

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

'Out of SPACE - Out of TIME': Edgar Allan Poe and the Gothic Tradition

Speakers: Dieter Schulz and Annika Elstermann
(2021-11-15)

Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Dieter Schulz, who is not only a professor emeritus for this university, but has also lectured at Yale University, at the University of New Mexico and at the University of Stuttgart among other places. He has also published extensively on American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The title of today's episode is "Out of Space, Out of Time: Edgar Allan Poe and the Gothic Tradition".

AE: The title of your talk today, "Out of Space, Out of Time" comes from Edgar Allan Poe. Do you maybe want to say a few words about where exactly this comes from and the context of this work?

Dieter Schulz: Okay, that's a line from a poem – which may seem a bit odd since most of the time I'll be talking about Poe's fiction, specifically his *Tales of Terror*, his Gothic fiction – but it seems to me that this line beautifully captures one of his fiction's major strategies and in fact, also I think sums up the key principle of his aesthetics. Maybe I'll just read the lines first, they are from *Dreamland*—the first stanza from *Dreamland*, a poem published in 1844:

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule—
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE – Out of TIME.

DS: Now the typography of space and time, 'out of SPACE, out of TIME', is not something that I've added but in the original. So here we have a speaker, the I (das "lyrische Ich"), the speaker who refers to a journey he's undertaken, he comes from a place which he calls "an ultimate dim Thule", which according to ancient mythology was the northernmost spot of the inhabited world. So he's left the place that is already on the border on the confines of the inhabited world and he's travelled from there by a "route obscure and lonely", etc. So, you could say he's twice removed from the land of the living and finds himself in a position in which he can no longer locate: It is out of space, it is out of time.

I take this to be one of Poe's distinctive strategies not just in his poems, but also in much of his fiction, certainly the kind of fiction that I'll be talking about, I remember in your conversation with David Eisler last week, you referred to Coleridge's often quoted remark about the 'willing suspension of disbelief'—fiction in connection with the issue of authenticity, which was at the center of your discussion. Coleridge says that poetic Faith requires a willing suspension of disbelief. Now, Poe, it

seems to me, carries this principle to an extreme in the way that he asks the reader to basically leave behind the procedures of reason, of common sense. One of the ways of achieving that or at least trying to achieve that is by using settings, by using physical settings that can no longer be located in time or in space or at least are far removed from ordinary experience.

AE: Yeah, so this isn't just that he's writing about somewhere else, sometimes he is actually writing about a non-place, essentially, right?

DS: Yeah, as the heading of the poem suggests (*Dreamland*), the first thing, to put it somewhat bluntly, I guess, for Poe to shut out daylight – to shut out ordinary consciousness, the consciousness of the mind awake – and to transpose us into a realm where those laws, where those categories no longer obtain. When you take a look at some of the— I've selected some of the most-famous stories, I think. I'll give it a quick rundown, so you will see what I mean, how he goes about this in his fiction. Those stories that focus on a natural, (quote-unquote) "natural" setting like *A Descent into the Maelström* or *Manuscript Found in a Bottle: A Descent into the Maelström* is located way up north on the Lofoten Islands off the coast of Norway. So it's really on the boundary, actually beyond the boundary of what most people have seen of this world, of the earth, way up north. *MS Found in a Bottle* takes us in the opposite direction, starting out from a place somewhere in Indonesia, and then the boat is caught by a strong current to the south and presumably disappears in an abyss, in an opening of the earth in the South Pole. There was a theory at the time that the globe had openings at both poles, the North Pole and the South Pole. And if you came too close to these openings then you were likely to be sucked in. And this was apparently what happened to the narrator of *Manuscript found*—

AE: So is this a hollow earth? Is there something— if you get sucked in, is there then a world within a world or is it just you fall through and—

DS: You just disappear. You just disappear and he barely manages to note what he sees and write it on a piece of paper and put it in a bottle and throw it up the, you know, the "Flaschenpost". So, the narrator by the time of writing his last line has literally crossed the boundary into a world that is inaccessible to the rest of us. Other stories can be located in time and space but both, time and space, are quite remote from the contemporary, from everyday like *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the poor guy that's trapped in a dungeon of the Spanish Inquisition. *The Masque of the Red Death* is set in Italy, there's a Prince Prospero, who has withdrawn with his associates into a castle.

