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Violence as Spectacle: Happy Gothic in Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London*

ABSTRACT

Discussing the specificity of the Gothic plot in Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London*, this study focuses on the theatricality of crime which, by blending violence and laughter, by transforming policemen into performers and criminals into artists, also highlights the fact that various methods of detecting and law enforcement have thespian roots.

Keywords: Ben Aaronovitch, *Punch and Judy*, happy Gothic, postmillennial Gothic, theatricality of crime

1. Introduction: Theatricality of Crime

Writing about the pervading presence of crime in modern culture, M. L. Rio, author, thespian, and bardolator contends:

[w]e, as a culture, are obsessed with crime. In the age of cop dramas, legal thrillers, and murder documentaries, it can be difficult to tell where violence ends and entertainment begins. ... Theatre seems to satisfy our strange human appetite for physical and emotional violence. Theatre invites us inside a criminal mind. Theatre lets us get away with murder. ... So we turn to the theatre where we can live vicariously through the prince of Denmark, the king of Scotland, or the citizens of Rome. We witness their murders and regicides and assassinations, we feel their ambition and envy and outrage, and when all the 'carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts' are done, we get up and go home, satisfied (Rio, 2017).

Horace Walpole, the father of the Gothic, who worshipped Shakespeare as "the great master of nature," emphasised hybridity in the Bard's works, where the combination of theatricality and crime was further enhanced by a mixing of the comical and tragical. In his second preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, he wondered whether the "tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* would not lose a considerable share of their spirit and wonderful beauties, if the humour of the gravediggers, the

fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens, were omitted, or vested in heroics.”¹

Although by no means aspiring to follow in the footsteps of Shakespeare, in his *Rivers of London* (2011) Ben Aaronovitch offers an equally rewarding fusion of theatre and crime. Blending magic with elements of the detective story and the police procedural, his urban fantasy demonstrates that the presence of the supernatural, violence and spectacle has become an indelible part of the visage of the modern city and its peculiar Gothic character. The novel owes much of its impact to a plethora of ghosts whose actions not only provide an insightful, and frequently humorous, comment on the condition of humanity and justice in the metropolis of the twenty first-century but, by defining in the process the concept of crime itself, they also emphasise theatricality and ‘comic turn’ (Horner & Zlosnik, 2005, p. 1) as its crucial characteristics. Like other contemporary Gothic texts which often hybridise with comedy or romance, *Rivers of London* can be described as “comic, romantic, [or] celebratory,” thus reflecting Catherine Spooner’s requirements for “happy² Gothic” (*Post-Millennial Gothic*).³ The comic streak, built throughout the novel whenever the human world is confronted with the supernatural reality, serves not only to ‘debase’ traditional Gothic, reducing its terror-inducing power, but also to create hero who, in accordance with Freud’s findings, “refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality,” and compelled to suffer. Rather than being “affected by the traumas of the external world,” they will view such traumas as “no more than occasions [...] to gain pleasure” (Freud, 2010, p. 4545). Laughter not only reminds people of their humanity, but also strengthens the morale of the oppressed. As noted by Wylie Sypher (1980), their being “able to laugh at evil and error means [that they have] surmounted them”. (p. 54)

In this essay we argue that apart from the obvious presence of humour – verbal and situational – the category which best enhances the Gothic “lightness of being” in *Rivers of London* is the theatricality of crime which, by blending violence and laughter, by transforming policemen into performers and criminals into artists, also highlights the fact that various methods of detecting and law enforcement have thespian roots. Due to the devices of theatricality and humour, the murders “most foul” that the novel depicts are made less terrifying and, disquietingly,

¹ Retrieved May 1, 2014 from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Castle_of_Otranto/Preface.

