THE SPACE-TIME DIMENSION IN "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER" *BY EDGAR ALLAN POE*[1]

Abstract*: The present esaay deals with the time and space dimensions in the short story* "The Fall of the House of Usher" *by Edgar Allan Poe in a very explicit and detailed manner. The temporal and spatial dimensions of the short story are marked by obscurity and fog, water and dream, the finite and the non-finite, silence and pressure, physical and mental disease, fear and terror, sadness and inner tearing, madness and horror, normal and abnormal, real and fantastic, irational and supranatural, existence and non-existence, life-death and death-life.*
Keywords*: house, disease, twins.*

The Fall of the House of Usher is a short story of Gothic horror written in first-person point of view. It was first published in September 1839 in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. In 1840 and 1845, Poe published it with other stories in *Tales of the Grotesque and of the Arabesque*.

Buranelli considers *The Fall of the House of Usher* a "mosaic of incidents, psychological attitudes, symbols, all melting in a uniform structure, according to the rules of a major and refined art" (Buranelli, V., 1966: 106, our translation). However, Cornwell suggests that *The Fall of the House of Usher* "this story is open to supernatural (or perhaps unnatural), psychological and, no doubt, psychoanalytical interpretations" (Cornwell, N., 1990: 86)[2].

The opening transposes the reader in the realm of fantasy from the very first sentence of the short story: "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens" (Poe, E. A., 1994: 40). The beginning offers the reader some very important signals regarding the temporal topoi: the autumn day is "dull, dark and soundless" and its clouds "hung oppressively low". In this gloomy landscape the narrator-character enters. He halts alone in front of the Usher and stoops in front of a "black and lurid tarn" and looks around him "with an utter depression of soul" (*Ibidem*: 42). All around the Usher House floats "a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (*Ibidem*: 43).

Writing about the atmosphere surrounding the House of Usher, Georges Poulet points out that we can notice

> […] a sphere. Unconnected with the air in the sky, but reflecting in the waters of the tarn, the house of Usher lives sunken in the special density of the vapor it emanates. Thus, it has created its own time. It does not exist only in the spheric continuity of its own ambitions, but also in the liniar continuity of the family it harbors. It «has been perpetuated only in a direct line». In this way, its lack of connections with the air one has to notice also «the absence of a lateral branch» (Poulet, G., 1987: 281, our translation).

When referring to the black and gloomy tarn which surrounds the Usher house, we can state that the water[3] is a privileged matter, fundamental for the unconscious of

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[2] "this story is open to supernatural (or perhaps unnatural), psychological and, no doubt, psychoanalytical interpretations".
[3] Chevalier, J. & Gheebrant, A., 1993: 107-117, our translation: "Water is the substantial form of manifestation, the origin of life and element of bodily and spiritual regeneration, symbol of fertility, purity, wiseness, grace and virtue. […] It gives life and death, the creator and the

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Edgar Allan Poe. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard talks about "[…] a special kind of water, a heavy, deeper, more dead, more asleep than all the dead waters, the deepest waters we can find in nature" (Gaston, B., 1995: 55, our translation). It becomes in Poe's imagination a superlative, the substance of substance, a mother-substance" (*Ibidem*). Water is, for the American writer, also an invitation to a special kind of death, the substantial copy of darkness, a substitute for the tomb and a great epiphany of death. To contemplate the water is "to drain off, to dissolve, to die (*Ibidem*: 56).

It is "the matter of the beautiful and loyal death. Only water can sleep while retaining its beauty; only water can die, keeping immobile passed on" (*Ibidem*: 77). All water is for Edgar Allan Poe "a water that must grow dark and absorb the black suffering. Any living water is a water that must slow down and grow heavy. Any living water is dying" (*Ibidem*: 56). For Poe water is imaginary because it realizes the ideal of a creating reverie while holding the reflection of the absolute. Water, through its twitches, doubles the world, the objects and the dreamer, who is lured into a new visionary experience, being the matter through which nature prepares its dream.

The text of the short story shows us from the beginning only a discrete intrusion of the fantastic elements, and with the entrance of the character-narrator in the Usher space, we readers enter the realm of the irrational. We are in front of a self-diegesis.