AE: This was often quoted during the pandemic last year, I think. During the earlier days, yeah.

DS: The pandemic – was it included in your previous...?

AE: It wasn't, but it was one of those which we might have included, because it's such a contained community.

DS: Yeah, it's a very confined space. People, you know, try to get away from the plague that ravages the country, somewhere in Italy. And *The Cask of Amontillado*, again, the very name suggests a Mediterranean country, probably Spain. Other stories like *William Wilson*, *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, I don't think, there are any indic— Well, *William Wilson* is set somewhere in an old house, I think an Elizabethan house in London. So there are some hints there, but again, pointing

away from everyday life, from contemporary life. And then, *Ligeia*, one of his notorious stories about dying women. Remember, Poe thought that the most poetical subject in the world was the death of a beautiful woman. So these stories *Ligeia*, *Morella*, *Eleonora*, *Berenice*. . . *Ligeia* for the most part is set in – and here I quote: “Some large, old near-decaying city near the Rhine.” That’s the first part of it, and then the second part of it is kind of these, the reincarnation – The reincarnation of *Ligeia* takes place, I quote from *Ligeia*:

After a few months of weary and aimless wandering, I purchased and put in some repair an abbey, which I shall not name, in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England.

DS: So, in every single case we have a locale that is very far removed – and even that sounds like an understatement – from the world as we know it, from everyday life. One of the most-famous examples is of course *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Given the somewhat longer quote, I’ll just read the first couple of lines, by way of illustrating that strategy. This is the very beginning of the 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, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

DS: I think I’ll pause here. You get the idea, again, the narrator has to spend the whole day on horseback to get away from wherever, you know, he normally lives. To this place, this wild area to the House of Usher, where the rest of the action takes place.

AE: And it’s also very indistinct where he is. It just says ‘It’s a singularly dreary tract of country’, but it doesn’t say where this tract of country is.

DS: Right. There are no geographical clues or anything. You know, not even in terms of— Unlike, say, in *The Pit and the Pendulum* where you are like ‘Ah this is Spain, where the late medieval or early modern Spain’ or *The Masque of the Red Death* presumably in Italy. Here you have no idea. This could be anywhere. Just a wild, dreary tract of country. And it takes at least a day to get there, you know.

Okay, this kind of fiction, especially in *The Fall of the House of Usher* has often (and I think justifiably) been called the epitome of a gothic story, a gothic tale. Which is a genre, it was once called a ‘genre’ or a ‘tradition’, that Poe did not invent: Literary historians are familiar with it from several major examples of the 18th century, British novels. The first Gothic novel is usually considered to be *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole 1764 and a major, well single most-important bestseller of the late 18th century was Ann Radcliffe *The Mysteries of Udolpho* 1794, then I also added here Matthew Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk*—

AE: We discussed this briefly in last year’s lecture series. This really, really gory and horrible piece—

DS: *The Monk*? Yeah, right. So, *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* both take place in Italy, *The Monk*, as I recall, mostly in Spain, in Madrid. A number of chapters took place in Madrid. So it’s usually southern Europe, Mediterranean countries, which to a— an American audience

must have been even more exotic than, say, to a British audience. We need to remember that Poe was an American writer.

Okay so, this in literary history, in English literary history, is usually referred to as Gothic fiction, the German equivalent would be something like "Schauer-Literatur", "Schauer-Romane". Gothic we tend to associate with an architectural style. We talk about Gothic Cathedrals, the pointed windows being the most conspicuous feature, that's a bit too narrow. Gothic in the 18th century, for the British people really meant medieval, wild, barbarian as opposed to what by then had become the dominant intellectual trend: The Enlightenment. So the Pre-Enlightenment period of history projected onto the middle ages, as 'The Dark Ages', as they were often called.

