

Poe's Magazinish Career and "The Cask of Amontillado"

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***Abstract:** This paper explores Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" in terms of the author's turbulent magazinist career which has often been overlooked or omitted from the academic analysis. As he wrote of himself, Poe was "essentially a magazinist," the nineteenth-century term for a working journalist, editor, and reviewer. While critics influenced by post-structuralism tend to construe Poe's texts irrespective of the authorial presence, the biographical approach is not an outdated mode of investigation in Poe scholarship. Eventually, "The Cask of Amontillado" appears as a personal fantasy of revenge against the powerful cliques, editors, publishers, and the New England literary establishment as a whole in the 1840s, rather than a simplistic tale of revenge against the paternal figure.*

***Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado", Antebellum South, Magazinist*

In recent decades, Poe scholars have concentrated on the project of situating Poe's writings more explicitly within his antebellum contexts, exemplified by influential collections such as *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales* (1993), *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (1995), *A Historical Guide*

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to *Edgar Allan Poe* (2000), *Romancing the Shadow* (2001), and *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* (2012). Critics like Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman emphasize a need to “recognize that Poe’s most extravagant literary maneuvers were usually based in the specific cultural and political climate of antebellum America” (x-xi). Terence Whalen also argues that Poe’s texts are not “the wild offspring of . . . diseased mind,” but “the rational products of social labor, imagined and executed in the workshop of American capitalism” (9). Following the recent trend in Poe scholarship which ventures to locate his work in various social and historical contexts, biographical interpretations on Poe increasingly suggest that many of the recurrent themes and motifs of his tales are not originated from the author’s unconscious Oedipal conflict and the mother fixation, but rather from intimate historio-cultural occurrences of his life. While critics influenced by post-structuralism tend to construe Poe’s texts irrespective of the authorial presence, the biographical approach is not an outdated mode of investigation in Poe scholarship. As Scott Peeples has pointed out, “Poe’s writing is always intriguingly autobiographical” (6).

Since its publication, biographical or psycho-biographical readings that investigate the correlation between the author’s life and the text have long dominated the critical discussion of “The Cask of Amontillado.” “Marie Bonaparte claims that the execution of Fortunato reflects the author’s deep-rooted, infantile Oedipal rivalry with the father” and the long, dark wine-cellar in the story is a symbol of the maternal womb (506). In a similar vein, Daniel Hoffman finds in the story Poe’s symptomatic mother fixation, and claims that the crime scene suggests “the mother’s womb, in its aspect of the terrifying: a charnel-house of bones, the family vault. Here is the undoubted source of Montresor’s/Fortunato’s being” (221). According to Francis B. Dedmond, the tale is “a product of the Poe-Fuller and the Poe-English feuds,” an autobiographical embodiment of the author’s desire to avenge the attacks of Hiram Fuller and Thomas Dunn English (137). More recently, James M. Hutchisson claims that the story contains various allusions to Poe’s hated foster father, John Allan, who “much resembles Fortunato — he was admired and respected, interested in wines, and a member of the Masons” (205).

In this study, I intend to explore Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” in terms of the author’s turbulent magazinist career which has often been overlooked or omitted from the academic analysis. As he wrote of himself, Poe was “essentially a magazinist,” the nineteenth-century term for a work-

ing journalist, editor, and reviewer (*Letters* 270). Born in Boston, reared in Richmond and London, and educated at the University of Virginia and West Point, Poe spent the fourteen years of his career as a publishing magazinist traveling back and forth between major American cities like Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. I will examine the various circumstances surrounding Poe's professional career in the antebellum literary marketplace and attempt to demonstrate that Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" is a personal fantasy of revenge against the powerful cliques, editors, publishers, and the New England literary establishment as a whole in the 1840s, rather than a simplistic tale of revenge against the paternal figure.

Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" can be better understood in the light of his distressful career as a professional writer in the first half of the nineteenth century. The orphaned son of actors, Poe was taken into the care of a wealthy Richmond couple, Fanny and John Allan. Although the Allans provided Poe with a good home and education, they made no movement to adopt him legally. When his foster father refused him money to pay his gambling debts, Poe was forced to withdraw from the University of Virginia. A few years later when Fanny Allan died, John Allan remarried and cut off contact with Poe. Although Poe expected to become his heir, he was totally rejected and disinherited. It was then that Poe first came to writing as his vocation with "a sense of deficiency in himself and of envy toward others he thought more adequate" (Silverman 72). When all attempts at reconciliation with Allan failed, Poe made his way to Boston and began to write poetry. During his first writing career between 1827 and 1831, Poe managed to publish three volumes of poetry. But, these volumes went largely unnoticed and secured no financial recompense. Poe realized that he could not gain sufficient profit from that genre to maintain himself. Although Poe essentially preferred poetry to fiction, he had to abandon his poetical career as a result of the poor financial condition.

Poe worked as a freelance writer publishing five tales from 1831 to 1835, and then as a magazinist from 1835 to 1849. Poe was on the editorial staff of the Richmond *Southern Literary Messenger* from 1835 to 1837. As an assistant to Thomas Willis White, the proprietor of the *Messenger*, Poe took on the typical chores of an editor such as checking proofs, revising copies, selecting typefaces, and dealing with contributors, while producing his own tales and critical reviews. Through the *Messenger*, Poe made a significant and successful entry into the new world of magazines. The circulation of the *Messenger* continued to rise as Poe gradually undertook most of the edito-

rial duties; during his tenure it is said to have jumped “from seven hundred to nearly five thousand” (David Jackson 69-70). The magazine provided Poe with a steady, if meager, income. However, it was very difficult for Poe to adjust himself to the demanding toils of magazine work. In speaking of his reasons for leaving the *Messenger*, Poe said:

The situation was disagreeable to me in every respect. The drudgery was excessive; the salary was contemptible. In fact I soon found that whatever reputation I might personally gain, this reputation would be all. I stood no chance of bettering my pecuniary condition, while my best energies were wasted in the service of an illiterate and vulgar, although well-meaning man, who had neither the capacity to appreciate my labors, nor the will to reward them. (*Letters* 141)

After he fell out with White, Poe moved first to New York City and then to Philadelphia. Over the next six years, Poe went through a painful time trying to scratch out a living through literary hackwork. In spite of the scanty income, Poe had to take on the editorial position on *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* (1838-1840), *Graham's Magazine* (1841-1842), and other publications in Philadelphia. After quarreling with William Evans Burton over editorial policies, Poe was fired in the summer of 1840. Poe plunged again into tedious editorial services at *Graham's* in 1841. Although he now had a substantial background as a capable editor with the *Messenger* and the *Burton's*, Poe's deplorable situation remained the same. Even though *Graham's* became one of the most popular periodicals in the United States under Poe's influence, as is the case with the *Messenger*, George Graham had no intention to offer him any proprietary share in the business. As early as June 1842, Poe expressed his frustrating experience as an editor of *Graham's Magazine*: “Notwithstanding Graham's unceasing civility and real kindness, I feel more and more disgusted with my situation” (*Letters* 170). A month later, Poe lamented, “to coin one's brain into silver, at the nod of a master, is to my thinking, the hardest task in the world” (*Letters* 172). After some thirteen months on the editorial staff, Poe resigned from *Graham's*, and wrote to his friend Frederick W. Thomas: “My reason for resigning was disgust with the namby-pamby character of the Magazine which it was impossible to eradicate -- I allude to the contemptible pictures, fashion-plates, music and love tales. The salary, moreover, did not pay me for the labor which I was forced to bestow” (*Letters* 197). Poe still remained poor even when he made his magazine owners rich. He complained, “If, instead of a paltry salary, Graham had given me a tenth of his Magazine, I should feel

myself a rich man today" (*Letters* 192). In April 1844, Poe returned to New York and worked as a sub-editor of the *Evening Mirror*. In May 1845, soon after leaving the *Mirror* for a new weekly *Broadway Journal* (1845-1846), Poe noted:

I put so many irons in the fire all at once, that I have been quite unable to get them out. For the last three or four months I have been working 14 or 15 hours a day -- hard at it all the time -- and so, whenever I took pen in hand to write, I found that I was neglecting something that would be attended to. I never knew what it was to be a slave before. . . . I have no money. I am as poor as ever I was in my life -- except in hope, which is by no means bankable. (*Letters* 286)

