

**Th = thesis (argument)**  
**gl = "glue" (relevant evidence/quote)**  
**c= concession**  
**trans. = transition-marked yellow**  
**T = they say**  
**I = I say**  
**arch =archival**  
**research**  
**cl=close reading**

## Poe's Art of Transformation: "The Cask of Amontillado" in Its Cultural Context

DAVID S. REYNOLDS

David S. Reynolds, "Poe's Art of Transformation:  
'The Cask of Amontillado' in Its Cultural Context."

In *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*.

Edited by Kenneth Silverman.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 93-112.

Th

gl

T

c

I

THE Cask of Amontillado" is a prime example of Poe's ability to sculpt materials from popular literature and culture into a masterwork of terror. At once derivative and freshly individualistic, the tale enacts Poe's belief that "the truest and surest test of *originality* is the manner of handling a hackneyed subject."<sup>1</sup>

It has long been surmised that this story of murderous revenge reflects Poe's vindictive hatred of two prominent New York literary figures, the author Thomas Dunn English and the newspaper editor Hiram Fuller.<sup>2</sup> If "The Cask" is, on some level, a retaliatory document, surely Poe could not have envisioned a more ghoulish type of retaliation. Seen against the background of the war of the literati, the narrator Montresor (Poe) gets back at his enemy Fortunato (English) for a recent insult, using their mutual friend Luchesi (Fuller) as a foil in his scheme. Although we know from the start that Montresor is bent on revenge, and we have ominous feelings as he takes his foe into the depths of his skeleton-filled wine vaults, the tale's atmosphere is deceptively convivial; the two connoisseurs banter and drink as they go in search of the cask of Amontillado (a fine Spanish sherry) Montresor says he has received. Only when Montresor lures Fortunato into a small niche, quickly chains up his stupefied victim, and proceeds to wall up the niche with bricks and mortar are we overwhelmed by the horrifying fact of live burial.

Poe's animus against the literati may have motivated the revenge theme, but it fails to account for specific details of plot, character, and imagery. For those we must look to the tale's popular cultural context. Poe was a great borrower, and he had an eye on the

popular market. On one level, his terror tales were clearly designed to cater to a public increasingly enamored of horror and sensationalism.<sup>3</sup> Writing in the era of the crime-filled penny papers and mass-produced pamphlet novels, he was well aware of the demands of the sensation-loving public. His letters are peppered with excited boasts about some work of his that has made a "sensation" or a "hit." In his tale "The Psyche Zenobia," he had the editor of a popular magazine declare: "Sensations are the great thing after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations – they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet" (340). Following the lead of the sensation mongers, Poe made use of some of the wildest situations imaginable.

One such situation was live burial. In "The Premature Burial" Poe wrote that "no event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death," a topic that creates "a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil" (961). The specific work which established the premise of "The Cask of Amontillado" was Joel Tyler Headley's "A Man Built in a Wall," first published in the *Columbian Magazine* in 1844 and collected in Headley's *Letters from Italy* (1845).<sup>4</sup> Headley reports having visited an Italian church containing a niche in which was discovered the skeleton of a man who had been buried alive by a workman under the direction of the man's smirking archenemy. After a detailed description of the grotesque posture of the skeleton, suggesting an excruciatingly painful death, Headley recreates the murder:

The workman began at the feet, and with his mortar and trowel built up with the same carelessness he would exhibit in filling any broken wall. The successful enemy stood leaning on his sword – a smile of scorn and revenge on his features – and watched the face of the man he hated, but no longer feared. . . . It was slow work fitting the pieces nicely, so as to close up the aperture with precision. . . . With care and precision the last stone was fitted in the narrow space – the trowel passed smoothly over it – a stifled groan, as if from the centre of a rock, broke the stillness – one strong shiver, and all was over. The agony had passed – revenge was satisfied, and a secret locked up for the great revelation day.

Several details in Headley's piece – the premise of live burial in a hidden niche, the careful placement of the bricks, the revenge

motive, the victim's agonized groaning and numbed stillness – anticipate "The Cask of Amontillado."

Also analogous to Poe's story is Honoré de Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche," an adaptation of which appeared in the *Democratic Review* in November 1843. Balzac describes a jealous husband who, on discovering that his wife's lover is hiding in her closet, has the closet walled up as the lady watches. Poe most likely also knew the story "Apropos of Bores" (*New-York Mirror*, December 2, 1837), in which a man at a party tells of going with a porter into the vast wine vaults of Lincoln's Inn to view several pipes of Madeira that were stored there. They found the pipes in good condition but had a terrifying accident: When their candle was extinguished, they groped to the cellar door only to have the key break off in the lock. They impulsively decided to forget their sorrows by staving in a wine pipe and getting drunk in order to forget "the horrible death that awaits us." Giving up this impulse, they soberly faced the fact that their remains would not be discovered until all traces of identity were destroyed. We never learn the outcome of the tale, for the narrator and his listeners are called to tea before he is finished.

