Poe's Art of Seduction: Montresor as Author in "The Cask of Amontillado"*

Matthew Hutton

ABSTRACT

Herein I argue that the character Montresor, the narrator and protagonist of "The Cask of Amontillado," serves as Poe's fictional illustration of an author engaged in the creative process. Montresor, in his actions and in his recounting of them, executes a "plot" that puts Poe's theory of "unity of effect" to the test. Montresor seduces Fortunato just as Poe seduces the reader: through verbal craft. His intent is to induce terror, and the measure of his success is the measure of the degree to which he achieves maximum effect. Montresor's plan, his execution, and his delivery of the tale all exemplify the principles Poe outlines in "The Philosophy of Composition"—an essay published just months before "The Cask of Amontillado."

In the first section of the paper, I trace Poe's development of the unity of effect theory in the years leading up to the publishing of "The Philosophy of Composition." I then apply the theory to a close reading of "Amontillado." In the final section, I discuss the tacit contract between author and reader required for Poe's brand of horror. In observing the correlation between Poe's conception of the author and his fictional illustration of the author, we see how Poe sets the preconditions for 20th-Century genre fiction by placing the audience in the foreground—an emphasis that would find full flower in the age of mass media, when the distinction between "art" and "entertainment" would become immaterial.

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In the climate of 19th-Century Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe posed a challenge to the dominant conception of the author as a vessel of divine intuition. Poe rejected the cult of spontaneous inspiration he saw in the Transcendentalists and responded by championing the view of the author as a skilled tactician exhibiting a mastery of practical craft. His 1846 manifesto, "The Philosophy of Composition," articulated Poe's theory of unity of effect, through which an author uses deliberate techniques to sustain the reader's attention, producing the intended effect by orchestrating details in accordance with the work's inevitable denouement. In "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), published just months after "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe invents a protagonist whose exercise of control in executing a carefully hatched plot stands as a representative Poe's ideal author. Poe's professed techniques of composition—unity of effect, economy of language, reverse plotting—all directly correspond to Montresor's fictive plot to seduce an unwitting subject, lead the subject through a labyrinth, and ultimately bury the subject alive. Montresor executes his plot in direct parallel to Poe's ideal author by appealing to his subject through a carefully premeditated means of rhetorical seduction. As with the author, Montresor's plot achieves its ends through the performative use of persuasive language.

I argue that Poe wrote "The Cask of Amontillado" as a deliberate application of his unity of effect theory as outlined in "The Philosophy of Composition": a narrative proof that the effect upon a reader is measured by the degree of control the author is able to sustain throughout the totality of the work. Although the author does not proceed with Montresor's barbarous intent in the narrative world of the story, his equivalent goal is to elicit fear and terror, the intended effect of the nascent horror genre anticipated by Poe.

Poe on Fire

"The Cask of Amontillado" may be Poe's crowning achievement in demonstrating the art of authorial control. In the words of Poe biographer Arthur Hobson Quinn, "'There is not one word wasted in 'The Cask of Amontillado'" (500). The story is a carefully distilled exhibition of Poe's unity of effect principle. At this stage in his career, Poe was especially fixated on the means through which to produce an effect upon the reader. "The Principles of Composition," written just months prior to "Amontillado," delineates his methods. In keeping with Poe's compositional fixation upon crafting a flawless story, the character of Montresor thinks like an author and acts like an author. In Montresor's machinations, Poe puts his theory to the test to its greatest extremes. Poe's author is admittedly a manipulator of the reader's attention, and here he paints a fictional portrait of a manipulator's ability to choreograph events with monomaniacal precision. The protagonist's "plotting" mirrors the author's plotting. Montresor ensnares his subject

in a "plot" he has crafted to lead his subject into a position of total submission, just as Poe's aim is to fictively bludgeon a reader who finds pleasure in the vicarious experience of pain. Readers submit to the author, allowing themselves to be guided through the fictional world the author has constructed, "brick by brick," Poe's parlance. Montresor "plays" Fortunato with the kind of finesse a Poe-inspired author aims to play with the reader's emotions. The difference—the crucial difference—is that the author induces a horrifying experience to provide the reader with a cathartic experience. In horror, the reader consents to this transgressive delight to release repressed fear, shame, and aggression—the same phenomenon Aristotle defined as *catharsis* in his foundational treatise *The Poetics*. In the case of "Amontillado," Poe seduces the reader into becoming an imaginary accomplice to Montresor's crime by framing the story in Montresor's narrative voice.

