



TRANS-

Revue de littérature générale et comparée

12 | 2011

La trace

“Into the dwelling of the hermit”: Imaginative Space in E.A. Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Jana Speth



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/trans/488>

DOI: 10.4000/trans.488

ISSN: 1778-3887

Publisher

Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle

Electronic reference

Jana Speth, “Into the dwelling of the hermit”: Imaginative Space in E.A. Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *TRANS-* [Online], 12 | 2011, Online since 08 July 2011, connection on 10 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/488> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.488>

This text was automatically generated on October 10, 2024.

The text and other elements (illustrations, imported files) are “All rights reserved”, unless otherwise stated.

“Into the dwelling of the hermit”: Imaginative Space in E.A. Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Jana Speth

- 1 Throughout Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the reader’s neuropsychological creation of the superordinate imaginative space is induced by the main narrative that revolves around the House of Usher. The secluded mansion metaphorically represents the imaginative capacity of the human mind. Imagination requires that we withdraw from reality, and the Usher mansion is far removed from the world. It can be found far away from civilization, after a long ride “through a singularly dreary tract of country” (U 49).
1
- 2 The building is effortlessly constructed by the individual reader’s unique visual imagination as soon as the solitary narrator finds himself “at length [...] within view” of the dreary mansion (U 49). In order to complete his imagination of the house, however, the reader has to deny the fictional quality of the building. The reader tunes out that he is *just reading* a piece of literary fiction by following the narrator in negating any “half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible” (U 49). Approaching Usher must be experienced as the “after dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into every-day life – the hideous dropping off of the veil” (U 49). The fictional must become real, while everything in its vicinity is declared insubstantial.
- 3 Between reason and imagination, there is a borderland full of “unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime” (U 49). From the outside, the building looks barred shut. The imaginative space is turned inward, unaffiliated with the external world, encapsulating the intimate. Only the non-reflections of its “vacant eye-like windows” are mirrored in the linguistic repetition that provokes re-visualization in the reader. The “lurid tarn” shows the “remodelled and inverted images” of the Usher mansion, an imaginative space in which the laws of physics are irrelevant.

- 4 Our visualization of the architecture of the imaginative space depends, paradoxically, on the visualization of its bleak desolation:

I looked upon the scene before me - upon the *mere* house, and the *simple* landscape features of the domain - upon *bleak* walls - upon the *vacant*, eye-like windows - upon *a few* rank sedges - and upon *a few white trunks* of decayed trees [...]

(U 49, Emphasis added.)

- 5 Our mental picture of the House of Usher is painted by the narrator with short, quick dashes. Despite the fact that we get relatively few architectural hints from the narrative, we can visualize the building in a striking richness of detail. Let us explore this particular dimension of Plato's problem: the phenomenon that the human brain builds the dynamic architecture of an imaginary world, even though it gets little - and very abstract - stimulus input. When we follow the narrator's description of the mansion, we do not learn much about its features:

I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine-tangled web-work from the eaves.

(U 51)

- 6 The brain can work with the associations generated through the information that the building appears quite old: the brain will add colour to the discoloured, construct angles and proportion surfaces.

- 7 While we can visualize the degeneration of the building which the narrator describes, our mental image will be held, like the fictional House of Usher, "apart from any extraordinary dilapidation" (U 45). The disparate, fragmentary elements described in the text are woven into a seamless virtual scenario by the synthesizing capacity of our brain, which draws upon our deductive skills, our general knowledge, and our creativity. The mental mansion is modified and completed until it appears as fully intact as the fictional building - in spite of the fact that we can observe "a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones" (U 51).

- 8 It seems as though E.A. Poe was well aware of the discrepancy between text and mental imagery. The narrator of *The Fall of the House of Usher* acknowledges that mere words cannot describe a painting accurately enough for the recipient to arrive at a satisfying mental copy of the artwork:

From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vagueness at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered not knowing why - from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of written words.

