

THE NARRATING SUBJECT AND THE MONSTROUS
POWER OF SPEECH IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S 'THE
CASK OF AMONTILLADO'

Fırat Karadaş
Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi

Özet: Bu makalede, Edgar Allan Poe'nun 'The Cask of Amontillado' adlı öyküsünde birinci tekil anlatıcının kullandığı retorik ve yönlendirici dil ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışmada, yaratıcı imgeleme sahip bir öznenin elinde dilin nasıl bir canavara dönüştüğü Kantçı ve Romantik düşüncelere dayanılarak irdelenmekte ve bu bağlamda sözkonusu öyküdeki anlatıcı öznenin elinde dilin nasıl güçlü bir silaha dönüştüğü incelenmektedir.

Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' indicates how language becomes a monstrous weapon in the hands of a modifying and creative subject. The narrating subject of the story, Montresor, represents the kind of 'constructive' subject that has been the main object of study in metaphysical philosophy from Plato and Aristotle up to Kant and the present. The monstrosity and animating power of language has always been taken in this philosophy in relation to this modifying subject and its

imagination, which play a primary role in the perception of natural phenomena and in the use of language. Kant argues that the human mind ‘creates’ reality in its own image by way of synthesis and schematization. As Gilles Deleuze (1984) clarifies in his study of Kant’s idea of the imagination, in artistic creation ‘the imagination surrenders itself to an activity quite distinct from that of formal reflection’ (p.50). In his ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ (1790) Kant argues that the imagination is a function of the mind that is very powerful in creating another nature by free association. It creates ‘ideas’ (of invisible beings such as ‘creation,’ ‘hell,’ ‘the blessed,’ ‘eternity,’ and so on.) to go beyond the bounds of experience and ‘to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature’ (p.268).

A Kantian philosopher and Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge also draws attention to the creating subject and the ‘synthesizing’ and ‘schematizing’ act of its imagination. For Coleridge, the imagination connects, fuses, blends and reconciles in a process of unification. To represent this character of the imagination, Coleridge presents the term ‘esemplastic’, by which he means ‘to shape into one’. In other words, the imagination creates ‘similitude’ out of ‘dissimilitude’, which is a fundamentally metaphorical and linguistic activity:

This power [Imagination], first put in action by the will and understanding [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image, the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects (Coleridge, 1993, p.410)

The twentieth century neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer also assigns great importance to the subject, as Montagu (1958) clarifies, ‘in the construction of the world of pure imagination’ (p.366) and sees language as a symbolic representation inherent in the very character of human consciousness. In the first Volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1953), he states, ‘[c]onsciousness is a symbolizing, ‘form-giving activity’ (p.61), which ‘does not merely copy but rather embodies an original formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite ‘meaning’, a particular ideational content’ (p.78). In this regard, consciousness endows sensory impressions with symbolic and conceptual content by the act of synthesis and schematization. It transforms the sense impressions of natural phenomena into metaphorical entities or representations by synthesizing spatial and temporal intuitions, and creating an infinite number of directions, relations, attributes and analogous contents.

The French critic Paul Ricoeur brings a new dimension to the role played by the subject in the construction of natural phenomena and in the use of language relying on Aristotle’s idea of *mimesis* and Kant’s idea of ‘schematizing a synthetic operation. Ricoeur’s idea is important in that it points to the subjective, cognitive and metaphorical base of not only Aristotle’s idea of *mimesis* but also all literary and linguistic creations. In *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) Ricoeur states that Aristotle defines tragedy as ‘the imitation of human action’. However, it is

an imitation that elevates, magnifies and ennobles this action. In this regard, Ricoeur argues that for Aristotle *mimesis* is *poiesis*, that is, construction or creation. With *mythos* (plot) it becomes a rearrangement of human action into a more coherent form and with *leixis* (poetic language) a structuring that elevates this action. Thus, as Ricoeur puts it, *mimesis* is something that composes and constructs the very thing it imitates (p.39). As suggested above, Aristotle sees *leixis* as an important factor of tragedy. Ricoeur takes *leixis* to mean metaphor on the discourse level and *mimesis* as a metaphorical construction of human action. Taking into consideration Aristotle's statement that 'to metaphorize well' is to 'see resemblance,' Ricoeur points to the role of the creating subject and its imagination in *mimesis* because in artistic creation not 'seeing' but 'seeing as' is important.