The Amontillado Effect

As Jorges Luis Borges famously argued, the short story form better suits Poe's unity of effect theory than does the poem (Esplin). Poe's deconstruction of "The Raven" as an exemplar of his writing process in "The Philosophy of Composition" has puzzled many critics, some of whom have even called the piece satirical. In fact, the poem may not have even been Poe's first choice of material for explication. Poe wrote commercially by necessity, and at the time of the "Philosophy of Composition," "The Raven" had become a public sensation. Poe may have sought to capitalize on its success (Quinn 440). But Poe's unity of effect theory itself had gradually developed through a lifetime of trial and error as a narrative writer. The mixed reviews and relative lack of success of *The Narrative of the Life of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837), his only attempt at a novel, posed to him a challenge in the ability to maintain narrative consistency for the full length of a novel. We see Poe subsequently honing his short story technique as his career unfolds, savoring the form's brevity and close circumscription of scope. Rapid denouement in a final culminating scene was his narrative instinct from the beginning, from the whirlpool in "MS Found in a Bottle" (1833) to the house crumbling into the tarn in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). But unlike Montresor in "Amontillado," Poe's earlier first-person narrators were often discursive and verbose, at times sounding like mouthpieces for his own philosophical musings on human nature or, in the case of his fictional detective Auguste Dupin, the processes of mind. These were novel approaches to characterization and narrative voice, but they would often veer from Poe's later insistence in "The Philosophy of Composition" that every word of a prose narrative should be essential to its totality, a feat he arguably did not wholly achieve until crafting "The Cask of Amontillado" in 1846.

By 1846, Poe had fully leaned into prose over poetry, a transition coinciding with his concurrent career as an aspiring magazinist. Befitting his entrepreneurial approach

to distribution, "The Philosophy of Composition" sought a balance between artistry and commercialism. His insistence that *any* written work must be fashioned to be read in a single sitting may correspond as much to the demands of appealing to readers of periodicals as to an aesthetic principle of formal unity (Whalen 39). Capturing the attention of a reader perusing a periodical required economy of language; any excess exposition or extraneous plot diversion could lead the reader to abandon the piece at any moment. Thus, his continual emphasis is *effect*. To sustain such an effect in a tightly bound narrative space, the author must deliberate over each detail, each snippet of dialogue, each character gesture. Every last word, for Poe, must increase the reader's immersion, elevating tension until the story's climax, which in a Poe story nearly always arrives just prior to a quick denouement in the very final sentences.

Hatching the Plot

The seeds of Poe's theory appear in the years leading up to "The Philosophy of Composition" in his letters and reviews. In his 1841 review of Edward Lytton Bulwer's *Night and Morning in Graham's Magazine*, Poe writes, "in the true construction, the cause...is absolutely brought about by the effect," and once the plot is determined by the final effect to which it aims, "no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole" (624). As if foreshadowing "The Cask of Amontillado," Poe uses an architecture metaphor in the Bulwer review, referring to a well-crafted story as "a building so dependently constructed that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric" (624). (A mixed metaphor, but in all fairness, Poe had not yet mastered unity of effect.) Later, in "The Philosophy of Composition," he concludes that "it is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation" (475). In his 1842 review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales, Poe devotes more time to theorizing on short story technique than discussing Hawthorne's work. He appears fixated on authorial control in the temporal confinement of a short story. He writes, "In the brief tale...the author is enabled to carry out his full design without interruption. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (692). Notably, the control he extols is not just of the mind but of the "soul." The reader is not just interested but induced to inhabit the author's entire fictional "design." This construction can only be held together if the tale is read in a short sitting "without interruption." Ceaseless control requires a carefully premeditated course of events, a kind of honed expertise. In the Bulwer review, Poe even adopts a professional sort of rhetoric, referring to "the management of imagination" through "felicity of execution" (616).

Poe takes pains to make his own presence behind the scenes invisible. True to the creative writing maxim "show don't tell," narrative effect is achieved not by

interpolation of the narrator's interpretive thoughts, but through the interplay of action, detail, and diction. The reader is more engaged by the concrete than by abstraction and molding the contours of the concrete requires careful construction. If the author does not begin with the end in mind, components of the narrative will stray from its totality. It is a matter of combining existing components as opposed to conjuring them from the ether *ex nihilo*. The process of creation must unfold in reverse sequence from the narrative's temporal unfolding, from effect to cause, phenomenon to source. Concrete details are called forth only after predicting a likely conclusion, and only with this end in mind can the tale-spinner select relevant detail to lead the reader to the climax. Though deemed a Dark Romantic, Poe's artistic expression requires not just inspiration, but industry. For Poe such industry rests in the hands of the artist, not in the hands of the gods.

