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**Between Theory and Narrative:
A Mask as a Hermetextual Artefact
in “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe**

The present paper is essentially an experiment in the liminal field between literary theory and textual reading. The narrative and its field of textual devices is considered to belong to a different category than the act of reading: the first is commonly understood as the “content,” the other as “the method” of interpretation. Hermeneutic theory, which very frequently conceptualizes the act of reading in philosophical terms, would consider presumptuous any attempt to devote special treatment to a particular symbol in the context of theoretical approach to interpretation. Generally speaking, both traditional and modern hermeneutics provide a framework, rather than criteria or waypoints for textual readings. The only places where we may find concrete blueprints for narrative interpretation are hermeneutic schools which are inspired by or derived from theories that are not themselves of literary character. This article will explore the possibility and conditions for treating a textual entity as privileged in relevance both to the internal structure of the text and a “general” hermeneutic theory that serves as a methodology for its description.

There exist, of course, a number of textual approaches where literary artefacts of a certain kind are especially relevant. Thus a Freudian interpretation would be particularly aware of symbolism embedded in psychoanalytic theory; a feminist reading would focus on elements indicative of gender power relations; a Marxist would be on the lookout for signs of class struggle and capital influence. Oversimplification as it may be, this serves to turn our attention to the fact that perspectives on interpretation which are not ideologically marked (at least by their own definition!), but based on various understandings of the principle of the hermeneutic circle, do not favour any particular textual element over any other. The emphasis that they place on the coherence of interpretation is

a principle rather than a criterion; whether the methodology itself is based on the meeting of socio-historical contexts of creation and reception (Gadamer), filling the phenomenological gaps of indeterminacy (Iser), defining the social context of reading/writing (Fish), examining the semiotic structures of the work (Eco) or the outcome of an intercultural dialogue (Habermas), there are no actual prescriptions as to the relative importance or precedence of what we may call of narrative artefacts – symbols, characters, narrative strategies, etc. One may argue that despite numerous, often fundamental differences, these theories do share a common element – the implication of the principle of the hermeneutic circle – the insistence that the final interpretation ought to constitute a holistically consistent reading. The criteria of judgments or validity of such a reading are a different matter altogether and are based upon the philosophical foundations of each theory respectively.

Such a description of the relation of theory to literature implies a stance that considers theory as a paradigm of perception, an interpretive “optical filter” rather than a set of pragmatically applicable methodological prescriptions for interpretation. Therefore, the actual narrative/symbolic/ideological content of literature is immaterial in relation to a particular hermeneutic approach. From this perspective, the only possible exception to this rule would be a narrative artefact, device, or element which would itself be hermeneutic by essence, i.e. would involve in all of its essential aspects (pragmatic, symbolic, metaphorical, and even physical) notions that would in some way parallel the processes involved in the act of interpretation. Such a liminality of a symbol would of course necessarily be limited: any commentaries referring to, for instance, similarities between the role of the artefact in the story and theoretical issues of textuality, authorship, intention and meaning would have to remain within the sphere of an extended illustrative metaphor. The sole possible context of such a treatment would be literature that openly invites such parallels – a kind which Linda Hutcheon termed “metafiction.”¹ In such texts “the writing of the text [becomes] the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text [...] Any text that draws the reader’s attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes – whether ‘literary’ or ‘social’ – artificially construct apparently ‘real’ and imaginary worlds.”²

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1980).

² Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 22.

Barthesian “texts” by Vonnegut, Barth, Eco, Borges, Somoza, and Fowles are good illustrations of such instances, as they are permeated by the postmodernist quality that Ihab Hassan calls “self-reflexiveness.”³ In all other cases, the hermeneutic character of the literary device/artefact in question would have to relate only to the most general theoretical notions: the process of uncovering/producing meaning, or the description of the act of reading itself.

