

# Caving in : character-spaces in Nietzsche and Poe

Autor(en): **Mendicino, Kristina**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata**

Band (Jahr): - **(2018)**

Heft 47: **Raum und Narration = Espace et narration = Space and narration**

PDF erstellt am: **14.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006262>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Kristina Mendicino

## Caving In

### Character-Spaces in Nietzsche and Poe

„Das Aussereinander“, schreibt Gustav Teichmüller in seiner Abhandlung *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt*, „bedeutet bloss, dass die Vorstellungen verschieden bleiben und nicht verschmelzen sollen.“ Wenn aber Räumlichkeit dergestalt relativiert wird, sind nicht nur die Bedingungen jedes objektiven Koordinatensystems und jeder subjektiven Orientierung *a priori* abgeräumt. Denn die Möglichkeit eines entscheidenden Kriteriums für die Trennung zwischen Innen- und Außenraum wird ebenso außer Kraft gesetzt, im wörtlichen wie im übertragenen Sinne. Ausgegangen wird in den folgenden Seiten von der Frage, wie nach dem Aussetzen oder Einstürzen jeglicher statthaften räumlichen Ordnung weiter erzählt wird. Durch eine Auseinandersetzung mit Friedrich Nietzsches *Also sprach Zarathustra* und Edgar Allan Poes *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* soll auszugsweise angedeutet werden, wie diesen desorientierenden Schriften anders charakterisierte Räume eingeschrieben sind.

#### I. Space, Relatively Speaking

Space is telling. Taking distance; digressing in a discussion; performing a metaphoric transference at the literal, figurative, or etymological level – : such spatial metaphors, among others, characterize the ways in which innumerable relations can be told, including those which would describe entities with no status by mechanical-empirical standards, such as the relation of bodily exterior and inner soul. On the importance of this point, Augustine writes, for example, in *De quantitate animae*:

[...] et si figurarum omnium planarum illa optima est quae circulo effingitur, in qua ratio docuit nihil melius esse puncto atque potentius, quod nullo dubitante partibus caret; quid mirum si anima neque corporea sit, neque ulla aut longitudine porrecta, aut latitudine diffusa, aut altitudine solidata; et tamen tantum valeat in corpore, ut penes eam sit regimen omnium membrorum, et quasi cardo quidam in agendo, cunctarum corporalium motionum?<sup>1</sup>

---

1 Augustine. *De quantitate animae liber unus. Patrologiae cursus completus*. Ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Vol. 32. Paris: Garnier, 1877. Col. 1036-80. Here Col. 1048. “And, if a circle is the best of all plane figures, and if in a circle nothing is more excellent or more important than a point, which beyond all doubt is without any parts – why should anyone be astonished that the soul, which is neither a body, nor extended in length, nor spread out in width, nor massed in depth, has,

And in tallying up still more examples from any number of places, it might even seem that figures of speech for spirit, matter – and other matters altogether – are construed, more often than not, *more geometrico*.

But this order of priority itself is far from unquestionable, and at various points in the Western philosophical and literary tradition, deviations from it take place. In 1882, the classical philologist and philosopher Gustav Teichmüller derives abstract geometrical space from the comparison of repeated (and distorted) perspectival observations – as when “der Mann, der sich von mir entfernt, in meinem Auge immer kleiner wird, je weiter er fortschreitet.”<sup>2</sup> Through this and other, at times far-fetched examples<sup>3</sup>, he defines space in sheer relational terms, but without any fixed order; its essential feature lies instead in the following cognitive act: “dass ich Verschiedenes setze, welches zu gleicher Zeit, ohne in einander überzugehen und in eine Vorstellung zu verschmelzen, vorgestellt und durch beziehende Thätigkeit zusammengefasst wird.”<sup>4</sup> It is not, in other words, that spatial metaphors derive their meaning from an abstract understanding of geometrical space, but rather that geometrical space constitutes, first of all, a register of signifiers – one metaphor among others – to describe separations and distinctions of an otherwise indefinite character: “das Ausereinander,” writes Teichmüller, “bedeutet bloss, dass die Vorstellungen verschieden bleiben und nicht verschmelzen sollen.”<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, one could speak meaningfully of spatial relations only in relative terms. Space would be removed from its status as a transcendental *a priori*, and shifted in significance fundamentally, such that it transfers to countless other areas of description, but *without* grounding them in a presupposed stable order. Teichmüller empties “space” of all solid meaning, but for its commutable value as a signifier, concluding:

---

nevertheless, such power that it rules all the members of the body and presides over all the motions of the body for all the world as the director of its activity?” Augustine. *The Magnitude of the Soul*. Trans. John J. McMahon. *The Fathers of the Church*. Ed. Hermigeld Dressler et al. Vol. 4. Washington: Catholic University 2002. P. 49-149. Here P. 85.

2 Gustav Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt. Neue Grundlegung der Metaphysik*. Breslau: Koebner, 1882. P. 266.

3 In one passage, he writes: “so kann man sich einen sehr entfernten Stern denken, bis zu welchem mein Lichtstrahl mehrere Jahrtausende braucht, um anzukommen. Stellen wir uns nun vor, auf solchem Stern wären Beobachter mit genügend starken Fernröhren, so könnten sie sagen: Siehe, da bricht jetzt auf der Erde Eva einen Apfel vom Baume, den Adam in die Hand nimmt. Jetzt erschlägt Abel den Kain u. s. w.” Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 230.