The Literary Histrio and the Mathematics of Performance

Published in *Godey's Lady's Book* in November of 1946, seven months after "The Philosophy of Composition" (*Graham's*, April 1846), "The Cask of Amontillado" exhibits an almost seamless narrative architecture. The action occurs in a single scene, in a time span not far exceeding the amount of time the story takes to read. The contours of the plot are shaped through a dialogic exchange between Montresor, the devilish plotter, and Fortunato, his decidedly unfortunate victim. Unlike the narrators of Poe's other celebrated first-person confessionals, "The Black Cat" and "The Telltale Heart," each published in 1843, this narrator has absolute control of his logical faculties. He makes no mention of his own unsoundness of mind, nor does he demonstrate any mental ailment other than psychopathy--a condition defined not by an absence of control, as Poe's prior first-person narrators tend to suffer, but by an excess of control. Montresor gloats over his ability to manipulate other human beings. Until the final moments, Montresor displays no interiority, no self-reflection. He is monomaniacally bent on hatching his plan, not unlike a determined author executing his final draft. But Montresor's "authorship" does not occur on the page. His verbal execution is more akin to a dramatic monologue, bringing his narrative to life performatively, as if already having gone through an extensive rehearsal process. As an author-performer with a prewritten script, he has no need for deliberation as he navigates the course of action. All deliberation occurs before the action takes place, just as the author strives to make all decisions made in the writing process invisible to the reader. Likewise, an actor's transformation into character seeks to make invisible the time and effort it took to memorize a character's lines. As a monomaniacal manipulator, Montresor anticipates every potential pitfall in executing his plan, without missing any turns, without leaving any room to rely on improvisation.

Although Montresor uses Poe's authorial techniques, he is not a mouthpiece

for Poe the man. He uses these techniques to pernicious, unsound ends. Poe firmly believed art did not need to serve a moral purpose—part of the reason he had such contempt for the pious didacticism of the Transcendentalists. He is solely concerned with perfecting the power of the short story in seizing and taking hold of the reader. The critics who argued that "The Philosophy of Composition" is subtly satirical may have been disoriented by Poe's choice of "The Raven" as his exemplar of unity of effect. As Borges noted, unity of effect is a temporal principle: a principle dependent on narrative sequence. "The Raven" has a plot of sorts, but plot is not its most affecting feature. The chief aim of "The Raven," Poe insists in "The Philosophy of Composition," is to summon a feeling of melancholy. "Amontillado," on the other hand, is characterized by a disarming absence of emotion, a cerebral emphasis on calculation far more befitting a work that proceeds, in Poe's words, "step by step to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (677). Unlike the lovelorn speaker of "The Raven," Montresor takes pride in his lack of emotional vulnerability. Both the narrator of the story and the speaker of the poem are self-obsessed, but the subject in "The Raven" has been immobilized by his own emotional pain. Montresor more resembles the artist Poe writes of in "The Philosophy of Composition," an actor in total control of his execution—one who "will always contrive . . . to tone [the work] into proper subservience to the predominant aim," using hyper-focused calculation to achieve those aims (676). He conceals all the effort it takes to prepare the conditions for achieving his intended effect. Poe writes,

> Most writers prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought . . . the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps . . . which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*. (676)

What is most revealing here is Poe's use of the Latin term *histrio*. *Histrio* translates as "performer, actor." Poe plainly states that the author is not just a writer, but a performer. Notably, each of Poe's biological parents were stage actors, and his mother, Eliza Poe, who died when Poe was three, achieved considerable success. Her fame as an actress, and his earliest memories of the life of the theater, had to have influenced Poe's self-conception. This legacy is palpable in the theatrical terminology Poe uses throughout the passage in its reference to "scene-shifting," "step-ladders," and "demon-traps." These are the props and techniques of a performer backstage, behind the curtain, preparing

for a dramatic performance. The reference to "demon-traps" is telling, as it suggests a spectacle. This is less like a sober drama and more like a magic show, the kind of show that requires smoke and mirrors, production values that take place backstage: building the props, establishing the blocking cues, running through the scenes, anticipating the audience's response, modifying the delivery of lines with each performance by gauging the audience's reception—"carefully thinking over," Poe states, "all the usual artistic effects—or more properly *points*, in the theatrical sense" (681). Also key is for the dramatist to consider is audience—in this case a demographic akin to Poe's readership. A performance incorporating "demon-traps" appeals to a wide audience. As Poe insists, the author-performer must "[keep] steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable" (78).

Tapping the Cask

Unity of effect is on display from the very opening sentence of "The Cask of Amontillado." As Quinn notes, not a word is wasted. "Brevity," Poe claims, "must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect" (677). Poe wastes no time in establishing the story's inciting incident or the character of the narrator. Montresor begins, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (415). Poe has honed the opening sentence to do as much "work" as possible. In one sentence, Poe establishes the narrator's voice, his intention, and his motivation. At the same time, he deliberately leaves out any indication of who Fortunato is, what his "insult" had been, or what "injuries" he had caused. These omissions pique the reader's interest by raising dramatic questions. Montresor's desire for revenge is what matters, not the cause of it. In fact, its mysterious origins heighten the tension. Most significant to Poe is establishing the narrator's psychopathy. An insult tends to be seen as a minor offense. Here it constitutes an all-consuming narcissistic injury. That Montresor feels so wounded by a single insult reveals the monstrous capacity of his pride.

