

THOMAS PFAU

Rhetoric and the Existential: Romantic Studies and the Question of the Subject

I

THE STUDY OF LITERATURE, INCLUDING the study of European romanticism, has generally accepted without much ado a circularity according to which readers must necessarily commit themselves to a set of basic concepts in order to delineate that which is to be investigated. Regardless of whether one accepts this hermeneutic circle grudgingly as a vicious reminder of certain inescapable limitations or as a structure capable of constructive manipulation, it appears that even those theorists who oppose the more traditional, hermeneutic modes of reading generally do not believe that such a proleptic commitment can be altogether circumvented. The troubled conscience which often coincides with the need to make some proleptic conceptual commitment about one's "field" and the "issues" at stake, seems to have been alleviated recently in that the interrelation between the cognitive and the rhetorical has been radically reassessed. Specifically American "deconstruction" has disputed the possibility of an equilibrium between the linguistic and the cognitive—a thesis laboriously maintained by philosophical hermeneutics—to the point that the rhetorical appears as the quicksand rather than as the foundation of the cognitive.¹ Thus one of the most prominent exponents of "deconstruction" in America, the late Paul de Man, discusses some implications of this shift within the paradigm of literary theory itself when, in his essay "The Resistance to Theory," he contends that "as long as it remains grounded in grammar, any theory of language, including a literary one, does not threaten what we hold to be the underlying principle of all cognitive and aesthetic linguistic systems."²

1. On the relation between the cognitive and the rhetorical, see Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), henceforth cited parenthetically as *AR*. Still the most representative argument for a philosophical hermeneutics may be Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975).

2. Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 1–20. Quote from 14–15; hereafter cited as *RT*.

SiR, 26 (Winter 1987)

487

According to de Man, the study of literature and particularly the study of European romanticism are largely characterized by the overly rigorous application of "cognitive and aesthetic systems" which themselves rely on what he calls a grammatical and logical paradigm of language. This tradition, whose Aristotelian origins were perpetuated through the medieval *Trivium*, is responsible for what de Man criticizes as the "totalizing (and potentially totalitarian)" theoretical resistance to "language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition" (*RT* 13). De Man's argument suggests that if as readers we inevitably depend on certain basic concepts, that is, remain caught in a hermeneutic circle of some form, then these concepts merit a permanent allegorical inversion rather than being systematized as symbols of a theoretical closure and totalization. While it may be left open at this point whether the textual diversity which traditional modes of reading seek to reduce is as much an "entropy" as de Man contends, it certainly appears a more sensible procedure for criticism to "configure" its own basic concepts with the literary texts in question rather than vice versa.

Probably no concept remains more questionable in the study of romanticism than that of "subjectivity," and in what follows I hope to show that the romantic quest for self-constitution *within* expressive language goes deeper than the diverse critical paradigms of "subjectivity" against which the poetry of Coleridge, Wordsworth and the later romantics have been measured thus far. Even though most readers of romantic poetry in general, and of an autobiographical poem like Wordsworth's *Prelude* in particular, have shown little trouble in deciding on a certain paradigm of the "subject," the theoretical conditions of possibility for such a commitment have remained largely unexamined. As shall be seen, the investigation of the presuppositions which ground critical concepts, such as the formulaic "poetic I" or its phenomenological heir, a poetic (self-)consciousness, is worthwhile. For not only does the quest *of* the "subject" in romantic poetry reveal itself to most readers increasingly as the quest *for* a subject, but this very recognition, once again, tends to undermine the readers' own interpretations as they seek to assign meaning to the poem on the basis of a self-identical and transparent "poetic subject."

As Paul de Man poses the question: "Can we not suggest . . . that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?"³ That is, the question of whether "the

3. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New

referent determine[s] the figure” or vice versa essentially coincides with the question concerning the decidability of rhetorical structures as such. With respect to the interpretation of literature, especially of romantic autobiographical poetry, a “thematic” reading—if still purposeful—would thus be possible only once the question concerning the status of the subject, including its relation to language, had already been decided. Extending de Man’s argument, it may be said that a thematic reading which refers linguistic structures (as predicates of a subject) via grammar to thematic categories, such as, history, politics, religion or aesthetics, inevitably reveals its affiliation with an Aristotelian logic, on which grammar has traditionally been patterned.

