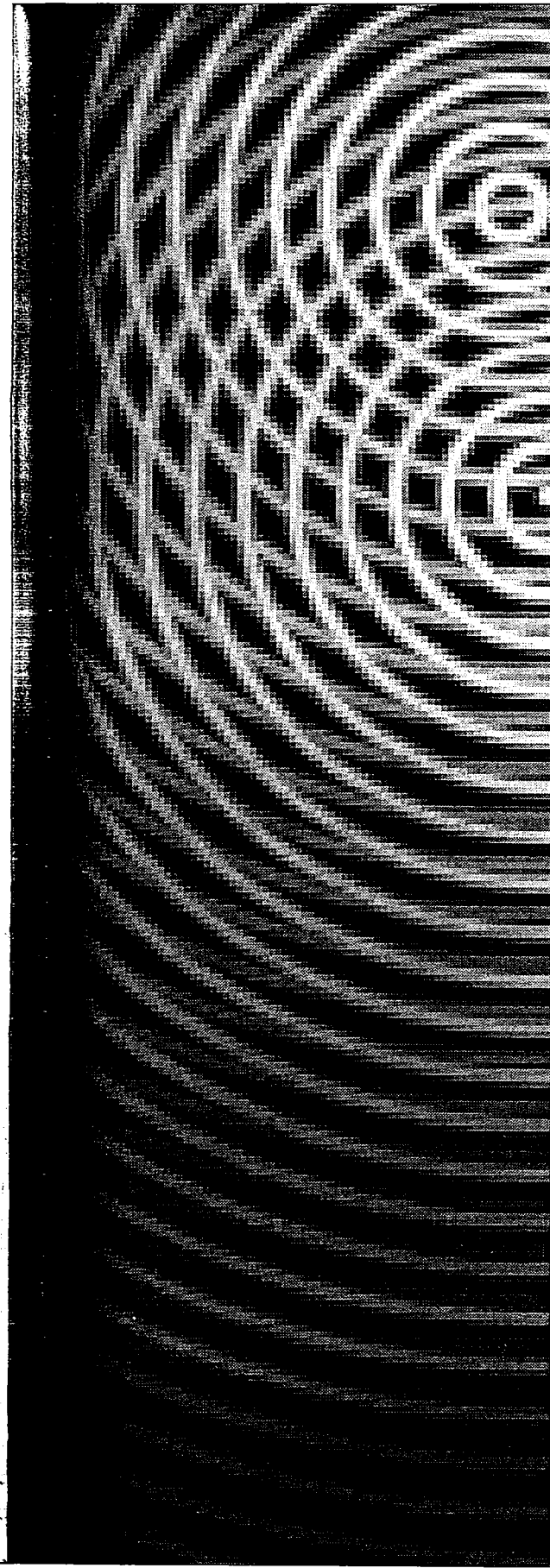


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The theme of live-burial in William Gaddis' "Carpenter's Gothic"

The idea of live-burial, so recurrent in the structure of traditional Gothic fiction, is undoubtedly one of the representative features of postmodern literature. This can clearly be felt in *Carpenter's Gothic*, a novel that "affects" its reader in the negative sense, as it aptly fulfills its aim of producing the effects of unpleasantness, discomfort and malaise. Readers are unexpectedly pushed into a whirlpool where they witness a sequence of short and very violent scenes following one another very fast, undermining every attempt to cling to any of the points of view presented in the narrative.

The title of the novel refers to the architectonic style of the house where Liz and Paul live -- or rather, where they seem to be buried alive. It is a house "built to be seen from the outside," a rustic unsuccessful copy of those grand Victorian houses that were also awkward adaptations of a frustrated ideal of mediaeval Gothic. According to another character in the novel, Mr. McCandless, the reason why the American Gothic style, in architecture, differs so much from its original inspiration is that all the builders had "were the simple dependable old material, the wood and their hammer and saws and their clumsy ingenuity bringing those grandiose visions the masters had left behind down to a human scale with their own little inventions¹.

This simile applies to the people we meet in the novel, all of them cherishing dreams and expectations they are unable to fulfill. Liz and Paul, the couple in question, are never at all focused as a *couple*, in the sense that it is

utterly impossible for them to establish a successful kind of personal relationship. In an analogy to the architecture of the house, the same distortion that has affected the principles of Gothic art seems now to contaminate people's understanding of the several circumstances that cause them to feel the way they do, and still be able to reach the other and build a satisfactory life together. In both cases, what has originally been designed to fulfill the aims of harmony, beauty and simplicity has

¹ William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986. p. 227.) All further quotations from the novel refer to this edition.

been undermined and reached a distorted and pathological state of ugliness.

