

# Rhetoric of the self in deconstruction and in psychoanalysis

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The integrative agency of human subjectivity has always been a central question of psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup>. Of course, this is true to the whole modern period of philosophy and other branches of the humanities too. Recently – as a kind of late modern or postmodern development – an interconnection, a constant dialogue developed in this theme between psychoanalysis and the humanities. Psychoanalysis offered an effective mode of explanation concerning the heterogeneous nature of human subjectivity, while philosophy and other fields like literary theory presented the general principles of different subjective entities. In my paper I try reflect on the rhetorical nature of subjectivity, a theme that was already discussed by Freud and also from a different point of view through the analysis of the concept of self, was developed by deconstruction.

I use the term “self” in a very general, inclusive sense, referring to a phenomenized, autonomous subjective entity that includes the person in general. This meaning of the word developed only in early modernism when the person became the central creative cultural force. According the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Oxford English Dictionary the “self” is “A permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness” The OED then quotes the poet Thomas Traherne from 1674:

A secret self I have enclos'd within,  
That was not bounded with my clothes or skin

The poem quoted refers to a basic, inner essence, an inside that is different from its outside, something that has, must have a kind of phenomenization as we know it from something that it is really there. This concept of self is different from the idea of the subject or person or ego, as it is a dynamic, self-perceptive and self-creating entity, not an object, but an objectification of a feeling. Probably the most detailed and historically based summary of the idea of self was given by Charles Taylor in his excellent book titled *Sources of Self*. Taylor described the term as

“the ensemble of (largely unarticulated) understandings of what it is to be a human agent: the senses of inwardness, freedom, individuality and being imbedded in nature which are at home in the modern West”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Elliott presented psychoanalysis through a modern/postmodern undertsanding of subjectivity in an excellent book (Anthony Elliott: *Psychoanalytic Theory – An Introduction*. New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Charles: *Sources of Self – The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989. 1.

Taylor's self concept was a bit over-inclusive, in his book he followed the full history of the changing ideas of human individuation, first as it was connected with identification with God, than followed by the appearance of the idea of "inwardness" in the work of Augustinus, and arrived at the modern times of the renaissance and in the philosophical concept of the "I" or ego in Descartes, Locke and finally to psychoanalysis and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. My approach, my understanding of the idea of self is historically much more limited, as I would like to reserve this term for that self-reflexive creativity that was first sensed in the Renaissance and fully developed in the period of romanticism<sup>3</sup>. One sign, one clear phenomenalization of this was the birth of the self-portrait in the Renaissance. In literature the self became central theme in Shakespeare, first of all in his *Hamlet*, which was the *expressis verbis* tragedy of the self, and which was really read, accepted, canonized only in romanticism, a period when this dynamic concept of individuation became a basic, general cultural experience. Taylor defined this period as an "expressive turn", and exactly this phenomena, this expressivity of the subjective that I would like to reserve the term "self".

According to Taylor the idea of "nature as an inner source"<sup>4</sup> appears in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. But with Romanticism an important turn happened: nature lost its deistic character and turned into the "notion of an inner voice or impulse, the idea that we find truth within us, and in particular in our feelings"<sup>5</sup>, a "significance (that) comes from within"<sup>6</sup>. German interpreters of *Hamlet* like Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel all talk about a new inner center, a "Gemüt" that limits and forces the actions of the melancholic prince. In this type of thinking a constant problem, enigma continuously popped up: the problem of the availability of this inner center, its presentation in something definable that often appeared in binary hierarchy of the inner and the outer. Besides the philosophical, poetical understanding romanticism raised the linguistic, rhetorical side of this problem through the opposition of the concepts of allegory and symbol. The subject, in this understanding can rely only on its own invisible resources, on its feeling as it is phenomenalized, become available. This phenomenalization is not representation, not mimesis, but more a recreation, a repetition, where it is not easy to define what the original is: the phenomenal creates the inner, or the inner is recreated in the outer.