AE: And so architecture plays a role there as well in the aesthetics, because you often do have the Gothic castle, I mean the *Castle of Otranto*, you have this crumbling house and also, I mean, I guess in *The Fall of the House of Usher* in a metaphorical sense.

DS: That's an important point, because after all, even though, as I tried to point out to Gothic as a sense of the German "gothisch" is too narrow. Nevertheless, the architectural implication that we associate with the term are quite legitimate, as the architectural setting is absolutely crucial in addition to the geographical setting. It's no coincidence that in both Walpole and Radcliffe's novels you have the building (*The **Castle** of Otranto*) and Udolpho (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*), Udolpho is also the name of a castle, which leads us of course right up to Poe's stories: *The Fall of the **House** of Usher* as – this was the end of the section I quoted – the traveller finally arrives at the House of Usher. And one of the most distinctive elements, I guess, of Gothic fiction is the close interrelations, the close interaction, between the architectural setting, the castle or it could be a monastery, or the ruin of any kind of medieval or, say, pseudo-medieval building, the interaction between that and the protagonist. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the very title refers to the building, the House of Usher, but also, as the narrator later points out, to the family of Usher. Usher is also the name, of course, of the protagonist, Roderick Usher, and there's an almost one-to-one equation here, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, between the architectural setting, the house on the point of collapse, the fall of the House of Usher, and the mental disintegration of the protagonist, Roderick Usher, because that's what the story is basically about, Roderick Usher, the protagonist on the brink of insanity and finally losing it altogether, and both the house and Roderick Usher are doomed to die, or to collapse at the end of the story. So, the setting is not just the physical locale, but it has symbolic or indeed in this case I would even say allegorical implications, in the sense that it reflects the protagonist and vice-versa. From the state of the house, as it is described in this long opening paragraph, you already learn a lot about the state of mind of the protagonist.

AE: Yeah! Even the fact that it says "the melancholic House of Usher" in that first sentence— the house itself, a house usually cannot be melancholic, because it's a human state of mind.

DS: [agrees] Okay.

AE: These are cases which you've cited so far, which have either undefined settings or settings which are very far away, or at least to the English and especially the American reader at the time very far away. *Frankenstein* as well, I mean in *Frankenstein* it starts and ends in the Arctic, I think, but then there is— Would you say there is a shift over time, that the setting gets a bit closer to home?

DS: Perhaps it's worth noting, among the titles I listed here, to illustrate the later development of the genre, is Bram Stoker's famous or notorious *Dracula* and I guess most of us are more or less familiar with the plot of *Dracula* either from the book itself, published in 1897, or the film version. Remember that Dracula at some point decides to move from Transylvania, this exotic area – I mean, there is actually such an area that is now Romania, in the Balkans – to London. And that is perhaps one of the most conspicuous developments of that genre. In the hands of the other writers, I noted here: H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, Anne Rice and others, still the object in terms of the kind of reader response they try to illicit is terror, fear, creepy feelings, the uncanny, and so forth, but it is no longer located or at least not invariably located way outside, far away from the world we are familiar with, but the focus really is more on the terror that lurks under the surface of ordinary life. So Lovecraft for instance— still often underground settings, but they are right in the middle of London or some city that— the locale is no longer transferred to some region away from England or the United States, etc.

AE: One thing that I find interesting about *Dracula* is, in the beginning when Jonathan Harker is travelling towards Transylvania, he makes all of these notes about the train times and he says "It seems to me that the further east you go the more unpunctual are the trains", so kind of this 'the further you go away from England, the home, the wilder it gets and the less controlled it gets as well' – I thought that was interesting in this spatial removal from home and the wilderness of the surrounding areas. I was wondering about Stephen King earlier and whether there is a distinction to be made between gothic and horror; so, gothic as one subset of horror and then horror fiction as well. Because Stephen King, of course, unlike Edgar Allan Poe, often has these settings which are very much like his home and then, like you said, the horror lurks underneath the surface of the familiar.

