades of the twentieth century. The genre, which initially developed mainly as short story focusing on the puzzle abstracted from any broader (social or psychological) context, now turned to novel "with »plenty of reading in it«" (Sayers, 1931, p. 16). One of the consequences of these changes was turning crime into a commonplace. Already Agatha Christie in some of her novels presents crime almost as part of daily routine (Kokot, 2015, pp. 88-89): anybody may be a murderer, the motive is usually most simple and trivial while the social and spatial setting is rooted in the tradition of the novel of manners. Such a commonplace and plain aspect of crime stresses what is the dominant feature of the world model presented in detective fiction in general: its rationality and predictability. There is no place for mysteries in this type of fiction but only for puzzles that can be solved – contrary to Gothic romances which question rationality, assuming the existence of the Unknown and the possibility of its intervention.

However, some of detective tales introduce an element of uncertainty as to the dominant genological convention¹. This is the case of some Margery Allingham's novels (Rowland, 2004, pp. 28-39) – for example in *Look to the Lady* (1931)

¹ Maurizio Ascari stresses the fact that the rational element present in detective fiction did not eliminate completely the possibility of combining it with supernatural motifs (Ascari, 2007, p. 10), while Srdjan Smajić notices "a persistent metatextual concern in detective fiction: the anxiety that generic purity is unattainable; that the supposedly rational genre in which the supposedly rational [detective] feels at home is everywhere contaminated by the supernatural, occult or irrational" (Smajić, 2010, p. 3).

the criminal and sensational intrigue includes a village witch and a mysterious guardian of a Celtic chalice. One can also find echoes of occult fiction in many short stories by Gilbert Keith Chesterton (especially those in *The Incredulity of Father Brown* [1926]), even though the final explanations bring back rationality into the presented world.

Close to Chesterton's stories mentioned above are the detective novels by John Dickson Carr. On the one hand he carries out the recommendations of John Knox and S.S. Van Dine almost to the letter and constructs intricate intrigues constituting a challenge to the assumed reader and an invitation to compete with the fictitious detective. As Douglas G. Greene remarks:

Despite the fact that Carr wrote in the mood of neo-gothic horror or high comedy, almost all his novels are formal detective stories. No detective novelist was more scrupulous in giving every clue to the reader and in presenting rational explanations of all the seeming impossibilities. (Greene, 1991, pp. 9-10)

On the other hand, however, an impression is created that the puzzles cannot be explained otherwise but by an intervention of the supernatural. The uncanny circumstances of the crime are enhanced by references to black magic and occult arts in the presented reality. In *The Hollow Man* (1935) the reader meets Professor Grimaud, a specialist in "low magic", when he is lecturing on Hungarian vampire legends, according to which "the dead men could leave their coffins, and float in the air in the form of straw or fluff until they took human shape for an attack" (Carr, 1964, p. 7), which is exactly how the narrator characterises the murderer. *It Walks by Night* (1930) opens with a passage from a fifteenth century book devoted to werewolves whose attributes the psychopath, Laurent, claims to possess. It seems at first that behind the incomprehensible crimes in *Below Suspicion* (1945) or *The Crooked Hinge* (1938) lie Satanic practices performed by some characters, while in *Hag's Nook* (1933) and *The Plague Court Murders* (1934) the victim's death is related to a sinister legend concerning the past of the family or of the place. Finally, the eponymous lamp in *The Curse of the Bronze Lamp* (1945), found in an Egyptian pharaoh-priest's tomb, is said to be cursed; indeed its owner disappears without a trace on the way to her room; moreover, the incident takes place in a neo-Gothic castle imitating the style of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.

Carr [...] had the crime shake one's faith in a rational universe. By quoting from seemingly ancient manuscripts and legends about witches and vampires, Carr implies that only someone in league with Satan could have committed the crime. (Greene, 2008, p. 254)

The subject of the following analysis will be four earliest novels by John Dickson Carr, featuring Henri Bencolin, a Parisian *judge d'instruction*, the first of the serial

detectives created by the writer². The narrator of all the novels is a young man of letters and Bencolin's friend, Jeff Marle. The fact that Jeff is a writer is significant – he, as the teller, would be responsible for the literary patterns imposed on the tale.

