ILL-FATED SPACE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S 'THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER' AND GALA GALACTION'S 'CALIFAR'S MILL'

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Abstract*: Used as a motif for a larger theme which belongs to fantastic interactions, ill-fated space is treated in a similar way by Edgar Allan Poe in* The Fall of the House of Usher *and Gala Galaction in* Califar's Mill. *The dwelling places are paralleled first of all by their owners with whom they have some traits in common, and secondly by the presence of the pool which reflects and doubles their images. By using anticipatory devices and antropomorphism, the two short stories succeed in supplying the spatial elements with independent values and roles in the plot.*
Keywords: *ill-fated space, pool, antropomorphism*

Fantastic prose equates two types of universes: a fictional one, which is mimetic in relation to the real universe, or, in other terms, a "possible world", and a fantastic one, equally fictional, but non-possible. Borrowing the notations proposed by Ileana Ruxandra Popescu in a recent book on the fantastic[1], U_1 is the mimetic universe which reproduces on a fictional level the components of the real universe U_0, which, although can be defined as non-true in relation to real existence, is yet credible, because it is subjected to the laws we can admit as true or possible. On the other hand, U_2 is the fantastic universe whose components cannot be explained with the help of the world familiar to us. If U_1 can be characterized as sub-referential, its components contructing an alternative to the flat reality of U_0, U_2 appears as non-referential.

Function of the relation between the two types of universes inherent to fantastic prose, U_1 and U_2, three types of themes have been distinguished[2]: fantastic "interactions", fantastic "mutations" and fantastic "apparitions". Ill-fated space is a motif subsumed to a theme belonging to the first category and defined as "the sign of ill-omened latencies and of the great fateful temptations" [3]. Our paper will draw some common traits in the use of this motif in two short stories belonging to American and Romanian 19th century fantastic literature: Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Gala Galaction's *Califar's Mill.*

Space and time coordinates have a major importance in creating a mimetic universe in prose. Three-dimensional space, doubled by time as the fourth dimension represent the coordinates defining the universe of the real world. The mimetic universe rendered in prose should be defined in relation to these four dimensions in order to gain verisimilitude for the readership.

The Russian critic M. Bakhtin proposes the scientific term 'chronotope' in studying literature, a term which denotes "an essential connection of time and space relations as they are artistically valued in literature"[4]. With mathematical roots and introduced by Einstein in his theory of relativity, the term 'chronotope' underscores the "indissoluble character of time and space" [5], it being understood as "a category of both form and content"[6] in literature. Here are the characteristics of the chronotope: "The literary and artistic chronotope achieves the fusion of space and time indicators into an intelligible and concrete whole. Time, here, compresses and becomes visible from an artistic point of view; on the contrary, space intensifies, penetrates within the movement of time, subject and history. Time indicators define themselves in space and space is

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understood and measured through time. The intersection of series and the fusion of indicators characterize the artistic chronotope."[7]

While Bakhtin regards space and time in their indissoluble relation, Gaston Bachelard devotes a book to space itself, where he aims at examining "the images of the happy space"[8], the beloved space being invested with protective values. Bachelard is not interested in examining hostile spaces which can be associated with apocalyptical images and which represent the main interest in studying fantastic literature. The space-time relationship acquires new values with Bachelard, "space contains compressed time"[9] and preserves memories. Another idea which is helpful for our study is that "the image of the house becomes the topography of our most intimate being"[10], each level of the house preserving specific feelings and life experiences. This idea will become concrete in the short stories we shall analyse by the parallelism drawn between the characteristics of the house and the ones of its master, as well as by the role of independent character played by the house itself.

In fantastic prose, space can occur under various shapes. First of all it is an axis of the mimetic universe U_1, as a reflection of the space characteristic to the real universe U_0. On the other hand, space can play the most important role in defining the fantastic universe U_2. When the spatial element is integrated within the mimetic universe, it can be neuter, representing only a background for the plot, or it can carry an emotional charge with a premonitory role or a role of triggering the action. The importance of space can be inferred through a formal analysis of the textual share of space and sometimes it is even admitted to by the writer in choosing the title, as is the case of the two short stories we shall analyse.