That masks and camouflage ought not to be considered on the same level as the countless other literary symbols is precisely due to their hermeneutic essence. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to conceal means to “keep from the knowledge or observation of others, refrain from disclosing or divulging, keep close or secret,” while the nature of the mask is to “hide or conceal from view by interposing something.”⁴ Thus concealing or masking as an action, related object, faculty or power may subsequently be paraphrased as hiding, covering, obscuring; making secret, invisible, and indiscernible. It is therefore essentially an object of a hermeneutic procedure, hermeneutic, of course, in the traditional sense of the term, understood as “bringing what is strange, unfamiliar, and obscure in meaning into something meaningful,”⁵ representing a “system for finding the ‘hidden’ meaning of the text”⁶ and structurally reflected in what Roland Barthes describes as the code of enigma where “an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed.”⁷

Taking into consideration the hermeneutic nature of masking and camouflage, let us define more precisely their possible relevance for the analysis of literary texts. It would appear that two kinds of applications of the concept arise. The first would consider the notions in question as elements of the plot, i.e. examine their role in the narrative structure of the text and perceive them as functions involved in character interaction. This perspective would not mark the privileged nature of those symbols at all – there would be no reason to distinguish them on the basis of their innate merit from any other artifact in the text. The second approach, which is of primary interest for the purpose of this article, would focus on masking as being part of the narrative, yet at the same

³ Ihab Hassan, “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoone (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 399.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: OUP), CD-Rom edition.

⁵ Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 29.

⁶ Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics*, p. 36.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1975), p. 18.

time being somehow reflective of the perception and interpretation of the text itself. In other words, this particular symbol would perform a double function: within the narrative as one of its meaningful elements and “outside” the narrative as an indication or a signpost in the process of interpretation.

Let me forestall potential criticism by remarking that the above observations need not apply to all possible occurrences of masks or camouflage in all possible literary genres. It seems that the privileged character of those concepts is of particular relevance in genres with the evident predominance of the previously mentioned Barthesian hermeneutic code or code of the enigma. Such texts are usually characterized by their focus upon mystery, suspense and a final “twist” of revelation – it is not surprising, therefore, that we may find most of its representatives in the genres of thrillers, horrors and detective fiction. The most obvious, and as such least interesting, instances of a mask being the crucial element in the emergence of an interpretation would be in texts based on the secret identity of one of the characters, an identity that is revealed at the end of the tale, frequently to the shock and horror of both the reader and the other characters. Classic examples of such tales are Howard Phillips Lovecraft’s *Whisperer in Darkness* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Masque of the Red Death*. Far more interesting, however, would be a case where the function of a mask is less apparent and involved in a more complex network of relations between the narration, the characters and the reader. I believe, however, that the most curious instance would be one which, at least to some extent, reverses the customary role of the mask, yet maintains the aforementioned parallel between the artefact and the hermeneutic circle, yet in the least apparent way.

Let us then proceed to a demonstrative analysis of such a case in action: the illustration of the concrete occurrence of a mask in a literary texts will allow me to simultaneously develop the theoretical side of my argument and further comment on the consequences of the special treatment of this notion. *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe is surely one the classic tales of revenge. A typically “Poesque” story, it contains many of the elements that we have come to associate with the grotesque style of the writer: carnival frenzy, terrible vengeance, a descent into the depths of the earth, a live burial. Montresor, the protagonist and simultaneously the narrator of the story, vows to avenge himself for a nameless insult upon his friend, Fortunato. Under the pretext of an opportunity for appraisal of a pipe of rare Amontillado, Montresor lures Fortunato to the cellars under his residence. Having intoxicated and brought the unsuspecting victim to the catacombs under the cellars,

he entombs Fortunato alive, thus living up to the motto of his ancient family "*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"⁸

In order to examine the hermeneutic strategy of revelation, we must investigate the strategy of concealment, both within and "outside" the tale. In other words, we need to differentiate between what Montresor as a character conceals from Fortunato, and what Montresor as the narrator conceals from the reader. Only the context of this double stratum of concealment will allow us to properly comment of the hermeneutics of the mask within the tale. Even a cursory examination of the text yields the observation that the two operative levels of concealment do not coincide. Montresor hints at his murderous intent to the reader in the very first sentence of the story: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge."⁹ His victim, on the other hand, is kept in the dark until the final scene which leaves him moaning incomprehensibly in a predicament not to be envied by any living soul – being entombed alive. The power of the tale resides in the tension that results from the gradual development of two conflicting states of awareness: the suspense of the growing realization on the part of the reader as to Montresor's twisted purpose and the good-natured naiveté and unsuspecting friendliness of the poor Fortunato. Thus, the unfolding of the narrative progresses on two levels in two opposite directions.