The discomfort experienced in the house may well stand for a symptom of social disease. In Liz's kitchen we are practically suffocated by the turmoil of the horrible stories portrayed by all sorts of newscasts. The radio is on, TV is on, several magazines and newspapers are open on the table. The telephone is constantly ringing to warn them of the bills to pay. In a time when real life can prove far more scaring than any sort of Gothic fiction, people are justified in their fear of not being able to manage economically, of losing their jobs, of dying in car accidents, of being stolen, injured, or murdered on the streets. Liz herself has grown so claustrophobic that it is a real adventure, for her, to walk out of the door towards the mailing box, and then to run back home.

The narrative structure of *Carpenter's Gothic* is very dense. The impact of the intention to shock is heightened to grotesque proportions, so that the novel may keep up with the horror to be found in the dark aspects of current daily life.

One of the techniques used to reach this purpose is the exacerbate pace of the narrative, marked by a plethora number of different voices preaching different over-simplified ideologies, drowning us in a sea of discourse. In an interview with Anders Stephanson, Fredric Jameson refers to such intensities of highs and lows as to a kind of *drug language*, "a non-human experience of limits beyond which you get dissolved."² He reminds us that this amazing shift of abortive cuts is found not only in literature, but in all means of artistic representation, from the music of John Cage to the architectonic notion of space displayed in the Bonaventure Hotel, or in the pace in the exchanges in TV ads (they ranged from one per 7.5 seconds, in the sixties, to 3.5, or less, in the nineties). Such marked changes in the norms of aesthetic representation, though highly subject to controversy, are definitely one of the marks

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the new logic of Capitalism*. New Left Review, n. 146, Jul. Aug. 1984, pp. 53-92.

of contemporary life. They seem to point towards a new logic of subliminality, characterized by the disappearance of depth, both visual and interpretive. Jameson refers to the drawings by Andy Warhol as an instance of the phenomenon.

In this sense, *Carpenter's Gothic* presents a variety of different voices that never manage to get together so as to form a dialogue. Ideas never meet ideas, the "I" never meets the "You." Several monologues, constant and simultaneous, fill the pages apparently to no purpose, so wordy that they operate as a parody of the annihilation of personality. Ideas grow distorted, and so emptied of meaning that they may eventually signify anything, even their own paradox. The growth of this pernicious substance -- words -- is illustrated by a recurrent cancer imagery, that ends up by engulfing and suffocating the characters, which seem to be all drowning in logos.

Tension is immensely increased whenever Paul enters the house. Although we hardly have any action, he is always in a hurry, extremely tense, at the verge of a breakdown, the rhythm of his speech oppressively increasing to an extortionate speed.

Paul's neurotic behavior is a consequence of his return from a traumatic experience in a war, and reflects the social problem ill-adjusted people stand for. His aggressiveness, that granted him so much while in the army, and granted him prizes and the notion that he was a hero, is useless -- or rather, harmful -- in daily life. He is now unemployed, living on his disability check, constantly trying to cheat security in a pathetic attempt to lead a decent life, so that he may again buy the products imposed on him through the advertisements in the newspaper, in the mail-box, on the radio, or on TV. He gets then so hardened up that he ends up believing that, in life, you either find a way to succeed or you are terminally rejected. That is when Paul meets Rev. Ude's sect, preaching that "an organized conspiracy is under way to destroy the Constitution of the U.S. We are witnessing a conspiracy to destroy all our churches, our free press and our rights of assembling peacefully before God. Will you let this happen?" (CG, p. 203) Rev. Ude's crusade offers Paul a cause to champion, makes him feel he

belongs to something, and pays him a large sum of money to cling to their ideology.

Meanwhile Paul's wife, Liz, tries to preserve the old fundamental values. She tries to see people as people, to keep to her friends, her husband and her family, and fails soundly in the attempt. Economically, she is a wealthy heiress who, in fact, cannot make use of what belongs to her because of several intricate legal procedures. Her brother only comes to her to ask for money, she is beaten by her husband. Besides being afraid of leaving the house, she is also arrested in it because she has the task of answering the phone and keep the messages from Rev. Ude to Paul. She is also afraid of letting her hand into the mail-box since that day when Paul told her a snake was found in it. It is her husband, now, who brings -- and selects -- her correspondence.