Poe places the spotlight immediately on the narrator and his voice. He provides no exposition of time or place, preserving an ambiguity of setting to focus the reader's attention on Montresor and his psychological state. Montresor addresses the reader in the second sentence, bringing the narrative voice into the second person. He is speaking to another person, presumably in a space intimate enough to allow a confession to take place. Thus, the reader becomes a character in the story. But in this case the reader also hovers over the story, outside its frame. The character to whom Montresor speaks would better be called "the listener." The listener is not the reader per se, but a character Montresor has deemed his confidante. His tone is conversational, establishing a sense of scene, as if Montresor and the listener are together in a dimly lit room. The reader stands outside

the story, aware of what Poe is doing as an author and having enough distance from Montresor to detect his psychopathology. Montresor's listener is familiar to him— "you who know so well"—and likely intimidated by Montresor's physical presence, but unlike the reader, not conscious of the author who has invented Montresor, creating a dramatic irony. But as the tale unfolds, the reader, initially standing outside the frame and aware of Poe's machinations, becomes the listener, just as entrapped by Montresor, the "mason" who lays the brick and mortar of Poe's fictional world. The tale has already been written in the scheme Montresor hatched in his past. His confession to the listener, fifty years later, returns to his original script, but with new additions and omissions. Both Poe the author in his composition and Montresor his character in narration "must sustain the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression," Poe attests, lest "the affairs of the world interfere" (677). Both Montresor's listener and the reader inhabit confined spaces, just as the scene Montresor recounts has occurred in a confined space, a space equivalently determined by his character. The tale as a whole thus has three tiers, separated by two interior frames. The original event is the core story; Montresor's confession of the event to the listener is the frame around the core story; and the confession sits within the larger frame of "The Cask of Amontillado" as a whole, as presented by Poe to the reader.

By saying, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat" (415), Montresor earns the trust of his listener within the confines of the confessional space. This variation on the nineteenth century "Dear Reader" trope (415) initiates Poe's control over the reader in the same manner Montresor establishes control over his listener in the confessional, as well as over Fortunato in the space of the core event: by flattery. As a manipulative technique, flattery gives the listener an impression of the flatterer's approval. By saying, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul," Montresor makes the listener proud of their own discriminating character. Suggesting that his listener knows him intimately, he feigns vulnerability and conveys a false impression of humility in his seemingly generous willingness to express amiable appreciation. Insisting that the listener would never suppose he "gave utterance to a threat," he subtly controls how the listener should interpret his actions, and makes the listener feel privileged enough to know and understand Montresor—a man whose tone and vocabulary, by virtue of self-aggrandizement, connote power and importance.

When Montresor declares that he "must not only punish, but punish with impunity" (415), he makes a debatable claim with enough smug assurance to imply that his "punishment" is a logical, imperative action. On the literal level, he is saying "I will make a spectacle of the punishment. I will make it hurt, and I will enjoy making

it hurt." Though the notion is cruel and psychopathic, Montresor's chiseled rhetoric makes the preposterous sound reasonable. Montresor's sadism comes in sideways, snakily inserting itself into the listener's consciousness undetected, exploiting the listener's impressionability and gradually tapping into any latent unconscious sadism the listener has kept guarded. Montresor is giving the listener permission to transgress.

Having earned trust, Montresor enlists the listener to hear a detailed narrative explication of his devious methods. He will suffer his listener to vicariously relish in his manipulative prowess. He states, in a supercilious tone, "It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will" (415). The passive voice suggests an unbestowed authority. Although Montresor's listener will subsequently hear the confession to a despicable crime, they have no cause yet to know the degree of barbarity in Montresor's deed. The reader, on the outer frame, has more ability to anticipate what will ensue, because the reader is aware that this is a fictional construction. But as Poe leads the reader further into Montresor's verbal lair, he seduces the reader into becoming a voyeur, a kind of participant in the action, and at the point of the reader's compulsive desire for the tale to come to its fruition, an accomplice.