With the help of the notion 'paraxis', Rosemary Jackson suggests that "many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are located in, or through, or beyond, the mirror. They are spaces behind the visible, behind the image, introducing dark areas from which anything can emerge."[11] More than that, "the topography of the modern fantastic suggests a preoccupation with problems of vision and visibility, for it is structured around spectral imagery: it is remarkable how many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes – which see things myopically, or distortedly, or out of focus - to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar." [12] Jackson also insists on the clash between mimetic space and fantastic space: "Unlike marvelos secondary worlds, which construct alternative realities, the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing. They are empty, emptying, dissolving. Their emptiness vitiates a full, rounded, three-dimensional visible world, by tracing in absences, shadows without objects. Far from fulfilling desire, these spaces perpetuate desire by insisting upon *absence*, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable." [13]

There is a cultural motivation in choosing the spatial element. Thus, Edgar Allan Poe chooses a traditional Southern mansion as his element of space whose decadence comes to symbolize the degradation of the rich landowners from the South. In the Romanian short story, the element of space pertains to the traditinal country life where the house also bears the mark of the inhabitant's job as a miller.

A last theoretical coordinate is set by Labov and Waltezky in their model of narrative structures[14]. According to them, a narrative is structured on more sections. *Orientation* is the first section which guides the reader about the person, space, time and situation. The second section is *complication* which contains elements that serve to the evolution of the plot. *Evaluation* helps the reader to point out the dénouement in the climax of the previous section, showing the narrator's attitude by underlining the share of specific narrative units as compared to others. The *resolution* follows the evlauation

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and involves the resolution of the plot, while the *coda* presupposes the final return to the intial perspective of the story. Within all these narrative sections, space usually covers the first one, with the role of orientation in the narrative. Space becomes important when it also appears in the resolution or the coda and especially in the complication section.

An important spatial element which acquires ill-fated characteristics is the house. Understood in Bachelard's terms as a space of love, the house changes its usual connotations in the two short stories we shall analyse and contributes to creating suspense. Thus, its specific atmosphere is opposed to the natural attributes of this chronotope (happiness, childhood, space of pleasant memories). The best example in point is Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

The narrator of the short story, an old friend of Roderick Usher, was invited by the latter to pay him a visit as Roderick suffers from a deep loneliness, caused on the one hand by his illness, described as an acuteness of the senses which keeps him locked in his house, and on the other hand by the illness of his twin sister Madeline – frequent cataleptic fits. The narrator who will take part in the events, notes down from the very beginning all the sensations stirred in him at the sight of his friend's house. If at the beginning he does it with objectivity, the atmosphere of oppression and gloom overwhelms him little by little. Thus, in the first paragraph of the short story, the writer lays equal stress on the description of the house and nature and on the sensations produced in the narrator's heart by the view of the house. As a consequence, the space of the house acquires a fateful aura, through an anticipation device. This device is obvious in the first mentioning of the house: "and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher."[15] The introduction of the adjective "melancholy" contributes to suggesting the atmosphere and sensations that will be described in detail in the paragraph to come. After this anticipation follows the exact denomination of the feeling stirred in the narrator's heart: "I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit."[16]

Gradually the sensation changes into something more profound and bearing physical indicators: "I looked upon the scene before me […] with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into everyday life - the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime."[17]

Another contribution to creating the atmosphere around the house is brought by the time coordinate. Paradoxically, although the house is very old, it does not seem ramshackle. "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. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen […] Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability." [18]

The anticipation device is also present in describing the house by the attention shown to the fissure that will finally cause the fall of the house: "Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a 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."[19]

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In Gala Galaction's short story, the description of Califar's mill is not given so much importance in the orientation section, especially because it is a third person narrative and the suggestion of ill-fated space is consequently made with the means of objectivity. The same temporal coordinate of antiquity found in Edgar Allan Poe contributes to a great extent to creating an atmosphere favourable for the fantastic in Galaction's short story. But the attribute of old age is shared, in the Romanian short story, with the surrounding nature and with the miller himself (the age of the miller becoming already a genuinely fantastic element). "Close to an age-old woods there looked in the pool Califar's mill. It had been looking at its own image since the old men of the other corner of the forest could remember it, and Califar had been 'father Califar' since times out of mind."[20] This placement in a time of legend introduces the thrill necessary for the fantastic. The unexplainable old age of father Califar (who is believed to be hundreds years old) orients the reader towards a world whose laws are not the logical laws of the real world. Besides the temporal coordination, the Romanian writer resorts to another method to create the atmosphere of the short story. As it is narrated in the third person thus lacking the possiblity to directly note down the sensations produced at the sight of a specific spatial element, Galaction's short story inserts the collective voice, the villagers' beliefs which, sent down from generation to generation, have an inherent truth value: "In Alautesti, on bad weather nights, the spinners used to say, lighting the fire again, that father Califar had sold his soul to Satan for nobody knows how many centuries of life; that Old Scratch had laid in the mill pool a magic snare for the Christian souls; and that the miller supplied with the riches the devil had tempted Jesus Christ with, anyone who wished them and came to ask for them." [21] Thus the person and object described acquire legendary characteristics.