Another interesting character in *Carpenter's Gothic* is Mr. McCandless, who represents the disillusionment of the intellectual who finds out there is no room left for his idealism. He then falls into the trap of mistaking any commitment to any possible value for a plea of compliance with the system. His view of religion, for instance, is radically opposed to the one offered by Paul, who has found true religion in Rev. Ude's Capitalist ideology of collecting money enough to save himself and his fellow men. According to McCandless' Marxist rhetoric, "since the Portuguese heard about those great silver and gold and copper mines in the kingdom running up the Zambezi valley and came in with a few missionaries and a free trade monopoly from the Pope, a missionary's killed and it's a war for anybody opposing propagation of the true faith (...) if you want that nice line between the truth and what really happens." (CG, pp. 190-1)

Like Paul, he also oversimplifies complex matters and creates his own reduced version of reality. Both Paul and McCandless go so far as to write didactic books about the things they claim to believe. Meanwhile, while they argue about political and ideological implications and about the relation between religion and power, they totally ignore the human dimensions of the question: they are so busy

saving their fellow men that they simply lack the time to care about them.

Wrong as they are, however -- or rather, precisely *because* they manage to grow so wrong, Paul and McCandless somehow manage to fit the system. Their neurotic behavior seems far more normal than Liz's, who pays with her life for refusing to do to life what these two men do to religion, as they shrink complex matters into a mere misrepresentation, where secondary issues grow more relevant than the things that really matter. That is why her death, in the end of the novel, is allegorically associated with the death of the white dove.

Liz is the only character who seems to display some kind of humanized feelings for the situation of their friend, Cettie, who is dying in hospital after a car accident. Paul is only able to concentrate on the political implications of the question, now that Cettie's family is suing a car company for twelve million dollars. At the board of this company sits Mr. Grimes, a supporter of Paul's boss, Rev. Ude. Therefore, any possible embarrassment might threaten his job.

Constantly exposed to tension and pressure, each character in the novel reacts his or her own way, and all of them seem to fail. Paul loses his own measure as an individuality, Liz is unable to pass beyond her doorsteps, and McCandless becomes cynical and misanthropic. Liz's brother, Billy, becomes a late hippie who lives on the money he gets from his friends. As for the others, they simply try to adapt to the new rule of "stupidity conquering ignorance." (CG, p. 214)

The world of Late Capitalism presented in this kind of fiction leads us into the impression that contemporary life and Gothic literature have indeed much in common. The horror hinting at the total isolation of the individual brings the feeling that we may be taken unaware anywhere and everywhere, leading us to the philosophical conclusion that we either collapse through anxiety, like Liz, or just ignore the threat, like Paul and McCandless, get dehumanized, and follow the river's flow.

Since there seems to be no appearance of a solution for this paradox, the tone of the narrative develops into that of a mock parody, and all we can do is to take the whole thing as a morbid joke.

The tragic flaw intrinsic to *Carpenter's Gothic* relates to our conspicuous inability to integrate such irreconcilable models as the Marxist and Hegelian levels of dialectical thought. Matter or spirit, which is ultimately to prevail? Apparently, it is not in Liz and Paul's dilemma that we are going to find the answer. The contribution of this novel, however, is to evince what Jakobson would call the problem of communication between the emitter and the receptor. In the context of *Carpenter's Gothic*, like in the context of our current social life, this gap seems impossible to be covered up. On the other hand, we feel this urgent need to start thinking *complementarily*, establishing interrelated connections between the signs and that "something" of the thing-itself which always eludes the grip of language.

It is still very difficult to devise the new thought procedures to be established in the next millennium, or the implications in the course of our philosophical, scientific or artistic development. They will certainly demand, however, a discipline of thinking at once positively and negatively -- which, according to Jameson -- will imply a new kind of vocabulary. Meanwhile, we are left with the uncomfortable sense of a dead-end we find in *Carpenter's Gothic*.

One of the interesting achievements of the novel is the metafictional intercourse between *Carpenter's Gothic*, sanctioned standard literature, and reality. This shaking of the traditional boundaries that separate literature from life, or experimental art from established art, can be found in two episodes of the novel. The first relates to the 'Tearful Mom' affair, and the second to the scene where Liz watches a rerun of George Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* on TV.

'Tearful Mom' is a new nation-wide celebrity, Mrs. Fickert. Her son, Wayne, is accidentally drowned in one of Rev. Ude's baptism ceremonies. Through an efficient interference of the media, the boy is transformed into a martyr of the Christian cause. Mrs. Fickert, the

'tearful Mom', cannot help being pleased with all the attention she is getting. She is even invited to play the role of Wayne's mother in a film about his life, on the condition that she agrees to go to Actor's Studio so as to learn how to play the role.