4 Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 249.

5 Ibid.

[S]o sieht man, dass wir bei den räumlichen Ausdrücken nur allgemeine Ordnungsverhältnisse denken. Es hat darum keine Noth, dass wir die realen Beziehungen als räumliche denken sollen, da wir sonst auch alle ethischen, politischen, logischen und arithmetischen Ordnungsverhältnisse auf geometrische zurückführen müssten, um dann schliesslich doch einzusehen, dass die geometrische Seite nirgends von der geringsten Bedeutung ist und kein Verhältniss bestimmt und keine Veränderung hervorruft, sondern dass umgekehrt jede physisch oder logisch oder ethisch begründete Ordnungsveränderung auch den Schein einer räumlichen Veränderung mit sich führt oder sich einigermassen verständlich durch räumliche Metaphern ausdrücken lässt. Mithin hat die räumliche Beschaffenheit nur den sehr werthvollen Charakter einer Semiotik, einer Zeichenlehre.<sup>6</sup>

This semiotics mobilizes what had hitherto functioned as a fixed order against which changes over time conventionally received their measure. And just as sizes and distances grow and diminish according to the standpoint, viewpoint, and optical apparatus of the observer, rather than any transcendental coordinates<sup>7</sup>, so too does interiority figure as an extrapolation on the basis of superficial observations.<sup>8</sup> On this point, he remarks:

An sich betrachtet, [...] muss jeder vorher als im Innern gelegen aufgefasste Punkt sich in gar nichts von den Punkten der Oberfläche unterscheiden; [...] da der ganze Gegensatz nichts als Beziehung ist, d.h. die Setzung von möglichen Punkten einer dritten Dimension in Beziehung zu einem gegebenen Flächenbilde.<sup>9</sup>

Yet whereas Teichmüller is ultimately willing to forget the radical uprooting of metaphysical foundations that he performs through his semiotics in order to establish an ideal “reality” based on the *cogito* – for it is consciousness, he goes on to argue, that unifies disparate *relata* in all their perspectival variants to arrive at relatively universal truths<sup>10</sup> – at least one of his readers,

6 Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 274.

7 See Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 271.

8 He defines the third dimension in the following way: “Sie ist das Bewusstsein von der Möglichkeit, andere Punkte, als in der Fläche gegeben sind, aufzufassen und sie auf die in der Fläche gegebenen Punkte zu beziehen.” Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 284.

9 Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 288.

10 Early in his monograph, he writes: “Das Ich vermittelt auch die Temporalunterschiede der Existenz mit dem prädicativen Inhalt des Was. Das Ich gehört nicht bloss zu Einem Prädicate, sondern unterschiedslos auch zu jedem beliebigen andern. [...] Das Ich ist gleichgültig gegen die sich ausschliessenden Gegensätze und umfasst sie alle und vermittelt sie durch Zeitunterschiede und andere Bedingungen.” Teichmüller, *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 58.

Friedrich Nietzsche, will go further to undermine the priority of the *cogito* as well. Abandoning a transcendental subjective consciousness and the transcendental *a priori* of space becomes Nietzsche's point of departure for the configurations of space and signs that appear in *Also sprach Zarathustra* – which he wrote after abandoning his notes for a physical-mechanical proof of his thought of eternal return, in notebooks interspersed with references to, among others, Teichmüller.<sup>11</sup>

## II. No Space Like Home

There is little talk of interiors in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, as it charts his journeys to and from his mountain. The traces of narrative in this most ambivalent book "für Alle und Keinen" are organized, above all, along the lines of his up-comings and under-goings, parallel to the trajectory of the sun – as well as his travels overseas, through cities, and to and from islands. Modern dwellings figure in the narrative only once in passing, along the way of Zarathustra's return to his solitude on his mountain in the third book:

Und ein Mal sah er eine Reihe neuer Häuser; da wunderte er sich und sagte:  
Was bedeuten diese Häuser? Wahrlich, keine grosse Seele stellte sie hin, sich  
zum Gleichnisse!  
Nahm wohl ein blödes Kind sie aus seiner Spielschachtel? Dass doch ein ande-  
res Kind sie wieder in seine Schachtel thäte!

---

These remarks lay the ground for a similar return to the transcendental subject towards the end of his chapter devoted exclusively to space. Teichmüller. *Die wirkliche und scheinbare Welt* (as note 2). P. 289.

- 11 For an erudite elaboration of Nietzsche's engagement with scientific literature and his mechanical and cosmological proofs of eternal return, see Paolo D'Iorio. "The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation." *Lexicon Philosophicum* 2 (2014). P. 41-96. For a discussion of Nietzsche's engagement with Teichmüller, see Robin Small. *Nietzsche in Context*. London: Ashgate, 2001. For Nietzsche's notebook references to Teichmüller, see *Kritische Studienausgabe*. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999. Vol. 10. P. 292, 310, 590; Vol. 11. P. 627, 633, 640. This edition is hereafter abbreviated *KSA*, followed by volume and page number. The abandonment of a transcendent *origo* that Nietzsche's writing reflects would, in a longer discussion, need to be taken up in relation to Jacques Derrida's remarks on "espacement" in *L'écriture et la différence*. Within this text, Derrida marks out, for example, the ways in which ordering oppositions, such as "[I]a structure Dedans-Dehors," provide no orientation and make no sense "dans un espace pur abandonné à lui-même et désorienté." Jacques Derrida. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967. P. 166.