Besides appealing to the temporal coordinate in order to give fantastic traits to the spatial element, Edgar Allan Poe and Gala Galaction have two other common elements in describing space in their short stories. One of them refers to the space outside the dwelling where we find, in both cases, a pool (tarn, in Poe's case) in which the respective dwelling mirrors. If in Poe's story the tarn is mentioned towards the end of the first paragraph (the American writer creates a greatly developed orientation section), in Galaction's story it appears from the very first sentence. In the American short story, the tarn seems to synthesize and also amplify all the symphony of negative feelings stirred by the view of the house: "and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down - but with a shudder even more thrilling than before - upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows."[22] Notice should be made of the choice of the two descriptive epithets "black" and "lurid" which induce thanatological sensations, completed by mentioning its "unruffled lustre". In Galaction's description of the pool, the same detail of stillness of the water surface can be noticed: "This pool, in which the mill had been looking at itself for centuries, was not a pool like other pools; for on its face no ruffle was ever stirred. Its face lay forever smooth, clear, frozen still, like a piece of transparent salt in a stem of reed or willow bough."[23] The attribute of darkness can also be encountered in the Romanian short story, but it is connoted with the world of the devil, the sentence "Califar's mill and pool were just an invention of darkness."[24] following after the presentatin of the folk belief about the "magic snare" laid by the devil in the pool. The initial description of the pool with the help of "black" and "darkness" anticipates the end, to be more exact the final sentence of each short story. Thus, in both cases the pool is the one that "swallows" a victim, either the House of

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Usher with its two twin brothers in it, or the brave young man Stoicea, the one who had fallen prey to the devil's temptation and who kills father Califar. Here are the two final sentences of the short stories, "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'."[25]; "Stoicea went on the footbridge and, head straight forward, plunged into the translucent depths." [26]

Moreover, in Galaction's short story, the pool plays an important role in the plot because its water triggers the fantastic experience of the hero: "After washing his hands, he made a hollow in his palms, put them into the cold water of the pool, and, taking them out full of water and of murmurs, threw the water on his cheeks... Oh, what a belated dream! Stoicea jumped from the coat he was seated on and realized he had been awoken by the cold drops of a stormy rain, which was stirred unexpectedly from the deceptive midday clear sky."[27] Presented as a dream, Stoicea's story, his becoming a rich man, marrying Tecla and ending tragically once with the arrival of the Tartars, appears in fact as a journey in time: "In a few moments, as he had just thrown a handful of the magic water on his cheeks, the devil had borne him astride along a whole century of a man's life." [28] Thus the pool becomes, as a spatial element, even more important than the mill, an idea suggested in the text by the sequence when Stoicea, coming out of the thick forest, gets a glimpse of the pool first, which is so eerie that confiscates his whole attention, and only afterwards of the mill itself: "When the noon had already passed, Stoicea got a glimpse of a razor-like lustre. It was the pool of Califar's mill. On he went and the mill turned up. The mill – like any mill; but the pool seemed to lie underneath, too gleaming and too still."[29]

A third common trait in the description of space in Poe's and Galaction's short stories is the antropomorphism of several elements. It is already usual for the critics of Poe to suggest that the House of Usher is itself a character in the short story, a thing suggested by the use of this device. But it is not only the house which acquires antropomorphic traits ("vacant eye-like windows"[30]), but also other elements of the surrounding nature are personified, "white trunks of decayed trees" [31].

