

1982

Poe and the Picturesque: Theory and Practice

Kent Ljungquist
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ljungquist, Kent (1982) "Poe and the Picturesque: Theory and Practice," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol3/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**POE AND THE PICTURESQUE:
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

KENT LJUNGQUIST

WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE

I

Critical studies demonstrate the role neoclassical and Romantic aesthetic theories have played in enhancing Poe's pictorial techniques. The primacy of the concept of beauty receives detailed acknowledgement,¹ and more recent analyses stress the importance of the aesthetic of the sublime for evoking terrifying but delightful effects.² Another aesthetic category that deserves greater attention is the picturesque.³ The sublime, the picturesque, and the beautiful constituted for Poe an approved triad that allowed him to develop subtle effects from the accepted aesthetic theories of his time. Although Poe generally exploited the sublime to describe scenes of vastness and grandeur, the picturesque was suited to more circumscribed settings. J. Lasley Dameron documents Poe's interest in this subject by indexing fifty-five uses of the adjective "picturesque" and twelve uses of the noun "picturesqueness" in the criticism alone.⁴ This index represents only Poe's explicit terminology and does not include similar references in the tales and poems, nor does it embrace implicitly pictorial portions of his work. My purpose is twofold: (1) to survey Poe's use of the term in his criticism with special attention to passages in "Autography"; and (2) to apply his theoretical concern with picturesqueness to "The Fall of the House of Usher," perhaps his most comprehensive exercise in this aesthetic mode.⁵ This two-part approach will constitute a translation of picturesque theory into fictional practice.

II

Although Poe often subsumed aesthetic appeals under the general rubric of Beauty, there is a discrete place for the picturesque in his criticism,⁶ Poe's categorization perhaps owing something to aestheticians such as Uvedale Price. Price and others set up picturesqueness as a kind of middle ground between sublimity and beauty. According to Price's general theory, picturesqueness avoids the horror and uniformity of the sublime while correcting the languor and insipidity that

are the possible results of beauty. Such a mediating category is called "intricacy in landscape," which might be defined as "that disposition of objects, which, by a particular and uncertain concealment, excites and nourishes curiosity."⁷ Curiosity is maintained by allowing roughness, hardly a pejorative term for Price, which guards against either excessive deformity or propriety. Thus, in the fictional landscape of "Landor's Cottage," "The greatest care had been taken to preserve a due medium between the neat and graceful on the one hand, and the *pittoresque*, in the true sense of the Italian term, on the other" (*M*, 3: 1330). The scene surrounding the cottage is not one of total propriety since "The stones that once obstructed the way the land had been carefully *placed*—not thrown—along the sides of the lane, so as to define its boundaries at bottom with a kind of half-precise, half-negligent and wholly picturesque definition" (*M*, 3: 1329). The prospect needs a degree of irregularity since, "if a defect could have been attributed...in point of picturesqueness, it was that of excessive *neatness*" (*M*, 3:1334). In general, picturesqueness in Poe's fictional "landscapes" as well as in his criticism may not be quite as rough and rugged as that espoused by Price, but it is still not so regular and flowing as to fall within the realm of pure beauty.⁸

Consequently in "Autography" Poe sharply distinguishes between picturesqueness and the grace or repose associated with beauty. Mr. McMichael's "MS., when not hurried, is graceful and flowing, without picturesqueness" (*H*, 15:221). In his analysis of Albert Pike, Poe seems to appropriate the aesthetic polarities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that set up beauty and picturesqueness as separate categories: "Pike has a keen sense not only of the beautiful and graceful but of the picturesque" (*H*, 15:257).⁹