Und diese Stuben und Kammern: können *Männer* da aus- und eingehen?  
Gemacht dünken sie mich für Seiden-Puppen; oder für Naschkatzen, die auch  
wohl an sich naschen lassen.<sup>12</sup>

Brief as this relatively minor episode may be, however, there is much that takes place and much that is in play here, beginning with the title of the chapter: “Von der verkleinernden Tugend.” For the title implies not only the very kind of diminution over distance that Teichmüller takes as his prime example for perspectivalism. Talk of “der verkleinernden Tugend” also suggests a transaction between the quantitative register of *res extensa* and the qualitative characteristics that would, more often than not, be considered a world apart from the physical and empirical world of spatial measures, the world composed of *partes extra partes*. Furthermore, because it is an approach, and not a recession into the distance, that renders the row of houses small to Zarathustra – as habitations fit for cats and dolls – the dimensions seen in this account of an experience seem to correspond to no ordinary, habitual view of dwelling spaces along a road. Once no ascertainable order of geometrical coordinates universally holds, however, such alternative perspectives become not only speakable, as they always were, but also irrefutable. Everything *is* as it is said to seem – but for this very reason, there is also no way to tell for certain what it is that Zarathustra says he sees, which may, by virtue of the semiotic status of space, be signs of other things a world apart. In any case, Zarathustra gives several signals that the words of this text, in addition to describing a residential area, speak to and from a metaphysical tradition in which distinctions are drawn between body and soul, themselves illustrated along the lines of housing and inhabitant – whether the body be a prison for the soul, as Socrates describes it in the *Phaedo*<sup>13</sup>, or whether it be the soul’s (living) burial mound (σῆμα), as he says in the *Cratylus* in more playful terms and plays on words, despite the grave subject matter.<sup>14</sup> (The semiotics of space are at stake here, too, insofar as the word for this mound is also the ancient Greek word for the sign (σῆμα); whence, perhaps, the juxtaposition of hermeneutics and housing in the question with which Zarathustra begins: “Was *bedeuten* diese Häuser?”) It is telling, in any case, that the row of new houses is no sooner seen, than the houses are read as signs, which, as such, do not stand for themselves, but as the likeness (*Gleichnis*) of a soul. Yet insofar as the quantitative predicate “gross” is attributed (and denied) first of all to the soul, and not to the space that soul sets forth or sets out (*stellt hin*), the soul would be no more independent of quantitative measure, than quantity

12 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 211.

13 See Plato. *Phaedo* 92a 1. *Platonis Opera*. Vol. 1. Ed. John Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon, 181989. P. 133.

14 See Plato. *Cratylus* 400c 1-2. *Platonis Opera* (as in note 13). P. 197-198.

(*Größe*) would be exclusively pertinent to extension. And if it is not entirely unprecedented to consider quanta in terms other than extension – as Augustine does in *De quantitate animae*, where he describes the soul in analogy to an unextended point, and then attributes quantities of force to this punctual, immaterial soul – it is disorienting to find these terms adopted by a speaker such as Zarathustra. After all, he had characterized the body-soul distinction in an early speech as childish talk – “‘Leib bin ich und Seele’ – so redet das Kind,”<sup>15</sup> diminishingly echoing one of the opening questions in Augustine’s dialogue: “sic cum quæritur ex quibus sit homo compositus, respondere possum, ex anima et corpore.”<sup>16</sup>

Now it could be that Zarathustra is playing around; parodying Plato and Augustine; and thereby speaking a language that approximates the sight of homes fit for children, as he sees them. But if it is true that childish talk returns in talk of childish homes, and that the appearance of the latter could be seen to motivate the recurrence of the formerly dismissed dichotomy, the significance of this regression raises new questions. On the one hand, Zarathustra’s rhetoric would seem to be inflected by his perspective on the houses. The childish questions of interpretation – what the houses mean, what kinds of souls set them up – would themselves be reflections of an interpretation of these houses as child’s play. Even if his speech is inflected by his environment, in other words, his own flexibility could yet be understood as an expression of his rhetorical virtuosity, and not “der verkleinernden Tugend” itself. On the other hand, within this reflexive logic, where Zarathustra lowers his register and betrays his principles to portray the homes as products of a soul, he implies that his language does not simply reflect a superior subjective perspective, should “subject” signify, as it does for thinkers such as Teichmüller, an independent self-conscious agent who synthesizes sentiments and pronounces judgments over what he sees, of his own accord. For if Zarathustra’s view of the childish homes leads him to adopt a childish rhetoric of body and soul, then childishness is no separate quality that he, knowing better, nonetheless attributes to things condescendingly. And soon enough, he will admit to being *forced* to bend before these small homes and small ones himself, affected by the subject of observation, to the point where he laments: “Oh wann komme ich wieder in meine Heimat, wo ich mich nicht mehr bücken muss – nicht mehr bücken muss *vor den Kleinen!*”<sup>17</sup> The subject of perspectival relations turns out to be as relatively determined as the view that comes to him. If the relativity of perspective went only one way for Teichmüller – namely, through a stable self-consciousness – perspective goes at least two ways for Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra is also seen and shaped

15 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 39.