DS: Yeah, yeah. I think that point is well taken and I think you see the beginnings of this in Lovecraft, also a tendency toward creating, well, a kind of horror that is close to revulsion. In say, classical gothic fiction, what I have in mind here is the kind of gothic fiction as practiced by, say Ann Radcliffe and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, this may sound a bit simplistic, but perhaps it serves my point: you really have no idea what actually takes place in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The narrator imagines all kinds of things, but whether he actually hears them or whether he projects them remains open, even the final image when he sees Roderick embrace, or being embraced by his twin sister and collapsing on the threshold of the house. Is he overcome by a hallucination, has he been totally caught up in the wild imaginings of Roderick Usher, or does this really happen?

The same— *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, these mysteries are really at the end unresolved. It may have been imagined— or much of it, at least, imagined by the heroine. So, say, if there is a corpse here, in one of these haunted places, it may be there, but it may also be a figment of the protagonist's imagination. In Lovecraft, in contrast, you stumble across the corpse, literally. It's right there in front of you, actually physically there and for many aficionados of gothic fiction this is kind of a let down, you know: They'd rather have more leeway for their own imagination, or they prefer the traditional, right? So I suggest that I would perfectly agree, there are major shifts here. Perhaps from the terrible to the macabre, actually, you know. We stumble across a decaying corpse, you know, and there's a sense of revulsion on the part of the narrator or protagonist to an integration of the uncanny of the criminal, etc. into everyday life.

AE: Yeah. It's very interesting and also what you just mentioned, the unresolved and it being so subjectively centered on the protagonist. Of course, this is an effect that Poe's writing can also have with these non-spaces. If it says, 'I walked along a singularly dreary tract of country', if he says like 'I traveled through a singularly dreary tract of country in the south of England' and I happen to really like the south of England, I might find this a bit hard to get into. But here I'm just imagining, very subjectively, the feeling. It's not about the actual place, it's about the feeling that a place evokes. And similarly also in like, as you said before, the wildest and least frequented places in England; it's not important where this place is, this is about a subjective feeling. You have another quote from Poe, from his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and I think this would be a good point to include this here.

DS: Yeah. The question, of course, that one would want to ask is, you know, what's the point of this? What is the point of these strategies of choosing remote settings, focussing on unstable (to put it mildly), unstable protagonists and so forth? Why would one want to cross the boundary from everyday experience, from what someone called, the light of common day as the hallmark of realism into a realm where you feel threatened, into a realm that in a very general sense that seems to be haunted, that is beyond the confines of rationality and of common sense. And it seems to me that there are at least two directions, two lines of inquiry that Poe himself suggests that one might follow-up: You cross the boundary from the everyday to the uncanny, to the uncommon, first because you have a strong interest in psychology and especially in, you know, deviant psychology, as one could call it, abnormal states of mind – so there is a psychological motivation for this crossing into another realm – and the second one would be Poe's notion of aesthetics.

Aesthetic experience for Poe is separate, is quite different, is radically different from ordinary experience. And the first point, the first direction toward psychological exploration is indicated in the passage you just referred to, from Poe's preface to *The Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*. By around the 1830s and 1840s, the gothic genre had become closely associated with German fiction. You know, the 18th century it was people like Walpole, Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, but in Schauer-Literatur, gothic fiction seems to have become a dominant trend in German writing and the big name there was E. T. A. Hoffmann. I mean, some of us remember reading, I think in high school, the story *Der Sandmann* and one of his most widely read works which I've also listed here, E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Die Elixire des Teufels*, 1815, set in Italy. So the charge that Poe in his preface tries to defend himself from is that he is simply trying to cash in on a literary fad, on a—

AE: Making money off the latest trend.

DS: Right, right. So I think I'll just read those two or three lines from the preface:

If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis [**DS:** That is the main concern], I maintain that terror is not of Germany,—

DS: And here you need to be, have at the back of your mind horror fiction as a trend, a literary trend associated mainly with Germany, notably E. T. A. Hoffmann.

that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, — that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources and urged it only to its legitimate results.