Although – apart from rather hazy suggestions in *It Walks by Night* – there are no attempts to persuade the reader that any supernatural factor might be involved in the crime, the narrative techniques refer straightforwardly to the tradition of Gothic fiction. On the one hand the crime scenes are – as we shall see – saturated with macabre and horror, on the other, the Gothic mode in descriptions often results from Jeff's sensitivity to the surroundings perceived by him as uncanny, *unheimlich*. Thus the terror invades reality both on the level of facts and on the level of the observer's impressions and intuitions.

2. The shadows of the past

In the pre-Romantic Gothic romance an important role is played by the past which the protagonists have to face. The space setting – a medieval castle or abbey – is a fragment of reality immersed in another time where the echoes of the past are still alive. Let us remember that the supernatural phenomena typical of Gothic fiction consist in blurring not only the barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead, but also that between the present and the past. Ancient walls hide secrets of old crimes, the latter “returning” when the victims' ghosts cry revenge. The same happens in the nineteenth century ghost stories, where the supernatural manifestations make the past appear before the protagonist's eyes. The “Gothic” space is not only a numinal one but also one where time is suspended.

Some locations in Carr's novels are viewed in a similar way – as enclaves in the contemporary world, belonging to another time and “haunted” by the spectres from the past. The Gallery of Horrors in the wax museum is the world of the dead with its wax figures representing people long gone. It is there M. Augustin, the owner, believes he sees a ghost of a woman once sent to the guillotine by Bencolin. As he says: “one night, months ago, when I was closing up, I could have sworn I saw Madame Louchard, in her fur neckpiece and her little brown hat, walking along the green-lit Gallery ...” (Carr, 1984, p. 16). He sees the same spectre again

² In *It Walks by Night* (1930), Bencolin and Marle investigate the murders of Duke de Savigny and Edouard Vautrelle; both victims were beheaded and the prime suspect is Laurent, the first husband of Madame de Savigny, who dealt with his psychiatrist in a similar way. *The Lost Gallows* (1931) is set in London, while the puzzle concerns mysterious threats addressed to a rich Egyptian, Nazim El Mouk, by someone who calls himself “Jack Ketch” (an English nickname for a hangman). The crime site in *Castle Skull* (1931) is a medieval castle, where an actor, Myron Alison, is burnt alive, and where – as it eventually expires – a magician, Maleger, has been kept prisoner for several years. The eponymous place in *The Corpse in the Waxworks* (1932) is linked by a passage with a house of ill fame, while the victims are two young girls, Odette Duchene and Claudette Martel, and a blackmailer, Etienne Galant.

a day before the action proper starts, when he follows Miss Claudine Martel, a girl that will be found murdered in a passage at the back of the museum: the phantom as if announces her death. Of course the reader can deduce the identity of the alleged ghost on the basis of the further course of events, but the place itself seems an obvious setting of such manifestations – it is a place of the dead in a double sense of the word. The figures in the Gallery of Horrors not only represent people already gone, but they also present them at the moment of their death.

The house of de Savigny, too, is presented as a place where echoes of the past are still alive. The house seems to return to life when the detectives enter it, but it is life from before many decades:

We tramped down the great staircase, as though we descended into a dim gulf from which rose voices of the past, all those portraits on the walls stretching out their mimic arms, stirring and rustling in brocade through the whitish dusk; as though the candles in those silver scones drew back their ghastly light, and into the carpets crept the bloom they have lost a hundred years. . . . I could not put down the impulse to wander through the place, to feel the pull of the memories that must have haunted it for so many. (Carr, 1986, pp. 121-122)

Jeff's further mention of "mirrors reflecting the past" (Carr, 1986, p. 122) suggests that the house is filled with the echoes of old days which indeed "have haunted it for so many". It is not surprising then that when he sees Bencolin going out of the wine cellar, the detective looks "like a ghost", while the protagonist-narrator states that "it was none of my business" (Carr, 1986, p. 123), as if he found himself in another reality, from the perspective of which it is the present that appears to be a spectral world.