² Coined by Spooner (2017), “happy Gothic” (known also as “debased Gothic”, “sellout Gothic”, or “Gothic lite”) is an “umbrella term” embracing such OED definitions as, ‘deep pleasure in, or contentment with, one’s circumstances’ as well as “happy” as a mobile, oppositional term that groups together a range of positively inclined emotions or moods that are unexpected in conventional Gothic critical discourse (p. 10).

³ A similar conviction was articulated by Botting (2008) in his *Limits of Horror*, stating that “Gothic texts do not want to shock or scare but are playful or even celebratory in tone.” (p. 10)

more fun. By distancing the reader from crime as a fact of life, and especially an act of cruelty, theatricality turns violence into a show, an entertaining spectacle, wrapping ugly truths in the fancy costume of a magical illusion which, together with deception and pretence, constitutes the very core of thespian delight.

2. The Gothic World of *Rivers of London*: Magic and Murder

In *Rivers of London*, the comic dimension of Gothic comes to the fore through Peter Grant, a detective narrator gifted “with a touch of the sight” (Aaronovitch, 2011, p. 9)⁴ whose rational, pragmatic personality is heavily tested by various weird incidents and creatures he comes across in his work. His encounter with magic begins when, guarding the scene of a bizarre murder, “Grant sees a ghost, who introduces himself as Nicholas Wallpenny, and claims to have witnessed the crime” (Nunez, 2016). While following the lead from this “corporeally challenged” (*RL*, p. 26) witness, Peter becomes recruited as an apprentice wizard in the Folly, a secret branch of the London Metropolitan Police handling supernatural incidents. In such a capacity he is to assist inspector Thomas Nightingale, his wizard superior, in finding what turns ordinary people into vicious killers. Here, the main thrust of the novel “concerns a revenant of a failed actor, [Henry Pyke], who taking the role of Mr Punch, [the protagonist in *The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy, of Punch and Judy* by Giovanni Piccini], forces random individuals to act out what are ultimately murderous scenes in a warped version of a classic play occurring mostly in his head” (Brazil, 2012).

Peter shares his investigative success with Lesley May, his attractive co-worker and friend whom Punch chooses to be his “Pretty Pol”, and eventually transforms her into a deadly enemy. However, before Grant realizes the danger she is in and, more importantly, the one she poses to others, the constables happen to watch *Punch and Judy*, eventually comprehending that each of the supernatural killings under their examination follows the play’s plotline.⁵ Thus everything begins with Toby the dog. Bitten on the nose, and thus magically “infected,” Brandon Coopertown kills William Skirmish and then his own wife and infant child. Punch stands behind the cycle courier Derek Shampwell’s kicking Dr Framline in the face and his lethal revenge on the biker. Punch, too, uses Michael Smith, a former crack addict and now a Hare Krishna, to beat Gurcan Tamiz to death with a large

⁴ Aaronovitch, B. (2011). *Rivers of London*. London: Gollancz, henceforth abbreviated as *RL*. All quotations, parenthetically followed by page numbers, come from this edition.

⁵ Chapter 8 of the novel opens with a summary of the original *Punch and Judy* plot: “Toby the dog bites Punch. Mr Punch beats the dog’s owner to death. Mr Punch then goes home, throws his baby out the window and then beats Judy (his wife) to death. Mr Punch falls off a horse and kicks a doctor in the eye. The doctor tries to beat Mr Punch with a stick, but Mr Punch grabs the stick and beats the doctor to death. Mr Punch rings a loud bell outside a rich person’s house. When a servant tells him off, Mr Punch beats the servant to death.” (*RL*, p. 204)

cow bell. Finally, he gets Lesley May to try to hang Peter on stage at the Royal Opera House. Comedia dell'arte becomes real horror.

Apart from pointing to the puppet figure of Mr Punch as the master mind behind all of the villainies, the play suggests an anti-Punch strategy to be implemented when the Piccini script, this time in its musical version, is performed at the Royal Opera. Unfortunately, Peter's plan to insert himself into the play and arrest the villain backfires, and the Opera night ends with the killer who, free and ready for mayhem, provokes a full-scale riot in central London. It takes a lot of magic skills and the help of the river spirits to finally destroy Mr Punch and send the vengeful Pyke back where he belongs.