Indeed, Poe's professional career can hardly be understood apart from the revolutionary rise of the periodical press in the first half of the nineteenth century. The period of the early to mid-nineteenth century has been called "the golden age of periodicals" and the number of magazines published in the United States increased dramatically (Mott 341). There existed only about a dozen American magazines at the beginning of the nineteenth century; by 1810, there were approximately forty or so; and by 1825, there were nearly one hundred magazines (Tebbel169). In the next two decades, that number increased sixfold, "somewhat less than a hundred periodicals other than newspapers in 1825, and about six hundred in 1850" (Mott 341-42). The magazine market was radically expanding as a result of cheaper printing processes and the emergence of mass reading public. As urban readers turned to literary magazines, periodical literature increasingly dominated the antebellum market. In his early career, Poe firmly believed that magazine was a profitable business for the poor writers. Unfortunately, the real conditions of the magazine publishing industry were quite different from Poe's initial expectation.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the American publishing grew and prospered, but it was markedly hostile to native writers. Since there was no international copyright law at the time, American publishers were reluctant to bring out the works of domestic writers. Instead, they were largely engrossed in reprinting popular works of established British writers like Dickens and Scott, for which they did not have to pay royalties. The publishers tended to neglect domestic authors, generally demanding financial guarantees against any possible losses. Although such literary notables as Irving, Cooper, and Longfellow made considerable sums of money from their writings, very few American authors could expect as much. In fact, most writers were

asked to pay for publication themselves in advance. This publishing practice explains why Poe's numerous attempts to publish his collection of short stories had failed repeatedly. As William Charvat puts it, this phenomenon was "disastrous to American authorship" (31). Driven by the relative lack of opportunity in book publishing, American writers without other sources of income turned to the magazine trade to make a living. Poe keenly perceived that the great proliferation of periodicals during the early nineteenth century was in part attributable to the absence of international copyright legislation. Certainly, periodicals offered native authors many more opportunities to publish than did the book trade. But here again, the possibilities for monetary success were low. With authorship as a new profession, most writers received little for their magazine contributions.

Furthermore, just like book publishing, American magazines prospered on a culture of piracy of well-known British authors and unaccredited reprints of other magazine materials. According to John William Tebbel, the standard rate of pay was \$1 per page for prose contribution in the 1840s (70). However, many of the magazines paid less than they had advertised or paid nothing at all: "fair payment" to authors for periodical contributions was hardly to be expected (Mott 504). Poe was no exception; he had difficulty in selling his writings to magazines and was always poorly paid. The *Graham's* paid four to twelve dollars a page for prose depending on the reputation of the author: Longfellow got \$50 for a poem and Cooper \$1,000 (or \$10 a page) for a biographical series; but Poe was "low on the Graham schedule, receiving only four or five dollars a page for prose" and "three dollars a page from *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*" (Mott 506-8).

Throughout his career as a struggling magazinist, Poe underwent the mechanical drudgery of editing manuscripts and strived to write almost one thousand reviews, essays, columns, and critical notices at various magazines. Despite a considerable writing output, however, Poe had to remain content with a low salary. Even though the circulation of most magazines rose during his term as editor and his critical reviews were widely reprinted by Northern publications, Poe's own share of the magazine's rising profits was no more than a subsistence income. Poe, constantly overworked and underpaid, deeply resented his magazine employers and lamented the lack of autonomy. After being fired from the *Burton's*, Poe wrote that "So far I have not only labored solely for the benefit of others (receiving for myself a miserable pittance) but have been forced to model my thoughts at the will of men whose imbecility was evident to all but themselves" (*Letters* 154).

Poe's lifelong ambition was to launch his own literary magazine that would contribute to improve the conditions for authors and would bring his independence on both a financial and intellectual level. Poe's dream developed over many years of editorial experience on several leading periodicals, and the first definite mention of the plan was made when he wrote to a Virginia poet, Philip Pendleton Cooke, in 1839: "As soon as Fate allows I will have a Magazine of my own and will endeavor to kick up a dust" (*Letters* 119).