Roderick is calling his friend through a letter to personally come and see him, hoping that this event will lean his sufferings. The epistle talks about certain nervous tremor and mental agitation. The reader enters with the character narrator the house of Usher (a double entrance), which corresponds to the final exit alongside the same character (a double departure).

The Usher house has its walls bashed by the wind, its windows looking like "hollow orbits", with no eyes watching, the sedge bushes are rare, the trunks of the trees are "hoary and hunched", "crippled and ghostly" (Poe, E. A., *op. cit*.: 43). The age of the house is unbelievable: the color is almost completely gone and mould covers the whole outside. However the building does not seem frail, there are no parts of the masonry that have been worn down and there is a strange "disproportion between the perfect blending of its parts and the frail state of each of its bricks" (*Ibidem*: 46).

The Usher domain is represented as having gothic rooms and numerous "dark and rambling" corridors (*Ibidem*). These symbolize the labyrinth. The tapestries on the walls of the rooms are somber and the floors are as dark as ebony.

A first look reveals multiple states of mind: "a dreadful dreariness", "an endless flagging" seen as the vision of one waking up after opium dose, "a shiver of ice", "a dive", "a painful shrinking of the heart", "an affliction" (Poe, E. A., *op. cit*.: 44). If we carefully follow the text we can notice the fact that the emotional states of the character are narrated in crescendo, starting with the unreasonable dreariness and ending with affliction of the "unsolvable mind". The whole Usher house is covered with the mysterious air of "the unbearable" (*Ibidem*).

The Usher house is an inanimate double of the one living in it. It is a symbol of the intermediary space between the world of the living and the underworld, and also a symbol of death. Poe transfigures the house through anthropomorphosis, represented by a larger womb and at the same time a mortuary, another *regresus ad uterum.*

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destroyer. […] To totally sink in water and to come out complete is to come back to the origins, to find your shelter in a huge reservoir of potential".

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Roderick's room is described by the character: it is very spacious and high. The windows are "long, narrow and pointed and so far away from the black oak floors that it seems impossible to get to them" (*Ibidem*: 45-46). The ceiling is arched and sculpted, the draperies are dark, the furniture is very heavy, old and used. Many sheets of paper and tools and scattered across the floor. The whole atmosphere inside the room is entangled within "a deep, gloomy, terminal grief" (*Ibidem*).

Roderick Usher's life has been marked by his belief in the sensitivity of all vegetable beings. The rocks covered with moss, the stooped trees and the waters of the tarn have gathered around them the whole Usher domain and are reflected in all of the destinies of its family members.

Roderick, taken down by a tremendous mental disturbance, is presented by the character with all his facial expressions emphasized: the cadaveric face, the bright wide greenish eyes, the thin and very pale lips, the thin aquiline nose with its dilated nostrils, the rounded chin, the "softer and thinner than a spider's thread" hair and the very large forehead. The skin with its ghostlike pallor, the supernatural bright eyes and the hair left to grow in all possible directions permit our character to state that Roderick has something not human about his expression and a simple glance from his terrifies him. Roderick's voice fluctuates too: sometimes it is sharp, echoed, "trembling and undecided", and at other times rhythmic and full of energy (*Ibidem*: 47).

Usher is suffering from an incurable nervous disorder: the diminishing of all the senses. The disease is the entrance in the realm of the fantastic. It is manifested through Roderick's strange habits: he only eats the simplest and the most vapid food, he only wears clothes made from certain materials; he can only bear the scent of flowers, the dimmest lights and only string instruments.

Roderick is attracted to art: poetry (the titles of one of his poems is suggestive: *The Haunted Palace*) and painting. For example, this is how the narrator describes a painting:

> inside a small canvas, depicting the inside of a tomb or an endless rectangular gallery, with low, white, engirdled walls, purposeless. Certain secondary elements of the painting hinted to the gallery being deep below the ground. No links or any other sources of artificial light could be glimpsed, but still a streaming blinding light washed everything from one end to another, bathing everything in a meaningless colony of spectral splendor (*Ibidem*: 53).