16 Augustine. *De quantitate animae* (as in note 1). Col.1036.

17 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 212.

through that which he views, and vice versa. The language of this passage – the torsions and distortions to which Zarathustra “must” submit in person and through his speech – shows how far-reaching the disorder can be, when *neither* a transcendental subjective consciousness *nor* the transcendental *a priori* of space can be taken for granted. Even Zarathustra, confronted and affronted with this world, seems forced to bend and turn against himself in order to go through it.

But go through it he does, and in so doing, he undergoes it: taking perspective literally as seeing-through, Zarathustra moves from pointing out “diese Häuser” to “*diese Stuben und Kammern*,” as though they were transparent. Thus, he provides an insider’s view, before progressing to the inhabitants: “Gemacht dünken sie mich für Seiden-Puppen; oder für Naschkatzen, die auch wohl an sich naschen lassen.”<sup>18</sup> And soon, the eye that sees will be coordinated with the foot that goes and the speech that proceeds, when he addresses the town in the second and third sections of this chapter, beginning with the words: “Ich gehe durch diess Volk und halte die Augen offen,”<sup>19</sup> opening his eyes to the people as they open their ways to him, and holding his eyes in a receptive position as he passes through the town that receives him, thoroughly involved in a dynamic of motion and stasis, activity and receptivity, that sets him in reciprocal relation with this place. Submitting to it in this way seems necessary, even in the beginning, where Zarathustra merely talks to himself. For it is only in entering into more detail – in teasing out the way that the homes do not house souls after all, but inanimate toys and animals – that Zarathustra departs from his earlier childish questions. In other words, it is only in entering the picture he sees and unpacking its contents that he can find a way to exit the homes he has come to, even if this means temporarily turning himself into the child who was in question from the start, of whom he had said, playfully: “Nahm wohl ein blödes Kind sie aus seiner Spielschachtel?”<sup>20</sup> Perspective becomes a play between mastery and suffering at once, a process of adept overcoming through adaptation. On the one hand, the homes may seem smaller to Zarathustra because he has grown greater since the last time he passed through, so that Zarathustra’s remarks on diminution would testify indirectly to his greater magnitude. His perspective would be, in this regard, determined by the pathos of a distance that first comes to expression in the way Zarathustra sees not himself, but the others, and this pathos of distance would be immense and immeasurable in terms of spatial extension, so long as spatial measures are predicated upon the notion of a homogeneous continuum and

---

18 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 211.

19 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 213.

20 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 211.



the principle of equivalence.<sup>21</sup> But things stop looking so great from the moment one recognizes that the very distance which makes his greatness *is* a pathos that forces him to suffer performing the role of the “blöde[n] Kind” he disparages from the start. Worse yet, the only way to get through this suffering, it appears, is by way of further performance.

In the section that follows this one, Zarathustra will proceed to talk his way out of town, delivering a speech “über die verkleinernde Tugend,” which already marks a significant shift from the chapter-title, “*Von der verkleinernden Tugend*”: the new preposition indexes Zarathustra’s progressive *overcoming* of what he actively bespeaks and perforce undergoes. But this exit procedure initially entails coming even closer to these inhabitants, who no longer figure as relatively harmless, nibbling cats at a distance, but who are characterized more violently as hens biting directly at him –

Noch gleiche ich dem Hahn hier auf fremdem Gehöfte, nach dem auch die Hennen beissen; doch darob bin ich diesen Hennen nicht ungut. Ich bin höflich gegen sie wie gegen alles kleine Aergerniss; gegen das Kleine stachlicht zu sein dünkt mich eine Weisheit für Igel.<sup>22</sup>

Even if his emergence from town brings Zarathustra nearer still to a state of emergency, however, his speech also displays a development that alters the situation he describes, as well as the ways in which he figures within it. Already here, as the home becomes the homestead, everything begins to shift through permutations at the level of the signifiers set in play. Against and within this homestead (“Gehöft”), Zarathustra’s polite behavior (“ich bin höflich”) – situates him in a courtly context and thereby sets him apart. The language pertaining to him may be inflected by his foreign environment, as it was from the start, but only in order to elevate him now and to reconfigure his position in this context. And on a smaller scale, his refusal to mount defenses or to be “stachlicht” may also represent a reshuffling of the letters that made up the “*Spiel-schachtel*,” and therefore amount to a refusal that dissolves and thus does away with those toy boxes.

Above all, however, Zarathustra’s strategies entail dissolving the signs of spaces, things, beasts, and persons in a series of likenesses and linguistic slip-pages that alternate registers rapidly, breaking the cohesion of the residences and residents that he makes his way through. There is no way to trace his trajectory through town, as he points out a recent, isolated episode, and then

21 In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche describes the “Pathos der Distanz” as that which grows “aus dem eingefleischten Unterschied der Stände, aus dem beständigen Ausblick und Herabblick der herrschenden Kaste auf Unterthänige und Werkzeuge und aus ihrer ebenso beständigen Übung im Gehorchen und Befehlen.” Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 5. P. 205.