A few months later, Poe published a "Prospectus of the Penn Magazine" asserting the urgent need for a high-class journal. In this prospectus, Poe gave particular attention to the feeble state of American letters and literary criticism. Alluding to the embarrassing provincialism in critical practice, Poe deplored the fact that the public opinion and the literary reputation were manufactured by a controlling group of powerful editors, critics, publishers, anthologists, and literary cliques firmly grounded in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. In the first place, Poe boldly proclaimed that his magazine would strive to achieve and maintain "an absolutely independent criticism" (*Essays* 1024). Poe sought to raise the aesthetic and moral standards of the contemporary American culture through his new monthly magazine. In the second place, he claimed that it would devote itself to promote "the general interests of the republic of letters" (*Essays* 1025). Poe's aspiring design to start his own prestigious periodical reflects his attempt to assert independence from the contemporary publishing business that was dominated by profit-oriented capitalist ideology instead of literary value and originality. Declaring his plans for "The Penn" in a circular letter written in 1841, Poe solicited contributions from well-known literary figures, including Irving, Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, John Pendleton Kennedy, and Fitz-Greene Halleck. Despite his enthusiastic efforts, Poe's project failed because of the lack of the capital and the economic downturn in America.

After resigning from *Graham's* in 1842, Poe seemed to have put aside the hope of his own magazine for a while. But his dream was soon rekindled and the original name of his prospective journal, "The Penn," was changed to "The Stylus" in order to avoid the former's local connotation. The "Stylus" magazine was for Poe a sort of literary stronghold from which he might have full editorial and financial autonomy to write and publish what he saw proper. In his 1844 letter to Charles Anthon, Poe related that "my ultimate purpose" was to establish my own magazine "in which at least I might have a propriety right" and that he wanted to claim "the true and permanent read-

ers of the land” as his own by making this magazine a forum for quality literature (*Letters* 270). Poe spent his last years trying to get support for his dream magazine but unfortunately nothing materialized.

Today Poe is known chiefly for his ratiocinative tales and macabre Gothic masterpieces. In his own time, however, Poe was not known for his tales but rather for his savage literary criticism on contemporary writers. From the earliest days of his professional career, Poe was a perplexing problem in the literary circle and often recognized as an outsider because of his poverty, aristocratic Southern background, and critical contentions on other American writers: “To those Northern publishers he was forever railing against, he appears to be too much the Southerner;” and “to those Southerners forever railing against him, he seems not quite a gentleman” (Dauber 125). As a poor and obscure Southern writer, Poe had no access to the major publishing houses of the metropolitan Northeast and began to realize that he would have to fight for the literary eminence in this New York-Boston dominated business. Accepting his marginal position in the literary scene, Poe publicly postured himself as an alienated outsider completely severed from Northern cliques and launched incessant assaults on the existing literary establishment in a series of critical reviews. At the very start of his career, Poe resolutely disdained the prevalent critical practice of “puffing” which blindly favored inferior American writers and their productions. He felt that his contemporaries misguided by narrow nationalism were often “involved in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American” (*Essays* 506).

Poe consistently reiterated that the fate of American letters depended on the impartial critical establishment and that the indiscriminate praise for mediocre works was destroying the development of a mature American literature. Poe asked for “a rigorous and self-sustaining criticism” because the “corrupt nature of our ordinary criticism has become notorious;” as seen in the recent “exposure of the machinations of coteries in New York” (*Essays* 1006-7). Poe quickly earned a notorious reputation and came to be called “the tomahawk man” for his critical harshness (Leon Jackson 97). The most scandalous event in Poe’s career took place in 1845 when he launched his vicious assault on the New England poet and professor, Longfellow, calling him “the GREAT MOGUL of the Imitators” (*Essays* 761). Poe’s accusation quickly triggered off a series of attacks and counterattacks between Poe and the Boston literary coterie, and expanded into the notorious “Longfellow War,” lasting through the next eight months. What really irritated Poe was

not so much the artistic quality of Longfellow's work as the critical puffery employed by the cliques: Longfellow may not be a quack himself, Poe insisted, but he controls "a whole legion of active quacks" ready to promote his work through "his social and literary position as a man of property and professor at Harvard" (*Essays* 1120). This sensational war against the foremost poet at the time made Poe lose the friendship of many powerful figures including James R. Lowell and Evert Duyckink.