DS: I think this preoccupation with the terror of the soul is perhaps most pronounced from the stories that I've listed on my handout, in say *The Black Cat*, *The Tell Tale Heart*. It is an element in the soul that Poe elsewhere describes as the "imp of the perverse". There is something in us that he also calls an impulse to violate the self, to punish the self or to hurt the self, or to violate the self. This is a far cry from one of the dominant convictions, say of the American Transcendentalists as contemporaries, who felt that deep down each individual soul really was governed by divine impulses. Poe wasn't so sure, you know, whether these impulses came from above or from below, and in his stories he focuses on the destructive impulses and especially on the self-destructive impulses of the soul, as he does in *The Black Cat*, *The Tell Tale Heart* and also *William Wilson*.

The other sort of major motivation for creating other spaces, or creating worlds out of space, out of time, I think is his idea of aesthetics. The notion that poetry, and I mean poetry here in the German, the wide German sense of "Dichtung", including stories, not just poems, should lift the reader out of the constraints of everyday experience and provide a kind of experience that is totally different from the ordinary, from the common sense. In quotations here from his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, some may be more familiar with *Philosophy of Composition*, where he claims to describe the way his poem *The Raven* was written. Perhaps I'll just limit myself to making a few remarks on the quotations from *The Poetic Principle*, because what he does here in *The Poetic Principle* is one of the first and most forceful formulations of what later came to be known as the principle of *l'art pour l'art*. Art serves neither didactic purposes, nor does it reveal any truths that would be unattainable elsewhere, but art is a realm that exists on its own, as he puts it— I think I'll just read that first paragraph from *The Poetic Principle*:

I need scarcely observe that a poem— [**DS:** For "poem" you could also say "story". I mean, the genre terms here don't really matter.] that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement.

DS: Okay, so. This is important to note: elevating, you can take that literally, lifting you up. Elevating excitement, you are lifted up, you are lifted out of the ordinary and it is from this notion that Poe derives what one could call his 'Aesthetics of Brevity'. We tend to think of Poe as the first major theorist of the short story, but his theory of the short story really is part and parcel of a more general theory of brevity. Aesthetic experience, for him, by definition, has to be short because it is defined as an elevating excitement, but— I'll read on now:

But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. [**DS:** That is, of short duration.] That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags – fails – a revulsion ensues – and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

DS: With regard to the short story, remember he says, you know, a short story has to be read in a single sitting. So he says you know, by and large, an hour and a half or maybe two hours, it shouldn't be longer. Because if it's longer then you're likely to be interrupted, you know, today say the phone, you get a phone call or somebody knocks on the door and you have to get a cup of tea or whatever.

So—

AE: Very deep— I mean, this idea of uninterrupted emerging into the character's mind, essentially, right? It's very interesting both in terms of aesthetically how Poe writes and also on the other side, this romantic idea of this spark of inspiration that you have to capture on the writer's end as well.

DS: The writer has to be inspired, although remember in *The Philosophy of Composition* he claims that there's no inspiration, not even a lot of imagination in place here. There's a paradoxical relationship between what he says about the process of creation, right, how a poem comes to be written, which for him is a highly rational, calculated procedure, and the kind of effect he tries to achieve which is totally irrational, right?

AE: Right. I was just reminded, regarding the interruptions of the short story, of this creation story of, I think it's Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, where he claims that this came to him in a dream and then he started writing it down and then he was interrupted and he lost the spark and of course it's most likely a fiction, but he constructs this idea of the spark of inspiration, that he received the divine spark and so on. And this Poe criticises in his *Philosophy of Composition*, but then on the other side, the reader should and also the only way the reader really can receive this story and have this effect is through this total immersion into a different mind, into a very absorbing mind as well.