The inauguration of subjectivity, however, may prove more than can be left to logic. To the extent that a specific subject may be grounded in the very rhetorical structures which it is supposed to coordinate as the thematic continuum of romantic autobiography, its status definitely seems problematic. The mere ideation of it as an intrinsically self-transparent entity imputes to the basic concept of subjectivity a permanence which seems to be incompatible with the rhetorical complexity of “its” representations, particularly those in romantic poetry. Being posited as self-evident critical concepts, figures such as the “poetic I” or self-consciousness already assume the intrinsic decidability of the inherent referential structure of texts, that is, reflect a set of highly mechanical assumptions about literary “meaning” in its more traditional and somewhat gratuitous sense.⁴

Still, the question concerning romantic subjectivity and the conditions of possibility for any notion of a “poetic subject” is certainly not sufficiently motivated by simply suspending any notion of subjectivity and/or literary meaning whatsoever. It appears equally gratuitous to insist on the factual existence of a transparent subject or to “suspend” it, as either procedure would already assume a certain understanding of what is meant by a “subject.” Indeed, we have to ask whether and to what extent “subjectivity” is really a basic concept in the study of romanticism, and what exactly is problematic about it. In short, through what movements do we “secure” rather than “invent” the issue, and to what

York: Columbia UP, 1984) 67–81. Quote from page 69; hereafter cited parenthetically as *AD*.

4. See Paul de Man’s contention that “tropes, unlike grammar, pertain primordially to language. They are text-producing functions that are not necessarily patterned on a non-verbal entity, whereas grammar is by definition capable of extra-linguistic generalization.” Reading for meaning, as it is usually sanctioned by grammatical categories, coincides for de Man with the “ideological” presupposition of a fundamental commensurability of a “linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism” (*RT* 15).

extent does “subjectivity” indeed constitute the core of the entire problematic?

One of the first not only to point out the importance of the basic concepts by means of which we proleptically delineate the horizon of our respective “field” of inquiry, but also to insist on the necessity for a careful analysis of these concepts was Martin Heidegger. As is stated explicitly in the “Introduction,” the question of Being in *Being and Time* originates in response to a widespread crisis of basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) in the empirical and historical sciences. If, as Heidegger subsequently argues, “the level which a science has is determined by how far it is *capable of* a crisis in its basic concepts,” then to what extent can we claim that the “basic concept” of subjectivity undergoes some crisis, and what are the symptoms of such a crisis.⁵ Is not the determination of the basic concept itself and hence that of its alleged crisis simply gratuitous? If the inquiry into the allegedly problematic category of the “romantic subject” shall amount to more than just another conceptual trend, we must secure this “theme” properly, that is, as the veritable origin of a certain crisis.

In order, then, to assure that the category of “subjectivity” is more than a phantom-issue, it may be helpful to review some representative interpretations of Wordsworth, whose poetry many readers view to be particularly concerned with the question of self-constitution. A first glance at Wordsworth’s reception-history reveals a considerable instability of those concepts readers used to map out what they perceived to be his fundamental themes. Since the publication of E. D. Hirsch’s *Wordsworth and Schelling* and Geoffrey Hartmann’s comprehensive study of Wordsworth’s poetry, Wordsworth criticism has drawn on conceptual backgrounds as disparate as German Idealism (Hirsch), a certain conception of phenomenology (Hartmann, and the early de Man), and “Deconstruction” (the later de Man, Timothy Bahti, Cynthia Chase, Eugenio Donato and numerous other critics). Yet rather than pointing to an ongoing debate on this matter, the diverse conceptions for the Wordsworthian “subject” indicate merely the lack of any proper *paradigm* of subjectivity. This obscurity is also what Heidegger means when he observes that the revision of basic concepts is complicated by the fact that “the real ‘movement’ of the sciences takes place in a more or less radical revision of its basic concepts which is *not* transparent to itself” (*BT* 29; my emphasis).⁶

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962) 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BT*. “Das Niveau einer Wissenschaft bestimmt sich daraus, wie weit sie einer Krisis ihrer Grundbegriffe *fähig* ist.” *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979) 9. Henceforth cited as *SZ*.

6. The translation is plainly wrong here, omitting the negative. The German reads:

Such an opaqueness, then, implies for our proposed review of Wordsworth readings, that the question of subjectivity will most likely *not* constitute the topic of the respective critic. Instead, the reexamination of three exemplary interpretations of Wordsworth will have to show where a given argument about a poem generates involuntarily those tensions and contradictions within its own critical vocabulary which require a rethinking of the concept of the subject. Conversely, such a review, beside its potential to facilitate a deeper understanding of the romantic conception of subjectivity, may also help to cast new light on what thus far have been discussed as specific “themes” for the Wordsworthian “subject.” Accepting for now de Man’s objections to a reduction of the linguistic to intuition, the recurrent *loci classici* of romantic studies—such as the relation of a “poetic subject” to its imagination, its transcendence of “mere nature,” its relation to temporality, and concerns with spiritual and political freedom—may prove to be more than “thematic preoccupations” for a transparent and self-identical subject. For, besides assuming the *decidability* of verbal figures from the outset, the concept of a “theme” also presupposes the *continuity of verbal structures* as themes. Yet such continuity seems to depend precisely on the possibility of a self-identical subject which is fully in control of its semantic intentions.