From May through October 1846, Poe also published his controversial column, "The Literati of New York City," which contains thirty-eight sketches and biographical profiles of contemporary literary figures. Along with the protracted Longfellow War, this literary profile series created a great disturbance in the Northern literary circle and Poe's numerous friends turned their backs on him. As Jeffrey Meyers succinctly puts it, Poe employed his "tomahawk to counteract the wholesale and indiscriminate inflation of mediocre works which then prevailed in American criticism as well as to retaliate for his own lack of worldly success" (170-71).

Certainly, Poe both resented and envied the literary autocrats in Northern publishing centers, and his critical temper and practice had some defects. It is quite understandable why Poe was so strict and cruel in his criticism and why he strived to reject provincial standard and generate an impartial native criticism with analytic precision. However, Poe's adversarial relationship with the literary establishment upon which he nevertheless depended for his career was enormously disastrous to his dream project: "Poe's literary enemies and their supporters were slandering his reputation years, even decades, after his death. In his final years, they were apparently sabotaging his attempts to establish the *Stylus*. . . Much of this fallout was the direct result of Poe's tomahawking critical reviews" (Zimmerman 372).

Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," which first appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book* for November 1846, remains one of his most popular short stories. It is a relatively short but intense psychological tale that deliberately combines a confessional crime narrative with popular *Blackwood's* elements. Among Poe's Gothic pieces, there exists a related group of tales that deal with the narrator's crime and confession. Although "The Cask of Amontillado" contains a confession and a description of a hideous murder committed by the first-person narrator, it is somewhat different from other narratives. Poe's major confessional murder narratives such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse" often begin in retrospect with the narrator awaiting execution for the murder he com-

mitted. In these tales, there is some doubt about the narrator's sanity. The unreliable narrator often denies his own madness which is apparent to the reader. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," for instance, the narrator starts his story by assuring the reader that he is entirely sane: "True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" (792). The narrator's declaration of his sanity, however, becomes immediately suspect when he tells about his disease, which is similar to that of the morbid acuteness of the senses of Roderick Usher. The narrator of "The Black Cat" also begins his confession by insisting on his sanity: "Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not — and very surely do I not dream" (849). The homicidal narrator tries to deny his madness and present his bizarre tale as "nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (850).

After the horrible murder, the narrator of each tale usually experiences a false sense of security for some time and then suffers from an uncanny hallucination. The criminal narrator's aberrant actions are beyond normal human understanding. The narrator of "The Black Cat" can only attribute the strange impulses and events to the spirit of the perverseness -- "one of the primitive impulses of the human heart. . . It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself -- to offer violence to its own nature -- to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (852). On the fourth day after the murder, the police come to investigate his wife's disappearance and carefully search the cellar several times. As the police are about to leave the crime scene, the narrator, driven by the powerful spirit of perverseness, goes so far as to tap with a cane the very wall behind which he has placed the corpse. Suddenly, from behind the wall comes a terrifying, wailing howl. He swoons and staggers in horror and then confesses his murder. In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator has murdered his victim in bed by means of a poisoned candle. For a long period of time he enjoys his absolute security, "but there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought" (1224). He repeats to himself the phrase "I am safe — I am safe — yes — if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (1225). No sooner does this idea occur to him than he experiences the perverse impulse toward self-destruction. Driven by the hallucinatory sound ringing in his ears, the narrator panics and begins to run through the street. At last, the narrator unconsciously shouts out the testimony of his crime, and then swoons.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator tells us that the idea of killing the old man "haunted [him] day and night" in spite of his affection for him (792). After murdering his victim, the narrator at first believes that he can keep his newly-gained power. But, the narrator's perfect triumph soon gives way to a state of psychological collapse. Finally, the tale ends with his hysterical and humiliating confession of the crime to the unsuspecting police. As in "The Imp of the Perverse," it is the narrator who makes the confession before the exposure of the corpse.

