The Art of Dissimulation.
The Good Christian *vs.* the Loyal Freemason

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Edgar Allan Poe, the leading American romantic, became famous – *post mortem*, if we may add – primarily for his "tales of the grotesque and arabesque", which, as we know, abound in monstrous assassinations. One in particular – quite remarkable for its brevity –, *The Cask of Amontillado*, illustrates something more than a gruesome murder. It attempts to minutely establish the steps of a perfect crime. Let us follow closely the phases of the diabolical plan and try to understand what exactly generates the already mentioned "perfection"! The story is set in traditional Italy, at the time of the Venetian Carnival. We should clarify, at this very early stage, the spiritual significance of the "Carnival" (a specific Catholic feast), since it will turn out to be immensely useful later on. Thus, originally, "carnival" means "meat removal" (*carnelevamen* in Latin, *carnevale* in Italian) and is celebrated just before the beginning of Lent. The less spectacular Romanian equivalent of this religious event is the so-called *lăsata secului*, i.e. the cessation of meat consumption.

The action of Poe's tale develops during this great symbolic masquerade of Venice and it happens so because of the indicated "perfect crime". The narrator and, simultaneously, the assassin of the story, Montresor, a local nobleman (according to the few details we get about him), tells us that he has borne "the thousand injuries of Fortunado" the best he could, but when his supposed rival (the nature of the relationship between the two remains rather obscure throughout the text) moves to "insult", he vows "revenge". We should not bother right now with the ambiguity of the terms used by Montresor in his opening *exposé*, i.e. *injury* and *insult*. We shall do it later. For the time being, let us focus on the immediate aspects of his short confession! These aspects are: the necessary revenge he must take against Fortunado and the Carnival as the setting chosen for his violent action. One should not expect the enigmatic aristocrat to be extremely communicative here. He appears as a restrained talker. Yet, even so, what he has to say freezes the listener's blood.

Montresor has sent all his servants to the Carnival, in order that no unwanted eye-witness should pop out at the house. The family castle (*palazzo*) is at his

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disposal. All evening, he has followed the unfortunate Fortunado, waiting for the appropriate moment to start his plot. The future victim is dressed up ("disguised"), quite suggestively, in the Fool's costume and entertains himself at the feast, having no idea about what awaits him at the end of the night. Suddenly appearing in his way, as it were, Montresor greets Fortunado, informing him that he is in a hurry to find Luchesi, an important local expert in wines, we understand. He intends to ask him to come to the castle and taste a wine which "passes for Amontillado", but about which Montresor has some "doubts". Only Luchesi, due to his singular skills, will be able to dispel the uncertainty. At once, the narrator has struck at the core of his victim's main weakness: his vanity. Fortunado is a wine expert himself and claims to better than Luchesi. He can certify the Amontillado, albeit he has drunk a lot already.

Consequently, Fortunado convinces Montresor that he will gladly undertake the wine-tasting task and accompany him to his vaults. The satisfied executioner thus walks by his ignorant victim to the catacombs of the *palazzo*, where, supposedly, a cask of controversial Amontillado wine is to be revealed. These catacombs – used as vaults – are uncanny from the outset. Although intoxicated, Fortunado notices the oddity of the place, being particularly intrigued by the dark "extensions" of the walls and the human relics they come across in their unusual descent. At the victim's legitimate questions about these curious elements, the narrator answers somewhat symbolically: "The Montresors were a great and numerous family!" He seems to imply that the vaults are, in fact, the sepulcher of several generations of people. Calmed down by the observation, Fortunado requires information about the code of arms of the Montresors and their motto in history. Both are distinct signs of a long, cherished, noble and significant family tradition.

The former, Montresor replies, displays a foot crushing the head of a serpent "whose fangs are imbedded in the heel", whereas the latter is a Latin citation, sounding a bit strangely: *"Nemo me impune lacessit!"* ("No one insults me with impunity!"). Equally the arms and the motto revive Biblical metaphors from *The Old Testament*: the foot crushing the serpent represents an image from *The Book of Genesis*, alluding to the eternal triumph of good in its confrontation with evil, and the idea of retaliation in distribution from the motto constitutes an almost explicit reference to *lex talionis*. Not at all disturbed by these explanations, Fortunado wants "to proceed to the Amontillado". Therefore, deriding his victim's insensitivity, Montresor even plays a little game. Specifying that the place is too damp (the catacombs are under a river), the narrator asks Fortunado to go back home, lest he should get ill (the victim coughs persistently during their descent into the vaults). "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved, you are happy as once I was", Montresor says.