Apart from the mystical killings they have to solve, Grant and Nightingale are called out on other supernatural incidents, one of which involves destroying a nest of vampires peacefully inhabiting a villa in Grassmere street, and the other brokering a peace "in the turf war between the two warring gods of the River Thames and their respective families" (Saxon, 2011). "It turns out that," as Brazil (2012) contends, "each river has its own god or spirit, with the Thames currently divided into two sections; one ruled by Mother and the other by Father Thames," and this thread, strictly connected with the novel's title, offers a collection of *Genii Locorum*, colourful deities who, along with enriching the supernatural aspect of the story, defy the traditional stereotypes of what ghosts should look and behave like, and thus highlight the comic turn of the novel.

During his chase after the revenant, Peter goes back in time to the very start of the city of London, where Father Thames (aka Baba), known then as Tiberius Claudius Verica, not only facilitates the spear which kills Punch, but also ceremonially sacrifices him to the river. Baba's son Oxley and his wife provide the information about Pyke and his feud with Charles Macklin, his rival performer, celebrity and playwright. Mother Thames, with not even a drop of Anglo-Saxon blood, is a glamorous Nigerian woman whose court embraces her many daughters (Tyburn, Fleet, Lea etc.), each as temperamental as the river after which she has been named. Amongst them is Beverly Brook whose beauty and charm soon entice Grant into thinking amorous thoughts and whose friendly nature makes her a perfect ambassador to negotiate an end to the turf war.

3. Aaronovitch's Gothic Villains

The world created by Aaronovitch is peopled by many supernatural characters. *Genii Locorum* and life-sucking vampires notwithstanding, there are many other spectral heroes amongst which the most vivid is Mr Punch, the miscreant of many names including Pulcinella, or "demon drink". Feeding on people's anger and frustration and using his magic, he specialises in the method called 'sequestration' through which he compels his victims to commit preposterous crimes. He thus not only turns them into murderers by proxy, but also into his clones, easily

recognisable by hooked noses and jutting chins. Sometimes they are found wearing a distinctly Punch-style red jacket and hat or heard shouting his famous (punch)line “That’s the way to do it,” before carrying out the murder.

Another equally Gothic perpetrator is restless Henry Pyke who frequently changes his identity (Wallpenny, Pyke, Punch). Both Punch and Pyke are characterised by excessive emotionality and, as will be seen, their connection with acting highlights both the performative and theatrical status of their crimes which, in fact, cannot be eradicated: their wickedness is revealed but their punishment is mainly symbolic. Even though killed in the end, Punch still triumphs and, resurrected from show to show, he still embodies the anarchic spirit of the London mob (the icon of which he has been for over three hundred and fifty years; Masters, 2012). Moreover, as befits the tradition of the carnivalesque and street performance (Punch is the real celebrity of his show), his gruesome actions are invariably co-orchestrated by the audience, voluntarily participating in the story, and thus exonerating him from exclusive guilt.

Aaronovitch bends the concept of the criminal and his crime even more by investing his villains with specific theatrical pasts and acting capabilities. Mr Punch, one learns, leads his double-life—on the page as a literary creation of Piccini, yet he also has his stage self—as a puppet character in the *Punch and Judy* show. Not as successful, Pyke’s late eighteenth century stage life was, however, more varied, Mr Punch being merely one of many parts he played. It was also marked by a feud with his great enemy, Macklin, by whom he was eventually murdered. And yet, although Henry’s return as a revenant is driven by his hope to avenge himself on his rival, he is also propelled by his vanity as well as love for the stage/theatre and limelight. In his modern self, he fulfills himself by acting out scenarios of Mr Punch for whom Pyke’s insatiated anger is a convenient channel to spread violence. Incidentally, it was Macklin’s play *The Married Libertine*—promoting, like *Punch and Judy*, betrayal, brutality and toxic relationships as themes that modern society also finds entertaining. When performed at the Royal Opera House, it triggered the displeasure of the present-day libertines, those two “killing gents” Wallpenny described, and thus started an avalanche of grotesque murders in modern London.