Another predecessor of Poe's tale, hitherto unacknowledged, was the sensational best-seller *The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845) by George Lippard, Poe's friend from his Philadelphia days.<sup>5</sup> Monk Hall, a huge mansion where Philadelphia's prominent citizens gather in secret revels and debauchery, has below it a so-called "dead-vault," a vast cellar with labyrinthine passages and hidden recesses. The cellar is anticipatory of the vast vault beneath Montresor's mansion in several ways: It is lined with countless skeletons, its walls are clammy with moisture, and it is the scene of live burial. One critic has called "absurd" Poe's notion in "Cask" of "an ossuary . . . gruesomely combined with the appurtenances of a wine cellar,"<sup>6</sup> but many of Poe's contemporary readers had been prepared for such an odd coupling by the description of Monk Hall, where not only are the wine cellar and dead-vault side-by-side but the dead-vault is littered with liquor bottles strewn amid the skeletons. In a scene that presages Montresor's long descent with his victim into the catacombs, Devil-Bug, the sadistic keeper of Monk Hall, slowly takes a victim, Luke

Harvey, down an extensive staircase into the depths of the dead-vault. Hardly as subtle as Montresor, Devil-Bug mutters to his victim, "I am a-goin' to bury you alive! D'ye hear that? I'm a-goin' to bury you alive!"<sup>7</sup> Just as Montresor howls and laughs at the enchained Fortunato, so Devil-Bug takes noisy pleasure in the sufferings of his victim. "He shrieked forth a horrible peal of laughter, more like the howl of a hyena, than the sound of a human laugh." Unlike Montresor, Devil-Bug does not succeed in his murderous scheme; his intended victim escapes. Devil-Bug, however, is haunted by the vision of a previous murder victim, just as (according to one reading) Montresor is tortured by the recollection of his crime.

A larger cultural phenomenon that influenced Poe was the temperance movement, which produced a body of literature and lectures filled with the kinds of horrifying images that fascinated him. Poe's bouts with the bottle, leading eventually to his death, are well known. Less familiar is Poe's ambiguous relationship with the American temperance movement. In the 1830s Poe had befriended the Baltimore writer John Lofland, who delivered temperance lectures even though, like several other backsliding reformers of the period, he drank and took drugs in private. Another of Poe's acquaintances, Timothy Shay Arthur, wrote some of the most popular (and darkest) temperance tales of the day, including *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1842) and *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* (1854). In the early 1840s, the rise of the Washingtonians – reformed drunkards who told grisly tales of alcoholism in an effort to frighten listeners into signing a pledge of abstinence – brought to temperance rhetoric a new sensationalism. Walt Whitman's novel *Franklin Evans* (1842), for example, written on commission for the Washingtonians, luridly depicts the ill results of alcohol, including shattered homes, infanticide, crushing poverty that leads to crime, and delirium tremens with its nightmare visions. Poe had direct association with the Washingtonians. In 1843, after a period of heavy drinking, he promised a temperance friend from whom he hoped to gain a political appointment that he would join the Washingtonians. Whether or not he did so at that time, he did join a related group, the Sons of Temperance, in the last year of his life. When on August 31, 1849, the *Banner of Temperance*

announced Poe's initiation into the order, it said: "We trust his pen will sometimes be employed in its behalf. A vast amount of good might be accomplished by so pungent and forcible a writer."<sup>8</sup>

What the *Banner of Temperance* neglected to say was that Poe had already written temperance fiction, or more precisely, his own version of what I would call dark temperance, a popular mode that left didacticism behind and emphasized the perverse results of alcoholism. Following the lead of many dark temperance writers who portrayed once-happy families ripped asunder by a husband's inebriety, Poe in "The Black Cat" (1843) dramatized alcohol's ravages on an initially peaceful couple. The narrator tells us that he had once been known for his docility and gentleness but that his character – "through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance – had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others" (851). As in popular temperance literature, the first sip is followed by escalating pathological behavior. The narrator declares that "my disease grew upon me – for what disease is like Alcohol!" (851). One night a "fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured" impels him to cut out the eye of his cat with a pen-knife, a deed he tries unsuccessfully to drown in wine. Before long he has been driven by alcohol to paranoia and crime, even to the extent of murdering his wife.