22 Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 212.

leaps to a general comment on iterative activities that he observes along his itinerary, at no point in particular –:

Und jüngst riss ein Weib sein Kind an sich, das zu mir wollte: “nehmt die Kinder weg! schrie es; solche Augen versengen Kinder-Seelen.”

Sie husten, wenn ich rede: sie meinen, Husten sei ein Einwand gegen starke Winde, – sie errathen Nichts vom Brausen meines Glückes!<sup>23</sup>

There is no mediating or middle way between Zarathustra’s latest run-in with the young, and the generalized objections that an anonymous “they” coughs up. Rather, this “Einwand” itself constructs a fragile windshield and a sign of its collapsed remnants, nearly evoking “a wall” (*eine Wand*), but one that falls together in the same breath (*Einwand*) – and that also winds up sounding much like the strong “Winde” it would defend against. And since their protection is expressed in coughing, the immunity that the people’s “Einwand” should secure more truly figures as a symptom of illness pitted against an elemental force, and thus as a *sign* that the defenses of this domestic people are about to expire. In place of a coherent spatial order within which actors proceed, a semiotics involving physics, physiognomy, and affect operates at once through every passage to characterize the experience of this town, for all involved. Such is Nietzsche’s way of carrying further the consequences of Teichmüller’s remarks on the semiotic character of space. And all along, signifiers in the text undergo permutations, whose superficial similarities allow for slippages between semantic registers, pseudo-etymologies, and near homonyms, as with the imposition of Zarathustra’s “Höflichkeit” upon the people’s “Gehöfte,” which permits him to hold court in the midst of a barn. But once the traditional spatial metaphors that separately order exteriority and interiority collapse, the order of word and meaningful content fall with them. Nietzsche’s presentation of relativity exceeds that of thinkers whom he knew, such as Teichmüller – because the phenomena Zarathustra relates share no common ground; the rhetoric of space does not stay in place; and each word may always turn out to be other than it appears.

### III. Caving In: Character-Spaces

It is through these signs of perspectivalism that Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* would need to be read further – especially his home on his mountain and in his cave, which appears to be slightly different every time he returns to it, as though this point of departure were, each time, a point of no return.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 212.

<sup>24</sup> In the fourth book, Zarathustra announces his cave as a space that is “gross und tief und hat viele Winkel; da findet der Versteckteste sein Versteck. Und dicht

But it is the cave of another – namely, Edgar Allan Poe’s eponymous Arthur Gordon Pym – that shows a still more radical instance of the collapse of spatial order as well as the metaphysical and linguistic categories traditionally organized along its lines. It is to this narrative to which I turn next, beginning towards the end.

Throughout the second half of the novel, Pym sails on the ship of Captain Guy, whose initial intention to pursue commercial interests veers off course and gives way to a more exploratory journey to the South Pole. Along the way, the vessel lands on an uncharted island of cannibals who had, through stakes driven into the ground of a stratified soapstone gorge, managed to bring about a “partial rupture of the soil” that proved “capable of hurling the whole face of the hill, upon a given signal, into the abyss,” crushing the crew.<sup>25</sup> Pym and Peters alone “effected an escape from inhumation” by straying from the group and entering into a “fissure in the soft rock” that had “attracted [their] attention” beforehand and that allows them to be spared by a slight margin, as less earth falls over them in the cavern than the others buried below.<sup>26</sup> Up to this point, Pym (who is narrator), recounts the journey with meticulous references to dates, latitudes, and longitudes – and continues to imitate this mathematicization of earthly space even after losing track of precise dates, latitudes, and longitudes, openly admitting to the heuristic

---

bei ihr sind hundert Schlüpfе und Schliche für kriechendes, flatterndes und springendes Gethier.” Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 4. P. 331. He echoes these words in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, where he illustrates the way the German soul accommodates many others: “Die deutsche Seele hat Gänge und Zwischengänge in sich, es giebt in ihr Höhlen, Verstecke, Burgverliesse; ihre Unordnung hat viel vom Reize des Geheimnissvollen; der Deutsche versteht sich auf die Schleichwege zum Chaos.” Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 5. P. 185. And here, the soul itself takes on the bodily features of brain matter, has Nietzsche had written of it in his early texts on philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks: “Anaxagoras [...] vergaß das Gehirn, seine erstaunliche Künstlichkeit, die Zartheit und Verschlungenheit seiner Windungen und Gänge und dekretirte den ‘Geist an sich.’” Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 1. P. 860. Even such physical depths, however, may just as well be read as a series of surfaces, as Nietzsche indicates in a note from April–June 1885, writing on Socrates: “Immer *ironice*: es ist eine köstliche Empfindung, einen solchen wahrhaftigen Denker zuzusehn. Aber es ist noch angenehmer, zu entdecken, daß dies Alles Vordergrund ist, und daß er im Grunde etwas Anderes will und auf sehr verwegene Weise will. [...] Plato selber ist ein Mensch mit vielen Hinterhöhlen und Vordergründen.” Nietzsche (as in note 11). *KSA* 11. P. 440.