Montresor's unfolding oral narrative is as focused on his brilliance as a manipulator as it is on the story itself. "I continued," he shares, "as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation" (415). Montresor invites his listener to take pleasure in the success of his deceptions—an appeal to *schadenfreude*, to experiencing delight in beholding Fortunato's torture. And like the wine that he will proposedly uncork for Fortunato, his tale lures the listener in by appealing to a baser instinct, in this case *hathos*, known colloquially as the "trainwreck instinct"—that kernel of the human mind that cannot resist gaping at calamities and misfortunes—a tendency the manipulative personality can easily exploit. When Montresor tells his listener that Fortunato's weak point is his snobbery as a self-appointed wine connoisseur, he is simultaneously appealing to the listener's weak point: the desire to gloat over the weakness of Fortunato. It is a triangulation of weaknesses. He further appeals to the listener's prejudice, saying, "few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit." Although Montresor affords Fortunato one complimentary feature, that "in the matter of old wines he was sincere," the words have a patronizing connotation. "Sincere" is an endearing quality, not a commanding quality. All these subtle verbal appeals serve to suggest a co-conspiratorial discourse, a false camaraderie through which Montresor will offset the listener's better judgment and be led to perceive Montresor's evil as something legitimate, if not impressive.

Meanwhile, the ideal reader sees what Poe is doing, but not for the story's

full duration. Poe's aim runs parallel to Montresor's, albeit to a solely aesthetic end: to entrance the reader into losing third-person observer status and be drawn into the monomania of Montresor's madness. The reader's critical judgments are gradually relaxed as the reader cedes to the author's narrative control. Montresor the character becomes Poe's authorial henchman. As his sensory descriptions become ever more entrancing, more authorial, and the dramatic irony in the dialogue between Montresor and Fortunato thickens, the reader hungers for the story to continue. The author has earned the reader's trust, just as Montresor has earned both the listener's trust and Fortunato's trust. Such trust can make the depiction of a lurid and grotesque scenario seem, in context of the fictional experience, satisfying. This effect is achieved by Poe through his ultimate authorial control—a control not at all unlike that of Montresor's upon his listener, and upon Fortunato.

Only after Fortunato enters into the scene does Montresor veer from anecdote-teller to storyteller. The story-within-a-story told to the listener begins in traditional gothic mode: "It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend" (415). If this were standard genre fiction, this sentence would open the entire frame story. Instead, Poe first places us in the hands of Montresor, as befitting his unity of effect. The tale is more a portrait of a monomaniacal mind than of a random murder in the catacombs, and Poe's immediate aim is for the reader to be seduced by Montresor's charisma, lured in more by the character than the exposition. If Poe were to have begun the entire tale, "It was about dusk, one evening . . ." the reader would ease into the familiarity of the gothic mode, which instills a certain comfort, a sort of Victorian luxury. But Montresor's narrative voice in the hushed tone he delivers the tale to the listener is more dramatic, more arresting, and more unsettling. It asserts more control than a soft-focus, objective third-person narrative voice would.

Montresor subsequently plants the listener into the scene of the fifty-year-old memory where the action takes place. What might otherwise be an anecdote we now know to be a story-within-a-story, a box within a box. It is the sort of stacked, symmetrical, labyrinthian framing in which Poe delights. Poe further jars the reader by panning into panoramic exterior space, the night of Carnivale, where an air of festivity is palpable. The event evokes the spaciousness of a town square, a mood of public cheer and community—a direct contrast to where Poe will lead us, into a windowless cell deep underground where the scene, the anecdote, and the story as a whole will simultaneously reach their climax and denouement. Enclosed interior space, as Richard Wilber points out in his classic essay "The House of Poe" (1959), is nearly always Poe's chosen setting. In this case, Poe wants to exploit the contrast between the festive open street setting and

the isolated underground setting, from the champagne burst of Carnivale to the untapped wine of the bone-lined catacombs. The reversal of atmosphere unsettles Fortunato, the listener, and the reader at once. Fortunato himself stands in contrast as well, dressed in a cap and bells as a jester, in jest, but about to be genuinely fooled. His giddy bearing, the festive atmosphere, and his literal state of intoxication all serve to render him uniquely vulnerable to Montresor's manipulation. All the demon-traps have been set.

Montresor has clearly chosen the night carefully, like an author with his denouement in mind, and has come prepared to greet Fortunato on his rival's own terms, adopting a cheerful, ingratiating tone: "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts" (416). Poe puts every word to work. Every word Montresor utters has an ulterior motive. There is the sly "you are luckily met," not specifying what kind of luck, and letting the listener in on a pun on "fortune" and "lucky." If Montresor's listener does not get it, the reader does, as the connection between "fortune" and "Fortunato" is especially evident when read on the page. He continues to flatter Fortunato by complimenting his appearance and, without a moment's hesitation, broaches the subject that will most nibble at Fortunato's pride. The four-word clause "I have my doubts" constitutes the inciting incident. As Fortunato bites at the bait, the journey commences, and he believes that he is the one initiating it. Montresor has anticipated Fortunato's response, having determined that Fortunato's weakest point is his vanity, his need to feel superior as a connoisseur. Further, as a master of narcissistic manipulation, he knows that he will wield more control if he gives his subject the impression of being in control. Montresor's flattering of Fortunato mirrors his flattering of the listener at the very beginning of the story. His method is to plant three flattering ideas into any subject's head: (1) you are special; (2) the two of us are superior to others; and (3) I am going to let you in on a privileged secret. He yields maximum effect by hiding his intent behind his surface words. This is authorial control.