"The Cask of Amontillado" also studies the diseased psyche associated with alcohol. Everything in the story revolves around alcohol obsession. The object of the descent into the vault is a pipe of wine. Both of the main characters are wine connoisseurs, as is their mentioned friend Luchesi. The narrator, Montresor, boasts, "I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could."<sup>9</sup> As for Fortunato, he is so vain about his knowledge of wine and so fixated on the supposed Amontillado that he goes willingly to his own destruction. When we meet him, we learn "he had been drinking much" in the carnival revelry, and as he walks unsteadily into the vault his eyes look like "two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication." He gets drunker after sharing the bottle of Médoc that Montresor breaks open in the cellar, and even more so when he subsequently gulps down the flacon of De Grave (one of several puns that point to his fate).

cl

Fortunato's name has a double meaning: from his perspective, he is "fortunate" to have an opportunity to show off his expertise in wines; from the reader's viewpoint, it is his bad "fortune" to be sucked to doom by his overriding interest in liquor.<sup>10</sup> Poe's contemporary readers, accustomed to dark temperance rhetoric, would have found special significance in the interweaving of alcohol and death images in passages like this:

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled.

My own fancy grew warm with Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost depths of the catacombs.

cl

The jingling of the bells reminds us of the fool Fortunato has become because of his destructive obsession. The wine-instilled agitation of Montresor's fancy reflects his role in this devilish communion, while the intermingled casks and bones, besides recalling Lippard's Monk Hall, enhance the eerie dark temperance atmosphere. After Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall, their dialogue takes on a dreary circularity that shows once again the importance of alcohol obsession to the story. "The Amontillado!" exclaims the victim; "True, the Amontillado," replies the murderer. Even after he has been walled in, the hapless Fortunato, in a desperate attempt to pass off the situation as a joke, returns to the subject of drinking:

"We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo – he! he! he! – over our wine – he! he! he!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"He! he! he! – he! he! he! – yes, the Amontillado!"

arch

The dark temperance mode gives the tale a grim inevitability and another cultural phenomenon – anti-Masonry – contributes to its black humor and mysterious aura. At the center of the story is a dialogue that shows Poe tapping into his contemporaries' concerns about the Masons, a private all-male order widely thought to be involved in heinous crime. After drinking the bottle of De Grave, Fortunato throws it upward with a grotesque gesture Montresor does not understand.

"You do not comprehend?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said, "yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said.

"It is this," I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the fold of my *roquelaire*.

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. "But let us proceed to the Amontillado."

This marvelous moment of black humor has a range of historical associations rooted in the anti-Masonry mania that had swept America during Poe's apprentice period. The pun on "mason" (referring both to the fraternal order and to a worker in brick and stone) seems to have a specific historical referent. At the center of the Masonry controversy was one William Morgan, a brick-and-stone mason of Batavia, New York, who in 1826, after thirty years of membership in the Masons, was determined to publish a harsh exposé of the order but was silenced before he could, most likely by vindictive members of the order. Morgan's disappearance was wreathed in mystery. One night in September 1826 he was seized, gagged, and spirited away in a carriage to the Niagara frontier, where all trace of him was lost. The story spread that a group of Masons, viewing Morgan as a traitor, had drowned him in the Niagara River. (It is perhaps meaningful, in this context, that Montresor leads his victim "below the river bed.") Anti-Masonry sentiment snowballed and became a substantial political movement, peaking in the mid-1830s and then feeding into the ascendant Whig party. The Masonic order was viewed as undemocratic and as a tangible threat to American institutions. In particular, its oath, whereby members swore to uphold rational secular values (without reference to God or Christianity), was seen as sacrilegious. When Poe has Fortunato make a "grotesque" movement signaling membership in the order, he is introducing a sign that many of his readers would have regarded as demonic. When Montresor

arch

gives the sign of the trowel, he is not only foretelling the story's climax but is also summoning up the associations of brick-and-stone masonry, murderous revenge, and mysterious disappearance surrounding American Masonry.

So central is the Masonic image that the tale has been interpreted as an enactment of the historical conflict between Catholics and Masons. In this reading, Fortunato's real crime is that he is a Mason, whereas Montresor, a Roman Catholic, assumes a perverted priestly function in his ritualistic murder of his Masonic foe.<sup>11</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that in the predominantly evangelical Protestant America of Poe's day both Masons and Catholics were held suspect. If anti-Masonic feeling feeds into the portrait of Fortunato, anti-Catholic sentiment lies behind several of the grim images in the tale. In the 1830s and 1840s, American Protestant authors, fearful of the rapid growth of the Catholic church with the sudden flood of immigrants arriving from abroad, produced a large body of lurid literature aimed at exposing alleged depravity and criminality among Catholics. In 1838 one alarmed commentator wrote of the "tales of lust, and blood, and murder . . . with which the ultra-protestant is teeming."<sup>12</sup> Of special interest in connection with Poe's tale is Maria Monk's best-selling *Awful Disclosures of . . . the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal* (1836), which featured a huge cellar that served as both a torture chamber and a tomb, where priests had killed some 375 people and cast their remains into a lime pit. Whether or not Poe had Maria Monk and her ilk in mind when he concocted his tale of torture behind cellar walls, it is notable that he made use of Catholic images: The story is set during the *Carnivale*, a Catholic season just before Lent; Montresor's family motto about the heel crushing the serpent refers to Genesis 3:14 (the curse upon the serpent) and historically symbolizes the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil; the early history of the Church is recalled when the underground passages are called "catacombs"; and the final words, "*In pace requiescat!*" are the last words of a requiem mass. The Catholic connection is further strengthened if we accept the idea that Poe derived the name Montresor from an old French Catholic family.<sup>13</sup> Although not explicitly anti-Catholic, the tale combines religious