(U 55)

- 9 A writer has to blaze a reverse trail as far as he can. Poe thus valued the art of presenting what we today call *adequate stimulus material* to greatest mental effect:

In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed [...]²

- 10 A powerful writer can arrange the limited amount of words in his text in such a way that the sensitive recipient is provoked into imagining an incomparably rich and detailed virtual world. This forceful effect is alluded to in the beginning epigraph:

Son cœur est un luth suspendu;
 Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.
 De Béranger.
 (U 49)

- 11 We are hermits of our own secluded imaginative world, which we construct so perfectly that its "fabric", like that of the fictional House of Usher, gives "little token of instability" (U 51). We never get lost, but readily accept and visualize new subspaces with each step that the protagonist takes. When the narrator crosses the causeway to the House of Usher and fully enters the metaphorical imaginative space, we follow him unquestioningly, with the certainty of a sleepwalker. Like the narrator, we do not hesitate "to acknowledge how *familiar*" the surrounding is to us (U 52, Emphasis added.) - familiar, because the interior of the mansion, with "the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric amorial trophies" (U 52), is constructed from our own internal concepts of these objects. The centre of the imaginative space, a "very large and lofty room", appears unlimited and borderless:

[T]he eye [...] struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling [...]
 (U 52)

- 12 The fictional master of imagination, Roderick Usher, works in seclusion, without inspiration from nature. The windows of the chamber are "long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within", so that only few "[f]eeble gleams of encrimsoned light" will shine "through the trellised panes" (U 52). The vast imaginative space has no boundaries and will hold anything imaginary, but much of its own architecture, its particular features, remains hidden behind the "[d]ark draperies" hanging "upon the walls" (U 52).
- 13 The boundaries of the fictional imaginative space of Usher are equivalent to the boundaries of our imagination. No other human soul can retrace and enter our individual imaginative space. We meet only characters which we have shaped ourselves, and which are enclosed within the imaginative space - constituted in Poe's narrative by the desolate House of Usher. However, imaginative space does not guarantee ultimate protection. It is threatened by two dangers, two competitive spaces, that may widen the still "barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (U 51).
- 14 The first danger is reality, put forward by a fatal shift in the imaginer's state of consciousness. In "a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one singular in its terror and its beauty" (U 61), Roderick Usher forces open the windows of the imaginative space he inhabits:
- "And have you not seen it?" he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence - "you have not seen it? - but stay! You shall." Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.
 (U 61)

- 15 The hermit of the main narrative gazes into the unwritten, unimagined space outside the mansion. Roderick and the narrator catch "no glimpse of the moon or stars", the firmament of reality (U 62). The outer world does not yet fully affect them. There is no "flashing forth of the lightning" (U 62), but the reality outside the imaginative space, which has already been declared insubstantial, begins to intermingle with the fictional interior that is considered as earthly:

But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as the terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

(U 62)

- 16 The narrator knows that the fictional figure of Roderick Usher cannot survive the merging of his living space with reality. He hastily tries to convince his friend that these "appearances [...] are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon" or may have "their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn" (U 62) – that they are loose, random flashes of light, or come from the mansion's own tarn which reflects but the imaginative space. In order to save the imagination of Roderick, the reader must stop focussing on the world outside the imaginative space. The narrator thus tries to stop the contemplation and the visualization of the vicinity of the mansion:

"You must not - you shall not behold this!" said I, shuddering, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. [...] "*Let us close this casement; - the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame [...]*"

(U 62, Emphasis added.)

- 17 In order to re-establish safety, the narrator suggests not only that they retreat back into the secluded space of Usher, but also that they flee into an even more remote (doubly fictional) space:

Here is one of your favourite romances. I will read, and you shall listen: - and so we will pass away this terrible night together.

(U 62)

- 18 The *mise en abyme* – a fictionally famous story called *The Mad Trist*, written by a fictionally famous Sir Launcelot Canning, within Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* – appears to help the two men to *pass away* the night not only in a temporal, but also in a spatial sense. Although the narrator fears that there is not much in the "uncouth and unimaginative prolixity [of the doubly fictional story] which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality" of his artist friend, Roderick seems to find even in "the extremeness of the folly" (U 62) of the story a sufficient amount of adequate stimuli to construct a resilient virtuality into which he can withdraw.

- 19 However, the same accounts for the actual reader of Poe's embedded story, which bears a striking resemblance to the superordinate narrative. So far, the actual reader has, to the best of his abilities, sustained the imagination of the House of Usher, but now his focus shifts towards the doubly imaginative setting. The events in Sir Launcelot Canning's tale gain psychological dominance as the imagery of the House of Usher is overwritten.