It becomes very difficult, after the mixing of so many dimensions, to stick to orthodox conceptions about structure, or genre: the medley of unusual monologues presented in *Carpenter's Gothic* might as well be seen as a long one-act play. And it seems definitely open to intercourse with other kinds of art, such as the architectural simile implied in the title of the novel, or the contrast with the perennial Romantic ideals aroused by the reference to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Liz and Paul are in their bedroom, while the television is on, showing this rerun of *Jane Eyre*, starring Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles. Half of Liz's attention is with Paul, half with the movie. The hero of the film is sometimes referred to as Mr. Rochester, sometimes as Orson Welles. The description of the scenes is a direct collage from Brontë's text. Within the movie, actor and characters are fused in one; outside the movie, while Paul keeps on talking, it becomes impossible to identify when the "she" in the narrative refers to Liz or to Jane.

-- That's telling them, Elton, came down the hall to her from below, -- Jew liberal press... and she was up to get the door closed, back to shy an uncovered breast from the abrupt gaze of Orson Welles enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared, and steel clasped, with stern features and a heavy brow (...)

-- No my, my knee not so... she breathed sharply, -- how it, bruises... His head dropped there, left her face ashen over his shoulder in the light playing up the glistening strain of his back from the screen where a demonic laugh, low, suppressed, and deep, came uttered it seemed at the very keyhole of the chamber door. As she gazed, the unnatural sound was reiterated, and she knew it came from behind the panels. (*C.G.*, p. 94)

As Jane investigates the source of the noise she finds out that Mr. Rochester's room is on fire, (a hint of what is going to happen to Liz at the end of the novel), while Liz complains because Paul is smoking in the bed, while no one knows for sure if she has made love to her

husband, to Mr. Rochester or to Orson Welles in the bargain. Later on, because both are constantly smoking a cigar, she is going (quite mistakenly) to identify McCandless with Mr. Rochester.

The contrast between the Gothic horror of Liz and Paul's life and the idealized Gothic glamour of *Jane Eyre* is remarkable. The Romantic, faultless, attunement of Jane and Rochester makes it clear that the link the two novels lies in the *in absentia* elements, in the things they lack. Such as the wish for a time and a place where the needs of belonging, of establishing consistent personal relations and of building one's own sense of identity is finally fulfilled.

What we see in *Carpenter's Gothic* is too exaggerated to fit reality, but it is unquestionably a parody of it. And here is where the Gothic element sneaks from fiction into our real life, as we realize that in many ways we are Liz, so we are in danger of being destroyed. Or, what is even worse: that in many ways we are Paul, and the monster is within us.

Of course, there is nothing new about the remark, since this close connection between literature and art has always existed. The novelty refers merely to the new technique, this substitution of *affect* for *effect*, which is so drastic, so striking, and also so much subject to controversy.

In this sense, *Carpenter's Gothic* is representative of the whole corpus of contemporary, postmodern fiction. Questions are then inevitably raised, referring to the end of history -- in our case, to the end of the narrative. The issue concerning the criteria of literary quality is also extremely delicate. But, in spite of all the relevance of these new problems posed, we cannot avoid acknowledging two things.

The first is that we simply do not know where to go from here. Not only in literature, or in the varied means of artistic expression, but in all fields of human experience. Our values are changing, and so is our philosophy, science, or the way we experience reality. A new time demands a new wording, new signs, which are clearly barely being designed.

The second point to be assimilated is that our current model of reality, based on logocentricity and on an analytic process of investigation, is not broad enough to account for the complexity of the world. It has never been, but the excess of matter that exceeds rationalization has now, apparently, been stretched to its utmost limit, provoking the impressions of anguish, forlornness and immediate danger we so poignantly feel in *Carpenter's Gothic*.

Therefore, although we do not seem to have the faintest idea where to go from here, some courses of procedure seem to be delineated. In the field of human sciences, for instance, the most privileged minds are beckoning with the fusion of ideologies which, not so long ago, appeared to be openly incompatible. Sigmund Freud in his studies about dreams, Claude Lévi-Strauss and his acceptance of "scandals" in natural life, Ferdinand Saussure and the delineation of the gap between significant and signified -- these thinkers, among so many others, warn us to resist the temptation to provide easy equations to account for reality. Even among recent and contemporary theorists we find several alternative means of dealing with the problem. Derrida proposes a reevaluation of the concept of "center", concentrating on the analysis of *différance*. Althusser dares mingle structuralism with phenomenology. Morin regards ideological inconsistency as a strategy of survival, and Fredric Jameson proposes an articulation between Hegelian and Marxist dialectics. Physics, in recent studies about Chaos, is trying to cope with this new challenge.

Therefore, one of these days, we may possibly be agreeably struck with the possibility of an atonement of the "I" with the "Other." Meanwhile, we have gone hopefully as far as to sense what Jameson defines as his slogan that "difference relates."

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