As we have seen, Poe's confessional murder narratives are in some sense tales of self-destruction because the murderous protagonist is always punished by his own uncontrollable impulse. On the structural level, each of the tales begins more or less with an expression of reason and logic, but it ends in dreadful madness. The essential plot has largely to do with an insane narrator who kills someone close to him, initially gets away with the murder, and then perversely confesses to the crime. But, the story of "The Cask of Amontillado" is far from the remorseful narrator's deathbed confession: the protagonist is not imprisoned, not about to be executed.

The vengeful narrator, Montresor, begins his tale by telling readers why he determines to seek revenge: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (1256). We never learn the nature of the mysterious offense he has received from his enemy. We know virtually nothing of the two main characters, the epoch, or the place, other than that the story is set somewhere in Italy during "the supreme madness of the carnival season" (1257). Montresor plots a complete revenge and establishes two definite rules: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong" (1256). According to his exquisite retaliatory plan, the victim must recognize the act of revenge for what exactly it is, and the retaliator must go unpunished. Thus Montresor sets an elaborate trap and cunningly lures the drunken Fortunato to his underground vault by inciting his jealousy of a rival connoisseur and soliciting his assistance in evaluating the quality of some wine he claims to have stored there. The rest of the tale is the journey that these two men take as they make their descent into the damp tunnels of the underground wine cellar. On the way, Montresor meaningfully tells his nemesis Fortunato, who appears to be a man of high social standing, that his Latin family motto is "*Nemo me impune lacessit*," which signifies "No one provokes me with

impunity” (1260). When they finally reach a crypt at the most remote end of a passage, Montresor quickly shackles the stupefied, unsuspecting enemy within an obscure recess and proceeds to wall him up with stone and mortar.

Except for a brief moment of panic, Montresor’s monologue is calm and solid without any tint of delusional madness. Fortunato cries for help, but there is no one to hear, and Montresor fulfills his calculated execution, leaving his former friend to die. Unlike the psychologically unstable narrators in earlier tales, Montresor is coolly rational and hardly concerned with pleading his own sanity. In contrast to other confessional tales, the overall tone of “The Cask of Amontillado” is relatively light and is devoid of any serious sense of remorse. From the beginning of the story, Montresor clearly states that revenge is his murder motive. When Montresor discloses his secret fifty years after committing the crime, he plainly delights in retelling the genius in the live burial scheme and celebrates the successful escape without detection. He tells at the end of the story: “for the half of a century no mortal has disturbed” (1263). Only the perfect murder can make the avenger feel the full satisfaction, and Montresor’s idea or poetics of revenge seems to shed light on Poe’s own notion about triumphant retaliation.

Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” is an autobiographical fantasy of revenge, rather than a Gothic confessional tale. In the story, the vengeful Montresor represents Poe himself; Fortunato can be seen as Poe’s antagonist whom he both envied and despised in the bleak literary scene. Montresor here, as Poe so often displayed himself, expresses great pride in his distinguished heritage. When Fortunato comments on the vaults, the narrator replies: “The Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family” (1259). As Elena V. Baraban has recently pointed out, Montresor seems to have a “better aristocratic lineage than Fortunato. The catacombs of the Montresors are extensive and their vastness genuinely impresses Fortunato . . . The protagonist’s name, ‘Mon-tresor’ (my treasure) is a metaphor, for Montresor’s noble ancestry is indeed his treasure” (51). The family history of Montresor strongly echoes Poe’s own fall from wealth to poverty. Like the impoverished Poe who became exceedingly jealous of other literati’s reputation, success, and wealth, Montresor is jealous of his enemy Fortunato because he is “rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter” (1259).

This biographical aspect of the story can be supported by Poe’s own assertion made in his “Literati” essay on Margaret Fuller: “The supposition that the book of an author is a thing apart from the author’s self is, I think, ill

founded . . . [W]ith him who has written much . . . we get, from his books, not merely a just, but the most just representation" (*Essays* 1178). In Poe's view, the literary texts an author produces are an extension and expression of the writer himself, more personal "than in his most elaborate or most intimate personalities" (*Essays* 1179).