II

At least in the case of Wordsworth studies, the rapid succession of different critical approaches seems to have been initiated by Earl R. Wasserman’s landmark article on the English romantics which constitutes one of the first concentrated efforts to articulate fundamental epistemological issues as they surface in much English romantic poetry.⁷ While a discussion of older trends in Wordsworth criticism—still a tempting and worthwhile task—would lead us too far afield at this moment, an examination of Wasserman’s article proves a particularly instructive starting point for our concerns. Wasserman opens by pointing to the conceptual crisis which haunts the study of romanticism, a crisis that—herein Wasserman follows the stern admonition of Arthur Lovejoy—allegedly is rooted in that perilous term “romanticism” itself. The “vicious” hermeneutic circle according to which “the word [romanticism] must stand for something real prior to our isolation of that some-

“Die eigentliche ‘Bewegung’ der Wissenschaften spielt sich ab in der mehr oder minder radikalen und ihr selbst *nicht* durchsichtigen Revision der Grundbegriffe.” (SZ 9, my emphasis).

7. Earl R. Wasserman, “The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge,” *Studies in Romanticism* 4 (1964/65): 17–34. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *ER*.

thing" (*ER* 17) is sidestepped by Wasserman in a rather archetypal manner: he gives his subject proper names, assuring at the same time its logical unity through the grammar of the singular 'is': "*My subject, then, is Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley*" (17, my emphasis). After a brief, yet concise analysis of the pervasive disinterest and negligence which characterized the attitude of most 18th century poetry toward questions of epistemology, Wasserman proceeds to articulate the fundamental romantic concerns with this issue:

What Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley chose to confront more centrally and to a degree unprecedented in English literature is a nagging problem in their literary culture: How do subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship? By what means do we have a *significant* awareness of the world? (*ER* 22)

Most of what needs to be said about Wasserman here is contained in the two questions that he poses. First, Wasserman conceives of the basic issue of romanticism, or rather of the four romantics, as an epistemological issue, a decision which causes him to remain within a certain subject-object dichotomy that has characterized almost all epistemological systems in the history of Western thought. Wasserman's own rhetoric allows "world" to become manifest only as an "awareness of" on the part of a transparent, quasi Husserlian, consciousness; that is, he posits from the outset a self-present consciousness as the paradigm of subjectivity. To the extent that he does not specify the origins of this "awareness," that is, does not elaborate his paradigm of phenomenality (Associationism, a Kantian *a priori*?), Wasserman remains caught in the very dualism which haunted Coleridge and by extension Wordsworth so persistently. Being merely the correlate of successive intentionalities, Wasserman's subject seems to lack any unity whatsoever, disseminating, as it were, into the various natural phenomena which it happens to encounter. Wasserman's casual aside that "of course epistemologies involve ontologies" (*ER* 22) betrays his awareness of certain foundations which provide such an epistemological subject with its necessary unity; yet the remark also indicates that for Wasserman consciousness is by definition something reified, a *quasi* substantive unity that is essentially transparent to itself.⁸

8. Criticizing Husserl's and Scheler's act-based theories of personality Heidegger argues that in the case of an existential analysis, "one of its first tasks will be to prove that the positing of an 'I' or subject as something most proximally given, completely misses the phenomenal import [Bestand] of Dasein. *Ontologically*, every idea of a 'subject'—unless refined by a previous ontological determination of its basic character—still enacts this

It can be noted that Wasserman almost exclusively selects the "philosophical" passages from Wordsworth's poetry which for him are essentially rhetorical recuperations of reflexivity. Such moments of reflexivity, as Meyer Abrams was to point out shortly after Wasserman's article, usually follow a certain experience.⁹ The interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry as a sustained expression of self-reflexivity, however, implies a seamless transition between linguistic structures and those of consciousness, while also positing a continuous *eidos* prior to and outside of any discursive manifestation. Meanwhile it has been widely argued that in the "experience" which Meyer Abrams' dual structure of the "Greater Romantic Lyric" preordains to "reflection," the 18th century epistemological commonplace of a material "outside world" of objects becomes undermined or at least transformed. Wasserman's reading of Wordsworth betrays a reluctance to examine the conditions of possibility for a "poetic subject" with the same scrutiny.¹⁰