- 20 When Ethelred³, "the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force" (U 62), he commits a phenomenological break-in: the narrator has to pause for a moment "at the termination of this sentence", because he feels as if "from some very remote portion of

the mansion" there comes "what might have been [...] in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described" (U 63). The merging of the superior and the inferior fictional spaces by the reader constitutes the second great danger to Roderick Usher. When Ethelred has fully conquered the dragon guarding the entrance to the dwelling of the hermit – a "palace of gold" that constitutes the reader's imaginative capacity – the beast utters "a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard" (U 63) – except in the House of Usher, where it also reverberates between the fictional walls. The narrator pauses again in a feeling of amazement, experiencing on the fictional level, like the actual reader on the psychological level, "upon the occurrence of this second and most extraordinary coincidence [...] a thousand conflicting sensations" (U 64):

[...] there could be no doubt whatever that, in that instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound – the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

(U 63)

- 21 The actual reader's attention now shifts back and forth between the former superior and inferior narratives, which have now reached equal phenomenological status. In this imaginative parallelism, the grieving Roderick and the actual reader identify Ethelred as Madeline, Roderick's recently deceased twin sister. Madeline had been buried in a deep vault after her physician-baffling fictional death, but since this vault still lies "within the main vaults of the building" (U 59), she can re-enter the main imaginative space by using passive Ethelred as a phenomenological vehicle. The actual reader follows the narrative's description of Roderick's increasing associations between Madeline and the doubly fictional figure Ethelred, performing the mental transformation within the reading of a single sentence:

Ethelred - ha! ha! - the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield! - say, rather, the rending of *her* coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! [...] Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!

(U 65, Emphasis added.)

- 22 While the doubly fictional space of the *mise en abyme* collapses nearly unnoticed, Poe carefully stages the controlled demolition of the superior imaginative space, the House of Usher. Madeline's shocking, forbidden rise from her imaginary coffin cannot be tolerated. Her final end must come, and it must coincide with that of her twin brother, who will never let her rest in peace but will keep reviving her with his imaginative powers – and the twins' deaths must coincide with the collapse of the imaginative space of Usher, lest they be revived again by the actual reader's imaginative powers:

For a moment she [Madeline] remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

(U 65)

- 23 The narrator flees from the mansion, crosses "the old causeway" (U 65), and in the borderland between fiction and substantiality, begins to anticipate the solar system of reality:

The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon which *now* shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base.

(U 65, Emphasis added.)

- 24 Real cosmic objects cannot be perceived simultaneously with the imaginative space of Usher. When the narrator glances back at the mansion, reality and fiction become synthesized for a fraction of a second – before everything dissolves in one final visual implosion:

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher".

(U 65)

- 25 Now the reader may focus once again upon reality and, together with the memory traces of a secluded fictional world, the last fragments of the imaginary space of Usher will vanish.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Twice-Told Tales*, Philadelphia, Graham's Magazine, 1842.

Poe, E.A. *Selected Tales*, New York, Oxford UP, 2008.

NOTES

1. Poe, E.A. *Selected Tales*, New York, Oxford UP, 2008.
2. Originally from the review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, *Graham's Magazine* Philadelphia, May 1842, p. 298.
3. Please note the homophony between the last syllable of his name and the passive form of the English verb *read*. Ethelred gets involuntarily summoned into the superior imaginative space by the psychological powers of the *reader*.

ABSTRACTS

A hermit lives in complete seclusion from the outer world, and the fictional hermit in E.A. Poe's narrative enjoys the twofold seclusion of a doubly imaginative space constructed by the reader. Only the deconstruction of the *mise en abyme*, along with its superordinate fictional space – carefully staged by the author and executed by the reader – poses a threat to his existence, and will finally lead to *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

L'article analyse, à l'aide de notions tirées de la psychologie cognitive, tels que les "scripts", les "concepts" et la "transformation mentale", la tendance naturelle du lecteur à la construction de sens, c'est-à-dire son aptitude à inférer par l'imagination les informations manquantes d'une architecture imaginaire lacunaire donnée. La narration *La chute de la maison d'Usher* de E.A. Poe, grâce à une *mise en abyme*, évoque deux réalités imaginaires différentes qui finalement chutent pour faire place à un seul espace focalisé. Les méthodes de Poe qui stimulent la construction des espaces imaginaires aussi bien que leur déconstruction seront analysées avec les outils que nous fournit la neuropsychologie.

El artículo analiza con ayuda de nociones extraídas de la psicología cognitiva, como los "scripts", los "conceptos" y la "transformación mental", la tendencia natural del lector a construir sentido, es decir, su aptitud para inferir mediante la imaginación las informaciones ausentes en una determinada arquitectura imaginaria y de carácter fragmentario. La narración *La caída de la casa Usher*, gracias a una *mise en abyme*, evoca dos realidades imaginarias diferentes que finalmente caen para dar lugar a un único espacio focalizado. Los métodos de Poe que estimulan la construcción de espacios imaginarios tanto como su deconstrucción serán analizados con los instrumentos que nos proporciona la neuropsicología.