Given this opinion on the involvement of the author with his text, it is conceivable that Poe would invest much of his ideas and much of himself in his literary pieces. As the critic Roger Asselineau has noted, Poe often seems to be "the hero of all his tales. If Roderick Usher, Egaeus, Metzengerstein, and even Dupin are all alike, if Ligeia, Morella, and Eleonora look like sisters, it is because, whether he consciously wanted to or not, he always takes the story of his own life as a starting point" (34). Indeed, Poe's most intimate feelings about the antebellum literary scene, the cliques he hated, the mediocre writers, and the general conditions of the publishing industry that favored wealthy and influential New England writers are frequently exposed and reverberated in the pages of his writings: "Magazine Writing--Peter Snook," "Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House," "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob," and "Hop-Frog." In fact, the essential terms in "The Cask of Amontillado" can be traced back to Poe's own letter to his publisher, William E. Burton, at *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1840:

If by accident you have taken it into your head . . . that I am to be insulted with impunity I can only assume that you are an ass. . . As for the rest, you do me gross injustice; and you know it. As usual you have wrought yourself into a passion with me on account of some imaginary wrong; for no real injury, or attempt at injury, have you ever received at my hands. . . You are a man of impulses; have made yourself, in consequence, some enemies; have been in many respects ill treated by those whom you had looked upon as friends — and these things have rendered you suspicious. You once wrote in your magazine [a sharp critique] upon a book of mine — a very silly book — Pym. Had I written a similar criticism upon a book of yours, you feel that you would have been my enemy for life, and you therefore imagine in my bosom a latent hostility towards yourself. This has been a mainspring in your whole conduct towards me since our first acquaintance. (*Letters* 130)

The strong motto of the Montresor family ("No one provokes me with impunity") closely resembles Poe's own words to the magazine publisher. At the beginning of the story, Montresor relates that Fortunato is in most regards "a man to be respected and even feared" (1257). Fortunato's name itself suggests the worldly prosperity and happiness that the narrator claims to have lost. As the story progresses, however, the respected and wealthy Fortunato becomes a helpless, drunken fool who puts on motley and the conical cap and bells on his head; the aristocratic but socially insignificant Montresor

risers to power and is transformed into a Dupin-like masterful man who proficiently manipulates and finally punishes his enemy. What Poe's narrator calls a perfect crime in other murder narratives always turns out to be an illusion: what seems to be buried or repressed only returns in greater force to threaten, aggravate, and finally overwhelm the homicidal monomaniacs.

In contrast to other tales, the unfortunate Fortunato do not return in ghostly form to torment Montresor. "The Cask of Amontillado" must have been extremely satisfying, because everything turned out just as Poe/Montresor wished. Poe found his deep gratification not only in torturing and terminating his enemy, but in letting the abandoned victim understand exactly what was happening. For Poe/Montresor, revenge is quite gratifying and to be relished slowly: "There was then a long and obstinate silence . . . and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones" (1262). Once the clanking subsides, Montresor resumes work until the wall is level with his breast. Fortunato struggles with the chains and moans as the effects of the alcohol begin to wear off. Now the victim's low moan turns to piercing screams:

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated, I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall; I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamor grew still. (1262)

In answering and outdoing Fortunato's screams with shrieks of his own, Montresor's revenge seems to reach a climax. Nowhere is Montresor making himself felt as the avenger more than here, and nowhere does he celebrate his impunity more explicitly. No one will hear the screams, for the "solid fabric of the catacombs" stands between Montresor's crime and the outside world. As Edward H. Davidson has noted, Montresor has the "power which was denied to Usher, Wilson, and others: he is from the beginning master, even god, of his circumstances" (201). Indeed, Montresor is able to carry out his crime through methodological planning. He is capable of convincing the enemy to venture into the wine cellar to taste the amontillado while ensuring that none of his servants will be present. He also carefully arranges all of the equipments that he needs to build a prison wall. To Fortunato, Montresor's walling him up fast seems at first to be a joke, and

so he still laughs: "Ha! ha! ha! — he!he! — a very good joke indeed — an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo — he! he! he! — over our wine — he! he! he! . . . Let us be gone" (1263). When Fortunato finally realizes what has happened, he begs to be released: "For the love of God, Montresor!" (1263). But the triumphant narrator answers only with mockery, "Yes, for the love of God!" (1263). The desperate victim pleads with him, but the vindictive Montresor rejects and derides his enemy, just as Poe's requests for money and help from other literati had been utterly refused and ridiculed throughout his lifetime.