DS: Yes, for me at least it's kind of hard to reconcile the two: on the one hand, his theory of composition, where he claims that the creative process is utterly irrational. You know, inspiration, imagination has no part of it, and then the kind of effect that he tries to achieve. I mean, of course, he tends to get carried away in his own logic at times and to make a point he never hesitates to resort to extreme formulations, to provoke people also. But what he says about the creative process is really utterly anti-romantic. You mentioned Coleridge, one could add Wordsworth's remarks, where he says, you know, the poem emerges from a spontaneous overflow of powerful imaginations. This of course is brushed aside by Poe. No emotions, it's just a— it's more an act of 'ratiocination*' as he would call it: To have some kind of an effect in mind and then you assemble the means, almost like a mechanic, you assemble the means that are likely to bring about the kind of effect you try to achieve.

One of his, to my mind, most effective narrative strategies is his use of a first person narrator who gets caught up sometimes gradually, sometimes immediately in the weird uncanny world that he has entered. In the case of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, he had a gradual approximation of the narrator's mind, the first person narrator's mind, who first tries to analyse things. What is it about the house that I find so disorienting? What is it that goes on here, what's the matter with Roderick Usher? And then at the end his mental state, I think, really coincides with that of Roderick Usher, he's just as much caught up in whatever goes on in the house, as is Roderick Usher. In other stories, Poe takes a more aggressive approach, say in *The Tell Tale Heart*, where the narrator says, well, 'People have called me mad, but mad I'm not.' You know?

AE: Yeah!

DS: The Poe-esque character claims not to be mad, you know, then all the red lights should flash.

AE: I think it's— with what you've mentioned earlier, a bit earlier, I mean this is a completely unreliable narrator, but it's also hard to classify this narrator as unreliable because we don't have any

external factors, we don't know what is happening, like you said before.

DS: Yes. If you wanna get something out of the story, if you wanna read on, you have to rely on the narrator, being fully aware that this guy is crazy. So at least temporarily you have to suspend your own, yeah, disbelief, to go along with this fellow, and this is of course something that can be done only for a limited space of time, hence again this idea that a tale or a poem should be brief, should not go beyond, in the case of a story, two hours or so, and a poem even less. But what's at stake here is the idea that I think is worth emphasizing, that Poe aims at total reader identification. Identification with a narrator who gets caught up in all kinds of wild ideas, imaginations, hallucinations, god knows what. And as you get caught up in the narrator's wild imaginings, you also get transported out of your own ordinary state of mind and this, as we already pointed out, can only be upheld for a limited span of time, hence a poem, hence a story has to be short.

AE: This idea of going beyond your own mind and – trying to avoid the word here, but I'll get right to it – of transcending your own state of being is of course not limited to the gothic, but is also something which is linked to romanticism, which the gothic is linked very strongly to, and to the movement of transcendentalism. This is all contemporary to Poe in some way, right? [**DS:** Yeah.] Is there any reception of Poe's— of these transcendentalists, for instance?

DS: Well, Poe spent much of his life as a critic, writing polemical pieces on the Bostonians, by which he meant generally the transcendentalists. Partly because, or perhaps mainly because, he didn't— Actually, let me put it this way: He shared neither the view of nature (that it is nature out there) nor of human nature. We already touched upon the issue of human nature. For the transcendentalists, human nature is fundamentally good and you realize yourself fully to the degree at which you manage to release that divine spark, that divine being that is that Oversoul (or whatever, you know, it is called) that is in all of us. Poe, by contrast, focusses on the dark elements in the psyche, on the destructive or self-destructive elements. What happens when you realize yourself is chaos, basically. With regard to nature, Poe didn't believe in nature either. I mean one of the— I said right in the beginning what he does in the very choice of his settings: He shuts out the light of common day – even, interestingly, in a genre, which he is also famous for but which I didn't touch upon here, in his detective stories, his detective— tales of ratiocination. In a way of course they are the opposite pole from the tales of terror. But remember Dupin: How does he solve a case? By meditating on it in his home at night: So the nocturnal setting, shutting out the daylight, seems to be as important to committing a crime as it is to solving it. So there is some, despite, you know, the obvious contrast between the two; they are polar opposites.