In defining the role of the imagination in artistic creation Ricoeur connects Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* with Kant's idea of 'schematizing a synthetic operation' and states that the creating subject 'constructs' reality with its imagination by way of what he calls 'predicative assimilation', that is, by seeing the similar in the dissimilar.

In this regard, in its form giving activity the imagination expresses itself via the use of language, which is a metaphorical and mythical agent in which inanimate natural phenomenon is animated. It is the imagination and consciousness of the subject that makes language monstrous and imbued with a spiritual and mythical content. In his analysis of the language of 'the first gentile people' in *The New Science* (1968) Vico

argues that those people ‘by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters[...] the poetic characters of which they speak were certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes, formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus (p.22). Vico contends that the language of the imagination of those primitive people is inevitably metaphorical. In his essay *On the Origin of Language* (1966) Rousseau presents a similar idea arguing that the language of the first man was figurative. There was no such distinction as figurative meaning-literal/proper meaning because this distinction is the result of logical and abstract thinking. He states, ‘as man’s first motives for speaking were of the passions, his first expressions were tropes. Figurative language was the first to be born. Proper meaning was discovered last. One calls things by their true name only when one sees them in their true form. At first only poetry was spoken; there was no hint of reasoning until much later’ (p.12). In ‘*Preface to Poems*’ (1988) Wordsworth thinks that poetic imagination is not a faithful agent of copying external objects; it is ‘of a higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws’ (p.377). For Wordsworth, these processes of imagination are carried on ‘either by conferring additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses’ (p.379). Thus, imagination is not only a ‘modifying’ power; it also shapes and creates (p.380). In this regard, the poetic imagination is a prophetic one,

one which can be seen in the lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures and the works of Milton, 'who was a Hebrew in soul' (p.382). Then, as in *Aids to Reflection* (1993) Coleridge states, 'If words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanized' (p.10). For Coleridge, 'Language is the sacred Fire in the Temple of Humanity; and the Muses are its especial & Vestal Priestesses' (p.23). As Wordsworth argues, 'words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with...an incarnation of thought...like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe' (p. 361). Walt Whitman stated, 'all words are spiritual'(in Richards, 1959, p.24); and I. A. Richards argued: 'The whole human race has been so impressed by the properties of words as instruments for the control of objects, that in every age it has attributed to them occult powers' (Richards, 1959, p.24).

In Montresor's imagination words gain such a living and monstrous power and become, as Wordsworth says, 'too awful an instrument [...] to be trifled with.' They become in the hands of Montresor a weapon serving for the manipulation of the narratee, who 'so well know the nature of [Montresor's] soul', and the destruction of the enemy. The narrating subject of the story, Montresor, begins his act of manipulation of the narratee and construction of the world of the text from the very beginning of the story with the statement 'The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge' ('The Cask of Amontillado,' p.158). However, he does not state how

Fortunato injured and insulted him and thus obstructs the narratee's access to his inner dark world. In the following statement, as a rhetorical strategy to make the narratee his ally, he speaks directly with him using the second person pronoun and says: 'You, who so well know the nature of my soul will not suppose, however, that gave utterance to a threat.' Language becomes most monstrous in his hands when he uses metaphorical statements that make his speech more and more effective and persuasive. He will not only punish Fortunato but punish him with impunity. He states, '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' (Ibid, p.159). In his study of metaphor, Wayne C. Booth suggests that what makes a metaphor successful is not taste but its rhetorical power (Booth, 1978, p.54-5). What makes the above metaphorical statement an effective one is its rhetorical power because it is appropriate to the rhetorical situation created by Montresor and it serves for the manipulation of the narratee. With the use of the 'monstrous' power of such metaphorical statements, Montresor tries to persuade the narratee about the rightness of the action he took about fifty years ago. Montresor uses language in a way that almost validates Plato or John Locke's warnings about the negative aspects of figurative speech. When criticizing figurative speech and the art of rhetoric in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke states:

Since wit and fancy finds easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, *figurative speeches* and allusions in language will hardly be admitted as an

imperfection or abuse of it...But yet, if we would speak of things as they are...all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheat...*Eloquence*, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against (in De Man, 1978, p.13).