It ought to be added here that despite the apparent presence of numerous symbols within the tale, their examination is superfluous from the perspective of the analysis of the aspect of the suspense (which is bound to represent a reader-oriented approach). While they most certainly open up a plethora of interpretive paths, they do not seem to augment in any significant manner the stretching of the tension caused by the double concealment of the story. In accordance with my initial statement in this paper, pursuit of the meaning of those symbols would be consequential for the critical approach assumed upon the interpretation in the sense that certain approaches might (and probably will) necessitate an entailment of an ideologically/psychoanalytically/socio-culturally marked theory. It is my firm belief, however, that any such theory is ultimately secondary in origin, since it already assumes, for the legitimacy of its application (the mere presence that it makes in reading), a certain meta-hermeneutic approach: neither more nor less than an attitude that the interpreter assumes towards the relation

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," in *The Portable Poe*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 309–317. All subsequent references to the story are based on this edition of the tale.

⁹ Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," p. 309.

author-reader-text and the definition of meaning and interpretations that follow as a consequence.

To better illustrate the two dimensions of the narrative, let us present them as two parallel structures of the presentation of the plot: the first will reflect the temporal unfolding of the events before the eyes of the reader, and as such will emulate the hermeneutic process of the emergence of the narrative level of meaning of the text. If we were to make reference to any particular model of theoretical description of that process, then in what proves to be the tale of suspense we would focus on hermeneutics where the main accent falls upon the temporality of reading. Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach based on Ingarden's concretization seems to be particularly fitting here,¹⁰ as is Paul Ricoeur's dynamic version of the hermeneutic circle based on the interwoven play of understanding and explanation.¹¹ Iser's approach would describe the appropriation of the narrative events as a movement of anticipation and retrospection with the final revision of previously presumed content. Ricoeur's perspective, in its explanatory aspect deeply rooted in structuralist thought, would see it as a temporal reflection of the existent narrative structures. The other, parallel part of the presentation describes the events as they unfold before the eyes of the victim, Fortunato. Thus, on the one hand, we are addressing the content of the reader-narrator relationship, and on the other, character-character interaction.

The events, as they are presented to the reader, evolve as follows:

1. The reader learns of the grudge of Montresor against Fortunato.
2. Montresor expresses his desire for revenge.
3. He cons Fortunato into visiting his cellars by appealing to his taste in wines.
4. As they descend deeper and deeper into the cellars, Fortunato becomes more and more intoxicated with wine provided by Montresor.
5. When they arrive in the innermost catacombs, Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall and entombs him alive.

In the eyes of Fortunato, the events occur in the following form:

1. Montresor informs him of the delivery a pipe of rare Amontillado and expresses his intention of consulting another wine connoisseur.
2. Montresor urges Fortunato to taste his newest acquisition and invites him to his home.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1978).

3. Together they descend into the cellars, drinking copious quantities of wine on the way.
4. To Fortunato's surprise, Montresor chains him to the wall and proceeds to bury him alive, oblivious to his pleas for mercy.

In terms of the reader's perception of the plot, the final act of revenge introduces new information that forces a temporal modification in the timeline of the story. This is the only exception to the plot/story congruency and the reader discovers the twist only at the end of the tale:

1. The reader learns of the grudge of Montresor against Fortunato.
2. Montresor expresses his desire for revenge.
3. *Montresor prepares the place and the tools of burial that are to serve his vengeance.*
4. He cons Fortunato into visiting his cellars by appealing to his taste in wines.
5. As they descend deeper and deeper into the cellars, Fortunato becomes more and more intoxicated with wine provided by Montresor.
6. When they arrive in the innermost catacombs, Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall and entombs him alive.