There are also continuities there, parallels, affinities there. But nature, it is never a source of healing as it would be for Thoreau. If you align— in Thoreau's *Walden* – you can lead a happy life or heal whatever it hurts or you're suffering from, by aligning yourself to the rhythms of nature. Closeness to nature means being yourself, becoming part and parcel of nature. Poe in contrast cuts the bond between him and nature: For him, the realm of Beauty is actually opposed to nature, whereas Thoreau finds beauty all around him. So does Emerson, in different ways, but nevertheless. If you look at a flower closely enough, if you observe it long enough, you will find that there is nothing more beautiful anywhere, on earth or in the arts than in such a flower.

And I think the best document in Poe's writing where he most clearly states this idea that aesthetic experience, the experience of beauty is really totally different from ordinary experience is one or two paragraphs again from *The Poetic Principle*, where he argues against what have traditionally been taken for two major tasks of literature, one is truth – we can learn something from literature, its truth-value, basically – number two: it makes us better people – it educates us, its moral function. So, Poe says, I mean there is some kind of correlation between the realms of truth, the good, and the beautiful, but it is not in the sense that a poem, say, should teach us a moral lesson. Or that we should learn something about this, that and the other from a story, but beauty the experience of beauty has value – extraordinary value – on its own terms. Perhaps, I'll read these two paragraphs here from *The Poetic Principle*, where he argues against the idea that poetry should be didactic, should teach us something, either truth or a moral lesson, I quote:

It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; [DS: So he lumps the two together, truth and morality.] and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. [...] but [DS: Now, here it comes!] but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified – more supremely noble than this very poem – this poem per se – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – this poem written [solely] for the poem's sake.

DS: So, what we have here is clearly an anticipation of what then later came to be known as the theory of *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake. And then he goes on to emphasize the existential function of our desire for the beautiful. And he says, this is the last paragraph:

An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the Beautiful. [DS: It's an immortal instinct.] We have still a thirst unquenchable. [...] This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us [DS: This would be more the Thoreauvian approach, you know, the beauty before us] – but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above.

DS: And for "above", I guess you could also say "beyond". Say, first of all, we have here a prefiguration of what we then later associate with Boudelaire, Mallarmé, the French poets and their idea of *l'art pour l'art* and the idea that paradise is not something that we can find on this earth, but it is artificial: *Le Paradis Artificiel* is one of Boudelaire's— Boudelaire also argues in favor of the use of drugs by the way. There's a reference to the use of drugs, I guess, at the beginning of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where he describes the way he feels about the house, it's like the way one feels when one comes out of a dream induced by opium or something like that – Okay, so for Boudelaire, there is nothing wrong with drugs, you know, anything that helps you go beyond the ordinary. The ordinary is associated with the banale, the realm of art really is beyond this world. That I take to be ultimately the most— profoundest rationale on Poe's part for justifying his use of remote settings, his use of a narrator that, as we identify with him and we have to identify with him if we want to get something out of the story, who is also not really one of us, sort of. Is not an ordinary person. That aesthetic experience is not aesthetic beyond ordinary experience.

AE: I was going to ask, before you quoted that last paragraph, whether the poem written solely for the poem's sake still needs a reader. Which I suppose, if you just take that side of it, then no, it doesn't. Then maybe the writer needs to publish it in order to eat— to make some money but the poem itself doesn't need a reader. But this argument would be that the reader needs the poem, right? The readers need the poem or the short story and these remote experiences to transcend their own being. This is a very open question now: But do you have a hypothesis on why we still want to read this? I mean, Poe is still very popular. His stories are still very well-known, very popular, I mean not only within academia but he is one of the best-known writers of the gothic genre. Why is this still so appealing to us?