and criminal imagery in a way reminiscent of the anti-Catholic best-sellers of the day.

Though grounded in nineteenth-century American culture, "The Cask of Amontillado" transcends its time-specific referents because it is crafted in such a way that it remains accessible to generations of readers unfamiliar with such sources as anti-Catholicism, temperance, and live-burial literature. The special power of the tale can be understood if we take into account Poe's theories about fiction writing, developed largely in response to emerging forms of popular literature that aroused both his interest and his concern. On the one hand, as a literary professional writing for popular periodicals ("Cask" appeared in the most popular of all, *Godey's Lady's Book*) Poe had to keep in mind the demands of an American public increasingly hungry for sensation. On the other hand, as a scrupulous craftsman he was profoundly dissatisfied with the way in which other writers handled sensational topics. John Neal's volcanic, intentionally disruptive fiction seemed energetic but formless to Poe, who saw in it "no precision, no finish . . . — always an excessive force but little of refined art."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, he wrote of the blackly humorous stories in Washington Irving's *Tales of a Traveller* that "the interest is subdivided and frittered away, and their conclusions are insufficiently climactic [sic]" (*ER*, 586–7). George Lippard's *The Ladye Annabel*, a dizzying novel involving medieval torture and necrophilic visions, struck him as indicative of genius yet chaotic. A serial novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton wearied him with its "continual and vexatious shifting of scene," while N. P. Willis's sensational play *Tortosa* exhibited "the great error" of "inconsequence. Underplot is piled on underplot," as Willis gives us "vast designs that terminate in nothing" (*ER*, 153, 367).

In his own fiction Poe tried to correct the mistakes he saw in other writers. The good plot, he argued, was that from which nothing can be taken without detriment to the whole. If, as he rightly pointed out, much sensational fiction of the day was digressive and directionless, his best tales were tightly unified. Of them all, "The Cask of Amontillado" perhaps most clearly exemplifies the unity he aimed for.

The tale's compactness becomes instantly apparent when we

arch compare it with the popular live-burial works mentioned earlier. Headley's journalistic "A Man Built in a Wall" begins with a long passage about a lonely Italian inn and ends with an account of the countryside around Florence; the interpolated story about the entombed man dwells as much on the gruesome skeleton as on the vindictive crime. Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche" is a slowly developing tale in which the narrator gets mixed accounts about an old abandoned mansion near the Loire; only in the second half of the story does he learn from his landlady that the mansion had been the scene of a live burial involving a husband's jealous revenge. The entombment in "Apropos of Bores" is purely accidental (two unlucky men find themselves trapped in a wine vault) and is reduced to frivolous chatter when the narrator breaks off at the climactic moment and his listeners crack jokes and disperse to tea. arch Closest in spirit to Poe, perhaps, is the "dead-vault" scene in Lippard's *The Quaker City*: There is the same ritualistic descent into an immense cellar by a sadistic murderer intent on burying his victim alive. Lippard, however, constantly interrupts the scene with extraneous descriptions (he's especially fascinated by the skeletons and caskets strewn around the cellar). In addition, this is just one of countless bloodcurdling scenes in a meandering novel light-years distant, structurally, from Poe's carefully honed tale.

arch So tightly woven is "The Cask" that it may be seen as an effort at literary one-upmanship on Poe's part, designed pointedly as a contrast to other, more casually constructed live-burial pieces. In his essays on popular literature, Poe expressed particular impatience with irrelevancies of plot or character. For instance, commenting on J. H. Ingraham's perfervid best-seller *Lafitte, the Pirate of the Gulf*, he wrote: "We are surfeited with unnecessary details. . . . Of outlines there are none. Not a dog yelps, unsung" (*ER*, 611).

cl There is absolutely no excess in "The Cask of Amontillado." Every sentence points inexorably to the horrifying climax. In the interest of achieving unity, Poe purposely leaves several questions unanswered. The tale is remarkable for what it leaves out. What are the "thousand injuries" Montresor has suffered at the hands of Fortunato? In particular, what was the "insult" that has driven Montresor to the grisly extreme of murder by live burial? What personal misfortune is he referring to when he tells his foe, "you

are happy, as I once was"? Like a painter who leaves a lot of suggestive white canvas, Poe sketches character and setting lightly, excluding excess material. Even so simple a detail as the location of the action is unknown. Most assume the setting is Italy, but one commentator makes a good case for France.<sup>15</sup> What do we know about the main characters? As discussed, both are bibulous and proud of their connoisseurship in wines. Fortunato, besides being a Mason, is "rich, respected, admired, beloved," and there is a Lady Fortunato who will miss him. Montresor is descended from "a great and numerous family" and is wealthy enough to sustain a palazzo, servants, and extensive wine vaults.