In addition to establishing picturesqueness at a midpoint between sublimity and beauty, Poe often uses a simple notion of picturesqueness, originally derived from William Gilpin, which involves framing an event or scene as in a painting or a picture. Poe states this painterly idea in the "Autography" section on John Pendleton Kennedy: "From this specimen of handwriting, we should suppose Mr. Kennedy to have the eye of a painter, more especially in regard to the picturesqueness—to have refined tastes generally" (*H*, 15:155).¹⁰ The preface to Poe's *Poems* of 1831 merits note in this regard because he therein defines poetry as "a beautiful painting whose tints, to minute inspection, are confusion worse confounded, but start boldly out to the cursory glance of the connoisseur."¹¹ Rather than attempt

ing to reproduce every natural detail in a minute, representational way, Poe's pictorialism aims, in poetry as well as in prose, to produce the effect of a painting, a piquant combination of details that can be seen as within a frame. Although at least one critic has seen this development as a harbinger of impressionism,¹² the notion falls clearly within the purview of picturesque theory current in America of the 1840's and 1850's. As Hans Huth notes, "The old idea of the picturesque was perhaps never more discussed than in this period."¹³ In his pictorial definition of poetry, Poe implies that the reproduction of every inconsequential detail in a scene invites visual monotony for the sake of pedestrian accuracy. This idea also finds expression in an 1836 review of Slidell's *The American in England* (*Southern Literary Messenger*):

Commencing with his embarkation at New York, our author succeeds, at once, in rivetting the attention of his readers by a *succession of minute details*. But there is this vast difference between the details of Mr. Slidell, and the details of many of his contemporaries. They—the many—impressed, apparently, with the belief that mere minuteness is sufficient to constitute force, and that to be accurate is, of necessity, to be verisimilar—have not hesitated in putting upon their canvass all the *actual* lines which might be discovered in their subject. This Mr. Slidell has known better to do. He has felt the apparent, not the real, is the province of the painter—and that *to give* (speaking technically) the idea of any desired *object*, *the toning down*, or *the utter neglect of certain portions of that object is absolutely necessary to the proper bringing out of other portions—portions by whose instrumentality the idea of the object is afforded*. With a fine eye for the picturesque, and with that strong sense of propriety which is inseparable from true genius, our American has crossed the water, dallied a week in London, and given us, as the result of his observations, a few masterly sketches, with all the spirit, vigor, raciness and illusion of panorama. (*H*, 8:216).

This passage constitutes a paradigm of Poe's concept of picturesqueness with all the key elements present: the acknowledgment of painter's eye in Slidell's description, the demanding of the reader's attention by the vigor of the treatment, a succession of visual details, the heightening of certain tonal attributes and the muting of others, and the mention of verisimilitude. All these qualities deserve further mention for their impact on Poe's pictorial techniques.

The first and simplest aspect is the striking nature of picturesque art. The picturesque was emphatically associated not only with exter-

nal nature but also with a particular style. In 1805, Richard Payne Knight, in his *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, provided this definition of "picturesqueness": "Lately, too, the word has been extended to criticism, and employed to signify that clear and vivid style of narration and description, which paints to the imagination, and shows every event or object distinctly, as if presented in a picture."¹⁴ On a rather superficial level, the picturesque thus became a synonym for "striking," "vivid," "graphic," for anything that demands visual attention. Poe uses the term in this manner extensively, for example, describing in *The Journal of Julius Rodman* (*Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, 1840) a group of Indian savages: "They were well provided with bows and arrows, and small round shields, presenting a very noble and picturesque appearance" (*H*, 4:61).

Poe applies this terminology most extensively in "Autography," a document meriting attention as a serious attempt to define picturesque style rather than as a forum used merely to debunk his literary competitors. Believing that "the soul is a cipher, in the sense of a cryptograph" (*H*, 15:81), he attempts in "Autography" to connect human signatures and the personalities of the contemporary *literati*. Written characters literally become evidences of human character. As I shall discuss later, this analogical relationship, based upon correlations between physical shapes or outlines and human psychology, has significant implications for the picturesque style of "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Poe's evaluative comments in "Autography" on the content, writing style, and chirography of contemporary authors, if minimal and hardly definitive, remain meaningful generalizations on the picturesque because of his tacit equation between the effect of an author's handwriting and his pictorial creativity. For example, the analysis of Nathaniel Parker Willis reads: "Mr. Willis writes a very good hand. What was said about the MS. of Mr. Halleck, in the February number, will apply very nearly to this. It has the same grace, with more of the picturesque, and consequently, more force" (*H*, 15:165). Willis, of course, numbered among the foremost figures in the picturesque movement—the author of *American Scenery* (1840), *Canadian Scenery* (1840), and *Pencillings by the Way* (1844), among others. Once again, analyzing J. P. Kennedy, Poe remarks: "The features are boldness and force of thought (disdaining ordinary embellishment, and depending for its effect upon masses rather than details), with a