The incongruence of those two structures is immediately apparent: the whole story is based on the notion of the reader being privy to knowledge that is withheld from the victim. At the end, the reader learns but a mere detail of the whole operation, a detail that is in itself horrendous, yet whose input relates primarily to our understanding of the cruelty of Montresor's character, not to the suspense provided by the narrative structure. For Fortunato, it is a different matter altogether: the final scene reveals his host's terrible purpose, exposes his own naïve trust in Montresor's good will and foretells his unpleasant end. We may therefore close this demonstration with a statement that what becomes a revelation for Fortunato is but a confirmation for the reader.

It has been my initial argument that symbolism connected with masks and camouflage may to be seen as privileged over other symbols, since it is essentially (anti)hermeneutic in nature. Let us now appropriate this notion in the context of Poe's story. The action takes place during the "supreme madness of the carnival season" and masks make their appearance against the background of the Dionysian reversal of the natural order. What interests us here more than the implications of the carnivalesque are the possible reverberations of the introduction of masks in the story for the hermeneutic aspect of its reading.

As we examine the presence and role of the masks and masking attire from the perspective of both character interaction and reader-narrator

relation, we immediately notice that they reinforce the double tension marked earlier in this article. Fortunato wears motley: “he had on a tight fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells”¹² – in plain words, a fool. Montresor, on the other hand, is the one who wears a real mask, “of black silk” and envelopes himself in a “roquelaire”¹³: the archetypal image of a “caped avenger.” The disguises of the protagonist clearly serve to reflect and strengthen the unfolding events of the story: Montresor’s grotesque determination to avenge an insult with death and Fortunato’s naïve blindness which borders on idiocy.

It is only when considered in its hermeneutic “double application” that Montresor’s mask acquires a greater, albeit not necessarily symbolic, depth: what Montresor’s mask hides from Fortunato, it reveals to the reader. This function of the mask is by no means a simple one: there are several implications which need to be clarified. Let us attempt to present them in an orderly fashion.

1. Fortunato sees nothing suspicious in Montresor’s attire – his blindness is made more severe by the context of the carnival and his intoxication.
2. The mask does not in fact appear to conceal anything. By its evidently foreboding, “evil” character, it makes Montresor’s intention plain to the reader; the act of masking works in the direction opposite to the customary: it becomes a gesture of demonstration, signature and revelation rather than concealment.
3. Masking as a revelation, a disclosure of purpose is only apparent in the narrator-reader relation. Fortunato knows not the anger and malice that Montresor feels towards him – only the reader is partial to this information.
4. Fortunato’s mind is soothed by the discourse of deception produced by Montresor during their descent into the wine-cellars/catacombs.

The function of the mask is further complicated by a new element, hitherto unmentioned in our discussion: the language of deception employed by Montresor towards Fortunato. This element produces yet another field of tension based on contradiction or opposition. The mask makes Montresor’s purpose evident, while his speech is maliciously false. Unlike Fortunato, the reader recognizes the avenger’s discourse for what it is: thus from the perspective of character relation, language takes predominance over the significance of the mask, but from the point of view of narrator-reader relation, the situation is exactly the

¹² Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado,” p. 310.

¹³ Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado,” p. 311.

opposite – the intention revealed by the mask casts a dubious light over the benevolent care expressed in Montresor’s speech.

The hermeneutic strategy of the mask is therefore, in accordance with our preliminary remarks, a double one. What it reveals to the reader, it hides from Fortunato. Its function within the text fully reflects the temporal schemes which I have presented in the beginning of the analysis. As a textual artefact, Montresor’s mask, though seemingly marginal to the plot, constitutes a condensation of the two separate fields of address: on the one hand, it epitomizes the relation of the two characters based on the villain’s secrecy and the victim’s foolishness, and on the other, serves as additional means of privileging the reader in the context of information provided by the narrator. The interpretation of the story is largely based on conflict construed between the perspective of the reader and that of Fortunato. The hermeneutic code experienced by the reader is not based on secrecy but, quite to the contrary, on awareness of the situation. It is Fortunato who takes the reader’s customary role and uncovers the truth hidden from him by the narrator. Of particular interest is the fact that the reversal of the usual order of a tale of suspense constitutes no hindrance for the special status of the mask as a hermeneutic symbol. Even a departure from the traditional chronology that culminates in a final revelation does not prevent the mask from being simultaneously a narrative element and a reflection of the structure of the act of reading.