The proud Fortunado does not even think about it nevertheless. He intends to taste the Amontillado at all possible costs. In the meantime, "the rich and respected" nobleman drinks whatever comes in handy, like, for instance, a bottle of *De Grâve*, randomly discovered along the way, which he empties at a breath. After having finished the wine, he throws the bottle upward with a bizarre gesticulation that Montresor does not appear to understand. "You do not comprehend?" Fortunado interrogates Montresor. "Not I", he answers. "Then you are not of the brotherhood",

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Fortunado continues. "You are not of the masons". At the unexpected conclusion of the victim, Montresor suddenly and firmly intervenes to confirm: "Yes, yes, yes, yes!" "You?", Fortunado shows his amazement, "Impossible! A mason?" "A mason", our narrator argues, "producing a trowel", as a sign, from beneath the folds of his *roquelaire*. Undoubtedly, we must admit that the dialogue between the victim and the executioner has changed in a rather unpredictable manner, so to say.

Therefore, we need to interrupt the descriptive momentum of the critical endeavor, at this point, with a brief analytical *intermezzo*. A huge confusion determines the completely weird dialogue related above. The two men talk about Masonry in the terms of an incredible semantic incongruence. While Fortunado refers, obviously, to the speculative sense of the concept – Masonry as a secret organization, based on occult and ritualistic practices –, Montresor, in his "understanding" of the context, does not abandon the concrete area of significance, i.e. the operative meaning of the notion – Masonry as a traditional profession (craft) of humanity. The narrator claims he has "masonic" training (which implies he would have specific abilities in the field of "constructions"), revealing (as "a sign") a trowel he has on him (accidentally?) at the time of his encounter with Fortunado. Attentive readers are bound to note here an arrogant form of implicit sarcasm. The executioner shows his victim, with utter cynicism, his sinister murder weapon: the mysterious trowel itself.

Completely disconcerted, Fortunado does not make any sense out of Montresor's remark, confirming, once more, his position of a "Fool" in the story. "You jest", he concludes, resuming his search for the wine of Amontillado. At the end of their odd conversation, the murderer himself whispers three words, barely understandable and apparently meaningless in the general context. Fortunado no longer seems to hear them however. We are not going to insist on or even mention them at this moment. A bit of mystery will not do any harm to our analysis! The enigmatic dynamics is, after all, in the spirit of Poe's tale. So, our heroes reach the most remote spot of the catacombs, where, within a wall, Montresor says, the cask was carefully placed. Fortunado inserts his right hand inside, whereas Montresor fetters his left arm with a chain (prepared in advance) which comes out of the granite. Suddenly, the intoxicated Fool becomes captive in one of the extensions of the vaults. He looks like a crucified person. Montresor walls him up alive, using his trowel.

The scene of the execution is cryptic, obscure, like the setting itself. The victim does not react at all, seemingly accepting the bizarre immolation-like ritual. Intoxication may have something to do with this lack of reaction or, perhaps, the wine expert has finally understood the fact he was ridiculed by Montresor and, consequently feels defeated. No one knows for sure. The only sentence (can it be an invocation, a prayer, a solicitation of compassion?) Fortunado speaks out (although, as we shall see, *these may not be his words!*) is the following one: "For the love of God, Montresor!" To which, driving us to total ambiguity, Montresor calmly responds (in an echo-like manner): "Yes, for the love of God!" We are going to try to figure out later whatever is concealed behind the unusual exchange of "metaphors" between the two. Right now, let us notice that the narrator gives us, in the end of his confession, an unexpected "chronology" of events. He says that, for

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fifty years, no human has disturbed the "Fool" from his "sleep"! He then committed the perfect crime.

In other words, nobody would have known anything about it, unless the criminal himself had decided to come out. The conclusion of the narrative will therefore be a late prayer for the soul of the victim, departed in such horrendous circumstances: *In pace requiescat!* ("May he rest in peace!"). Again, we have the feeling Montresor utters these Latin "lexemes". Yet, a more experienced reader of Poe would probably be tempted to ask: is it really so? Before clarifying all the less difficult ambiguities of the text, we must focus on the most challenging of them all, i.e. the murder itself. It may have been a perfect crime, no argument about that, but what was its motivation? Why does Montresor hate Fortunado so much? What do those "injuries" and that uncanny "insult" from the beginning actually mean? A glitter of hope appears when Montresor mentions that Fortunado is "rich, respected, admired, beloved and happy" as once he was. Could then a social rivalry between these aristocrats be the reason for "revenge"? Was there any competition in Venice in the past?