The premise of a continuous and transparent subject which remains strictly separate from the objects of its "awareness" eventually leads to a certain tension within Wasserman's own rhetoric: he concludes his interpretation of Wordsworth's ode "To a Highland Girl" with the somewhat oxymoronic observation that "subject is affected by object and yet is unrelated to it" (*ER* 23). To the extent that Wasserman views the subject as an intentionality ("awareness of . . ."), the observation that it remains unrelated to its (intentional) object would call into doubt his paradigm of subjectivity altogether. At the same time, however, the mere fact of poetic expression seems to reconstitute an "affective" relation between a consciousness and an other that would hinge on a certain form of subjectivity. The paradox of a relation and non-relation already suggests the possibility that the original consciousness of experience and the subject of poetic representation might not be entirely identical.

As has been noted, Wasserman's retention of the proto-Hegelian triad of perception/memory/imagination rests on an essentially transparent *eidos* as the paradigm of subjectivity.¹¹ At first sight, the paradox of a

positing of the *subjectum*, no matter how vigorous one's 'ontical' protestations against the 'soul-substance' or the 'reification of consciousness'" (*BT* 72; *SZ* 46).

9. Meyer H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Norton, 1970): 201-29.

10. See William K. Wimsatt, "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," *Romanticism and Consciousness* 77-88.

11. Eugenio Donato, "Divine Agonies: Of Representation and Narrative in Romantic Poetics," *Glyph* 6 (1979): 90-122. In his commentary on Wasserman's triadic system and, according to Donato, its *Hegelian origins*, the integrity of the poem rests on the premise that the temporal gap between perception and imagination is bridged by an entirely

subject “affected and yet unrelated”—rendering equally obscure both the foundations of the subject and its world—seems to be little more than a slight rhetorical tremor in Wasserman’s otherwise so rigorous conceptual system. However, as long as the rhetorical structures of the poetic text are not examined as the *potential foundation of the subject*, the intricate figural structure of romantic language may intrude as the “ontology” of the subject (which Wasserman dispenses with so quickly) thus threatening to cause a repeated caving-in of the very ground on which notions of the poetic subject are based. The problematic conclusion of Wasserman’s interpretation suggests that without an analysis of the rhetorical dimension of a posited subject, the “grounds of knowledge” are likely to suffer repeatedly from such landslides.

III

In 1964, Geoffrey H. Hartman published his second study of Wordsworth’s poetry (following his 1954 book *The Unmediated Vision*).¹² Due to its, at the time, rather innovative vocabulary, Hartman’s book was instantly recognized as a major event not only for the study of Wordsworth but for that of romantic poetry in general. A good starting point for the intended limited discussion of Hartman’s approach—for we are only concerned with shifts in the conceptual frame as they may emerge from Hartman’s reading of Wordsworth—may be a brief passage from his “Retrospect” (first included in the 1971 edition) where Hartman reflects on his intentions and methodological premises: “What I did, basically, was to describe Wordsworth’s ‘consciousness of consciousness.’ Everything else—psychology, epistemology, religious ideas, politics—was subordinated. If that is phenomenological procedure, so be it” (*WP* XII).

The major change in Wordsworth and romantic studies evinced by Hartman’s work involves the question of temporality. As is well known, Hartman interprets Wordsworth’s poetry as a rhetoric of analepse, poetry of the “after-image” which, according to Hartman, constitutes an attempt on the part of the poet’s consciousness to compensate for his incapacity to “sustain the encounter with imagination.” Hartman realizes that the traditionally assumed synchrony of a certain subject-object op-

transparent memory. Donato’s argument runs to the contrary: “Not only does memory inscribe a necessary narrative moment within the lyrical moment but the function of narrative is to monumentalize elements that do not remain intact as they are translated through memory” (90).

12. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP [1964], 1977); hereafter cited parenthetically as *WP*.

position—as exemplified by Wasserman’s study of the “English Romantics”—cannot do justice to the question of temporality which is so intrinsic to Wordsworth’s poetry; hence he interprets the poetic imagination as a “supervening consciousness.” In the course of the progressive dissociation of consciousness from nature, the imagination reveals itself increasingly as the major index of the subject’s profound solitude. Hence, Hartman argues, the imagination “stands closer to death than to life” (*WP* 17). As an attempt to retreat from temporality, which discloses itself most radically in a death-like solitude that accompanies the moments of imagination, the poem presents itself as the alternative (a *via naturaliter negativa*). It is designed to restore or preserve the integrity of a self which—“waylaid” by imagination—had encountered its lack of foundation. With this thesis, Hartman radicalized earlier interpretations which had already pointed to the issue of temporality in Wordsworth’s poetry.¹³