Roderick's books give meaning to his inclination towards the supernatural: *Heaven and Hell* by Swedenborg, *Nicolas Klimm s Journey through the Underworld* by Holberg, *Palmistry* by Robert Flud, *A Journey in the Blue Worlds* by Tieck, *City of the Sun* by Campanella.

Roderick has not exited his house for many years. He pleads the whole Usher domain (everything from walls, steeples, to the dark and somber tarn) has in time come to affect his mind, his morale, his whole existence. His admits as possible cause for his illness the death of his only sister, Madelaine[1], his last earthly relative.[2] It is also interesting to notice that the Usher kin only has descendants on its paternal line (with just very few exceptions).

[1] A possible decrypting of the symbolism of the name "Madeline": line – mad or line – made.

[2] In his book about Poe, Vincent Buranelli states that for the author, the mother figure has exerted a significant influence in the creation of young heroins such as Madelie Usher: young, beautiful, talented, delicate and damned. Poe never met his mother, as she died when he was very small. The Sonnet entitlet *To my Mother* was dedicated to his mother-in-law, not to his mother, as many have believed.

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Until this stage of the story the narrative mechanism is used metatextually and it offers the reader clues for the decipherment of the entire ambiguity as normality. From this point onward, Poe invites us to see through the eyes of the narrator and uses the suspense technique (also deployed in cinematography) and the reader becomes so entangled in the web of the story that, even if he/she may desire to stop reading, it becomes impossible to do so.

Madeline shows up at the moment Roderick talks to the character-narrator about her. She does let others take notice of her and the mere glimpse of her presence causes awe and bewilderment. One can also notice the way she shows up in the story: when she escapes the sight of the character, he starts looking towards Roderick who had already covered his eyes with his hands as a queer livid pallor pervades them and tears of grief start flowing.

Madeline also suffers, as does her brother, from a strange malady: her whole being becomes apathic and her body falls into a cataleptic trance. Both she and her brother are only living carcasses.

Once Madeline is dead, Roderick decides to keep her body in one of the many mortuaries for two weeks for three reasons: her sister's disease, the curiosity of the doctor and not willing to abandon her tomb.

She is buried by Roderick, who is aided by his friend. Her tomb is laid to rest and "had been closed a long time ago in a small, damp and lightless vault (and its torches only half ablaze didn't make our work any easier)" (Poe, E. A., *op. cit*.: 53). The scene is also represented in Roderick's painting. When laying the body inside the vault, Roderick notices through the unscrewed cover of the coffin, Roderick notices the striking resemblance between sister and brother. The catalepsy was still printed on her body: "a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lips which is so terrible in death" (*Ibidem*: 54). From Roderick the narrator finds out that they were twins.

After Madeline's death, Roderick changed: he gave up old habits, he roamed pointlessly through the house, he starred for hours and hours, his face became more and more cadaveric, his eyes lost their brightness, his voice became more and more silent and his few words tremble.

The terror Roderick finds himself overwhelmed by also takes hold of his friend, it becomes exported to the narrator and the reader. Roderick can no longer sleep, little by little: "an irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself […]" (Poe, E. A., *op. cit*. : 55). Roderick's whole demeanor is meanwhile disempowered by a state of restrained hysteria.

The state of both of the characters is also related to the realm of nature. In this way the relationship with reality is altered: nature is unleashed, the wind starts blowing heavily and a severe storm is on its way (internal meteorology):

> A whirlwind had collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity of with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance (*Ibidem*: 56).

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Roderick tried to listen with ease his friends reading from Lancelot Canning's *Mad Trist*.[1] Buranelli believes that Poe uses the principle of analogy in this short story when comparing the castle to the family as both share common traits and the events Roderick reads seem to be mere copies of events taking place in the castle. The noise coming out of the book: "and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the day and of the hollow-sounding wood alarummed and reverberated throughout the forest" (*Ibidem*: 57) find their echo in nature:

> it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came indistinctly, to my ears, 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 Lancelot had so particularly described (*Ibidem*: 57-58).

> […] there could be no doubt whatever that, in this 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 (*Ibidem*).