25 Edgar Allan Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket. Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: Penguin Random House, 1984. P. 1155-1156.

26 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1155, 1151.

invention of numeric approximations.<sup>27</sup> “To avoid confusion,” measures remain useful signifiers for telling things apart, even when they do not correlate to the map of the world, and even when the order they denote does not correspond, as he also puts it, to “its ordinary sense.”<sup>28</sup> Whereas Zarathustra’s departure from common measures results in radical linguistic displays of perspective that no longer correspond to plotlines, linear structures, or lexical conventions, Poe’s navigator and protagonist thus turns universal encodings for the surface of the globe into a trope, in order to maintain a faint semblance of order.

But when the ground gives way to the chasm of the cave, these strategies fail, exposing the fault-lines of the unmarked terrain they stood upon, as well as the underlying chaos of the cosmos. As the earth collapses, Pym becomes “suddenly aware of a concussion resembling nothing I had ever experienced before,” and is struck with the “vague conception, if indeed I then thought of anything, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand.”<sup>29</sup> So much as a semblance of universal coordinates dissolves with this collapse, in a disturbance that even renders the recollection of thought and the subject of experience questionable. With the “concussion,” the shock Pym undergoes melds with the shock of the earth, insofar as the ordinary usage of the word goes both ways, and both senses seem to converge here. The impressions related would thus be as physical as they are psychic, not only because Pym tells us he can no longer tell whether he had “thought of anything then,” but also because there is temporarily, according to this concussive logic and language, no difference between his mental procedures and physical experiences, or, if you will, between body and soul. In any case, the “universal dissolution” he bespeaks would entail too, the dissolution of mind and matter – which continues, as Pym goes on to speak of how he “collect[ed] [his] scattered senses [...], *grovelling* in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth.”<sup>30</sup> “Groveling,” he is indistinct from the gravel that had scattered, a specimen of human-dust having returned to dust, now trying to recollect itself. Even Teichmüller’s minimal definition of spatial and semiotic articulation – namely, as mental distinctions – fails to hold up here. And if the slippage among signifiers is not as conspicuous in these writings as it is in

27 See Poe. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (as in note 27). P. 1130-1135.

28 Poe. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (as in note 27). P. 1135.

29 Poe. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (as in note 27). P. 1152.

30 Poe. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (as in note 27). P. 1152. The language of these passages through which Pym’s “living inhumation” is told also verges upon a language of the “inhuman” through the ambivalence of individual words and the resonances of more univocal ones – such as “inhumation” – which we cannot but hear in this cavern, this echo chamber. Poe. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (as in note 27). P. 1153.

Zarathustra's speech, this massive burial mound and  $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$  modifies semantics and troubles the subject of sense in ways that will be carried out as the post-apocalyptic narrative carries on in caves and crypts that reveal the cohesion of its plot and its language to be thoroughly undermined.<sup>31</sup>

The solid globe is no point of reference any longer, as Pym and Peters resume a southward journey in the caverns. Henceforth, the dimensions Pym describes are presented solely as dislocated approximations. But what is most important are the figures Pym reconstructs, transcribing his perspective and perception of the winding passageways into a flat, unified overview of the terrain that could never have been seen this way before, thus offering drawings and descriptions, but no immediate insight into his perspective in going through them. Moreover, the drawings that are supposed to supplement his descriptions stand out to disrupt his discursive observations as they double them: "the precise formation of the chasm will be best understood by means of a delineation taken upon the spot."<sup>32</sup>

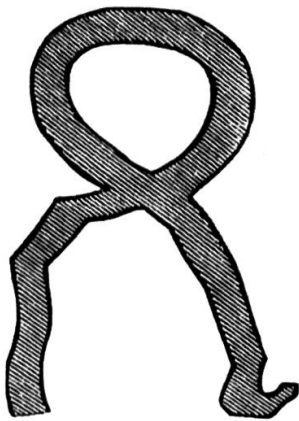


FIG. 1

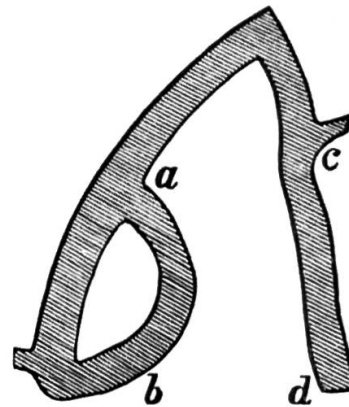


FIG. 2

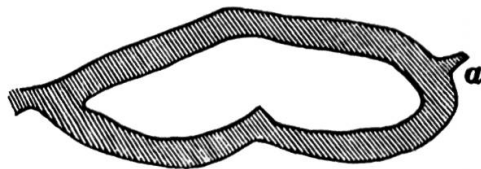


FIG. 3



FIG. 5

31 For a thorough and erudite study of the scientific context that Poe engages with in his writing, in ways that expose "the ultimate groundlessness of matter," with reference to texts such as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and *Eureka*, see John Tresch. "Matter No More': Edgar Allan Poe and the Paradoxes of Materialism." *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2016). P. 865-898. Here P. 898.

32 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1165.