More than this, Edgar Allan Poe makes extensive use of image parallelism, so that the detailed description of the house with its gloomy and sad atmosphere is paralleled by the description of its owner, Roderick Usher, who is in a similar state of physical degradation. One of the characteristics is the paleness of the house walls, "The discoloration of ages had been great." [32], paralleled by the paleness of Roderick's skin, "a cadaverousness of complexion", "ghastly pallor of the skin"[33]. In the same manner, just as the fungi, like a fine webwork suggesting the frailty of life itself, "overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves." [34], Roderick's hair "floated rather than fell about the face" [35], being "of a more than web-like softness and tenuity"[36]. Last but not least, the same sensation of frailty as well as anticipation of the disaster to come appears both on the house wall under the form of the fissure, and in Roderick's body, described as "an incoherence – an inconsistency" which was found to "arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome a habitual trepidancy – an excessive nervous agitation." [37]

In Gala Galaction's short story, the antropomorphism of the mill is achieved by personification and comparison: "there *looked* in the pool Califar's mill." [38], "the mill stood, under its cover with one fathom-tall eave, *like an evil thinking head under a hat drawn over his eyes*"[39]. Just like in Poe's prose, there is a similarity between the appearance of the mill and that of the miller: just as the miller's eyes "were prying sharply from behind the bushy eyebrows" [40], the mill seemed to pry from under its one-

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fathom tall eaves. In order to describe the mill more specifically, just as the pool is made unique, creating once again the impression of ill-fated space, Gala Galaction introduces a detail which proves very important: "Nobody had ever seen the mill working." [41] The mill is first of all the place where cereals are ground (that is the place where a job is practised) and only secondly a dwelling for the miller. But, as long as the mill does not work, the miller does not fulfill his Christian duty of working, which is, according to folklore, a devilish thing. More than this, people think that the miller, who made the pact with the devil, "ground only for his master Old Scatch – and nobody knew exactly when. But it is said that, when Califar raised the water gate and freed the mill race, the water hissed like a snake surrounded by flames; and, from under the mill, it flew foaming with blood. " [42]

As a conclusion, the motif of ill-fated space is treated in a similar way in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Gala Galaction's *Califar's Mill* by choosing to associate the dwelling with a pool in which its image is reflected and by the antropomorphism of the spatial elements described. Using anticipation devices, the two writers succeed in introducing *in nuce* the seed of the disaster that will come in the end. More than this, they use parallel images in describing the dwellings and their owners to amplify the eerie atmosphere that characterizes the respective place. Although different in plot and resolution, the two short stories are nevertheless similar in the treatment of the spatial element.

Notes

[1] see Ileana Ruxandra Popescu, *Proza fantastică românească. Structuri narative şi conversaţionale*, Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2005, pp. 22-24.
[2] see Sergiu Pavel Dan, *Feţele fantasticului. Delimitări, clasificări şi analize*, Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2005, pp. 73-82 (our translation).
[3] see idem, pp. 73-77.
[4] M. Baktin, *Probleme de literatură şi estetică*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1982, p. 294 (our translation).
[5] ibidem.
[6] ibidem.
[7] idem, pp. 294-295.
[8] Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica spaţiului*, Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2003, p. 29 (our translation).
[9] idem, p. 40.
[10] idem, p. 30.
[11] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Routledge, 1998, p. 43.
[12] ibidem.
[13] idem, p. 45
[14] Mircea Borcilă, Richard McLain, *Poetica americană. Orientări actuale*, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca, 1981, pp. 288-300.
[15] Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales*, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 76.
[16] ibidem
[17] ibidem
[18] idem, p. 78-79.
[19] idem, p. 79.
[20] *Masca. Proză fantastică românească*, preface and antology by Alexandru George, Editura Minerva, Bucureşti, 1982, vol. I, p. 55. (our translation)
[21] ibidem
[22] Edgar Allan Poe, op. cit, p. 76.
[23] *Masca. Proză fantastică românească*, *ed. cit,* vol. I, p. 56
[24] idem, p. 55

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[25] Edgar Allan Poe, *op. cit*, p. 95.
[26] *Masca. Proză fantastică românească*, *ed. cit,* vol. I, p. 63.
[27] idem, p. 58
[28] idem, p. 62
[29] idem, p. 57.
[30] Edgar Allan Poe, *op. cit*, p. 76
[31] ibidem.
[32] idem, p. 78.
[33] idem, p. 80.
[34] idem, p. 79.
[35] idem p. 81.
[36] idem, p. 80.
[37] idem, p. 81.
[38] *Masca. Proză fantastică românească*, *ed. cit*, vol. I, p. 55.
[39] idem, p. 56
[40] idem, p. 55.
[41] idem, p. 56.
[42] ibidem.

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