Possibly, but, let us face it, that constitutes a rather inconsistent detail of the narrative. Something else draws our attention in a more convincing way. It is the already mentioned "confession-like" style of Montresor's narrative. He has been addressing someone from the very beginning. This is how he starts: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul…" Who might be the silent listener? From the symbolic invocation made by the narrator, we could presume that the listener is God himself. Only He can know so well the nature of a sinner's soul. Nevertheless, we should adopt a more pragmatic view on things here and say that the listener is not necessarily God, but maybe his spiritual substitute, the priest. Considering that the tale indicates a gap of half a century between facts and their presentation (between the time of action and the time of story, as it were), we may infer that the old Montresor (the story teller as opposed to the action taker, i.e. the young Montresor) lays on his deathbed and has his last confession in front of his confessor.

If this is true – and let me say that it must be, since the clues of such a scenario are too evident! –, we have to accept the undoubted existence of a third character in the tale (beside Luchesi who remains just a strategic move of Montresor and not a real hero!). The character in question only appears to be silent, because, in reality, he talks and he does it quite visibly in the end. We are referring to the priest who listens to the narrator's terrifying account. He is the one (and not Fortunado!) who exclaims *For the love of God, Montresor!*, upon realizing that the dying man in front of him admits to a murder. Likewise, he is the one who prays for poor Fortunado's soul (*In pace requiescat!*), upon comprehending that the "Fool" was killed fifty years ago and no one ever knew anything about him during this time. Thus, Montresor's confession about the perfect crime starts making sense: an old murderer, ironically, in intention a good and simple Christian, wants to make peace with God before his death and therefore exposes a terrible sin to his confessor.

A dilemma however still lingers at the back of our minds. What pushed this good Catholic to the committing of perhaps the most disturbing sin in Christianity, a brother's assassination? In order to answer, we must return to earlier details of Montresor's confession. Let us note again the religious devotion of his aristocratic

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family! As said already, both the arms and motto of the Montresors are subtle Biblical references (even the slogan *Nemo me impune lacessit!/No one insults me with impunity!* has a religious connotation, in *The Old Testament* or *lex talionis* kind of way, i.e. "no one insults my faith without being punished for his insolence!"). Fortunado, on the contrary, is a different type of Italian nobleman. An overt Freemason, he appears to lead a non-Christian life, at least from Montresor's dogmatic perspective. According to the narrator's pious traditional angle, his victim may very well be "a pagan", whose presence in the civilized order of Christian Europe troubles profoundly. Montresor's very identity is menaced by Fortunado's values.

We should properly understand Montresor. He is prepared to commit and finally commits murder, paradoxically, out of his intense religious convictions. At the priest's remark *For the love of God, Montresor!*, his response is *Yes, for the love of God!* In other words, *he killed*, no matter how horrendous this may look to the modern man, *in the name of God*, as any good Catholic would or should have done it, under the same circumstances. In the light of this hypothesis – that of the traditional Christian who "punishes" a mason/a pagan for "spiritual aggression" –, the enigmatic words the narrator uses at the beginning of his confession get new significances. The "injuries" Montresor has borne the best he could are "personal insults" (brought presumably by Fortunado to his friend), insults which good Christians must accept ("Turn the other cheek!"). Yet, when the mason moves to "insult" (a term that should be read here as "blasphemy", i.e. a symbolic attack on Montresor's faith and God!), there is no turning back: the good Christian "vows revenge".

The conflict between the two men – far from being social (a competition within the aristocratic hierarchy) or psychological (envy determined by the same unstable social status) – is rather religious, facing an "offending" mason and an "offended" Catholic. It is only natural therefore that they should talk, persistently, about "the love of God". "God" represents the essence of the antagonism, but "God" seen from two perspectives allegedly opposed: Christian-spiritual and Occult-ritualistic. Montresor acts, symbolically, before the Lent, at the time of the Carnival, when the church-going individual "purges" his everyday life, eliminating all its temptation-bringing components, all its factors of corruption, vice and moral decay. Fortunado the Fool is one such factor of "decay", a spiritual "toxin" of society, a "toxin" that has to be eradicated. Montresor the Catholic undertakes this unpleasant task. Not in his own name (he has always borne the mason's personal "injuries" the best he could), but in the name of God (when he realizes Fortunado constitutes a "blasphemer").

So, we should ask ourselves if, adopting the above described hermeneutic scenario, one automatically drives away the mystery of Montresor's confession-like story. *No way* would be the immediate answer! Let us not forget we are dealing with the master of the narrative enigmas here, i.e. Poe! We mentioned the fact that, at the end of the two characters' "conversation" about Freemasonry, Montresor utters some uncanny words which have been deliberately left in suspension. We should return to them now. If you remember, realizing that Montresor does not know what he speaks about when referring to his belonging to "the brotherhood", Fortunado leaves in contempt, saying: "You jest!" He considers the poor man in front of him, with a trowel in his hand (as a "sign" of his masonic identity), simply an idiot. Yet, "the idiot" whispers something in the aftermath, which, if heard by Fortunado,

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would have certainly stopped him in dismay: "Be it so!" Taken as such, the words do not say much, but, associated with a historical "case" from 1826, they give you the creeps.