Jeff experiences a similar submerging in the world of the past in Nazim El Moulk's apartment full of artefacts from Egyptian tombs. Here, too, his companions turn into shadows, "dark figures" (Carr, 1985, p. 114), while he himself for a moment passes into the bygone reality: "I was listening to ghostly bugles in old wars – bugles that woke the coloured halls of Karnak, and then went crying through the streets of Thebes" (Carr, 1985, p. 114). A similar illusion is experienced by the tenant of the apartment. The murderer, going by the name of John Ketch, is inspired by a tale, dating back to the times of the Pharaohs, about a wicked prosecutor, El Moulk's namesake, who met death from the hand of his victim's ghost in a place called Ruination Street. Nazim El Moulk considers himself to be the descendant of the ancient Egyptian, fearing a similar spectral revenge of a man whose death he caused ten years ago falsely accusing him of murder:

Imagine him sitting there night after night by his green lamp. Imagine the horrible blackness that came on him the first time he ever saw that papyrus – when he saw his own story acted out with grisly exactitude, and his doom written for him four thousand years before his birth! (Carr, 1985, p. 174)

Faubourg St.-Germain, where the parents of Miss Martel live, seems to be an anachronism in the modern Paris, an enclave where time has stopped – the whole district is perceived as a phantom from the past, where “you might meet an unlighted coach, with footmen and four white horses, and you would realise, in the wind and thunder of its passing, that the passengers had been dead two hundred years” (Carr, 1984, p. 92). The associations are not groundless when confronted with the criminal intrigue. Colonel Martel, the father of the murdered girl, is an old-fashioned man living in and by the past, a stranger in the modern world. “For many years he has sat there alone with his ghosts” (Carr, 1984, p. 181) delighting in the fact “that Disraeli took tea on that lawn with Napoleon the Third when [Martel] was a boy” (Carr, 1984, p. 180). Moreover, the past does not mean merely people and events but also ideals: the family honour guarded by whole generations of the Martels and now stained by Claudine. When the colonel broods over his daughter’s deeds, “[t]he ghosts come round again. They prod him with the reminiscence of each Martel” (Carr, 1984, p. 181), while the Gallery of Horrors in the wax museum does not induce terror in the man but brings to mind equally absolute ideals in the name of which lives were taken or given away:

Now he saw the past [...] He saw people who killed and were killed for an abstract ideal. He saw cruelty or madness acquire a sort of terrible grandeur. He saw the Terrorists, unsmiling, watch the heads drop into the guillotine basket. He saw the Spanish Inquisition, unpitying, burn the heretics for the glory of God. He saw Charlotte Corday stab Marat, and Joan of Arc go to the stake, for the sake of an ideal, a terrible code which must never yield! (Carr, 1984, p. 184)

And in the name of such “a terrible code which must never yield” Colonel Martel kills his own daughter. Thus the way in which Jeff perceives Faubourg St.-Germain – as a space out of this time and out of this world – finds its embodiment in a character and attitude of one of its dwellers who is not able to free himself from the ghosts of times past.

The medieval Schloss Schadel is modelled in a similar way – this place, too, is perceived by Jeff as belonging to a different world. The guests from the modern times are strangers there, trespassing a reality they are not part of: “When we stood with our lights in the stone passage, we were anachronisms, and the halls did not like us. [...] We were intruders” (Carr, 1960, p. 68). As in the case of the Paris district, the *locus* described by Jeff functions as a metaphorical equivalent of its dweller who does not belong to the present time³. The owner of Castle Skull is a magician, Maleger, whose *nomme de guerre* is a name of a spectral

³ Already Yuri Lotman signalled links between a given locus and a character ascribed to it, pointing to “the possibility [...] of the moral description of literary characters through the type of artistic space corresponding to them” (Lotman, 1977, p. 22).

warrior from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and whose real name and surname as well as nationality and age are unknown. All this – as well as the terror provoked by his shows surpassing conventional illusionist tricks, as if real magic were at their heart – places this character rather in the context of a medieval Gothic castle than that of a twentieth century drawing room.

Moreover, several years before the action proper Maleger due to the machinations of his ex-friend was pronounced dead and now returns, like a ghost from Gothic romances, to avenge his wrongs. Even in the report of one of the characters Maleger is described as “a shadow on the white sky” (Carr, 1960, p. 27) and not as a living person. The man is indeed like a phantom from the past: he allegedly died seventeen years before; he “dies” after completing his revenge, losing his mind; finally, he actually appears to be dying, as he suffers from an incurable disease. In this way the character of Maleger confirms Jeff's initial intuitions – the *locus* ascribed to the magician does set him in the past, in the realm of ghosts and death.