predominant sense of the picturesque pervading and giving color to the whole. His 'Swallow Barn' in especial...is but a rich succession of still-life pieces.... A painter called upon to designate the main peculiarity of this MS. would speak at once of the picturesque" (*H*, 15:185). Poe's review of *Horse-Shoe Robinson* praises Kennedy along similar lines: "The second of Mr. Kennedy's volumes is, from a naturally increasing interest in the fortune of the leading characters, by far the most exciting. But we can confidently recommend them both to the lovers of the forcible, the adventurous, the stirring, and the picturesque" (*H*, 8:11). Based on these passages and others throughout Poe's criticism, picturesque style develops associations with force, vigor, and bold impression. Mr. Gallagher's writing is "clear, bold, decided, and picturesque" (*H*, 15:223). Elizabeth Barrett's *Drama of Exile* (*Broadway Journal*, 1845) has a "Homeric force...a vivid picturesqueness which all men will appreciate and admire" (*H*, 12:10). Passages from R. H. Horne's *Orion* "gleam with the purest imagination. They abound in picturesqueness—force—happily chosen epithets, each in itself a picture. They are redolent of all for which a poet will value a poem" (*H*, 11:273). Poe cites the description of the character Orion "not only as an instance of refined and picturesque imagination, but as evincing the high artistical skill with which a scholar can paint an elaborate picture by a few brief touches" (*H*, 11:267).

These citations show not only Poe's appreciation for the painter's eye of several authors, but they further illustrate the sharp difference between the picturesque and the sublime. Rather than energy and dynamic movement associated with sublimity, picturesqueness results from a vigorous succession of details. In addition, the picturesque invites variation and contrast rather than the uniformity demanded by the sublime. For example, in the "Autography" section on H. W. Herbert, Poe remarks that the style "resembles that of Mr. Kennedy very nearly; but has more slope and uniformity, with, of course, less spirit, and less of the picturesque" (*H*, 15:206). Moreover, the chirography of both Joseph Y. Miller and Judge Hopkinson appears "too uniform to be picturesque" (*H*, 15:163, 203). Rather than the overstraining of the faculties under stress as in the sublime, the picturesque can proceed with less difficulty, in Poe's phrase, "by a few brief touches."

It is worthwhile to place Poe's work more clearly in the context of the period because, in general, the kind of framed pictorialism that often interested him is just not amenable to the sublime. Although

Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville had intermittently become disenchanted with the sublime, a view of considerable currency in the 1840's and 1850's held that the vastness and unlimited nature of American scenery precluded the attention to detail demanded by pictorial treatment. H. T. Tuckerman's essay "Over the Mountains, or the Western Pioneer," in *The Home Book of the Picturesque*, contained such sentiments:

Our scenery is on so large a scale as to yield sublime rather than distinct impressions; the artist feels that it is requisite to select and combine the materials afforded by nature, in order to produce an effective picture; and although our country is unsurpassed in bold and lovely scenes, no ordinary patience and skill are needed to choose adequate subjects for the pencil.... Indeed general effect is the characteristic of American scenery; the levels are diffused into apparently boundless prairies, and the elevation spread in grand but monotonous undulations; only here and there a rock or a ridge, a defile or a cliff, form the nucleus for an impressive sketch, or present a cluster of attractive features limited enough in extent to be aptly transferred to a canvass.¹⁵

Although the essay postdates "The Domain of Arnheim" and contains overtly nationalistic sentiments, the ideas expressed are close to the artist Ellison's statement that vast extent fatigues the eye. He notes: "Grandeur in any of its moods, but especially in that of extent, startles, excites—and then fatigues, depresses" (*M*, 3:1278). Implicit in the passages by Poe and Tuckerman is the notion that limitlessness remains somehow undefined by precluding the perception of distinct, discrete details. The title itself of Poe's "The Landscape Garden" follows an eighteenth-century tradition of formality, circumscription, and landscape improvement that precludes the wildness and abandon of sublimity.¹⁶

