The curiously tangled metaphysical-epistemological issue is especially evident in the American ghost story, a subgenre of the gothic focused on the illusion of ghostly experience as an icon for the apparitional nature of all existence. The American ghost story embodies ontological, epistemological, and axiological concerns central to the romantic dilemma of subject and object. The relative lack of unambiguous ghosts and other supernatural phenomena in American romantic fiction reflects the philosophical uncertainties of the dominant intellectual movement of transcendentalism. The transcendentalist paradox is the necessity of valuing and believing in the external material world while seeing it simultaneously as the apparitional symbol of a higher (and “better”) world. The world view of American romantic writers—both the gothicists and the transcendentalists—is marked by a recurrent apprehension that all matter may be a mental construct, just as all dreams of the spiritual world may be a delusion. The greatest paradox of the American romantic movement is that the emphasis in the Emerson-Whitman world on a benign cosmos, in which all distinctions between material and spiritual are ultimately dissolved, proceeds not by denial of the material world, but by a reinterpretation of the spiritual that suggests that a supernatural realm of the wholly “other” does not finally exist but is a fiction in a world that is ultimately monist. If the only ontologic reality is a mysterious dynamic interaction between two fictional constructs—the physical phenomenal world of sensations and the spiritual noumenal world of ideas—what then is the ontological status of the indeterminate monism? What happens to the duality of the real and the apparitional, and which is the apparition? In such a dialogic, the natural and the supernatural fuse or “merge” one into the other; the uncertain result is a world of appearances, which are representational of the essential apparitional nature of nature. It is this gothic transformation of the world of Kantian “appearances” that Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” encodes. Far from being at odds on “all points” on Poe’s story, Voloshin’s observations are rather close to mine. Despite her observation that Berkeley and Hume collapsed Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities and that Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature clearly worked out the skeptical implications of Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Voloshin’s “Lockean” approach is too narrow; and any claim for its exclusivity or priority of “explanation” just grazes the tip of the philosophical iceberg.

G.R. THOMPSON

“THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO”: A CASE FOR THE DEFENSE

The usual way of responding to “The Cask of Amontillado” with something like pure and unqualified revulsion at Montresor’s dark deed as an act outside the normal range of human behavior has its validity but stops short of the story’s ultimate revelation. Wittingly or otherwise, Poe has
given us the means of seeing Montresor’s act as something other than a demented or Satanic pursuit of revenge. True, the story has been found compelling for generations of readers who see Montresor as a very special case of the human potential for evil. But is Montresor such a special case? I do not think so. He is neither demented nor Satanic. He has his reasons for what he does, and these are reasons we should be able to understand. Therein lies a deeper horror in the story.

In order to understand how Montresor can feel justified in what he has done and be free of any twinge of guilt even fifty years after the event, we must understand how family in general and his own family’s motto and coat of arms in particular affect his motivation. One of the puzzles of the story has to do with its location. Does it take place in Italy, as some detail might suggest and as most readers have assumed; or in France, as the name Montressor might suggest? There is no way of answering this question definitively, and perhaps Poe intended it that way. For what is important for Montresor is not that he is French or Italian but that he is a Montresor. His allegiance is to his family in a way that we can understand only by reflecting on our national allegiance. Poe has left the historical setting somewhat indeterminate, but his story seems to take place at a time in the past, before the triumph of nationalism, when an aristocratic family like the Montresors could feel something akin to sovereignty and even assert it openly. Living as we do at a time when the family has ceased to exist as a political unit, we may need to make a special effort to understand Montresor’s attitude toward his rights and responsibilities as a member of a noble family. From his point of view, he is acting patriotically, as it were, in seeking vengeance on his family’s enemy. It may be easier for us to understand how family could be an object of something like patriotic devotion if we bring to mind that the word “patriot” derives from Latin pater. Montresor feels justified in killing on behalf of his “fatherland,” his family, in the same way that a citizen or subject of more recent times can feel justified in killing on behalf of his “fatherland,” the nation-state.

In a modern nation-state, a family coat of arms and motto can be hardly more than innocent wall decoration, however formidable in content. But for Montresor, with his feudal orientation, they would be capable of imposing the most serious and fearful obligations. That is why Poe sees to it that we are informed of their contents. Fortunato’s ignorance of Montresor’s coat of arms may be an insult even though the presumed insult cannot provide motivation for the killing. That has already been decided upon. More importantly, however, Fortunato’s ignorance serves Poe as an expository device: it provides the opportunity for us to learn the details of Montresor’s coat of arms and motto. These details are essential to our understanding of the family imperatives rooted in Montresor’s mind as he plans and carries out the killing of Fortunato.