Carr creates spaces which belong to the world of the dead and not of the living. It is not only the atmosphere of terror that dominates there, but also that of desolation and unreality, when the protagonist suddenly experiences a world that exists no more. Moreover, all these places are connected with deaths that occurred in the contemporary times as well. Schloss Schadel and de Savigny's house are crime sites, the house at Faubourg St.-Germain and the apartment at the Brimstone Club are the dwelling places of murderers; in the latter El Moulk will eventually die hanged by the neck.

3. The Grand Guignol tradition

The Gothic aspect of Carr's novels does not result merely from some vague premonitions of the past invading the present or of the existence of enclaves where the past still survives in a spectral form and the present is an intruder disturbing the preserved order. It is also horror in its purest form.

A car with a dead man behind the wheel passes the streets of London; moreover, even if the vehicle moves at a great speed, it takes all turns properly and finally parks in front of the Brimstone Club as if the corpse were able to drive it. Jeff's imagination brings the driver back to life: “The corpse on its grisly ride was breaking all speed laws. I could fancy it shaking its arms and threshing about with the joy of the ride” (Carr, 1985, p. 22). The driver's throat is cut, the car soaks with blood and so does the body itself which – when lain on a billiard table – provokes grotesque and macabre associations.

The discovery of Vautrelle's corpse – shocking in itself, as the man's head is almost entirely severed from the body – is preceded by a rather macabre scene: when Jeff and Vautrelle's ex-lover, Sharon, are sitting on a garden bench, the girl feels a touch of a cold hand on her shoulder. As it appears it is not the hand of

her companion but that of Vautrelle, whose body was hidden in the bush behind the bench. The horror of the discovery is still enhanced by the seemingly oblique speech used in the narration, reconstructing Jeff's reaction to the nightmarish find:

Nausea! Steady now, steady! Get yourself together! It won't hurt you; it's dead, God knows! I gripped the rough bark of the bench, and bent in sick coolness. The fountain shrilled steadily, as though it laughed. Come, now, turn him over! Your head's in the way of the moonlight. Get to one side, so you can see his face! *His* head's been nearly severed from his body. Never mind *that* stuff; you can wash it off. Damn that fountain! (Carr, 1985, p. 165; highlighting by J.D.C.)

Myron Alison dies a terrible death, being burnt alive by his persecutor. Jeff is not a witness of this event, he only quotes the others' reports, but he is present at the discovery of another body – that of Bauer, the Castle Skull watchman. The detectives searching the castle find a cell in a secret passage where the man, several days dead, is found:

At first you saw the top of a man's head, lowered as though he were about to run like a bull, and you saw the dirty greyish hair hanging towards the floor. Then you realized that the man was suspended against the wall. Rusty chains had been wound about him, hooked under his armpits, and then fastened to iron staples in the wall on either side. His bony arms, with large-knuckled hands, hung far out of his coat-sleeves. To give details is not necessary, because they were not pretty. He must have been hanging there for nearly a week. There was an odour, too ... (Carr, 1960, p. 60)

The macabre and grotesque aspects of the crime scene refer rather to the tradition of Grand Guignol than to the poetics of detective fiction. This tradition is overtly pointed to in *It Walks by Night*, the first of Carr's Bencolin novels. A psychopath, Laurent, a fugitive from a lunatic asylum, leaves behind a macabre memento – the severed head of his psychiatrist “looking out from one of his own jars of alcohol on a shelf” (Carr, 1986, p. 24), which is commented by Bencolin: “For a man of imagination, what a Grand Guignol picture” (Carr, 1986, p. 23)⁴.

Often the decor of the crime site makes it a perfect background of the macabre find. In *The Corpse in the Waxworks* such a place is the Gallery of Horrors and the staircase leading to it. The gallery itself is full of wax figures presenting historical characters dying a terrible death; Jeff describes the figures as “a masterpiece of devilish artistry” (Carr, 1984, p. 25). Not only do the descriptions render the wax figures almost as real people, but also the border between what is real and what is only part of the exhibition is blurred. The dagger in Marat's chest is stained with actual blood, as it was used as murder weapon by Miss Martel's killer,

⁴ Actually, the first – shorter – version of *It Walks by Night*, published in 1929 in *The Haverfordian*, was entitled *Grand Guignol*.

while the body of the girl is at first mistaken for a wax figure. In the naturalistic performances of Grand Guignol fictitious cruelties looked like real ones, here real traces of crime are taken for part of the decor.