Picturesque contrast is also achieved through the interplay of light and shadow. This technique, very close to that of a painter's "chiaroscuro," received Poe's attention as early as his review of *Peter Snook* (*Southern Literary Messenger*, 1836). Once again, commenting on the forcible conception of the author, he adds: "It is a Flemish home-piece of the highest order—its merits lying in its *chiaroscuro*—in that blending of light and shade and shadow, where nothing is too distinct, yet where the idea is fully conveyed—in the absence of all rigid outlines and all miniature painting—in the not undue warmth of the coloring—and in a well subdued exaggeration at all points—an exaggeration never amounting to caricature" (*H*, 14:89). The transi-

tion from light to shadow stimulates the eye in painting as a tonal change excites the mind's eye in literature. Uncertain brightness and intricate rather than uniform outlines are a visual mirror of the complexity of psychic states so important to Poe's fictional "landscapes" and to "The Fall of the House of Usher." The picturesque thus becomes a technique to allow the union of psychological and pictorial states. The picturesque profusion and intricacy of much of Poe's fiction come close to a visual ambiguity and confusion that are harbingers of psychic derangement.¹⁷ In contrast to the sublime, the more subdued tones of the picturesque keep overt terror, at least temporarily, at bay. Visual and mental excitation is achieved without sublime abandon.

Although the picturesque allows an ideal excitation of the mind, Poe also associates this aesthetic term with verisimilitude. For example, the review of *Georgia Scenes* (*Southern Literary Messenger*, 1836) sees Longstreet's "The Dance" as rendered with "inimitable force, fidelity, and picturesque effect." Likewise, "The Horse Swap" has "joint humor and verisimilitude" (*H*, 8:260). Just a year later in the review of William Cullen Bryant's *Poems*, "The Prairie" receives approval in explicitly pictorial terms: "Its descriptive beauty is of a high order. The peculiar points of interest in the Prairie are vividly shown forth, and as a local painting, the work is, altogether, excellent" (*H*, 9:297). In "To a Waterfowl," Poe finds "fidelity and force in the picture of the fowl as brought before the eye of the mind" (*H*, 9:297). As in the review of Slidell, faithfulness to the actual, vigor, and verisimilitude remain key criteria in judging poetry and prose about natural scenery. But Poe's concept of verisimilitude defies equation with a representational reproduction of the actual. By verisimilitude, he means an earnest willingness to visualize the scene or event, but not in a photographic attempt to mirror nature. Poe sees verisimilitude as a magical mixture of representation, involving fidelity to detail, and a residue of wonder that such fictional veracity can be achieved.¹⁸ Of the "infinity of arts which give verisimilitude to narration,"¹⁹ the picturesque is a primary technique.

At several points in his criticism, Poe seems fond of associating the picturesque with the term "character": "Mr. Horne has a peculiar and very delightful faculty of enforcing, or giving vitality to a picture, by some vivid and intensely *characteristic* point or touch. He seizes the most salient feature of his theme, and makes this feature convey the whole. The combined naiveté and picturesqueness of some of the passages thus enforced, cannot be sufficiently admired" (*H*, 15:272).

“Character,” a term popular with the picturesque aestheticians, received most active stress from Humphry Repton, author of *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795). Repton and others often referred to the true character of a place and matched this quality with an appropriate style. In other words, a building or a prospect should proclaim, above all, its character. In a simple sense, a private residence, for example, should look like a home. But beyond the matching of effects with the so-called character of a scene, “characteristicness” came to have ideal and human associations. In this way, “character” became a significant aesthetic concern that could allow a union of place and personality, psychology and setting.

III

Such a correlation between fictional setting and human character is nowhere more evident in Poe’s works than in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Poe’s classic tale, in fact, fulfills most of the basic principles of the picturesque thus far outlined. Following the terminology of Repton and other aestheticians of landscape scenery, the narrator of “Usher” comments on “the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people” (*M*, 2:399). This terminology thus sets in motion the elaborate set of analogies between the house, the body of Roderick, and the Usher line—a series of pictorial similarities observed by many critics. Referring to the affinity between the architectural features and the Usher dynasty, the narrator cannot help “speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other” (*M*, 2:399). What has not been noticed previously is that Poe achieves this analogical relationship largely through repetition of the term “character,” mentioned no fewer than eleven times in the course of the tale. Its repetition not only develops the body-house relationship but also establishes a series of analogies among the landscape and the features of Roderick’s face, his esoteric studies, his “fantastic” musical performances, Madeline’s illness, her facial features, and the sound of the disintegrating house. Almost in duplication of his statement about the landscape features of the house, the narrator says that “the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this *character* of phantasm” (*M*, 2:408). Thus, a common affective language of the picturesque binds the description of the house, its

inhabitants, and the features of the landscape.