Roderick is overwhelmed by a state of paroxysm: his lips tremble in spasms, his head drops low, his eyes pull out of their orbits, and his body starts swinging severely. His condition grows worse as he continues reading: a shudder takes hold of his body and he becomes rigid. Roderick, on the brink of madness, claims that Madeline has been buried alive. For Freud being buried alive (the Lazarus Syndrome) is the strangest situation. Madeline appears in a gust of wind through the house's "ebony jaws", wound up in a shroud. Her body bears the marks of her escaping the coffin (*Ibidem*: 60): "there was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame" (*Ibidem*). Madeline crashes over her brother and they both die:

> 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 (Poe, E. A., *op. cit*., : 60).

Roderick's friend, frightened, runs from the house. The storm unleashes. As he looks back from the road towards the house, he notices a strange light: "the full, setting and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through the once barely-discernable fissure" (*Ibidem*). The walls of the house crash, broken in two as the tarn mirrors the fall of the Usher house in its waters. Regarding the final fragment, Georges Poulet states that

> the last glance he permits himself towards the house is a destructive one. The whole Usher house falls into nothingness because the violences of its birth determine its disappearance. Light creeps through the cracks in its walls. The night will fall into oblivion's ocean. But before it does, its dissolution must be witnessed one final time (Poulet G., *op.cit.,* : 260, our translation).

This denouement, according to Poulet:

[1] Both the author, Lancelot Canning, and the book Mad Trist, are imaginary; one can notice the intentionat alteration of the vowel (*u* becomes *a*) so that the real meaning may be distorted: canning – cunning.

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> is not caused by an exterior catastrophe, but by the condensation of all the life inside it into a whirlpool whose origin is the specific atmosphere of the house. By falling into its pond, the Usher house disappears the same way it has appeared, through itself. It reabsorbs space and time. It concludes, form cause to effect, the closed circle of its existence and its heroes (*Ibidem*: 281).

The image so exquisitely created by Poe in his short story has been painted by the Belgian painter René Magritte in his famous surreal work: „La Chute de la maison Usher"[1] (see Picture 1). It is certain that Margritte has carefully analyzed Poe's text from the way he renders what Poe has imagined. In his painting we have identified three registers:

I. The red, perfectly round moon, located in the exact centre of the painting, stands for the death of the twins.

II. To the sides we notice at equal distances parts of two drawn curtains and not three because the text talks about the walls breaking in two and falling in the waters.

III. The inferior half shows a branchless tree broken in half and ending in a huge leaf. It can represent the male descendance in the Usher family, but also Roderick's and Madeline's unity (the trunk) in two bodies (even though the tree is broken, it is not finally brought down)

The analogies one notices in the short story intertwine each other. The Usher family and the Usher mansion often are one: both are degraded by time, torn asunder, crumbling on the inside, awaiting their demise. Roderick Usher and his sister, Madeline, are twins that both share the same soul and the same body: the castle. Their trio crumbles together, the disappearance of one implying the disappearance of all.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the Usher domain contains not only the Usher family, but also its own space and time frame.

The Usher house resembles the tie and space it belongs to; both belong to this ambience alone and are in a relation of complementarity: space and time impose the ambient of the House which feeds on them and becomes an essence of that space and time. Within the house, however, space and time lose their topography and their physical coordinates. Space and time cut their way out of a strange kind of reality and slip into a differently configured universe.

The Usher family is made up of two twins and, at the same time, of two living carcasses. It is displaced to a remote, mysterious, queer realm where all contact with the exterior universe has been cut off. It also contains the mirror-like reflection of both in each other. Also, the house is forestalled by mental diseases manifested in: anxiety, depression, hallucination, even catalepsy (in Madeline's case).

The present essay has aimed at creating a different vision of time and space in the short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Our aim has been reached if the readers of this essay will discover a new key for the Usher House. Want to go inside?

[1] La Chute de la maison Usher, oil on canvas, private collection, Cologne.

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Picture 1.

René Magritte, LA CHUTE DE LA MAISON USHER, oil on canvas, private collection , Cologne.



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