However, according to Hartman, the imagination not only discloses the intrinsic temporality of consciousness—with its threat of mortality—but it simultaneously presents the soul “at the height of its freedom” (*WP* 41). It is precisely this dual phenomenal import of death and freedom which, as evidence for the “intrusion” of the imagination, points to a latent tension within Hartman’s conception of the subject as “self-consciousness.” With freedom and mortality simultaneously serving as its phenomenal index, the “imagination” constitutes at once the possibility and impossibility of an integral subject. Being Hartman’s dominant issue, the imagination confronts his notion of consciousness with the simultaneous presence of that which permits (freedom) and that which denies (death) such a phenomenological paradigm of subjectivity. Hartman’s interpretation of the imagination in Wordsworth’s

13. Melvin Rader, *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon [1931], 1967). Rader’s scheme of successive intellectual stages already projects a notion of temporality onto the poetic subject. See also Christopher Salvesen, *The Landscape of Memory* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1965). Salvesen’s reading is a particularly instructive instance of how a basic concept, in this case “memory,” may simultaneously admit and simplify the complexity of the issues in romantic poetry. By reading the poetic process as mere recollection, Salvesen’s use of “memory” presupposes some kind of solution to the epistemological questions raised by Wasserman. Also, “memory” protects the desired unity of the poetic subject against the potentially diversifying impact of temporality to the extent that, through the very process of recollection, all temporal distinctions are telescoped into a single, re-visionary instance. See his “common-sense” approach to the question of time, 3 ff. However, Salvesen advances the study of Wordsworth’s poetry in that he no longer sees it as temporally coextensive with a certain epistemological or metaphysical insight but as revision, as writing rather than as self-transparent *logos*.

poetry as a “supervening consciousness” fails to take into consideration that the imagination simultaneously brings to the fore the positive and negative condition of possibility—freedom and death—for consciousness itself.

Hartman contains this potential threat which the imagination poses to his paradigm of subjectivity (i.e., to consciousness) by addressing the imagination only after the fact of “consciousness” has already been established. Indeed, once “this shrinking away from visionary subjects” on the part of the poet is interpreted as a *via naturaliter negativa*, this very threat of “apocalypse” and mortality actually guarantees, *as a pattern*, the ultimate identity and continuity of the subject. In this respect, Hartman’s concept of consciousness remains “grounded” in the Cartesian *episteme* of “permanence” which in this case manifests itself precisely in the *sustained* attempt (a *via negativa*) of consciousness to escape from discontinuity.¹⁴ Thus the threat of imagination, of mortality, remains a psychological (rather than ontological) crisis of an essentially reified “poetic” consciousness-of-self. Rather than being interpreted as the rhetorical ground of the subject’s ontological crisis, Wordsworth’s poetry is still read, on behalf of consciousness, as a narrative vehicle of redemption. To the extent that he formalizes this threat as the pattern of the *via naturaliter negativa*, Hartman not only corroborates the continuity of his poetic consciousness, but simultaneously unifies his own argument as well.

The temporalized and hierarchized concept of “consciousness” which Hartman sees respond time and again to the threat of the “supervening consciousness” of imagination, has clear priority over any textual *memento mori*, “apocalypse” or the like. Seen as a merely psychological crisis, the imagination’s “supervening consciousness” remains ultimately a *derivative* and belated modification of an already personalized “consciousness.” Hence Hartman can analyze this “consciousness of consciousness” as an essentially logical and reflexive structure whose rhetorical manifestations still permit their sublation into the theoretical

14. See Descartes’s well known argument through which he establishes the *extensio* as the paradigm of corpo-reality by excluding any possible alternative on the grounds of its intrinsic mutability. To the extent that the figural appearance of a thing can be altered, only the *extensio* possesses the ontological validation necessary for an *episteme*, namely, that of *permanence*. “Principia Philosophiae,” *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam & Paul Tannéry (Paris: Cerf, 1905) viii: 32 ff. The Cartesian insistence on the continuity of all consciousness still informs most contemporary theories of subjectivity, particularly in literary criticism. By relying on the notion of *permanence* as the ontological predicate for any certainty whatsoever, such theories partake once again of what Heidegger criticizes as the “reification of consciousness.”

domain of grammar and phenomenology. On this occasion, it should also be pointed out that—conspicuous terminological affinities with Hegel’s phenomenological dialectics notwithstanding—the frequent classification of Hartman’s readings as overly Hegelian, rests on a misconception of Hegel’s dialectics. Death, for Hegel, constitutes a moment through which consciousness *must* pass for the sake of the self-explication of the absolute within it. As Hegel puts it:

Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. . . . But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.¹⁵

By contrast, Hartman sees the poet’s “consciousness” retreat from the “apocalyptic pitch” of the imagination precisely because it wishes to preserve a self-identity which it considers to be permanent. Unlike anything in Hegel’s phenomenology, this integrity is not established through a “dialectical movement” in time, but seeks to preserve itself in the face of any imminent discontinuity. Thus, throughout Hartman’s interpretation, death does not constitute a structural part in the progressive unfolding of consciousness but remains instead its fatal other. A consciousness which is concerned with preserving the continuity of a purported selfhood rather than with the dialectical foundation of that quality remains essentially Cartesian.