Other than that, Poe tells very little about the two. Both exist solely to fulfill the imperatives of the plot Poe has designed. Everything Montresor does and says furthers his strategy of luring his enemy to his death. Everything Fortunato does and says reveals the fatuous extremes his vanity about wines will lead him to. Though limited, these characters are not what E. M. Forster would call flat. They swiftly come alive before our eyes because Poe describes them with acute psychological realism. Montresor is a complex Machiavellian criminal, exhibiting a full range of traits from clever ingratiation to stark sadism. Fortunato, the dupe whose pride leads to his own downfall, nevertheless exhibits enough admirable qualities that one critic has seen him as a wronged man of courtesy and good will.<sup>16</sup> The drama of the story lies in the carefully orchestrated interaction between the two. Poe directs our attention away from the merely sensational and toward the psychological.

cl Herein lies another key difference between the tale and its precursors. In none of the popular live-burial works is the *psychology* of revenge a factor. In Headley and Lippard, the victim is unconscious and thus incognizant of the murderer's designs; similarly, in Balzac there is no communication at all between the murderer and the entombed. In Poe, the relationship between the two is, to a large degree, the story. Montresor says at the start, murder is most successful if the victim is made painfully aware of what is happening: "A wrong is unredressed . . . when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong."<sup>17</sup> By focusing on the process of vanity falling prey to sly revenge, Poe

shifts attention to psychological subtleties ignored by the other live-burial writers.

Particularly intriguing are the brilliantly cruel ploys of Montresor. An adept in what today is called reverse psychology, Montresor never once invites Fortunato to his home or his wine vaults. Instead, he cleverly plays on his victim's vanity so that it is Fortunato who is always begging to go forward into the vaults. Montresor merely says he has received a pipe of "what passes for Amontillado," that he has his doubts, and that, since Fortunato is engaged, he is on his way to consult another connoisseur, Luchesi. By arousing vanity and introducing the element of competition ("Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry," grumbles Fortunato<sup>18</sup>), Montresor never needs to push his victim toward destruction. It is the victim who does all the pushing, while the murderer repeatedly gives reasons why the journey into the cellar should be called off. This ironic role reversal begins when Fortunato, whose curiosity is piqued, demands: "Come, let us go."

"Whither?" [asks Montresor.]

"To your vaults."

"My friend, no; I will not impose on your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi —"

"I have no engagement; — come."

"My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre."

"Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing."

And so, as Montresor tells us, "I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo." Reverse psychology governs even Montresor's advance preparations for the murder: The palazzo is empty because he has told his servants they should not stir from the house since he would be away all night — an order "sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned." As he and Fortunato enter the vaults, he points out the white web-work of niter gleaming on the cavern walls. The mention of the niter makes Fortunato cough convulsively, at which Montresor makes a show of compassion: "'Come,'" I said, with decision, "'we will go back; your health is precious.'" Fortunato is resolved to go on, however, even when

they pass by piles of bones. Montresor again tells him: "'Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough —,'" but Fortunato doggedly drags forward. Only when he is chained to the wall does the savage irony of the situation become clear. Montresor invites him to feel the damp niter of the wall and repeats: "Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power." Montresor's show of concern for Fortunato is at last revealed as a craftily designed cover for murderous resolve.

There is a rigorous logic about the imagery Poe deploys in the tale. By far the most important image is the carnival. Virtually the only fact made known to us exterior to the central action or characters is that it is carnival season. When we consider the effect Poe is trying to create, we see how shrewd a choice the carnival is as a central image. To celebrate the carnival, Fortunato is dressed in motley, with a tight parti-colored costume and a conical cap and bells. His clownish dress is an apt symbol of his obtuseness as he becomes Montresor's willing dupe. The bells on his fool's cap jingle at key moments: when he first enters the catacombs; when he drinks the Médoc; and after he has been completely walled in and has given up hope. For Montresor, the carnival provides the opportunity for a perfect disguise. Before returning to his palazzo with Fortunato, Montresor dons a black silk mask and draws about him a cape, beneath which, we later learn, he has concealed a rapier and a trowel. His costume not only reflects his villainous intent but also facilitates his announced plan of murdering Fortunato with impunity: Who would know Montresor was with Fortunato the night of the latter's disappearance if both were in carnival disguise?