The "case" is that of Captain William Morgan from New York, a distinguished American Freemason. Edgar Allan Poe was surely familiar with this episode from the history of the United States. In 1826, Morgan published a book with a huge impact on the Americans of the time: *Illustrations of Freemasonry by One of the Fraternity*. There he discloses secrets of the masonic rituals (cf. Sorensen 1972), insisting on the significances of different types of initiations and the meanings of certain occult gesticulations. The author describes a situation that is similar to what Montresor and Fortunado experience in the catacombs. More precisely, Captain Morgan claims that a Freemason who wants to test the masonic identity of a fellow-partner may inquire him about his "belonging" to the brotherhood by raising the hands, symbolically, above his head. That is exactly what the "Fool" does after emptying the bottle of *De Grâve*! He raises his hands in the air with a gesticulation Montresor pretends he has not understood.

Confused, Fortunado asks: "You do not comprehend?" "Not I", Montresor replies. The "Fool" then legitimately concludes: "You are not of the brotherhood." Montresor is appalled and stupidly produces his trowel "from beneath the folds of his *roquelaire*"! The genuine Freemason rightfully gets annoyed. He says: "You jest! Let us proceed to the Amontillado!" And he continues his walk into the vaults. Well, at this point, we have an absolutely sensational element, often overlooked by the critics and the readers of this tale. According to William Morgan, when confronted with this weird gesticulation of the hands, the true Mason must confirm his belonging to the fraternity by simply saying a Biblical formula: "So mote it be!" *For the love of God*, to paraphrase the narrator himself, what does Montresor whisper at the end of the scene? "Be it so!" (the equivalent of "So mote it be!"). Probably, he even smiles cynically, when uttering these words, at the intellectual simplicity of the "Fool". The truth is thus eventually revealed: the conflict is not religious, but occult.

Undoubtedly, Montresor is a high-rank Freemason who has the mission to eliminate Fortunado the Fool! He acts in disguise, though, in order to deceive both his confessor (the priest, the listener) and the audience (the reader, the receiver). Why should he do this or, even more importantly, why should Fortunado be eliminated? Let us briefly return to William Morgan's story so as to properly answer the question! Immediately after the publication of his disturbing book of masonic disclosures, the military man vanished into thin air. After one year, what was suspected to be his remains "appeared" suddenly inside a cave (very damp, by the way). The position of the skeleton suggested the idea of crucifixion. People (including the press) were convinced at the time Morgan had been executed symbolically by the brother masons for his betrayal (let us specify that Montresor, too, sees his "revenge" as an act of "immolation"). Like the captain in discussion, Fortunado breaks the most important law of Freemasonry – *the law of silence*. He is talkative, superficial and stupid.

For no reason whatsoever, he discloses his belonging to the brotherhood to someone who apparently does not have any connection with the organization (i.e.

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Montresor). His executioner thus becomes the "hand" of the secret society, which must punish a "Fool" like Fortunado in an exemplary way! Fortunado is William Morgan. So, we may easily conclude that Poe's tale, far from being about a "social antagonism" or a "religious one", constitutes, in fact, a parable about "secret plots" or, more exactly, about "conspiracies". What we have in Montresor's confession is the perfect dissimulation, "a play of substitutions" from what will be, in the 20th century, the tradition of "the deconstructionist game". His false "identities" (*a social competitor* and then *a good Christian*) disseminate, toward the end of the *exposé*, into a real "one" (that of *a vengeful Freemason*). This text deals with the secret selves of a narrator, confronting us with, probably, one of the best examples of epic unreliability in the world history of literature. Poe illustrates himself, once more, as the master of this genre.

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Abstract

This article focuses on one of Edgar Allan Poe's famous tales, *The Cask of Amontillado*, a story of "perfect crime", as it is usually considered. The action is set in medieval Italy, at the time of the Carnival, in Venice. The protagonists are two noblemen, Montresor and Fortunado. Montresor is the narrator of the text and wants to revenge on Fortunado, because of a mysterious "insult". Fortunado's "mistake" is never made clear, although the punishment for the trespassing as such is extreme (Fortunado will eventually pay with his own life). The article tries to explain the enigma behind the "insult". This takes us into an occult world, where the identities of the characters change dramatically (they are, successively, social competitors, religious enemies and rival Masons). Poe's symbolism and epic games become here remarkable tools of constructing and amplifying the mystery. *The Cask of Amontillado* should therefore be viewed as a masterpiece of the American Romanticism and of "horror genre" as well.

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