Hartman, in fact, may have intuited that his reading with its ultimate restoration of a self-present and rhetorically transparent consciousness was more “Cartesian” than the intrinsic temporality and a simultaneously liberating and annihilating imagination seemed to allow. By the time that he writes his “Retrospect,” Hartman’s basic concept, consciousness, has of course received much critical attention from the schools of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism which then had just begun to reshape American literary studies. It is probably due to these

15. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 19. “Der Tod, wenn wir jene Unwirklichkeit so nennen wollen, ist das Furchtbarste, und das Tote festzuhalten das, was die grösste Kraft erfordert. . . . Aber nicht das Leben, das sich vor dem Tode scheut und von der Verwüstung rein bewahrt, sondern das ihn erträgt und in ihm sich erhält, ist das Leben des Geistes. Er gewinnt seine Wahrheit nur, indem er in der absoluten Zerrissenheit sich selbst findet.” *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952) 29 f.

changes that Hartman concedes the following at the end of his "Retrospect 1971":

Perhaps Wordsworth never did emerge to an assured sense of self or a decisive poetry. There is something peculiar in the way his text corrupts itself: the freshness of earlier versions is dimmed by scruples and qualifications, by revisions that usually overlay rather than deepen insight. I should have paid some attention to this problem but was *more interested*, I now see, *in the integrity of the mind* than in that of the single poem. [*WP xvii*, my emphasis]

IV

The most significant transformation of the paradigm of subjectivity within the study of romanticism involves essentially the substitution of structures of consciousness by structures of language. A recent collection of essays under the title *Romanticism and Language*¹⁶—a conscious attempt to supercede Harold Bloom's 1971 collection *Romanticism and Consciousness*—reflects this change which Paul de Man has characterized most succinctly when, in his essay, "The Resistance to Theory," he states that

the advent of theory, the break that is now so often being deplored and that sets it aside from literary history and from literary criticism, occurs with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature. By linguistic terminology is meant a terminology that designates reference prior to designating the referent and takes into account, in the consideration of the world, the referential function of language or, to be somewhat more specific, that considers reference as a function of language and not necessarily as an intuition. (*RT* 8)

In close adherence to Paul de Man's definition of literary theory and to his understanding of reading as an allegorical process, Timothy Bahti has recently interpreted some three passages from Book 1 of *The Prelude*.¹⁷ Similar to de Man in his essay "Autobiography as De-Facement," Bahti too calls into question the notion of a self- or subjectivity which, for him, can no longer be assumed to control what rhetorical analysis recognizes to be an infinitely complex structure of rhetorical transferrals within the poetic text. Commenting on Hartman's proposal, in the

16. *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

17. Timothy Bahti, "Wordsworth's Rhetorical Theft," *Romanticism and Language* 86–124. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *WRT*.

“Retrospect 1971,” of a “general theory linking verbal figures and structures of consciousness” [*WP* xvii], Bahti writes:

I would argue, however, that such a theory—to the extent that it is implied in this essay—ought not to presuppose a *self* whose consciousness would then be found in some relation to figural language; rather, structures of language would be the condition of possibility—if that—for the self and its faculties of consciousness. (*WRT* 99, note 19)

Bahti clearly recognizes and formulates succinctly the necessity to address the question of subjectivity by way of its rhetorical dimension. Such an approach no longer posits from the outset a continuous, self-present and extra-linguistic subject, that is, does not conceive of consciousness as a reified “inside” which somehow reproduces its ominous encounters with an “outside” world in the medium of poetic language. Instead, by reading the theft scenes of Book I of the *Prelude* “as a sort of prolegomenon to further interpretation of the textual character and strategy of Wordsworth’s autobiography,” Bahti wishes to demonstrate how “the self is ‘produced’ by this act [i.e., theft] of appropriation” (*WRT* 88). Indeed, so Bahti continues, it is precisely this trespassing appropriation of specific objects which renders them “improper”:

What renders them improper could be called the act or process of figuration, a movement from proper status and meaning to improper ones. The self is thereby in turn appropriated, so to speak, into this figural structure, itself a structure of allegory wherein a thing both is itself and also signifies or figures something else, an insubstantial state and meaning. The theft scenes thus display the self engaging its world and itself in a rhetorical economy of the proper and the improper, or literal and figural representations and meanings, the distinctions of which are always at stake when (autobiographical) narrative writes the reading of its own (self’s) text. (*WRT* 88–89)

It is tempting to assess Bahti’s rhetorical analysis and its contribution to the issue of subjectivity on its most “proper” terms, namely, by examining his own rhetoric. In an attempt to bypass any form of phenomenal realism, Bahti situates the object in the context of allegory, a state “wherein a thing both is itself and also signifies or figures something else, an *insubstantial* state or meaning.” Curiously enough, however, the very notion of “insubstantiality” has functioned throughout much of Western metaphysics as the distinctive mark of the “soul,” that

is as the very ground of unity for specific notions of subjectivity.¹⁸ The description of allegory as “an insubstantial state or meaning” thus aligns what purports to be strictly rhetorical with the classical topos of subjectivity. Indeed, similar instances of animation or personification of rhetorical structures recur with troubling frequency throughout Bahti’s discourse. Thus he argues in the same passage that the *narrative* “writes the reading of its own (self’s) text.” It is hard not to understand an explanation thus phrased as a mere inversion of *prosopopeia*, the “mask-making” trope which, for Paul de Man, is constitutive of autobiography: “voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poein*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). *Prosopopeia* is the trope of autobiography” (AD 76).

By “writing the reading of its own (self’s) text,” the “insubstantial” spirit of allegory increasingly assumes the function of a *performative agency*—a “mask or a face”—that compels the text’s own deconstruction. Bahti’s notion of allegory involuntarily substitutes the illusory figure of a self *qua* the performative *prosopon* of rhetorical readings as such. For to conceive of the text as the doomed attempt of figuring a self, that is, as the allegory of a certain figure (*prosopopeia*), presupposes the latent self-referentiality of linguistic structures and an identifiable *autos* as the center of such auto-referential processes. By viewing the text’s figuration of a self as a self-referential allegorical process, Bahti essentially transposes a form of reflexivity—as it was traditionally ascribed to a phenomenological “consciousness”—into the realm of the linguistic itself. To reinstate the category of reflexivity *qua* the self-referentiality of the rhetorical remains a diametrical reversal similar to that of Nietzsche’s “overcoming” of metaphysics and—as any diametrical reversal—is fundamentally metaphysical itself.¹⁹ The self can appear to have been “appropriated into this figural structure [of allegory]” only because the permanent deconstruction which is constitutive of allegory is already—as a self-referential process—based on a certain permanent *autos*.

According to Bahti, the text’s “rhetorical economy” not only figures an autobiographical self, but the very figure which “produces” such a

18. cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 411a, 412a.

19. In an essay on Nietzsche, de Man writes that Nietzsche’s “deconstruction of the self as a metaphor does not end in the rigorous separation of the two categories (self and figure) from each other but ends instead in an exchange of properties that allows for their mutual persistence at the expense of literal truth. . . . By calling the subject a text, the text calls itself, to some extent, a subject” (AR, 112). However, de Man seems caught in a very similar figuration of the text as persona precisely by stating that “the text *calls itself* a subject.”

self (through an “improper” referential process), simultaneously reveals itself also as the allegory of this produced “self.” The text’s plot, then, does not lead up to the ultimate “intuition” of a self-identical, autobiographical *persona* but rather to the indefinite (allegorical) suspension between the figural and the literal, an “insubstantial state and meaning” which itself permits no sublation into a conceptual system. However, even such a skeptical reading of the text’s own performance still contains a residue of reflexivity, for to read the autobiographical text as a performance of its own deconstruction presupposes the self-referentiality and thus the “self-identity” of the respective “figures.” Thus a certain unexamined notion of subjectivity still grounds Bahti’s rhetorical analysis rather than vice versa.

Such a residue of self-reflexivity is furthermore evinced by the transferral of agencies into rhetorical or simply textual notions: “It remains for Wordsworth critics to read and understand how Wordsworth’s autobiography writes its way from its initial projection . . .” (*WRT* 87). The displacement of a self-reflexive agency into a textual dimension, a common yet problematic gesture of “deconstructive” readings,²⁰ is particularly evident in Bahti’s main argument, namely, that in the theft scenes “the self discovers the improper or figural character of natural objects and their names, and thereby writes into its own allegory, a *reflexive* representation of its improper self-signification” (*WRT* 95, my emphasis). Toward the end of his essay, Bahti restates his thesis according to which the opening book of *The Prelude* exhibits the impossibility of self-signification by way of improper rhetorical theft of “natural properties.”