Although Locke's idea of figurative speech cannot be defended in today's linguistic, literary and philosophical context, it makes some sense when figurative speech is used effectively by such a mentally ill person as Montresor.

For Montresor, Fortunato had 'a weak point' although in all other respects he was someone to be respected and even feared. This weak point is his pride in his connoisseurship in wine and his 'virtuoso spirit' that is 'adopted to suit the time and opportunity' and 'to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires.' From this statement we understand that Fortunato was not only an expert at wine but also a representative of the newly-born capitalistic trading class. The real cause of his hatred becomes clear when we learn that Montresor lives in a 'palazzo', has servants and his ancestors are buried in catacombs, which indicate that he descends from an old aristocratic family that loses power with the emergence of the capitalistic class. In this regard, the story becomes a re-writing of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' as a revenge story against those that dethroned the old aristocrats from their time-honoured position and caused the destruction of the feudal system. In the catacombs, he tells Fortunato that

the Montresors were a great and numerous family ('The Cask of Amontillado,' p.161). Fortunato is 'rich, respected, admired, beloved, as once [Montresor] was' (p.160). In a way, Montresor's narration is an expression of hatred for those that displaced them from their old powerful social position. Thus, his real hatred is one that is directed to the class Fortunato represents. In this regard, Fortunato's statement 'I forget your arms' seems to be a great unintentional insult to Montresor because with this statement Fortunato belittles Montresor's origin and class.

The family 'arms' and the motto Montresor quotes in response to Fortunato's statement are exactly appropriate to the rhetorical situation Montresor creates in the story:

'A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose

fangs are imbedded in the heel.'

'And the motto?'

'Nemo me impune lacessit [No one attacks me with impunity].'

'Good!' (Ibid, p.161)

In his 'Essay on the Devil and Devils' (1819) Percy Bysshe Shelley argues that such images as that of the Devil belonging to Biblical mythology are personifications 'of the struggle which we experience within ourselves, and which we perceive in the operations of external things as they affect us, between good and evil' (p.265). The way Montresor re-constructs and personalizes the serpent image in the biblical mythology as well as in the family motto validates Shelley's idea. If the Latin motto and the beginning statements of the story are taken to mean 'no

one can tread on me without punishment', Montresor can be thought to consider himself as the serpent whose fangs are embedded in the foot crushing it as redress. In this interpretation, any kind of injury or an insult of almost any degree would warrant retaliation. However, as Walter Stepp puts it, Montresor may also think himself as the crushing foot because he is killing Fortunato 'for the love of God', which he ironically says in response to Fortunato's 'For the love of God, Montresor!' towards the end of the story. Though, for the reader, Montresor is, metaphorically speaking, more appropriate for being the snake because 'secrecy, cunning, serpentine subtlety – these are the themes Montresor demonstrates best of all.' (Stepp, 1976, 448)

Montresor's statement: 'Yes...for the love of God' ('The Cask of Amontillado,' p.163) is an example of verbal irony that Montresor continuously employs in his speech. It is verbal irony because his use of the same words Fortunato uses with a different meaning indicates Montresor's play with language. If we take Stepp's interpretation of Montresor's identifying himself with the crushing foot as our vantage point and keep in mind Montresor's feudal (which is a medieval, church dominating system) origin, treading on the serpent is a religious deed and thus what Montresor does by killing Fortunato is 'for the love of God.' When this interpretation is taken in socio-political terms, he is punishing the serpent that has caused the fall of man from the Garden of Eden and disturbed the heavenly system. If the Garden of Eden is considered to be the feudal system for the aristocrats, the serpent that caused the fall of man from the

Garden of Eden or the aristocrats from their comfortable and happy positions should be punished. Although in his own understanding he crushed the serpent, the serpent's fangs remained embedded in his heels because he seems to have continued living with the same sense of hatred until the time of narration, about fifty years from Fortunato's punishment. We can understand this from the fact that he narrates his story with a power of language that indicates a deep hatred. In this regard, as Stepp puts it, 'allegorically speaking, the foot and the serpent are locked together in a death embrace: neither can escape the ironic bond that is between them' (Stepp, p.448).