In the ensuing dialogue, Poe allows us to see how Montresor functions in the face of uncertainty—the greatest threat to absolute control. He cannot be sure of Fortunato's responses, but he has anticipated them deftly. Like Shakespeare's Iago, Montresor uses reverse psychology, telling Fortunato *not* to follow him, knowing this insistence will prompt Fortunato to desire to follow, and more importantly, to *opt* to follow. He has been given the illusion of choice. It is not unlike Montresor telling the listener at the outset that he will achieve his revenge while withholding any detail that might suggest how he will achieve it. The use of "negative space" makes the listener an eager participant, wishing to fill in the gaps of the story. Montresor has perfected the

technique of arousing desire indirectly, just as the author seeks to arouse the reader's desire to follow the tale to its end without making explicit how the author is crafting the story.

In their subsequent journey through "several suites of rooms," a "long and winding staircase," and a descent to the "damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors" (417), both listener and reader are led into the same labyrinth as Fortunato, a realm of increasing isolation and confinement. The architecture, from the bone-stacked walls to the structure at the interior, is a Poe trademark. As J. Gerald Kennedy notes in "Phantasms of Death in Poe's Fiction" (1983), "the subterranean passageway, the secret vault, and the sealed room . . . evoke anxiety because they pose the implicit threat of fatal enclosure," placing the reader, like the character subject to the controlling agent in the story, in a state of "ultimate vulnerability" (898). Andrew Dykstal argues in "The Voyeur in the Confessional: Reader, Hoax, and Unity of Effect in Poe's Short Fiction" (2019) that the reader plays an active role in the narrative, a role that "entails risk and commitment, as the reader at once engages and constructs the text . . . obeying cues and reading through the lenses crafted by his obedience." When Montresor has led Fortunato to the final corridor, we see an image of the two of them "[standing] together upon the damp ground" (419). The image suggests intimacy, not unlike the intimacy of Montresor's confession to the listener in the frame story or between author and reader in the privacy of the printed page. Such intimate spaces frame the fictional world, carefully chosen by Poe. When he speaks of "bringing together the lover and the Raven" in "The Philosophy of Composition," he notes that his "first branch of this consideration was the *locale*" (681). In Poe's gothic mode, the narrator must place the subject in an enclosed space which has "the force of a frame to a picture" (681). That sense of confinement carries "an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention" (681). The author has the world-creating power of a god. As Poe phrases it in his review of Bulwer, "I made the night tempestuous" (682). Only a god could make the night tempestuous. But in the realm of the imagination, so too can the artist.

The listener and reader are at this point fully entrapped in Montresor's tale, just as Fortunato has surrendered himself to his own entombment. The reader may savor the extremity of emotional effect Poe has constructed, layer by layer, in the narrative architecture of the tale. David Faflik, in his 2016 article "What We Talk About When We Talk About Poe" (2016), argues that many of Poe's tales take the form of a "captivity narrative." They "induce readers to relax the defenses with which they would normally meet the author's signature exaggerations," leaving the reader "in as awkward a position as the voyeur in the confessional." To Poe, providing the reader with such a witness to

destruction is the pinnacle of delight for author and reader alike. As he phrases it in his Bulwer review, "the air of premeditation . . . is so pleasing" (624).

Like Fortunato, the reader knows the dreadful act is imminent, but the deliriousness of immersion in the experience of wandering the labyrinth of Poe's fictional world, akin to Fortunato's intoxication, renders the moment of recognition no less terrifying. Fortunato seems to beg for his own immolation:

> "Come, let us go"
>
> "Whither?"
>
> "To your vaults." (416)

Montresor has led Fortunato to believe he is determining the course of events. By here eliciting Fortunato's request, in all its lack of awareness, Montresor lets the listener luxuriate in his inimical delight—the delight of witnessing an innocent suffer. It is a diabolical dramatic irony. By the story's end, the reader too has become complicit in the crime. Poe has indulged the reader to embrace their own unsavory desires and merge with Montresor's listener, putty in the devil's hands, eagerly hungering to witness—indeed to experience—the final dastardly act.

Poe's use of imagery to heighten effect is masterful in the final moments. If the plot is guided by Montresor's voice, the fictional world is painted by Poe's use of sensory details. From the light of the flambeaux to the smell of the nitre, Poe triggers all the senses. His greatest attention is given to sound, which reaches full effect in the climax, wherein Poe applies his poetic techniques. beginning with Fortunato's cough— "ugh! ugh! ugh! ugh!"— uniting auditory and kinesthetic imagery in rhythmic repetition. The repetition continues, punctuating the air with an anxious urgency, a creeping discomfort. Montresor and Fortunato's subsequent dialogic exchange, in this case stacked with double meanings, stretches the irony to diabolical extremes. When Montresor toasts, "To your long life" (418), the reader easily grasps the underlying meaning. Fortunato will not live much longer. Just as Montresor invites the listener to gloat, Poe invites the reader to gloat.