In this sense psychoanalysis, a deeply romantic discipline, and as such can be interpreted as the most elaborated systematic understanding and practice of the self. The major and radically new idea of Freud was that in the existence of the human subject the creative connection of the inner and outer is by no means homogeneous, cannot be understood as the coherence of two systems that are built on the same principle, the principle of rationality, logicity both present in the outer existence and the inner essence. With the idea of the unconscious Freud presented a heterogeneous, conflicting and deconstructive pole in the subject and the self was understood as the constant and problematic coordination of the conscious and unconscious. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, in its last, seventh chapter, Freud built up a kind of phenomenology of the self (he did not use this term directly), a metapsychology that discussed its components and the relation of these components. In a later work he defined the function of dream as "a projection: an externalization of an internal process"<sup>7</sup>. In this paper, written in 1915 Freud defined the inner and outer as understandable through their relation to perception, where differentiation is done with the help of activity.

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<sup>3</sup> This full development of self created such subjective entities as the literary work. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy discussed this process through the concept of "literary absolute" (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe – Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Literary Absolute – The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor: *Sources of Self*, 368.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 368.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 369.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund: A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Tr. by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, 2001, 223.

“A perception which is made to disappear by an action is recognized as external, as reality; where such an action makes no difference, the perception originates within the subject’s own body – it is not real<sup>8</sup>.

The control contains two components: referentiality and activity. Interestingly Freud immediately turns this definition of the existence of the inner into its epistemology:

It is of value to the individual to possess a means such as this of recognizing of reality, which at the same time helps him to deal with it, and he would be glad to be equipped with a similar power against the often merciless claims of his instincts<sup>9</sup>.

And he adds the following sentence returning to the idea of projection and to dreams as well:

That is why he takes such a pains to transpose outwards what becomes troublesome to him from within – that is to *project* it<sup>10</sup>.

The key term is projection that cannot be equaled with representation as it has a clear activity nature, it is more a repetition. In this paper Freud discusses the phenomenon of hallucination where the subject loses his ability to differentiate between the inner and outer, the subjective and objective.

Concerning the nature of this projection Freud emphasized an important difference, used a double definition in the *Interpretation of Dreams*. On the last pages of the Irma dream analysis we read the following definitions:

“the ‘meaning’ of the dream was borne upon me. (...) The dream fulfilled certain wishes which were started in me by the events of the previous evening. (...) *Thus its content was the fulfilment of a wish and its motive was a wish*<sup>11</sup>.

And the last sentence of the chapter repeats:

*When the dream interpretation has been completed, we perceive that the dream is the fulfilment of a wish* (Freud’s italics)<sup>12</sup>.

On the first level, Freud suggests a kind of referential relevance, defines the hidden wish as the referent of the dream. The referent, the referential connection however, is not a conventionally fixed symbolic relation, but an activity, a process, a fulfillment of that something, it is primarily a performative, not a piece of knowledge but more an event of existence (in the dream it is hallucinatory). The activity, however, connects two levels, a signifier-like dream-text and a signified-like inner meaning (“dreams have meaning” repeats Freud quite often).

The second aspect of Freud’s semantics comes up in a later part of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in a well known footnote added in 1925. In this Freud complains that the analysts:

“seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thought and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* thinking, made possible by the state of sleep. It is the dream-work that creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>11</sup> Freud, Sigmund: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Standard Edition vol. 4. 195.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. vol. 5. 506-507.

This alternative concept of the dream defines it as a rhetorical, formative process, not a meaning, not as a hidden essence but as a process of formation. This process is the activity partly of the dreamer (through the dream work) but also the activity of the interpreter. The dream, and through its example, the individual, the self can be therefore defined as a rhetorical process (like condensation, displacement, means of representation and secondary revision). Lacan talked about the first two with clearly rhetorical terms as metaphor and metonymy to which two others can be added: the imaginary, its visualized nature and also the frequent narrative character of dreams.

It is interesting that in a work of Paul de Man a clearly rhetorical understanding, analysis of the self can be found, with rather frequent but hidden references to Freud's work. De Man in the second, often unread half of the *Allegories of Reading*<sup>14</sup> interprets the works of one of the first philosophers of the self, Rousseau and creates a full theory of the of the constructive and deconstructive processes of the self and self-formation.

The central concern of de Man (quite similar to Freud) is the movement the process that connects the inside and outside. From a different, metatheoretical point of view the inside-outside difference is already stated in the first chapter of the book, titled *Semiology and Rhetoric*. Reviewing the present situation of literary theory de Man talks about a change that "we may no longer hearing too much about relevance but we keep hearing a great deal about reference, about the non-verbal "outside" to which language refers, by which it is conditioned and upon which it acts" (3), and in the background of this understanding, there is a "moral imperative that strives to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public effects" (3). To summarize the theoretical approaches to the literary work de Man talks about a

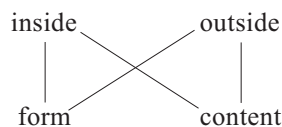
"metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or the critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside"(5).