What is said to be precise, in other words, no longer adds up to the numeric estimate of distances nor even to Pym's account of these caves, but comes down to the way the sketches cut a figure in the text, whose pages become the only space in which these cavernous spaces ever appear. Thus, when he introduces the second chasm, Pym no longer claims to give a "precise" rendition, but, more precisely, "its general figure."<sup>33</sup> And as each chasm is said to open to the next from left to right, like the order of the characters on these pages, while their outlets and turning points are marked alphabetically – e. g., "The total length of this chasm, commencing at the opening *a* and proceeding round the curve *b* to the extremity *d*, is five hundred and fifty yards"<sup>34</sup> – they form a system of signs in counterpoint to the lines of the narrative that seem to signify only the shape of the spaces themselves. In the midst of the record of Pym's journey, the passages stand as impasses and crypts that conceal nothing, but break open the narrative syntagma.

As soon as space takes shape as figures with distinct traits set between the lines of text, it becomes a foreign body in Pym's first-person narrative of his experience that raises the question of interpretation for even the writer himself. Pym introduces the first chasm: "it was, indeed, one of the most *singular-looking* places imaginable, and we could scarcely bring ourselves to believe it altogether the work of nature."<sup>35</sup> The question is taken up explicitly again when Pym and Peters, having traced through three caverns along the horizontal axis, reach a dead end and find themselves facing what Pym calls "singular-looking indentures in the surface of the marl forming the termination of the *cul-de-sac*."<sup>36</sup> These second singularities, moreover, are more resistant to being worked through or gone through, as the etchings precede Pym's sketching and appear to him on a vertical surface – obviating both his further passage and the process of translation that had allowed him to come to terms with his experience before. Instead, Pym and Peters are confronted with the problem of marks to which they have no access.

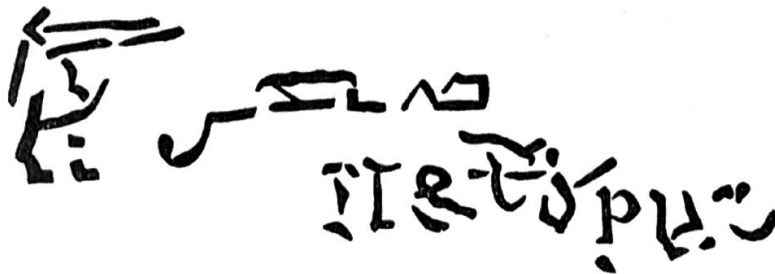


FIG. 4

33 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1166.

34 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1166.

35 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1164.

36 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1167.

On these marks, Pym writes:

With a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most northerly of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they were really such. I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of the marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentures; thus proving them to have been a work of nature.<sup>37</sup>

Now, an artificially induced concussion of the earth is what put Pym in his current situation in the first place, and thus should have already made clear that the displaced shards prove nothing concerning natural causes. But it is utterly immaterial whether the possibly artificial nature of the scattered fragments that Pym pieces together is unthinkable for him because of a memory lapse. Nor does it matter whether other causes underlie his lapidary dismissal of intentions behind this reproduction of his initial catastrophe in miniature, which literally renders it set in stone. In any case, the figures carved into the cave show themselves to be legible at once as the products of accident, visual representations, and alphabetical characters, illustrating in one stroke all three senses of *graphein*: to scratch, to draw, to write. Yet precisely as such, they point to a primary, prim-ordial text that cannot be read according to any of these orders of marks, not only because they are written in no known language and cannot even be known as script, but also and above all because they simultaneously solicit multiple, mutually exclusive approaches to graphics.<sup>38</sup>

---

37 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1167.

38 In the context of a broader discussion of Poe's discovery of cryptography and Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphics, as well as the distinctions between Poe's cave and the one into which Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* retreats, Shawn James Rosenheim similarly observes the instability of these characters, "the signs in the *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* waver uneasily between hieroglyph and cryptograph." Shawn James Rosenheim. *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. P. 60. The most extensive and ground-breaking reading of these figures, however, remains John Irwin. *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. P. 165-235. Drawing connections between Poe's writing and Egyptian hieroglyphics, among other scripts (including Scripture), as well as the Platonic allegory of the cave, Irwin follows the lines of the text to demonstrate

Perspectival and semiotic spatial relations, taken to such an extreme, rend asunder every spatial and signifying system they might otherwise figure. And yet, it is not the narrative, but the drawings – both Pym’s sketches of the passageways he traversed and the wall markings he copies – that will be read and interpreted by the anonymous narrator of the appendix, who is identified neither with Pym (who had signed the preface), nor with Poe (to whom co-authorship for “the first few pages” is ascribed in Pym’s preface).<sup>39</sup> Turning “to the indentures in figure 4” in particular, after an elaboration of the first drawings, the appendix-author writes:

[I]t is more than probable that the opinion of Peters was correct, and that the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art, and intended as the representation of a human form. The delineation is before the reader, and he may, or may not, perceive the resemblance suggested [...]. The upper range is evidently the Arabic verbal root [...] ‘to be white,’ whence all the inflections of brilliancy and whiteness.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, the new conclusion would have to be as inconclusive as Pym’s, based as it is on a hypothesis of correspondence with no ascertainable cause. And if anything, the location of Arabic writing near the South Pole is even more far-fetched than the matter Pym picks up and puts together to solve the puzzle. But distance no longer makes a difference when it comes to the possible conjectures regarding the spatial signs in this text. If Teichmüller would have defined the third dimension as the positing of possible points in relation to a given surface-image (*Flächenbild*), this literal surface image, in the absence of a system of coordinates to orient its observers, allows any point of the globe and any number of its signs to be proposed as its possible correlate, its possible interior sense, turning all these exteriors and signifiers into its implicit extensions.