In the evocation of an intricate landscape covered by fungi and web-like shrubbery, the appeal to principles of composition in landscape poetry, and the complicated tracing of the train of associations in architectural design,²⁰ the opening paragraphs of "Usher" fall clearly within the vogue of picturesque art. The pictorial emphasis is evident as the narrator attempts to remodel "the details of the picture" in order "to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression" (*M*, 2:398). His action of looking into the tarn, moreover, is like putting an additional frame on the picture. Consonant with the striking or graphic nature of picturesque art, this act increases the vividness of impressions: "And it might have been for this reason only, that, I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me" (*M*, 2:399). As he surveys the mansion, he is not impressed by the warmth of cottage art but by the outlines of a darker, more ominous version of the picturesque. The house is marked by "excessive antiquity," "desolation of age," "extraordinary dilapidation" (*M*, 2:400).

From such a perspective, it is a logical step to a study of the physical features of Roderick's face. Just as the outline and shape of handwriting in "Autography" provides a means of reading human "character," Poe interprets Usher's facial expression as the cryptograph of a tormented soul. As outer shape reflects inner meaning, Usher's physical and bodily features ultimately reveal deeper turmoil. The correspondence among countenance, character, and setting is common in picturesque art. As Martin Price comments: "The movement from texture—the shaggy coats of asses, the varied outlines of Gothic architecture, the mellow tints of time-worn stone—to the physiognomy is a clear one."²¹ This phase follows logically and clearly because aestheticians of the picturesque placed so much emphasis on human expression and the study of physical features. Although Hawthorne also stresses human physiognomy in his pictorial writing, Poe, in "Usher," does not attempt to elicit the feelings of compassion and pathos associated with Hawthorne's "moral picturesque."²² Nor does he achieve the sense of stillness and repose found even in his own "Landor's Cottage." The intricate style is even further removed from the gentle middle-class notion of the picturesque, associated with pleasant seaside scenes, quaint rowboats, and vacationing city dwellers. Rather, the mouldering ruins, the "minute fungi," "tangled web-work," and "leaden-hued vapour" act as a kind of enveloping veil on the entire scene. According to Angus Fletcher, "the whole art of the

picturesque is so obviously to veil that it may not need remarking. It employs a range of devices by which the veiling becomes a stimulus to curiosity, though not to liveliness."²³ The curiosity of the narrator becomes an almost deranged fascination with whatever is hidden. And quite explicitly in "Usher," Poe describes the narrator's incipient discovery as "the hideous dropping off of the veil" (*M*, 2:397).

Commentators have often noted that the central tension of "Usher" is between order and disorder,²⁴ thought's dominion balanced against incipient madness. This opposition, however, receives pictorial rather than overtly dramatic treatment. The narrator pauses over the qualities of the Usher Landscape: the complexity of organization through architectural arrangement, the house's endurance or excessive antiquity, its cohesion despite dilapidation and decay. Visual details communicate the hint of disorder: the inconsistency in the outline of the house and the barely perceptible fissure or crack. The narrator sees a "wild inconsistency between the still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of individual stones" (*M*, 2:400). This state, of course, mirrors the "incoherence" and "inconsistency" (*M*, 2:402) of Usher himself. A stasis that has too long endured becomes threatened by encroaching challenges to its stability. Uniquely evident in "Usher" is the inevitable assault of change on man in the landscape, a feature of picturesque art that binds human character to setting:

The typical picturesque object or scene—the aged man, the old house, the road with cart-wheel tracks, the irregular village—carries with it the principle of change. All of them imply the passage of time and the slow working out of its change upon them. A face in which one reads the experience of suffering and endurance is seen in a moment that is earned in the long processes that have gone into its creation; it is a moment of resolution, in which we see some counterpoise of enduring substance and the accidents of time.²⁵

The thematic thrust of the picturesque in "Usher" thus involves a precarious state of order achieved through time-worn endurance beset by the disorder of physical disintegration and incipient madness. "The picturesque in general recommends the rough or rugged, the crumbling form, the complex or difficult harmony. It seeks a tension between the disorderly or irrelevant and the perfected form. Its favorite scenes are those in which form emerges only with study or is at the point of dissolution."²⁶ Clearly, the Usher house, at the point of col-

lapse, is a fit subject for picturesque treatment.

The madness of Roderick, his fantastic art, the relationship with his sister—all these legitimate critical concerns—can be subsumed under a larger pattern: the pictorialized drama of the dissolution of the House of Usher. As in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the house itself becomes the main protagonist in the tale. Poe insures its connection with other elements in the story by Roderick's esoteric theory on "the sentience of all vegetable things." Set off against the order that the family wants to uphold, the all-encompassing "kingdom of inorganization" (*M*, 2:408) looms, acting as a force of destructive animation against the stagnancy of the Usher line. Once again, Poe presents this theory pictorially, and in architectural outline: "The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of the collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of the arrangement, and its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn" (*M*, 2:408). Usher projects to inanimate objects the qualities of life, energy, human expression. To paraphrase Leo Levy, such a projection of human feelings to external scenery constitutes the essence of picturesque art.

One can claim that Poe confines the picturesque to the opening pages of "Usher." A key element of the picturesque is the engagement of the narrator's mind, the ability to elicit energies expressed in visible objects. However, as the story progresses, Poe downplays pictorial composition *per se* and focuses on complexity for its own sake in particular objects. Coinciding with this transition, the narrator turns from the picturesque style of the house to witness the chilly Ideality of Roderick Usher's mind. Usher's paintings symbolize this movement from pictorial intricacy to total abstraction: "If ever a mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher" (*M*, 2:405). As picturesque disorder deteriorates into total disorder, mirroring the disintegration of Usher's psyche, Roderick is seen painting what can only be termed abstract, not picturesque, art.²⁷ The transition or disintegration is not all that surprising. The sense of play, associated with the picturesque, invites a kind of disorder that will ultimately take the restless mind outside the volatile realm of the picturesque. "The sense of play finds exercise in fancifulness and in those acts of abstraction which call attention to the arbitrariness of all the mind's creation."²⁸ The transition from pictorialism to ideal abstraction in natural scenery and in

stories like "Usher" leads to perhaps the ultimate endpoint of the picturesque since it allows, more than the other aesthetic modes, a free and flexible excitation.

Thus, in "Usher," the narrator moves through three aesthetic stages. At the outset of the tale, the intricate "landscape features of the domain" evoke a curiosity that is intensified by the veil of vapor and shrubbery, which acts as a picturesque invitation to discover what lies beneath the surface. After this mask is removed, the narrator is no longer in the realm of the picturesque. Within the narrator's mind, the changes suffered by Roderick and those undergone by the house are not merely compared; they are identified. In this second stage, the narrator is ushered into a realm of Ideality represented by the abstractions of Roderick's paintings. The external scenery has, by this point, become almost secondary to the weird mental projections of Usher. Such a transition has been observed by students of the picturesque, notably by Christopher Hussey, who notes that picturesque prospects often become so intricate and complex that psychological projections become paramount. Idealization of scenery results so that, in the final analysis, ideal abstraction exists without knowing precisely what it represents. Just so the case with Usher's weird, abstract paintings. Unlike the landscape features of the house, which provoke curiosity under the assumption that some kind of truth about Usher can be revealed, Usher's realm of aesthetic abstraction remains utterly mysterious and all but incomprehensible to the narrator. The narrator enters the third phase of his psychological journey. Abstraction gives way to uncontrolled terror.

Nevertheless, in the opening portions of "Usher" Poe gives subtle expression to picturesque theory. The framing of the landscape features of Usher's domain, the attraction of the narrator's attention by a series of vigorous details, the gradual unfolding of the scene by a succession of visual effects, the intensification or moderation of light and a shadow—all these picturesque techniques provoke the reader's curiosity about Usher, a tortured psyche amidst a precariously balanced, if disintegrating setting.