Yet another effect of the carnival image is to highlight, by way of contrast, Poe's terrifying climax. Fortunato's haughtiness and high spirits at the beginning of the tale bespeak a noted man of society enjoying the pleasures of the season with his wife and friends. By the end, Fortunato is in precisely the opposite of a carnival atmosphere. He faces the prospect of total isolation, degradation, and death by starvation or suffocation. Nothing could be more pathetic than his attempt to revive a carnivalesque conviviality. He calls his predicament a fine joke that will raise many a

laugh over wine at the palazzo. The carnival image is now a bitter mockery of the horrid fate he confronts.

**Other tokens of** Poe's craftsmanship are the puns and double meanings that abound in the tale, puns that take on full significance only in retrospect, when we reach the gruesome ending. Montresor's initial greeting – "My dear Fortunato, how luckily you are met." – makes an ironic pun on Fortunato's name ("lucky") and underscores how *unlucky* Fortunato actually is. Another black joke comes when in the vault Fortunato shrugs off his bad cough: "it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough." In light of the story's conclusion, Montresor's response is at once funny and foreboding: "True – true." It is ironic that Fortunato should raise a toast to "the buried that repose around us" (he will soon be joining them!) and equally so that Montresor replies with a toast "to your long life." A final devastating pun comes when the enchained Fortunato, in his pathetic effort to escape, says with feigned casualness, "Let us be gone." Montresor's loaded reply rings like a death knell: "Yes, let us be gone."

**The double meanings** surrounding the discussion of Montresor's family arms are especially telling. The arms has two contrasting meanings, dependent on perspective. The "huge human foot d'or, in a field of azure" that crushes a "serpent rampant" could stand for Fortunato, whom Montresor views as an oppressive weight to be gotten rid of; from this vantage point, the serpent's fangs embedded in the heel are symbolic of the vengeful Montresor. From a different perspective, the huge destructive foot may be said to represent Montresor's present murderous act, and the embedded fangs are the pangs of conscience he will have to live with for the rest of his life. The two perspectives illuminate different sides of Montresor's character, which is more complicated than it first appears. One side of Montresor tells him that his act of revenge is completely justified in light of the "thousand injuries" he has suffered. This side prompts his sham compassion, his wicked puns, and his sadistic behavior once Fortunato is chained up. The other side of him, which manifests itself three times toward the end of the tale, says that he himself will have to suffer as much as his victim. When the enchained Fortunato lets out a series of loud, shrill screams, Montresor recalls, "For a brief moment I hesitated

– I trembled." He then reassumes his sadistic posture, screaming even louder than his victim. Soon he pauses again, hearing the low laugh that "erected the hairs upon my head" and the "sad voice" hardly recognizable as Fortunato's. He becomes cruel again, drily repeating Fortunato's vain jokes about returning to the palazzo. But when his final call to his victim is answered only by a jingling of bells, "My heart grew sick," a confession only partly retrieved from actual compassion by the half-hearted explanation "– on account of the catacombs."

**These moments** when Montresor second-guesses himself have led some commentators to predict an unhappy future for him. "*In pace requiescat!*" Montresor says in conclusion, but, as Thomas O. Mabbott points out, these words may be ironic: "Fortunato had rested in peace for fifty years; Montresor must always have feared being found out" (1265–6). Does Montresor become the haunted criminal fearful of discovery, or does his callousness intensify and smother any residual feelings of remorse? Is the tale a moral exemplum on the wages of crime, or is it a gleeful portrait of a successful murder? One group of critics sees the tale as the death-bed confession of a criminal who has been tortured by guilt for fifty years.<sup>19</sup> According to them, Montresor's stated goal of punishing his foe with impunity is an ironic comment on the fact that Montresor himself has never been able to escape the punishment of his own conscience. In contrast, another group sees Montresor as an unrepentant, pathological killer whose crime is a source of power for him and a source of vicarious satisfaction for Poe and the reader.<sup>20</sup>