Later the Gallery of Horrors will be the scene of the death of Galant, who becomes almost an element of the presented *tableau*:

There was a creak, and one of the window-panes swung open. *A face pushed through, looking at us.*

Framed in the windows, it showed huge white eyeballs and irises pushed up under the upper lids. Its mouth hung open in a sort of hideous grin. Then the mouth was obscured by a gush of blood. It gurgled, its head twitched sideways, and I saw that there was a knife projecting from the neck. It was the face of Etienne Galant. (Carr, 1984, p. 169; highlighting by J.D.C.)

The horror of the scene is enhanced by the technique of the description – the dying man is reduced only to a face framed by the window, like a macabre portrait or a puppet on a stage (again associations with Grand Guignol are triggered – Guignol is the name of a hand puppet in the traditional French puppet show).

A theatrical dimension is imposed on the first murder in the wax museum, too – this time it is not a coincidence, but the murderer's wilful action. Miss Martel's body is posed as a victim of the Satyr, "one of the popular Parisian bogies, a sort of man-monster who lives in the river and draws down women to their death" (Carr, 1984, p. 23), whose figure stands on the landing of the staircase leading to the Gallery of Horrors. Evidently, the killer lay the dead girl in the arms of the legendary creature purposely: "Is it strange then [...] that he should continue this symbolism of his? That after he had stabbed his daughter he should put her body into the arms of – *the satyr*? He was offering her there as a kind of sacrifice" (Carr, 1984, p. 185; highlighting by J.D.C.). Claudette Martel was a regular customer of the house of ill fame where she treacherously lured her friend, eventually bringing death upon her. No wonder that she was laid as an offering in the arms of a satyr: the creature is not only a bogeyman from an urban legend, but also the embodiment of lust and debauchery.

The crime scene in *It Walks by Night* is significant, too. The very decor of the card-room where de Savigny's body is found fits the way the man met his death. The colour red is prevailing here (red walls, red tapestries, red carpet and dim red light), which not only matches the colour of blood but also brings to mind an executioner's attire. The associations with an execution are the more obvious that the victim was beheaded and died on his knees like a convict, while his head was exhibited afterwards. Like in the case of *The Corpse in the Waxworks* the position of the body is significant – as it will appear later beheading the victim was not merely a way to direct suspicions at the psychopathic Laurent but an execution indeed, even if it was not performed by the law.

Neither is Alison's death in flames merely a testimony to the killer's sick cruelty. It appears that the actor was planning to direct a play about early Christians, himself "starring as the Christian leader who was burnt by the Emperor Nero. But Maleger knew of it, and Maleger lived to give him his wish." (Carr, 1960, p. 126). Thus the last minutes of Alison's life function as a kind of a theatrical performance, where the gallery is the stage, the victim's villa on the other side of the river – the seats, and the victim himself – an actor playing the part of a live torch. Bauer's body, too, was posed deliberately: he was shot and then put into chains in the same cell in which Maleger himself had been chained for several years, while Bauer had kept watch both of the castle and of the prisoner.

The macabre dimension of the world presented in *Castle Skull* not only results from the *tableaux* created by the killer but also from the presence of music, otherwise perceived as the quintessence of order. Already the beginning of the novel introduces a grotesque contrast between the light melody played by the orchestra, extolling "the grace of Lizette, the smile of Mignonette, and the cuteness of Suzette" (Carr, 1960, p. 5), and the grim tale about Alison's murder told to Bencolin at a restaurant table. The actor himself dies as if to the melody of "Amaryllis" played by one of his guests ignorant of the tragedy that is taking place in the castle. As a witness puts it: "I'll never forget that it almost seemed to be dancing to that »Amaryllis«, that tune" (Carr, 1960, p. 20). Beauty and harmony that are usually associated with music, when confronted with a nightmarish crime, deprive the surrounding reality of its substantiality, exactly like the theatrical aspect of the crime does. The order imposed on reality paradoxically lets in chaos and terror.