4. Theatrical Space: The Crime Scene

With the Covent Garden area being the novel’s heart of criminal activities, the readers discover the significance of such thespian landmarks as The Old Royal Theatre and the modern Royal Opera House in Bow Street. The centre of tourist London is “gothicized,” but not because its mysterious mansions are drowning in mist and darkness, with midnight reserved for horror specials. It becomes Gothic due to the magic crimes that take place there. Once unleashed, the evil force reaches out towards other places and streets near the Piazza frequented by crowds

of theatre-goers, including The Urban Outfitters Pub, Sheekey's Oyster Bar, and Seven Dials. And it is against another famous site, the portico of the Actor's (St Paul's) Church, that a pale figure Grant takes for a street performer (sic!) turns out to be the ghost who initiates Peter into magic. When Grant informs Nicholas about the witness' duty to give a statement, the latter remarks that "that might be a bit of a problem ... seeing that [he is] dead" (*RL*, p. 6). He even "steps forward into the light," demonstrating that "he was transparent" (*RL*, p. 7).

Enhancing the Gothic hybridity of the scene by intermixing modern-day, realistic and supernatural elements (Ascari, 2008, p. 58; Lurz, 2014), this humorous confrontation of the two worlds illustrates the parodic potential of Aaronovitch being deployed as a key aspect of comic Gothic.⁶ The "cockney geezer," as Peter describes Wallpenny, so relates – in the dramatic present—how one of the two acquaintances he saw killed the other: the "killing gent," he recalls, puts on a cap and a red jacket, quietly and swiftly, "comes up behind the first gent and ... knocks his head clean off." (*RL*, p. 8). "Even for a ghost," he claims, "it was a terrible sight. I swear on my own death... Off came his head and up went the blood." (*RL* 8) Yet, he continues, "That wasn't the worst of it... There was something uncanny about the killing gent". And as a spirit, Wallpenny "knows the uncanny when he sees it" (*RL*, pp. 8–9). The man, Nicholas reports, "didn't just change his hat and coat, he changed his face. Now tell me that ain't uncanny." (*RL*, p. 9)

If during their first encounter Peter had paid more attention to the badge of a dancing skeleton in Wallpenny's lapel ("caught mid-caper" hence suggestive of more performance, mischief and theft), he would have been more cautious before this "goth" (*RL*, p. 6), the very term⁷ linking Nicholas to spectacle and supernatural horror. When, finally, Grant realises Henry's striking similarity to Nicholas, it dawns on him that "[i]t was always Henry Pyke, right from the start, from the portico of the Actor's Church", and that his confession at the church "had been just that – a scene, a performance" (*RL*, p. 366), a mere dramatic act put on for Peter's benefit. And yet, taking advantage of the oldest of theatrical strategies known to the actor—of masquerading as another, of creating illusion and deception (Świąder 2012)—Nicholas was disarmingly truthful, describing his activities as "performances [which] have hitherto been confined to the street" (*RL*, p. 366).

Grant's suspicions concerning Wallpenny become confirmed by Mr Punch himself, who admits: "I let Pyke do all the deception, lives to act, poor thing." (*RL*, p. 367) Henry, too, states that in his invasion of Lesley May's mind, as a male, he

⁶ "Parody of the convention functions as a key aspect of comic Gothic because through repetition with critical difference it foregrounds the production of the modern subject through discourse, an exploitation of stylized theatricality of the Gothic device is what characterized the comic turn of the Gothic" (Horner & Zlosnik, 2005, p. 9).