“Nemo me impune lacescit.” Montresor’s family motto has been trans-
lated, "No one attacks me with impunity.” But it can be translated, “No one bothers me in the slightest with impunity.” It seems to be an assertion, at the least, of extreme punctiliousness, if not of a kind of mad arrogance. Any kind of injury or an insult of almost any degree would warrant retaliation. Just taking the motto at face value, we might well sense a touch of peculiar family madness here. But what, then, are we to make of the fact that, as has been pointed out, this was the motto of the royal house of Scotland? Whether Poe got the motto by way of Fenimore Cooper or through some other source, he was, it would seem, making some kind of point here, although the point might be lost on a reader unaware of the motto’s ultimate origin. For by this one stroke, Poe has conflated royal house and aristocratic family. Is retaliation on behalf of the one, acceptable patriotism; and on behalf of the other, madness? Is extravagant touchiness acceptable in the one and arrogance in the other? Deeply buried in the story though it be, once seen, the fact that Montresor’s family motto, seemingly so arrogant and barbaric, is that of a royal house clearly places Montresor’s proceedings in a new light.

A particular detail in the motto that is worth noting is that it speaks not of “us” but of me. Insofar as we are not aware of the motto’s origin, the singular pronoun creates some misdirection. It gives the impression that Montresor is seeking redress as an individual person who has been wronged rather than as a member of a family he feels has been wronged. To do justice to Montresor, we should understand that he is not an individual person seeking redress for personal insult or injury but, rather, an agent of retribution acting on behalf of his family. Since we never get any specifics of Montresor’s grievance against Fortunato, we have no way of knowing whether Montresor took the brunt of the perceived offense or not. But the question is moot in the sense that Montresor clearly shows himself to be acting on behalf of family, not self. Even if Fortunato’s presumed offense had been directed against Montresor personally, not only Montresor but the entire Montresor family would be shamed by it. To strike one is to strike all.

“A huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel” (1259). The Montresor coat of arms owes little to the traditional symbols of heraldry and would seem to be mostly Poe’s invention. However, it may owe something to the American-Revolution era flag depicting a snake and the motto “Don’t tread on me.” The effect of this collocation of revolutionary-era flag and coat of arms is similar to that of the Montresor motto’s being that of the royal house of Scotland. Both connections tend to lend dignity and validity to what might otherwise seem to be the pretensions of the Montresors.

The family motto, emphasizing retaliation, would suggest that the snake in the coat of arms represents the Montresor family. The gold foot is

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5 Edward Craney Jacobs, “A Possible Debt to Cooper,” p. 23.
striking the snake—crushing it, as Montresor describes the coat of arms to Fortunato—but not with impunity. As the snake is being crushed, it is biting the heel of the gold foot. The scene seems to illustrate graphically what an enemy of the Montresors can expect. We notice also that even though it is being crushed, the snake still somehow manages a proud and heroic pose: it is “rampant,” and yet, at the same time, it is ignobly biting its adversary in the heel. The coat of arms suggests that if someone puts its foot on the family, the family will strike back as best it can, as a snake might strike the heel of the foot that crushes its body, and not lose any of its assurance of virtue. The coat of arms suggests that Montresor need feel no obligation to be concerned with chivalry in striking back. It is almost as if the coat of arms, depicting the adversary as a golden foot, shows with prescience the feudal family’s fall as concomitant with the rise of capitalism and gives its prospective blessing to a response that need owe nothing to the standards of chivalry. For even though Montresor acts with a sense that what he does is fully sanctioned, he still must act in a covert manner. His family can assert sovereignty openly in its motto and coat of arms, but he knows that the actual implementation of this sovereign power must be muted. And so he carries out the killing of his adversary in secret. The snake “rampant,” with whatever convolutions, being crushed by an adversary, must strike his adversary in the heel. Montresor need have no qualms about his covert operation. He has prior and complete sanction for it.

But we may still ask how he can relish his retaliation and why he need inflict the unnecessary cruelty of death by slow suffocation on his victim? In order to see how Montresor can do these things and still feel justified, we need to keep the larger context in mind. He can relish what he is doing because he can feel that what he is doing is right as surely as a soldier in the service of a modern state can take pleasure in the killing he does because he is carrying out a patriotic obligation and being of service to his country. The same context should enable us to understand the cruelty of Montresor’s method. Put into terms analogous to those of modern warfare, the method constitutes an atrocity. And anybody who knows anything about warfare knows that atrocities are more the practice than the exception. If we grant Montresor the mentality of a soldier in combat—and it would seem he is possibly entitled to such consideration—we should be able to understand that he would not have to be either demented or Satanic to carry out the killing of Fortunato as he does.

Montresor is so convinced of his right in carrying out his plan of vengeance that he can speak of the killing of Fortunato as an “immolation” (1257). We need not go so far as to see him assuming the role of a priest performing the ritual killing of a sacrificial victim, as some commentators on the story have done; but we should be able to understand that, given his family imperatives, he might well be able to see himself as a person carrying out a quasi-sacred duty.