NOTES

¹ George Kelly, "Poe's Theory of Beauty," *AL*, 27 (1956), 521-536.

² I suggest that Poe's commitment to the sublime waned in the decade of the 1840's in "Poe and the Sublime: His Two Short Sea Tales in the Context

of an Aesthetic Tradition," *Criticism*, 17 (1975), 131-151. See also Ljungquist, "Descent of the Titans: The Sublime Riddle of *Arthur Gordon Pym*," *SLJ*, 10 (1978), 75-92 and Alan C. Golding, "Reductive and Expansive Language: Semantic Strategies in *Eureka*," *PoeS*, 11 (1978), 1-5.

³ Although Robert Jacobs devotes significant attention to Poe's knowledge of the picturesque, other discussions of this aesthetic mode with reference to Poe are scanty. See Jacobs, *Poe: Journalist and Critic* (Baton Rouge, 1969), pp. 184-5 and 203. A carefully argued study of Poe's sources is Joel R. Kehler, "New Light on the Genesis and Progress of Poe's Landscape Fiction," *AL*, 47 (1975), 173-183. See also Motley Deakin, ed., *The Home Book of the Picturesque* (Gainesville, 1967), p. v; Hans Huth, *Nature and the American* (Los Angeles, 1957), pp. 12, 52, 60, 122; and James Callow, *Kindred Spirits: Knickerbocker Writers and American Artists* (Chapel Hill, 1967), p. 217. In "Psyche and Setting: Poe's Picturesque Landscapes," *Criticism*, 15 (1973), 16-27, Sharon Furrow is correct about Poe's use of the conventions of the sublime and the picturesque. She errs, I think, in calling "Al Aaraaf" and "The Coliseum" picturesque rather than sublime. Apparently ignoring "Londor's Cottage," she says that Poe's later works free him from landscape conventions.

⁴ J. Lasley Dameron and Louis Charles Stagg, *An Index to Poe's Critical Vocabulary* (Hartford, 1966), p. 38. The index is keyed to *H*, from which all passages in Poe's criticism are cited in the text by *H*, volume, and page number. Passages from the tales are taken from *M*.

⁵ Despite hints by some critics at the picturesque quality of the opening paragraphs, there has been no comprehensive attempt to see the tale as an exercise in this aesthetic mode. Commenting on the setting, Darrel Abel says: "it operates descriptively, as suggesting appropriate and picturesque background for the unfolding of events" and adds that it consists of a "merely picturesque ensemble of background particulars"—"A Key to the House of Usher," *UTQ*, 18 (1949), 176-185. More willing to acknowledge seriously the implications of the picturesque, Leo Levy posits a possible connection between Roderick's "kingdom of inorganization" and Hawthorne's picturesque style in "Picturesque Style in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *NEQ*, 39 (1966), 147-160.

⁶ The most extended treatment of the picturesque movement in England is by Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London, 1967). A valuable updating is by Martin Price, "The Picturesque Moment," *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), pp. 259-292.

⁷ Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque* (London, 1974), p. 18.

⁸ Callow mentions that the vogue of Uvedale Price in America is worthy of further exploration, p. 124. While the correlation with Price is suggestive, it is tempting to agree with George Mize: "Poe's treatment of landscape gardening...and his whole theory of taste and design border on the Eclectic, a vogue which was beginning to blur all forms of architecture and landscaping in mid-nineteenth-century America, like the mist that blurred Poe's vision on his approach to 'Londor's Cottage' "—"The Matter of Taste in Poe's 'Domain of Arnheim' and 'Londor's Cottage,'" *ConnR*, 6 (1972), 93-99.

POE AND THE PICTURESQUE

⁹ There are other examples: Halleck has a "love for the graceful rather than the picturesque" (*H*, 15:150).