One possibility is a grammatical understanding where the inside is form, the outside is content; the other is a referential, affect based approach, where the inside is a human content the outside is the form that serves the presentation of the content.



His aim, however, was "to speculate on different set of terms", to arrive at a better method to understand, read the inside-outside relation in case of subjective entities. This method accepts the possibility of the two boxes, but suggests that the referential relation is always surpassed by grammatical-linguistic relation; while the grammatical relation is deconstructed by the referential, subjective content.

One can never stop this process, as there are texts that are impossible to be fixed as referential or figurative. This way metaphorical box, the two a=b relations are turned into a different a:b=c:d syntagm, the metaphors are really woven into a chiasmatic process.



<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man: *Allegories of Reading – Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979 (Page numbers of quotations are given in the text).

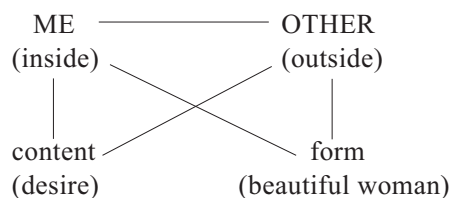
This chiasmatic structure serves as the basic characteristic feature of the concept of self in Rousseau’s work. The first chapter of the second half of the *Allegories of Reading* is titled “Metaphor”, it discusses the basic figurative position of the self. Metaphor can be defined as a special alternative method of signification that can be used to talk about subjective entities. In this chapter de Man discusses the naming of subjectivity, the naming, referring to the subject and with this the creating of the self. Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* presented two possible definitions of “man”. The first was through imagining a fictional situation when the primitive man met another and was frightened by him. He called the other “giant”, that is he used metaphor. Later, however, it turned out for him, that the other was similar to him, a repetition of him, and he created another word: “man” to refer to this being. The word “man” defines the self referentially through calculation. In the first case the self is figurative in the second it is literal, referential, these two relations, separated from each other, form the same type of box that we saw before. But de Man found an important deconstructive dynamics in Rousseau, one that prohibits the totalizing fixation of these relations. These dynamical, heterogeneous forces are fear, freedom, perfectibility, the will and ability to transgress – all are powerful inner forces that ruin the original, natural existence. These are all dynamic subjective energies, they introduce a heterogeneous tendency into a fixed, homogeneous situation. Fear, freedom and perfectibility are forces that turn the box of naming into a chiasmatic process, where man is figurative and referential in the same time:



The next chapter titled *Self (Pygmalion)* summarized this in the following way:

“In the case of such concepts as “fear”, “perfectibility” and ultimately “man” it is impossible to decide whether they are referential names for extralinguistic entities or mere phantoms of language. And it is equally impossible to let the question remain in abeyance, since the pressure towards meaning and the pressure towards its undoing can never cancel each other out” (161).

In this chapter de Man interpreted two plays of Rousseau: the early *Narcisse* and the later *Pygmalion*. In the metaphor chapter the self was understood by de Man as a self-reading, the naming of “the myself” in a context where the other served only as a passive mirror. Now the center is the definition of the self through the other, and this is the reason why the heterogeneous force would be different, it is “love” here. Love is a dynamic energy that allows the reading of the self (the inside) through somebody else, through an outside person. The first step is the differentiation between the natural self-love and the unnatural vanity, the search for the love of the others. In the play *Valere*, the main character, is cured from his self-admiration by his sister, who paints a portrait of Valere as a woman. Valere falls in love with the “woman” who is really himself. In this case the chiasmatic structure builds up the like this:



Another interesting rhetorical feature can be added: the introduction of love places the foration of the self into time and in the outside world. The mimetic becomes diagetive, or better to say, it is impossible to be decided in which moment it fulfills a mimetic or a narrative function.

I have to stop here, but through the analysis of Rousseau's work de Man builds up a complicated rhetorical and later performative analysis of the possible forms of understanding of the self. I believe that connecting his theories with Freud's early understanding, would add important aspects to a post-phenomenological theory of the self.