At the final point of passage, the interior crypt stands "ornamented" in bones comprising three walls of a room (419). Montresor says as an aside, "It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use in itself." This would seem implausible, but the reader at this point is rapt enough not to question its believability. Poe may also include the line for another reason: there is no rational "use" in Montresor's construction of this plot, nor in Poe's construction of the tale. For Montresor, this is revenge for revenge's sake. For Poe, this is art for art's sake. The "use" of the nearly formed chamber is merely to serve the tale. Just as Fortunato stands "stupidly bewildered," the listener is too stunned by the image to process its plausibility with any critical distance. It is simply too horrific to

question. The chamber so falls into the symmetry of the story that the reader, too, loses all critical distance. All actors are forced to behold the structure with the grim fascination of a helpless child. It serves as the ultimate prop for Montresor the performer to stage Fortunato's moment of recognition. As Elena Baraban argues in "The Motive for Murder in The Cask of Amontillado" (2004), "Montresor does not murder Fortunato secretly, but stages a spectacle of execution so that the victim knows who kills him" (56). Were the reader not drained of all critical faculties, they would question how Montresor could conceivably now proceed to bind and chain a wholly submissive Fortunato "too much astounded to resist" (419). Such a state of submission is where Poe wants the reader to lie, immersed in the extremity of the action. The reader has become willing voyeur to a sadomasochistic fantasy. As if to underscore his total control over Fortunato, Montresor plants a final tease. "Once more let me implore you to return" (420). Remarkably, and improbably in any other context but a Poe story, the bound Fortunato insists upon staying. He doubles down, begging for "The Amontillado!" while bound and chained in what will clearly be the site of his own slow and painful death (420).

Poe has achieved full authorial control—the closest thing to proof that in the cryptic confines of the imagination, everyone desires to be, in a sense, tortured. But another twist remains. Fortunato loses his passivity and asserts himself, saying "let us be gone" (421). In another ironic repetition, Montresor repeats, "let us be gone," in this case implying death. Fortunato then pleads "For the love of God!" which Montresor also coolly repeats, as if to say, "God wants you to suffer," or perhaps to assert an even greater authorial control, to say, "I am God. I have determined your fate."

But authorial control has its end point, and Montresor's words cease to sting. Montresor's "heart [grows] sick." Nowhere has it been yet suggested that Montresor possesses a heart. In Poe's final twist, Montresor's Nietzschean pride withers because he has lost control. The mind cannot ultimately sustain dominion over the heart. As Zachary Bennet argues in his essay "Killing the Aristocrats: The Mask, the Cask, and Poe's Ethics of S & M" (2011), "Montresor's heart grows sick because upon completing the perfect murder, he does not feel the satisfaction he had anticipated while planning it" (54). Montresor's ultimate loss of control reverses the result of an otherwise perfectly planned performance. When Montresor subsequently calls out "Fortunato!" and receives no response, the ensuing silence speaks volumes. Fortunato no longer heeds Montresor's call. Montresor is no longer able to engineer Fortunato's response. The final act of communication comes from Fortunato: the shaking of the bells. This is his last "word." It is an uncanny use of Poe's favorite sound device, in this case signifying mockery. Perhaps he is a jester after all. The murder, despite all Montresor's careful plotting, becomes a

joke—a joke at the expense of Montresor, rendering his entire diabolical plan ridiculous.

There is heated scholarly debate as to which character says, "*In pace requiescat*" (421). In either case, Fortunato is the one who rests in peace. Montresor lives on, without peace. He has not achieved revenge if Fortunato has not had the reaction Montresor so desired. Thus, nothing will erase Montresor's ultimate existential impotence. To have hatched and launched such a miserable scheme appears, in the end, damningly pitiful. It is clear that he feels shame, if not guilt. Fifty years later, he is still trying to process the sickness in his heart.

The Soul Delights in Self-Torture

"The Cask of Amontillado" is a tale of bald-faced malice and brutality. How, then, do we account for its appeal? Poe defended the horror story by asserting that it "satisfie[s] a human craving for excitement," something Poe may have learned from his teacher George Tucker at the University of Virginia who held that "what is horrible in life is tempered by the artist to satisfy aesthetically this fundamental drive of man" (806). Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, classically posed that tragedy must elicit "pity and fear" in the audience, providing a *catharsis* in which the line between pleasure and pain, entertainment and ritual, is blurred. As Joseph J. Moldenhaur argues in "Murder as Fine Art" (1968) "artist and audience alike must suffer to earn their beatitude—must lose their life to find it" (835).