Is "The Cask of Amontillado" intensely moralistic or frighteningly amoral? These questions, I would say, are finally unresolvable, and their very unresolvability reflects profound paradoxes within the antebellum cultural phenomena that lie behind the tale. A fundamental feature of anti-Catholic novels, dark temperance literature, and reform novels like Lippard's *The Quaker City* is that they invariably proclaimed themselves pure and moralistic but were criticized, with justification, for being violent and perverse. Many popular American writers of Poe's day wallowed in foul moral sewers with the announced intent of scouring them clean, but their seamy texts prove that they were more interested in



wallowing than in cleaning. This paradox of immoral didacticism, as I have called it elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> helps account for the hermeneutic circularities of "The Cask of Amontillado." On the one hand, there is evidence for a moral or even religious reading: The second sentence, "You, who know so well the nature of my soul," may be addressed to a priest to whom Montresor, now an old man, is confessing in an effort to gain deathbed expiation. On the other hand, there is no explicit moralizing, and the tale reveals an undeniable fascination with the details of cunning crime. Transforming the cultural phenomenon of immoral didacticism into a polyvalent dramatization of pathological behavior, Poe has it both ways: He satisfies the most fiendish fantasies of sensation lovers (including himself, at a time when revenge was on his mind), still retaining an aura of moral purpose. He thus serves two types of readers simultaneously: the sensationally inclined, curious about this cleverest of killers, and the religiously inclined, expectant that such a killer will eventually get his due. In the final analysis, he is pointing to the possibility that these ostensibly different kinds of readers are one and the same. Even the most devoutly religious reader, ready to grab at a moral lesson, could not help being intrigued by, and on some level moved by, this deftly told record of shrewd criminality.

Poe had famously objected to fiction that struck him as too allegorical, fiction in which imagery pointed too obviously to some exterior meaning, and had stressed that the province of literary art was not meaning but effect, not truth but pleasure. Effect is what a tale like "The Cask of Amontillado" is about. An overwhelming effect of terror is produced by this tightly knit tale that reverberates with psychological and moral implications. Curiosity and an odd kind of pleasure are stimulated by the interlocking images, by the puns and double meanings, and, surprisingly, by the ultimate humanity of the seemingly inhuman characters. Fortunato's emotional contortions as he is chained to the wall are truly frightening; they reveal depths in his character his previous cockiness had concealed. Montresor's moments of wavering suggest that Poe is delving beneath the surface of the stock revenge figure to reveal inchoate feelings of self-doubt and guilt. Unlike his many precur-

sors in popular culture, Poe doesn't just entertain us with skeletons in the cellar. He makes us contemplate ghosts in the soul.

**Vodka  
ending :)**

## NOTES

- 1 *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 802. Hereafter most references to the *Collected Works* will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Poe's acerbic commentary on the current literary scene in "The Literati of New York City," a six-part series that ran in *Godey's Lady's Book* from May through September 1846, prompted a violent rejoinder from Fuller, editor of the *New-York Mirror* and the *New-York Evening Mirror*. When Poe's derogatory article on English appeared in the July issue of *Godey's*, English wrote a slashing reply (published in Fuller's *Evening Mirror*) which heaped insults on Poe. After additional sallies in the press, Poe filed suit for libel against English on July 23, 1846. A few weeks after the suit was filed, English's novel *1844, or the Power of the 'S.F.'* began to appear serially in Fuller's newspaper. The novel contained a satirical portrait of Poe as Marmaduke Hammerhead, a drunken, pretentious literary fop. In this bitter atmosphere "The Cask of Amontillado" was written; the tale appeared in the November issue of *Godey's*. Poe won the libel suit on February 17, 1847, and was awarded \$225. See Francis P. Dedmond, "The Cask of Amontillado" and the War of the Literati," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 15 (1954): 137-46. A rather overstated Freudian reading of the literary battles surrounding the tale is offered in Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (London: Hogarth, 1971), pp. 505-6.
- 3 See my discussion of popular sensational literature in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 169-248.
- 4 The August 1844 issue of the *Columbian Magazine* in which the Headley piece appeared also contained Poe's "Mesmeric Revelation." Poe reviewed Headley's *Letters from Italy* in the August 9, 1845, issue of the *Broadway Journal*. Headley's volume was the third in Wiley and Putnam's "Library of American Books," the second being Poe's *Tales* (1845). See Joseph S. Shick, "The Origin of 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *American Literature*, 6 (1934): 18-21. See also Mabbott's introduction to "Cask" in *Collected Works*, pp. 1253-4.