⁷ See Urban dictionary, retrieved December 11, 2015 from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Goth>.

was attracted by “the challenge a female role always was ... and a modern woman doubly so” (*RL*, p. 376). Interestingly, Pyke’s thespian mentality triumphs over his vengefulness when he lets himself be persuaded to leave her.

“Listen, Henry,” I said, “This is your moment, your *big exit*”. ... “I don’t want to go,” said Henry Pyke. “You must,” I said, “That’s the mark of true greatness in an actor, knowing, down to the precise moment when to make his exit.” “How wise of you, Peter,” said Henry Pyke. “That is the true mark of genius, to give oneself to one’s public, but to retain that private side, that space, the unknowable ...”
 “To leave them wanting more”, I said, trying to keep desperation out of my voice. “Yes,” said Pyke, “*to leave them wanting more* [emphasis added] ... And then the mouthy git was gone. Right on cue” (*RL*, p. 380).

Living for his “big exit,” perversely, Pyke, the revenant actor, nourishes his desire for fame, even if now he can only give himself to his public through violence, enacting his private drama about his need to belong, to be talked about, to leave others “wanting more”.

5. Policeman on Duty: A Ghostly Comedy Of Manners

With the detectives’ plan to actually insert themselves into *Punch and Judy* as members of the cast, the theatricality of the rendering of a crime and its detection acquires a new dimension in the novel. However, even when so exposed, shown in the limelight, the actions of the people on the stage are by no means easier to understand; quite the contrary, they become even more ambivalent. Influenced by magic, both police and perpetrators are moved by the same driving force—an attempt to deceive the opponent and maneuver him into an ambush.

Acting as Jack Ketch (a homonym of the policeman’s successful “catch”), and true to the notorious hangman’s name, Grant hopes to apprehend the villain. However, the performance at the Opera is disrupted by a powerful compulsion spell, strong enough to “hold over two thousand in thrall” (*RL*, p. 307). Transfixed, zombie-like, the people watch the performance with glazed eyes, applauding or stamping their feet, manipulated into whatever Punch demands from them. The increasing aggressiveness of the audience is further enhanced by the situation on the stage, where Grant discovers the true meaning of stage fright when, forced to literally run for his life, he must defend himself not only against Pyke and Inspector Sewall, but the “whole principal cast howling for my blood” (*RL*, p. 319).

Possessed by Pyke, Lesley no longer personifies Law and Order. Peter’s trusted friend may still be wearing her police uniform, yet she is determined to eliminate Grant: he survives his execution only because he can liberate himself from “the theatrical noose” in which he has been hanged. On the stage, Lesley, whose impersonation of Mr Punch really colours the Gothic concept of the damsel in distress, tells the story of Punch Pyke’s way, interspersing it with Henry’s

personal history of his own grievance against the hated Macklin—said to be the ghost of the Opera—whom the revenant wants to provoke into appearing. Thus the original play changes into Pyke’s private recital, a show for the benefit of Macklin who, unfortunately, ignores Henry’s efforts.

Eventually, Pyke/Lesley sets the roaring crowd loose on London (“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. I think it’s time to go out and play,” *RL*, p. 315) and the “better class of riot” (*RL*, p. 321) creates its own theatre of violence and laughter when people fight with one another in the streets, looting or setting shops and cars on fire.

Convinced of the ineffectiveness of the police to restore order, Pyke prophesies their failure. Addressing Grant as the embodiment of the Law, he declares: “Over the last few months, I’ve come to think of you as less of an arch-enemy and more as the *comic relief* [emphasis added], the slightly dim character that comes on with the dog and does a funny turn while the real thespians are getting changed.” (*RL*, p. 316). Moreover, perceiving the relationship between the perpetrators and the police as a kind of game, Pyke argues

“We are playing our role, . . . we are Mr Punch, the irrepressible spirit of riot and rebellion. It is our nature to cause trouble, just as it is your nature to try and stop us.”

“You’re killing people,” I said.