Recent critics have been enamored of the apparent sadomasochism evident in "The Cask of Amontillado." Bennett claims that "the reader experiences the literary equivalent of the Stockholm Syndrome. Depending on whether the reader perceives the mood as sadistic or masochistic, he or she will vicariously experience either sadism or masochism, respectively" (52). Sadomasochistically speaking, under the author's control, the reader is in a submissive position. But such a submission may paradoxically be the result of Poe having elicited a repressed sadism in the reader. Any reader who hopes Montresor will follow through with his plan, who finds pleasure in the moment he finally binds and entombs Fortunato, must reckon with the source of this desire. In the words of Faflik, "the author would seem to have managed to hold us by a hook that has been forged on the strength of our fascinated attraction for the imperilment of persons other than ourselves. All the while, we read on without realizing that we, too, have been taken." What has been "taken" is our moral judgment, or as Baudelaire would have it, the moral fetters in which we are bound. Dykstal adds, "the transgressions in the tales mirror the transgressions inherent in reading them" (18). "The reader is able to take pleasure in the knowledge that he or she is not the one being punished," says Bennett, and the fictional victim's annihilation "serves our sadomasochistic need to excise the darker side of our

psyches, which we regard as morally inadequate" (49). Lurid as the experience may be, it would seem that Poe is offering us not only entertainment, not only escape, and not only an encounter with aesthetic totality, but with an opportunity to face the emotions we most hide from ourselves. In Kennedy's view, Poe's horror "violates language, logic, and cultural taboo, allowing the unspeakable to speak, the unbearable sight to be seen. It compels us to confront death in all of its visceral repulsiveness, unsoftened by the effusion of sentiment or the prospect of a spiritual afterlife" (904).

Sadomasochism is a preoccupation of scholars fond of examining transgression, discussed at length by French theorist Georges Bataille and others of the poststructuralist school. Scholar Mike Edmunson goes so far as to deem Poe's gothic mode "the principal forerunner to S&M culture in the United States" (Bennett 43). But Poe's literary concern is a malaise of soul more explored historically by philosophers and theologians than BDSM practitioners. He identifies it as "a species of despair that delights in self-torture" (680). Poe was possessed and preoccupied by this despair, and the connection between personal angst and fictional content, as evident in his doubling down on the subject in "The Philosophy of Composition," referring yet a second time to "the human thirst for self-torture" (683). Poe's appeal to the masochistic impulse would suggest that the brutalized Fortunato is a stand-in for the reader. But a key component of the author-reader exchange, if any parallel can be drawn between aesthetic experience and voluntary sadomasochistic practice, is the element of consent, which Bennett curiously does not address. Consent may be the most essential comparison when considering the extreme emotions elicited by fiction. The reader experiences "pleasure" in pain by virtue of the consent afforded to the author. Faflik, critical of Poe's delight in prompting the reader's self-torture, claims "we relinquish our self-governing capacity for any kind of independent agency. In their encounters with these works," adding, "readers often find that their critical instincts are slowly eroded; they are in consequence left captive to a pleasing species of release that depends on their submitting to a determining will other than their own." The willing embrace of both cruel impulses and submissive impulses in a controlled environment—the narrative space— is placed in the hands of the author. "[Poe] appeals to us," he writes, "precisely because he binds and restricts us, because he holds us captive." Faflik evidently fails to consider the prospect that in this indulgence of dark impulses we may find release. In the Aristotelian view, catharsis is a key purpose of fictional narrative. The experience involves suspension of moral disgust in the safety of the author's hands. Such trust is a vital component of the author-reader contract.

"Sadomasochism and the deathwish," Moldenhaur holds, "are a saving grace in the eschatology and psychology to which Poe is committed" (841).

In Pace Requiescat

Arguments as to why Poe achieves his aim of seducing the reader into desiring a character to be tortured and buried alive notwithstanding, the story unquestionably achieves his aim of putting his own unity of effect theory to the test. The story succeeds just as Montresor's plan succeeds in the fictional narrative. The plan, in each case, has been hatched with a specific end in mind: burial of Fortunato in the hands of Montresor, and "burial" of the reader in the hands of the author. Most mysterious is the story's conclusion, in which Montresor appears to suffer disappointment after losing control, to the extent that he still feels compelled to confess the story to the listener fifty years later.

Such a fate also parallels that of Poe. Upon publishing his work, he ceded control to his readership—and to his critics. Considering Poe's mysterious death and the false impression of his character given to history by his rival Rufus Griswold, his own story ended with a question mark. Whatever control he had as an author, he had no control over his legacy. Although his reputation and respect as an author has been reclaimed in recent years, the fact remains that only history can determine whether Poe will rest in peace.

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