DS: Well, by way of preparing myself for this, I re-read after a long time, I re-read *The Fall of the House of Usher* and some of the other stories and I was— I was just amazed at how well-written they are, what a brilliant stylist he is and how much, even though I know some of these stories in and out, I've taught them over... not years, unfortunately I can talk about decades – for decades. How much I get caught up in them, as I read them. You know, knowing everything in advance, they have kind of a— they have a hypnotic appeal. Which is perhaps the highest compliment one could pay to Poe and one which he would have liked particularly. It's also interesting I think, and here I would almost disagree with him: For him the aesthetic experience is limited by a psychal necessity as he said, this kind of elevated excitement can't be maintained, only for a very short amount of time. Nevertheless, after reading, say *The Fall of the House of Usher*, I'm all stirred up for hours: Wondering, and of course without any hope of actually solving the question what did happen in the House? Is this an incest story, you know, brother-sister? The motif of buried alive, premature burial, which is also the topic of another— of his sketches. His appeal to the imagination, I think, is as powerful, as powerful as ever. The brilliant stylist, but also highly effective on his own terms.

AE: I also think, there are lines from his poetry that just stick with you for years and years. And suppose I would agree with Poe that the extreme affect of the immersion dissipates after a short period of time, but that doesn't mean that the stories or the aesthetic qualities of the poem leave you. So this approach or this principle of deep immersion into a different world into a non-place and also into the mind of maybe a non-person from our point of view, not in the sense of that this isn't a person, but that this is someone who's so far away from our own mind that we can't really. Maybe we can't even really empathize in some way, but we can just sit by and watch what happens. This is a bit, goes in the direction of the sublime as well, I mean this is similar to Lovecraft where you have these creatures, these beings that we cannot conceptualize that we can only sit and watch in awe as whatever happens, happens.

DS: This remark, now this doesn't quite seem to fit, because it comes from the opposite direction, from Thoreau and I don't quite remember where this is: 'Think, if it were possible, that you could put yourself into someone else's mind what miracle that would be.' I mean, this coming from Thoreau of course. Having emphasized the distinction between, the difference between the two, but I think there is something about this. You do, or at least you are encouraged or urged, to step out of yourself in a way, to have an experience of ec-stas-y, you know like stepping out of yourself. Part of it and I think Poe's style also in his prose is highly poetical. There's something— I referred to the hypnotic quality of his stories and part of it is the highly euphonic quality. You look at the opening of *The house of*

Usher, the heavy use he makes of sound effects.

During the whole and the dull, dark and soundless day – D-D-D: Dull, Dark and soundless Day, in the AUtumn of the year when the cLOUds hung oppressively lOW in the heavens. This reads like poetry, too. And sometimes when I read it at that pace I no longer care about, you know, where we are and what this is about and just enchanted. Enchanted by the music of it – which for Poe, for him is the highest of the arts. And writing should approximate music to really get close to his ideal of transcendent beauty.

AE: If a piece of writing can even make a veteran of literary scholarship forget about literary scholarship for a while, I think that's saying a lot. Would you say in general, not only in this example but in general; that this kind of writing— Is this escapism?

DS: In a way, yes. But you have a good excuse, I think. It's an escapism that is— I mean, if Poe's arguments make any sense, is well justified. That's what aesthetic experience is supposed to do; To provide access to an alternative world. To a realm beyond this world. And in order to get there, you have to escape at least temporarily and Poe says for a short time, you know, from everyday life.

AE: I think the analogy to drugs is actually quite a good one because this isn't in any sense— this isn't a political criticism. It's not – like he said – it doesn't teach us anything about morals. I've never walked away from a Poe story and thought 'Ah now I know that if I do this then this will happen or whatever.' You walk away with nothing tangible. But you still walk away with something. But it's very— You can't really grasp it, it's intangible, afterwards.

DS: Yeah, for a short span of time, one's— the constraints, the laws and the constraints of ordinary thought, of one's daily affairs are suspended. And I think that's something worth aiming at. You might not wanna get stuck there, you know, that would be dangerous, just as the narrator of *The Fall of the House of Usher*: Remember when the house collapses "from that mansion, [etc.] I fled aghast." So he's in a real hurry to get back from there. So one does want to get back from this too. But as long as it lasts, sometimes it has a fairly long aftermath in one's mind, too, it's something I find liberating, exhilarating and very precious.

AE: Yeah, thank you very very much for taking the time to do this!

DS: Well, thank you! I enjoyed it!

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week, I'll be joined by Margit Peterfy to talk about transformations in transcendentalism and the literature of reform.