“Alas,” said Lesley. “All art requires sacrifice. And take it from one who knows – death is more of a bore than a tragedy.” (*RL*, pp. 316–317)

As if he had known de Quincy’s *Murder as Fine Art*, Pyke the criminal thinks of himself as an artist, defining himself through the freedom of “riot and rebellion” and seeing the police merely as the repressive force, trying to stop what is natural.

6. Patchwork Personality and Open ‘Theatre’

Lesley/Pyke’s performance at the Opera House—her handling of such parts as the Professor, “Pretty Pol”, Pyke and Punch – best illustrates the composite nature of a criminal whom Grant defines as “a patchwork personality” (*RL*, p. 317). A different meaning of ‘patchwork’ is described when magic attacks the Northern Line of the London underground and the presence of the “demon drink” (*RL*, p. 341) translates into rude and nasty behaviour by the passengers. In a crowded train, where commuters dance the dance of trying to keep their armpits out of each other’s faces, averting their eyes from dandruff or gagging on the offensive smells of sweat, urine and excrement, the worst side of people does not take long to reveal itself. For instance, taking her chance to experience some erotic satisfaction a woman begins to rub herself against Grant, attempting “to ground her hips into his crotch” while a white boy with dreads, leaning towards him, “with a great deliberation poked me in the face with his index finger. ‘Poke,’ he said, and giggled. Then he did it again” (*RL*, p. 341).

Violence and laughter are a heady concoction on the Northern Line where, magically, Peter hears the answers to the vital questions about the identity of the criminal and specificity of his murders. He believes that “there must be something behind Pyke”, the conclusion confirmed by the ranting drunk with Mr Punch’s face who declares “Of course there is (...) That would be me” (*RL*, p. 340). Thus, paradoxically, the villain himself happens to provide essential clues for solving Peter’s “whodunit.” More significantly, since his catching a revenant would hardly be possible without magic, Peter must know how to detect the presence of the so called vestigium, an “afterimage” of “violence and laughter” that the uncanny leaves (*RL*, p. 38). Trained in basic spell casting, learning to use magic as weapon and in self-defense, Grant gradually turns into a performer who, practising his skills, goes from one demonstration to another: this adds to the novel’s atmosphere as a show which, depending on their luck, may be terrifying or enjoyable for the audience. When, for example, working on the *lux*, Peter finally produces a werelight, “a perfect globe of light,” it makes his day. Amazed and shocked, yet also delighted, he thinks, “Fuck me ... I can do magic” (*RL*, p. 138).

7. Performances of the Magic Detective

Apart from the *lux*, Peter also gets to know and apply, the power of *seducere*, the compulsion spell used by magical creatures to make others do what they are told. As a “magic detective” he has what Lurz (2014) calls “a comic combination of skills”: a passion for the scientific method and a millennial’s facility with technology (Waterhouse, 2012) and this scientific component of magic is even highlighted by the fact that Isaac Newton is presented as the patron saint of wizards. (p. 79).

One fascinating case of Grant’s performance is the necromantic ritual (*RL*, pp. 211–219) he performs to summon Nicholas whose interrogation at the cemetery of the Actor’s Church reveals important information about the revenant’s name. “How’s ... death treating you?” Peter begins his examination, to which Wallpenny responds: ““Fair enough’, [...]. Can’t complain [...]. This being the Actor’s Church and all, we’re never short of an evening entertainment” (*RL*, p. 219). Nicholas mentions a visit of a guest artist, one Henry Pyke, making Grant wonder whether Pyke is planning “a long run” and speculate on the words which become clear only during the performance at the Opera, the words about Pyke having “bought the theatre,” his being “strangely hard on his co-stars” and his having “got a role in mind for [Peter]” (*RL*, p. 219).