For Poe, the building of a wall which seals permanently Fortunato away would be a supreme means of revenge because the live burial is the most terrifying torture in his oeuvre. Indeed, Poe obsessively and extensively used this sensational form of living death in many of his tales: "Loss of Breath," "Berenice," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Premature Burial," "Some Words with a Mummy," and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Ranging from the accidental to the intentional, various types of premature burials appear in at least a dozen tales. Premature burial, which exerted a persistent hold on Poe's dark imagination, serves not only as a recurrent thematic source of horror, but also as a fitting metaphor for the author's own career.

Early on in his career, Poe's literary reputation was itself in constant danger of being figuratively entombed alive; his tales had been subjected to living burials in the numerous magazines. Besides the horror of the actual phenomenon of living interment, the reason that this motif is so appalling to Poe is that it embodies his own sense of immense isolation, rejection, powerlessness, and confinement to periodical journalism. The threat of living entombment is thus closely linked with the author's fear of being buried alive in the antebellum literary marketplace. However, here in "The Cask of Amontillado," it is not Poe/Montresor but his adversary/Fortunato who undergoes the paralyzing terror of the premature burial. Poe must have obtained a vicarious satisfaction in acting out this way of death for his enemy because the threat of premature interment is what he fears most himself. The very writing of "The Cask of Amontillado" is an act of revenge against his literary enemies who had insulted and injured Poe. At the end of the story, the reader is at one with Montresor in sensing that his enemy Fortunato has got what he deserves.

Michael Allen argues that "a serious writer who is also a journalist is likely to be particularly preoccupied with things like popularity, the na-

ture of audience, the building of reputations . . . This is certainly the case with Poe” (3). Throughout his life, Poe wanted his writings to appeal to the masses as well as to the literary elite. He eagerly craved for both the literary reputation and the pecuniary success as a commercial writer and professional magazinist. By the late 1840s, Poe’s *Blackwood’s*-style tales, detective stories, and his narrative poem “The Raven” had brought him national recognition but not enough financial success to live on. Even in his 1845 letter to his friend in which he boasted of “The Raven”’s great and instantaneous success, he still complained that “I have made no money. I am as poor now as ever I was in my life” (286). In his another 1845 letter, Poe wrote despairingly of what it meant to be impoverished in the antebellum America: it is shameful that a literary magazinist should be forced to bear “sad poverty” in a country “where more than in any other region upon the face of the globe to be poor is to be despised” (*Letters* 270).

During his magazinist career, Poe edited a wide variety of eastern periodicals and composed an incredible number of tales, essays, and reviews. But his life was always precarious and he often represented himself as a helpless victim of the magazine business. Almost all of his letters contain humiliating pleas for monetary support or some other form of economic assistance. In 1845 Poe portrayed his own pitiful situation into a sketch entitled “Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House.” In this autobiographical piece, the poor author is unable to find a book publisher and is driven to periodicals, where he is insulted, humiliated, and exploited to death by the magazine publisher, the rich and cruel “editor and proprietor” (*Essays* 1038). Poe who was always wretchedly poor desperately wanted to be relieved from his “miserable life of literary drudgery to which I now, with a breaking heart, submit, and for which neither my temper nor my abilities have fitted me” (*Letters* 681). Poe’s whole life was marked by the desperate struggle to feed his family and by the continuous battles against the greedy editors, capitalistic publishers, and detractive literary cliques. Toward the end of life, Poe had lost most of his friends and had estranged much of the literary world. Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” was produced at a time when he was deeply depressed and dreadfully exhausted in the magazine prison house. As if to overcome his anxieties over the failure in the antagonistic literary scene, Poe made the story a fanciful wish fulfillment, in which the avenger perfectly and ultimately triumphed over his adversary.

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