- 5 Poe probably met Lippard in 1842 when he was working for *Graham's Magazine*, across the street from the Philadelphia *Spirit of the Times*, where Lippard was working at the time. Lippard's satirical series "The Spermaceti Papers," published in 1843 in the Philadelphia *Citizen Soldier*, singled Poe out for praise in his generally derisive portrait of the Graham group. For his part, Poe wrote Lippard a letter on February 18, 1844, praising Lippard's novel *The Ladye Annabel* as "richly inventive and imaginative – indicative of *genius* in its author." The friendship between the writers was still strong in the summer of 1849, when Poe, penniless and hungover, struggled up to Lippard's newspaper office begging for help. Although there is no record of Poe's having read *The Quaker City*, he very likely knew of this, his friend's most significant and most popular work, which sold some sixty thousand copies in 1845, the year before Poe wrote "Cask." See George Lippard, *Prophet of Protest: Writings of an American Radical, 1822–1854*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), pp. 256–67, and Reynolds, *George Lippard* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), pp. 8–9, 18–19, 102–10.
- 6 Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 29.
- 7 Lippard, *The Monks of Monk Hall*, ed. Leslie Fiedler (New York: Odyssey, 1970), p. 301. The next quotation in this paragraph is from p. 310.
- 8 *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809–1849*, ed. Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), p. 830.
- 9 Quotations from the "The Cask of Amontillado" are from *Collected Works*, pp. 1252–63.
- 10 The connection between Fortunato and self-destructive drunkenness is further underscored by Burton Pollin's discovery that Poe may have derived this character's name from a passage about a drunken man referred to as "Fortunate senex" in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. See Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, p. 31.
- 11 Kathryn Montgomery Harris, "Ironic Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1969): 333–5.
- 12 David Meredith Reese, *Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion, Whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838), p. 217.
- 13 See Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, p. 35. The Catholic connection is strengthened by yet another Montresor Poe may have been aware of: Jacques Montresor, a French officer in one of Benjamin Franklin's bagatelles

- who is depicted addressing a confessor just before his death. See William H. Shurr, "Montresor's Audience in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 10 (1977): 28–9. However, E. Bruce Kirkham suggests the name comes from Captain John Montresor, a wealthy British engineering officer for whom New York's Montresor's Island (now known as Randall's Island) was named. See Kirkham, "Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado' and John Montresor," *Poe Studies*, 20 (1987): 23.
- 14 Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1151. This volume is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *ER*.
  - 15 Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, pp. 29–33. Pollin points out that when Poe compares Montresor's crypts with "the great catacombs of Paris" he is revealing his awareness of contemporary accounts of the great necropolis under the Faubourg St. Jacques, in which the skeletal remains of some three million former denizens of Paris were piled along the walls. One such account had appeared in the "Editor's Table" of the *Knickerbocker Magazine* for March 1838. Pollin also develops parallels between "The Cask" and Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, a novel Poe knew well.
  - 16 Joy Rea, "In Defense of Fortunato's Courtesy," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 4 (1967): 57–69. I agree, however, with William S. Doxey, who in his rebuttal to Rea emphasizes Fortunato's vanity and doltishness; see Doxey, "Concerning Fortunato's 'Courtesy,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 4 (1967): 266. Others have pointed out that there may be an economic motive behind the revenge scheme. Montresor, who calls the wealthy Fortunato happy "as I once was," seems to feel as though he has fallen into social insignificance and to think delusively he can regain his "fortune" by the violent destruction of his supposed nemesis, who represents his former socially prominent self. See James Gargano, "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 4 (1967): 119–26. That economic matters would be featured in this tale is not surprising, since Poe was impoverished and sickly during the period it was written. His preoccupation with money is reflected in the names Montresor, Fortunato, Luchesi ("Luchresi" in the original version) – "treasure," "fortune," and "lucres" – which, as David Ketterer points out, all add up to much the same thing (*The Rationale of Deception* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press], p. 110).
  - 17 It is ambiguous, though, whether Montresor's stated goal is finally achieved. Jay Jacoby argues that Fortunato dies prematurely, since he is silent at the end and does not cry out in pain when Montresor's flaming torch is thrust at his head and falls at his feet. Thus the

- avenger's plan of making himself known to the victim as an avenger is foiled. See Jay Jacoby, "Fortunato's Premature Demise in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 12 (1979): 30-1.
- 18 Through this statement, Poe may be trying to show just how fatuous Fortunato is, for Amontillado is a sherry. Moreover, the fact that it is Spanish brings into question Montresor's vaunted expertise about "the Italian vintages." It is conceivable Poe himself did not know the facts about Amontillado, though one would think as a devoted drinker he would have.
- 19 See G. R. Thompson, *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pp. 13-14; Thomas Pribek, "The Serpent and the Heel," *Poe Studies*, 20 (1987): 22-3; James E. Rocks, "Conflict and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972): 50-1; Kent Bales, "Poetic Justice in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972): 51; Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*, p. 112; J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 142; and Mabbott, *Collected Works*, p. 1266.
- 20 See Marvin Felheim, *Notes and Queries*, 199 (1954): 447-8; Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Twayne, 1961), p. 72; Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 161; Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 202; Stuart Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe: Seer and Craftsman* (Deland, Florida: Everett Edwards, 1972), p. 87; Walter Stepp, "The Ironic Double in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 13 (1976): 447-53; and Eric Mottram, "Law, Lawlessness, and Philosophy in Edgar Allan Poe," in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Design of Order*, ed. Robert E. Lee (London: Vision, 1987), p. 160.
- 21 *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Chapter 2.