The dimensions of their potential significance increase in proportion to the utter irrelevance of these marks – and that may be precisely the point. For the tenuous way in which any number of fragments of sense or matter, art or nature, may (or may not) be drawn to them, corresponds precisely to Poe’s

---

the way the text revolves around the relation between writing and a search for an undifferentiated origin in language, and in all that follows from it. The result turns out to be various iterations of abyssal vortices, which figure both in the dark chasm and in the bright outlet with which the narrative breaks off. Indeed, even beyond that break, “the note,” writes Irwin, “returns the reader to the chasm episode, presumably to retrace the narrative line to the final break in the text, and then on to the note which sends him back to the chasm episode, and so on.”  
Irwin. *American Hieroglyphics*. P. 196-197.

39 See Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1008.

40 Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1180-1181.



definition of perfect poetry elsewhere. Towards the end of his last published text, the cosmological prose-poem *Eureka*, Poe writes:

[I]n human constructions a particular cause has a particular effect; a particular intention brings to pass a particular object; but this is all; we see no reciprocity. The effect does not re-act upon the cause; the intention does not change relations with the object. In Divine constructions the object is either design or object as we choose to regard it – and we may take at any time a cause for an effect, or the converse – so that we can never absolutely decide which is which. To give an instance: – In polar climates the human frame, to maintain its animal heat, requires, for combustion in the capillary system, an abundant supply of highly azotized food, such as train-oil. But again: – in polar climates nearly the sole food afforded man is the oil of abundant seals and whales. Now, whether is oil at hand because imperatively demanded, or the only thing demanded because the only thing to be obtained? It is impossible to decide. There is an absolute *reciprocity of adaptation*.

The pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is in the ratio of *the approach* to this species of reciprocity. In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it.<sup>41</sup>

Much as these remarks may seem to reiterate classical teleological constructions of the universe – which would amount to coming full circle, with “Divine constructions” that recall Augustine’s divine geometry – the point of Poe’s sketch differs fundamentally from them, in ways that show his argumentative grounds to be cracked up. For thorough reciprocity thoroughly undermines any attempt to determine relations – such that perfect coordination, with no way to tell what depends from or upholds another, renders all incidents co-incidences. If reciprocal adaptation had also, in a way, shaped Zarathustra’s speech for small people, Poe’s formulation of symmetry and adaptation pushes both principles to an extreme where not even so much as a central agent or figural center remains tenable, as John Carlos Rowe has similarly written in his most incisive reading of Poe’s text.<sup>42</sup> If there were an illustration of what Poe describes here as a perfect plot, it would be the semiotic and spatial disorder that follows or underlies the collapse of the globe in Pym’s narrative, and takes shape in the cave drawings.<sup>43</sup>

41 Edgar Allan Poe. *Eureka. Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: Penguin Random House, 1984. P. 1141-42.

42 John Carlos Rowe. “Writing and Truth in Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.” *Glyph* 2 (1977): p. 102-21, here P. 105.

43 The figures in the cave have their parallel at the level of the plot as well. As possibly artificial ruptures in the earth, they seem to prefigure the artifice that caused the concussion and crack-up of the island terrain, after the fact. At the same time,

Signs, space, and the plotting of their relations do not come down to the actions and events of agents, human or otherwise. Instead, they happen to emerge through the appearance of singular figures and the semblance of indecipherable characters. If the cave drawings, as the anonymous author of the appendix writes, “open a wide field for speculation and exciting conjecture,” speculation over them remains possible, to the extent that their sense is impossible to decide. Where narrated spaces become telling, and literal characters mark spatial configurations, there is no telling their ins and outs. Instead, irrelevant relata and coincident incidences dissolve the more familiar subjective, geometrical, and linguistic orders of the cosmos. But the possible configurations and recollections of their scattered pieces extend indefinitely; rent asunder, they render the plotted space of what one might call *scryptography*.

---

they manifest again before Pym’s proper narrative breaks off and the afterword begins. As Pym and Peters escape the island and proceed further south, the last sentences describing their sea voyage lead to a dead end akin to the one they had found in the caves: “And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.” Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (as in note 27). P. 1179. Not only does the dead end double the termination of Pym’s account of the caverns; so too, does the “human figure” perform a gesture that aligns it with the indentures in the wall. Furthermore, the color of this “human figure”—which may not be human at all—figures as another inflection of the “brilliancy and whiteness” the author of the appendix highlights. With these puzzling last words, all the pieces fit together, but in such a way that goes nowhere, when it comes to determining an ultimate meaning or purpose behind their coincidence. The “shrouded human figure” has, accordingly, solicited a wide range of interpretive approaches; for a description and bibliography of several major conjectures, see Ronald Clark Harvey. *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe*. London: Routledge, 1997. P. 13, 111, 153-154.