4. The atmosphere of terror

The patterns on the level of fictional reality changing that reality into a kind of a performance in a theatre of horrors have their equivalent on the level of the narrator's utterance. Jeff-narrator in the descriptions of particular scenes – not only those with elements of the macabre – utilises the conventions of Gothic fiction creating an atmosphere typical of a tale of terror⁵.

In the descriptions of *Castle Skull* the stress falls on darkness pervading it, dispersed only by the dim light of torches; on the play of shadows on the castle walls, when the detectives pass the interiors in search of clues; finally on the labyrinth of passages and staircases, reminding one of similar space organisation of the early Gothic fiction castles. Moreover, though the terror in the narratorial descriptions is limited only to the castle and has no access to the villa on the other side of the river (here the convention of the novel of manners, typical of

⁵ Jeff's fondness for Gothic atmosphere can be noticed also in *Poison in Jest* (1932) where Bencolin is substituted by another, more commonplace detective.

contemporary detective fiction, dominates), it seems to beset Alison's place, even if it is eventually dispelled by the prosaic nature of the surroundings.

A space analogous to a medieval castle is the wax museum, especially the Gallery of Horrors. However, here the Gothic atmosphere is not the narrator-protagonist's "response" to a crime already committed – on the contrary, it functions as a means of foreshadowing the horror as it permeates the place before the victim's body is discovered. Jeff's imagination gives life to the wax figures, provoking irrational fear. When he walks about the Gallery of Horrors he even suffers from hallucinations: it not only seems to him that the wax figures are following him with their glass eyes, but also that he hears their footsteps. A dripping sound (not very disquieting in itself) scares him out of his wits: "Panic seized me [...] I hurried up the stairs in a tumult of echoes. I wanted light, and the knowledge of human presence in this choking stuffiness of wax and wigs" (Carr, 1984, p. 26). All this foreshadows the moment when Jeff's fantasies find their equivalent in reality: the discovery of Miss Martel's corpse posed as a wax figure, as one of museum exhibits.

The Brimstone Club assumes Gothic characteristics as well: Jeff's impressions and premonitions foreshadow the Egyptian's macabre death. The club itself is a place permeated by the atmosphere of evil: it was here where Regency rakes lured young and naive aristocratic maidens. At the time of action the club functions as a hotel, but all the same it arises bad associations in Jeff: "But, though now the club has fallen into peace, it is a peace more evil and morbid than of any hauntings of the past" (Carr, 1985, p. 12). It even assumes some aspects of a haunted place: when Jeff walks through the empty building at night it seems to him that he sees human shapes and smiling faces in the unlit rooms. It is not clear whether these are real people or optic illusions, but in the narrator's relation they resemble ghosts, once visible, once invisible, showing in the interiors lit only by street lamps outside. Later Jeff perceives the murderer in a similar way – the man disappears in an inexplicable way, like a ghost passing through walls, and when the protagonist finally finds the secret room where the execution is to take place, "Jack Ketch" is first seen as a monstrous, distorted shadow on the wall.

The rendez-vous of Jeff and Sharon (*It Walks by Night*) takes place, as the narrator puts it, at "[h]aunted Versailles, filled with the sound of wind and willows, with gilt and glass and the white finery of kings" (Carr, 1986, p. 161). Initially the word "haunted" does not carry ominous associations; Sharon's beauty takes the enamoured man into an older and more sublime world of "the white finery of kings". The surrounding reality does not induce terror, but it becomes half-substantial, like Faubourg St.-Germaine or the galleries of Castle Skull. However, Versailles soon becomes "haunted" in a more sinister sense: Sharon, standing in the garden, looks like a lifeless spectre – in a short fragment the word "dead" is repeated three times: "I could see the dead white of her face staring up at the moon.

It was like a dead face, except for the eyes, and she was like one dead except for the faint movement of the silver gown” (Carr, 1986, p. 164). The tryst site changes into a *locus horridus*, provoking irrational fear – the “haunted Versailles” is no more a world of beauty and refinement but a world of death. Indeed, the scene in the garden precedes immediately the discovery of Vautrelle’s body with the head nearly severed from it⁶.