As can be observed in the above statements, the most noteworthy aspect of Montresor's speech lies in its ironical words and meanings. The dramatic irony in the family arms and the motto, whose meaning the reader can see in the story's context which Fortunato unable to realize, is a good example of the use of irony. Just before that, as a response to Fortunato's drinking 'to the buried around [them]', Montresor's 'And I to your long life' ('The Cask of Amontillado,' 161) is another dramatic verbal irony because the reader, unlike Fortunato, knows that Fortunato will not live long. Another ironical situation emerges when Fortunato asks whether Montresor is a Mason:

'You do not comprehend' he said.

'Not I,' I replied.

'Then you are not of the brotherhood.'

'How?'

'You are not of the masons.'

‘Yes, yes,’ I said, ‘yes, yes.’

‘You? Impossible! A mason?’

‘A mason,’ I replied.

‘A sign,’ he said.

‘It is this,’ I answered producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaure*.

(Ibid, 161-2)

In the above quotation while Fortunato uses the word ‘mason’ to mean the religious sect in this name, Montresor uses it to mean a person skilled in cutting stones and building walls, which Montresor does towards the end of the story for burying Fortunato alive. In this regard, there is both dramatic and verbal irony in Montresor’s answers to Fortunato’s questions in the above quotation. There is dramatic irony because we, as readers, can see the real intention behind Montresor’s word ‘mason’ and the trowel. It is also verbal irony because Montresor plays with the word ‘mason’.

Montresor does not only mislead the reader with the effective and rhetorical use of metaphorical language but also blinds Fortunato to his dark intentions. Using Aristotle’s words, he ‘metaphorizes’ so well that he makes Fortunato seem with his naivety clownish. His outer appearance, the carnival dress, that is, the motley and the jingling bells upon him adds to this impression. However, it should not be forgotten that the reader sees Fortunato from Montresor’s perspective, which is hatred-oriented. Thus, in the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s terminology, Montresor does not only ‘see’ Fortunato but ‘sees’ him ‘as’. In other words, with his ‘predicative imagination’ that sees ‘the similar in the dissimilar’, he

does not present Fortunato's costume as an ordinary carnival dress; but, with his imagination obsessed with the hatred for Fortunato and the desire for revenge and in accordance with the rhetorical situation of his narration, he 'sees' it 'as' a clown's costume.

Although Montresor exerts full authority on Fortunato with his rhetorical and figurative speech, he does not manage to exert such authority on the reader. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* W. C. Booth states,

All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work. Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point [...] The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting. (Booth, 1991, p.304)

In 'The Cask of Amontillado' although Montresor uses figurative speech effectively both to persuade the reader on the rightness of his action and to take Fortunato to his destination, the author and reader collude behind the speaker's back to see at what point he is wanting. Montresor's excessively emotional and hatred-oriented statements are guiding textual signals that help the reader evaluate the speaker and determine his own position in relation to that of the speaker. Realizing the wanting point in his character, the reader is able to detach himself from Montresor and his enchanting figurative speech.

In his poststructuralist essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' the French critic

Derrida argues that the free play of signs in language disrupts the idea of centre and totalisation. He states, '[f]reeplay is the disruption of presence' (Derrida, 1989, p.969), and, relying on this idea, he argues that the centeredness of a certain subject in language is impossible because the subject's author-ity is lost in the freeplay of signs. A similar idea concerning the subject or its presence/centeredness in language is proposed by the French critic Roland Barthes, who, in his canonical poststructuralist essay 'The Death of the Author', criticises the author or subject-centered approaches and claims that a literary text is made of various and multi-dimensional signs and writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody and contestation (Barthes, p.150). Although the narrating subject plays a crucial role in the language and narrative construction of the text, it is unable to play the same role in the manipulation of the reader. In other words, although Montresor is over-present in the narrative construction of the text and is able to exert full authority on Fortunato, his presence is disrupted with the play of signs in the text, which help the reader detach himself from the speaker's power of speech.

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