The code of academic rigour certainly prevents us from making generalizations on the basis of but one analysis. Yet the purpose of this article is primarily demonstrative: its intention is to confirm, if not a definite presence, then at least a possibility of the existence of textual imagery that reflects the process of reading in a way that is more than a mere comparison or analogy. Such a hermetextual artefact would certainly disturb the comfortable distance between the optics of theory and the textual content but at the same time can uncover a sphere of relations unexplored by both ideologically marked theories and philosophically “detached” descriptions.

Tomasz Kalaga

**Pomiędzy teorią a narracją: hermetekstualna funkcja maski
w opowiadaniu Edgara Allana Poe *Beczka Amontillado***

Streszczenie

Maska, będąca jednym z głównych elementów kamuflażu, jest symbolem szczególnym. Jako nieodłączny element estetyki literatury grozy skrywa zarówno tożsamość postaci, jak i nierzadko jej mroczne intencje. Jednak sprowadzenie maski jedynie do roli kamuflującego akcesorium byłoby dużym uproszczeniem. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ukazania podwójnej funkcji maski w opowiadaniu Edgara Allana Poe *Beczka Amontillado*, funkcji modyfikującej dwie płaszczyzny: wewnętrzną, na poziomie narracji tekstu, oraz poza-tekstową, wyznaczającą kierunek interpretacji dla czytelnika. Maska w tym opowiadaniu pełni rolę zarówno narracyjno-symboliczną, jak i hermeneutyczną: to co skrywa przed bohaterem-ofiarą tekstu, nieszczęsnym Fortunato, ujawnia przed czytelnikiem, wciągając obydwu w grę podwójnego znaczenia. Artykuł analizuje i opatruje komentarzem sekwencje wydarzeń przedstawione w opowiadaniu, ukazując dwie równoległe linie fabularne tekstu: wydarzenia, tak jak jawią się oczom Fortunato, oraz wydarzenia, takimi jakimi powinien widzieć je czytelnik podążający za zwodniczym głosem narratora-mściciela Mortesora. Maska jest tu czynnikiem wprowadzającym interpretacyjny dysonans – hermeneutycznym kamuflażem, dzięki któremu narrator prowadzi swą przewrotną, podszytą ironią grę z ofiarą i z czytelnikiem.

Tomasz Kalaga

**Entre la théorie et la narration: la fonction hermetextuelle du masque
dans la nouvelle d'Edgar Allan Poe *La Barrique d'amontillado***

Résumé

Le masque, un des principaux éléments de camouflage, est un symbole particulier. Comme élément indispensable de l'esthétique de littérature d'horreur, il cache de même l'identité des personnages, que leurs sombres intentions. Pourtant la réduction du masque uniquement à un accessoire de camouflage serait une grande simplification. Le présent article est une tentative de montrer la double fonction du masque dans la nouvelle d'Edgar Allan Poe *La Barrique d'amontillado*, la fonction qui modifie les deux espaces : intérieure, au niveau de la narration du texte ; et hors-texte, qui esquisse au lecteur la direction de l'interprétation. Dans cette nouvelle le masque joue un rôle également narratif- symbolique qu'herméneutique : ce qu'il cache devant le héros-victime du texte, le pauvre Fortunato, il dévoile devant le lecteur, en les poussant tous les deux dans un jeu de la double signification. L'article analyse et commente des séquences d'événements présentés dans la nouvelle, en montrant deux lignes de trame narrative : événements vus de la perspective de Fortunato et les événements que devrait voir le lecteur, suivant la voix fallacieuse du narrateur-vengeur Montresor. Le masque est ici un facteur introduisant une dissonance interprétative – un camouflage herméneutique, grâce auquel le narrateur mène son perfide jeu, teinté d'ironie, avec la victime et avec le lecteur.