8. Violence As Spectacle

With time Grant also learns the *impello* which involves making an object float and the spell actually saves Nightingale’s life, depriving the shooter’s gun of its deadly accuracy. In addition, watching the deaths or autopsies of the Punch-possessed

killers, Peter becomes an expert at recognizing the *dissimulo*, which, responsible for the greatest devastation of the body, moulds flesh and bone into a specific shape and appearance. For all of the witnesses involved, the death of the cycle courier becomes a spectacle of horror, its intensity all the greater for the slow motion in which it is registered:

The [man's] chin seemed to bulge, I heard the distinct cracking of bone and teeth as it just jutted forward into a sharp point. The lips twisted into a snarl as the nose stretched until it was almost as long. It wasn't a real face, it was a caricature. The mouth opened and I could see inside to the red ruin of his jaw. 'That's the way to do it!', he shrieked and lifted his stick...his face slumped like a wet papier mâché. (*RL*, pp. 158–159)

Transformed into human caricatures, this and the other accidental killers are rewarded by their “big exit,” their facelessness suggestive of the consequences of the vice, yet also of the status of the villain as everyman.

9. Human and Ghostly Institutions: Magical Interactions

His growing awareness of the very real presence of magic forces Grant to learn all he can about the various institutions helpful in fighting revenants who, naturally, do not fall under human legislation. Among others he visits a ghostly magistrate still occupied by Colonel Sir Thomas De Veil who trades in justice and is as corrupt as he used to be at the height of his power in the seventeenth century; he subsists off the magic given him in return for various services and transactions, such as signing an arrest warrant, for instance. Dealing with de Veil reveals a magic side to the ghostly business. In the parlour, which seems empty to the uninitiated, the figure of the judge with glittering, keen eyes materialises when addressed, “more transparent [Peter observes] than my friend Wallpenny, thinner and more ghostly.” (*RL*, p. 259)

“I'm looking for a warrant,” said Nightingale.

...

“And which miscreant are we looking to apprehend?” asked De Veil.

“Henry Pyke, Your Honour, who goes by the name of Punch and also by the name of Pulcinella.”

De Veil's eyes glittered and his lips twitched, “Are we arresting puppets now, Captain?”

“Let us say we are arresting the puppet master, Your Worship.”

A quill appeared in De Veil's ghostly hand, and with a flourish he scratched out a warrant. (*RL*, pp. 259–260)

Peter's werelight, which the judge greedily devours, is His Worship's magical payment (*RL*, p. 259) and the warrant, still blank when unrolled, is the constable's passport into the play in which Mr Punch's next victim is to be a policeman trying to arrest him, the role Grant chooses for himself.

10. Conclusion

It seems that Peter Grant's exposure to the Gothic London is, from the very beginning, categorised as part of a spectacle in which, in trying to come to terms with the discovery that "ghosts are real", he feels "like a man watching a magic show." He clarifies this feeling: "I'd expected a magician to step out from behind the curtain and ask me to pick a card, any card. I wasn't ready to believe in ghosts, but that's the thing about empirical experience – it's the real thing" (*RL*, pp. 33–34). The magicians Grant confronts in *Rivers of London* are Punch and Pyke and the card they deal, their "real thing", is murder most foul which, imbued with humour and theatricality, loses some of its nasty sting.

As befits the post-millennial Gothic, the readers laugh, yet their merriment does not allow them to forget about the many serious issues they need to confront. There is, for instance, the troubling awareness of the closeness to the uncanny or other invisible horrors, and along with this the conviction that the "incorporation of the monstrous into the normal results in (...) the dissolution of difference, so that (...) norm and monster become indistinguishable in a proliferation of differentiations and hybrids." (Botting, 2008, p. 10). This prediction of man's monstrosity is enhanced by the focus on the ghostly, which, exposing the inhuman nature of crime, allows one to explore it as a metaphor of unfulfillment and a key to the understanding of the criminal psyche: the psyche of a man who has turned into a ghost, who has replaced dialogue with murder and who, watching the spectacle of his own creation, no longer recognises violence as the distinctive trait of his performance.

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