¹⁰ This citation is similar to one on William Gilmore Simms in the 1836 *Southern Literary Messenger*. "The MS. of Mr. Simms resembles, very nearly, that of Mr. Kennedy. It has more slope, however, and less of the picturesque—although still much. We spoke of Mr. Kennedy's MS. (in our February number) as indicating 'the eye of the painter.' In our critique of *The Partisan* we spoke of Mr. Simms also as possessing the 'eye of the painter' " (*H*, 15:168).

¹¹ Quoted in *AHQ*, 175.

¹² *AHQ*, 175.

¹³ Huth, p. 84.

¹⁴ Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London: G. Mercier and Company, 1805), p. 151. Lewis Lawson speculates that Poe may have known Knight's *Inquiry* in "Poe and the Grotesque: A Bibliography," *PoeN*, 1 (1968), 9. The correlation between visual pictorialism and picturesque prose style goes as far back as, at least, Uvedale Price. Witness the following passage from his *Essays on the Picturesque*: "Few persons have been so lucky as never to have seen or heard the true *proser*; smiling, and distinctly uttering commonplace nothings, with the same placid countenance, the same even-toned voice; he is the very emblem of serpentine walks, belts, and rivers, and all Mr. Brown's works; like him they are smooth, flowing, even, and distinct; and like him they wear one's soul out.

"There is a very different being of a much rarer kind, who hardly appears to be of the same species; full of unexpected turns, of flashes of light; objects most familiar, are placed by him in such singular, yet natural points of view...This is the true picturesque, and the propriety of that term will be more felt, if we attend to what corresponds to the beautiful in conversation. How different is the effect of that soft insinuating style, of those gentle transitions, which, without dazzling or surprising, keep up an increasing interest, and insensible wind round the heart." [Quoted in Martin Price, pp. 274-275.] John T. Irwin briefly notes connections between human signatures and human character amidst his brilliant discussion of Poe's hieroglyphic symbols in *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphic in the American Renaissance* (New Haven, 1980), p. 52.

¹⁵ Deakin, pp. 115-116.

¹⁶ According to Uvedale Price, uniformity, the great enemy of the picturesque, is the cause of the sublime—*Essays on the Picturesque* (London, 1794), pp. 71-86. Samuel Monk comments in *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth Century England* (New York, 1935): "The materials with which the gardener works preclude much that went to the making of the sublime" (p. 164). Cf. Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*: "Where the parts by their harmony produce an effect of a whole, but where there is no seen form of a whole producing or explaining the parts of it, where the parts only are seen and distinguished, but the whole is felt—the picturesque. Where neither whole nor parts, but unity as boundless or

endless allness—the sublime” [Quoted by Martin Price, p. 280].

¹⁷ Remarking the prevailing taste of the nineteenth century, Siegfried Giedion has commented: “Picturesque disorder fascinated people, for it was a reflection of a chaotic state of feeling.” See “The Nineteenth Century: Mechanization and the Ruling Taste,” *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York, 1948), p. 364.

¹⁸ Speaking of *Robinson Crusoe*, Poe remarks: “We read, and become perfect abstractions in the intensity of our interest—we close the book, and are quite satisfied that we could have written as well likewise? All this is effected by the potent magic of verisimilitude” (*H*, 8:170).

¹⁹ See review of *Sheppard Lee* for context of the quotation (*H*, 9:138-139).

²⁰ For a discussion of Archibald Alison’s influence on “Usher,” see Barton Levi St. Armand, “Poe’s Landscape of the Soul: Association Theory and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *MLS*, 7 (1977), 32-41.

²¹ Martin Price, p. 281.

²² The phrase is from Hawthorne’s “An Old Apple Dealer.” A careful study of Hawthorne’s aesthetics is Buford Jones, “The Man of Adamant and the Moral Picturesque,” *ATQ*, 15 (1972), 22-41.

²³ Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY, 1970), p. 260.

²⁴ Notably E. Arthur Robinson, “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *PMLA*, 76, (1961), 68-81.

²⁵ Martin Price, p. 285.

²⁶ Martin Price, p. 277

²⁷ See Paul Ramsey, Jr., “Poe and Modern Art: An Essay on Correspondence,” *CAJ*, 18, (1959), 210-215 and H. Wells Phillips, “Poe’s Usher: Precursor of Abstract Art,” *PoeS*, 5 (1972), 14-16.

²⁸ Martin Price, p. 272.