Thus before the macabre discovery is made, the narrator creates an atmosphere foreshadowing the approaching horror, anticipating the climax. The result is not only foregrounding Jeff’s modelling activities as a narrator and a writer. Contrary to most contemporary detective tales, Carr’s novels do not present a crime as a mere (no matter how complicated) puzzle, an intellectual problem to be solved both by the fictitious detective and by the reader. The references to the conventions of Gothic fiction are at the same time references to a model of reality where the mimetic order has been violated by an alien element which is terrifying because it undermines the very essence of the universal harmony.

5. Final remarks

The character of Bencolin fits the reality created by Carr perfectly, adding to the sense of uncanny. His outlook, the way he dresses as well as his facial hair endow him with diabolical looks⁷. The associations with Mephistopheles may seem paradoxical since it is Bencolin who executes the law and restores the order of reality, entering the realm of chaos, crime and human hell – a hell that is doublefolded, as not only the external world seems to fall apart, but the same happens to the murderer’s personality. The motive of the crime is an irrational revenge which results from hatred often fed for many years (as in the case of Maleger or “Jack Ketch”). Contrary to most detective puzzles of the period, the crime scene is not arranged so carefully merely to hide the identity of the culprit – it is significant in itself, and so is the cruelty which underlies the murder.

In all the cases we have to do with a double (or double-folded) murder – a crime bears a crime, both being equally irrational. El Moulk kills one man and falsely accuses another because he is insanely jealous of a woman. Odette Duchene dies because the old-fashioned principles she confesses belong to the world that Miss Martel obsessively hates. Alison imprisons Maleger because the magician

⁶ Although the phrase “haunted Versailles” is motivated by the fact that Sharon’s villa is indeed at Versailles, the name together with the kind of death that Vautrelle met carries further associations – those with Louis XVI and his fate when “the white finery of kings” was overtaken by the bloody reign of the Terror.

⁷ This is how Jeff describes his friend in *Castle Skull*: “The black hair, parted in the middle and twisted up like horns. The long inscrutable eyes, with hooked brows drawn down. The high cheek-bones, the aquiline nose. The slow smile, stirring between small moustache and black pointed beard” (Carr, 1960, p. 6).

does not appreciate his Thespian talents. Laurent who claims: "It comes over me [...] sometimes as an impulse, often as a slow process of thought, that there would be pleasure in seeing blood – the blood of man, woman or beast" (Carr, 1986, p. 21) murders de Savigny and takes over his identity to re-marry a woman who once escaped his madness. The second wave of crime – the death of El Moulk, Alison, Laurent and Vautrelle, as well as Miss Martel and Galant – constitutes acts of revenge executed in a scenery straight from a horror tale, being the equivalent of the murderer's madness⁸.

Carr, using the pen of his narrator creates a world which loses its rational aspect or even its substantiality, as Jeff-narrator states more than once. For example, in *It Walks by Night* he speaks about the unreal nature of the case; the reaction to the atmosphere in the houses of de Savigny, Sharon and Terlin is respectively: "an aspect of unreality" (Carr, 1986, p. 79) "the unreality" (Carr, 1986, p. 124) "an unreal aspect" (Carr, 1986, p. 157) "a feeling of ghostliness" (Carr, 1986, p. 142). The world surrounding the protagonist becomes like a castle in a Gothic romance, where secret passages open unexpectedly, strange voices are heard, or spectres from another world seem to appear.

The final solution of the puzzle restores order, exorcising terror and presenting reality as rational after all (even if this rationality is guaranteed by Bencolin-Mephistopheles). It is so in other novels by Carr, too, where the genological uncertainty is introduced, but in the novels with Jeff Marle as the narrator the fact is stressed that the terror does not lurk outside man but within, that – like in the American variant of the Gothic – it has above all psychological dimension. And this on a double level: on the one hand the crime is committed out of irrational motives and it leads to further disaster, on the other – the irrational aspect is echoed by both the emotional reactions of Jeff-protagonist and by modelling reality by Jeff-narrator.

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⁸ The only one who remains sane is the real killer of Alison who shoots the actor and wounds him severely before Maleger exacts his revenge. This fact seems to suggest a justification of the act; Bencolin, too, knowing the identity of the murderer decides not to prosecute them.

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