He similarly shows confidence in the rightness of his action in his last words to Fortunato. Fortunato, desperate for his life, pleads, “For the love
of God, Montresor!" Montresor, with what must strike Fortunato as biting irony, replies, "Yes, . . . for the love of God!" (1263). He is doing this terrible thing, not "For God and Country!" but for what comes down to the same thing for him, "For God and family!" We are surely mistaken if we see Montresor's invocation of the divine as blasphemy or reduce it to parody. Montresor is apparently quite sincere in equating the family dictate with a divine commandment.

Montresor's lack of remorse, then, even after fifty years, should not be a wonder to us. He is not an exceptional person. He is not a Hamlet, reluctant to take issue with his family's adversary. He is bright, but not one of the best and brightest. He is quite ordinary and conventional. He is loyal, but limited. He has an obligation to his family; he carries it out, with relish, and savors deeply the satisfaction that success in carrying out this obligation brings him. He is coarse enough to have been capable of inflicting unnecessary suffering on his victim and enjoying his victim's distress. He is barely sensitive enough to have felt some passing queasiness during the performance of his deed. But, withal, what he did, he is convinced, was justified. He was carrying out an obligation to his family as he saw it — as he was culturally conditioned to see it. Now, fifty years after the event, he can recount it with pride.

He addresses his account to someone who knows, he says, "the nature of my soul" (1256). Who is this listener, this person who is physically present to Montresor as he tells of this incident in his family's history? We have no way of knowing. It is not likely to be his father confessor, for there is no hint of penitence, nor any hint that he feels he has done anything that requires penitence. All we know is that it is someone who, Montresor believes, knows the nature of his soul. This is where we, the reader, come in. Poe achieves another conflation here. For we, as surely as the person physically present, are Montresor's listener. And we, as surely as the person physically present, also know the nature of Montresor's soul. We know it because, whether we like to admit it or not, we share that soul. We, as members of the human community, share it with the royal house of Scotland, with revolutionary-era American patriots, with all members of universal humanity whoever they may be, who anticipating or experiencing a grievance against their tribal unit, whether it be one of formal political autonomy or not, feel justified in holding the right to take direct action against an adversary and in taking action if the provocation occurs. And, sharing that soul which we know so well, we know that the provocation can be slight and the retaliation brutal. And the conscience can be left perfectly clear. The story is a chilling example of man's capacity for rationalization. It is as much a tale of ratiocination as a tale of terror, and all the more terrible for that.

One commentator has claimed that Poe was using Montresor as his alter ego in pursuing vicarious revenge against his literary enemies when he wrote the story. Even if Poe were not doing so, he might still have been able to echo Flaubert's well-known words, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi."

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Given the nature of Montresor’s soul, that he, like us, could know so well, he might still have been able to say, “Montresor, he is I.” And we, the gentle reader, might similarly welcome Montresor back into the human community with our horror-stricken hearts.

PATRICK WHITE

JOHN UPDIKE’S “A SENSE OF SHELTER”

“When he opened his locker, and put his books on his shelf, below Marvin Wolf’s, and removed his coat from his hook, his self seemed to crawl into the long dark space thus made vacant, the ugly, humiliated, educable self.” These words, from the last paragraph of John Updike’s “A Sense of Shelter,” indicate a possible turning point in the life of the main character, William Young.²

In particular, the phrase “the ugly, humiliated, educable self” is significant because here, for the first time in the story, the narrator actually states that two sides of William’s personality are being examined and that a choice between them is being made. If William does change at the end of the story, then his young, immature self, sheltered by home, school, and mother, should be the self that is shut away in the locker. But if William remains static, then the self that made the feeble proposal to Mary Landis, that made the unsuccessful attempt to enter the world of mature, adult experience, is the self that William should hide away.

At first, the conflict might seem to be between William’s immature self and his maturing self. But the words “mature” and “immature” may be too general in meaning to describe William and may require some qualification before they can be applied to William’s selves, for the “immature” William is certainly maturing both intellectually and physically. It is the emotional, or social, side of his personality that is found lacking. The choice for William, then, involves whether to continue with his life as it is, developing intellectually but not emotionally and socially, or to leave the shelter of his intellectual superiority and take the risk of emotional and social development. The identification of his “ugly, humiliated, educable self” with either the intellectual or the emotional side of his personality will determine whether or not William Young changes at the end of the story. As a result of his encounter with Mary, either of these selves could


³ As they interpret William Young’s character, both Reising and Edwards refer to the sentence which contains this phrase, but neither critic examines the phrase as I do.

⁴ Both Reising and Edwards consider the question of William Young’s maturity.