But this personification—in the literal sense, a personafication or a persona-fiction, Wordsworth’s own “project” here—is never literal, but always figural, both as the self metaphorically appropriated and as nature rhetorically represented and then allegorically “understood,” or at least written as allegory. Wordsworth’s text thus performs a rhetorical writing of rhetoric that represents the process

20. cf. Rodolphe Gasché, “Deconstruction as Criticism” *Glyph* 6 (1979): 177–215. Gasché has pointed to the slippery ground between a conception of texts as self-conscious structures and a deconstructionist understanding of writing. While it remains open whether de Man conceives of the text as a self-reflexive structure, the tendency to reduce rhetorical transferrals to self-reflexive gestures is quite common in some “deconstructionist” readings. If “self-consciousness, however, is only the modern mode of presence being understood as subjectivity” (Gasché 207), then such readings fall evidently short of analyzing to what extent rhetorical structures form the condition of possibility for any subjectivity as such.

of persona-fiction as yielding neither the representation of the object personified (nature as *of* human meaning) nor the appropriation of the self to be “persona-fied” (Wordsworth as *of* human nature), nor even a literal understanding of the first two consequences. (*WRT* 123)

Arguing not only the impossibility of signification—when understood as a referential act of “appropriation”—but moreover the impossibility of “a literal understanding” of such bad news, Bahti, in his analysis of rhetorical structures, often comes disturbingly close to attributing the complexity of figural and “meta-figural” crossings to an agency which itself resembles the performative in Speech-Act theory. Thus he states that “Wordsworth’s text *performs* a rhetorical writing of rhetoric that *represents*. . . .” From what has been said so far about the necessary suspension of the concept of subjectivity, it would follow that an analysis of rhetorical structures must avoid any affiliation with theories of the performative which, as has been recently suggested, remain involuntarily indebted to positional axioms in German Idealism, specifically to Fichte’s concept of “positing” (*Setzung*).²¹ If the “process of personification” of which Bahti speaks is attributed to a performative agency, we would remain trapped once again in what Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, refers to as the “reification of consciousness,” only that this time it would occur within a rhetorical terminology.

Bahti, then, not only claims that the rhetoric of the text demonstrates the impossibility of self-knowledge within a system of metaphoric exchange, but he immediately performs what de Man calls the “deconstruction to the second degree” by adding that the text does not “even yield a literal understanding of the first two consequences.” According to de Man, whose model of the rhetorical informs Bahti’s essay much more than is acknowledged, the rhetorical leaves it undecidable whether grammatical structures convey literal or figural meaning, and whether the latter can be assimilated to a “proper” or merely “improper” mean-

21. See Rodolphe Gasché, “‘Setzung’ und ‘Übersetzung’: Notes on Paul de Man,” *Diacritics* (Winter 1982): 36–56. Henceforth cited as *SÜ*. Gasché shows that “the analogy between Fichte’s principle of the unconditioned identity of the self and the ‘act’ in Speech Act Theory cannot be overlooked: in both cases it is by means of the purity of an ‘act upon an act itself, which specific act is preceded by no other whatever,’ that a subject becomes objective or that a speech act turns into an intentional act” (*SÜ* 52 f). Bahti’s reading, then, remains problematic insofar as a rhetorical *aporia* is understood as the manifestation of the text’s performative dimension. However, Fichte’s *Tathandlung* (*Setzung*) as the historical origin of the performative would suggest that “rhetorical readings,” too, remain grounded in a certain notion of subjectivity.

ing. Textual ambiguity, then, can no longer be contained by “the trope of classical rhetoric” (de Man) and hence serves as a disruption not only of the text but of any logical construct of the reading process as well.²²

It is precisely this dogmatic assertion of the impossibility of significance that remains troublesome about Bahti’s “rhetorical reading.” A reading which considers undecidability as a mere *impasse*, as the allegory of a figure whose aspirations to coincide with its proper meaning are forever doomed to failure, appears formalistic if we consider that such a failure affects the very project of expressive self-constitution. By contrast, we might consider this potential undecidability of linguistic structures itself to be very much invested with significance. To the extent that it implies a *deferral* of reference—and we are thus far looking only at a deferral, not necessarily at what de Man calls an *aporia*—the undecidability of linguistic figures is essentially bound up with the category of *temporality*. Indeed, beginning with the typological readings of the Bible, the deferral of a semantic *parousia* was understood to be nothing less than constitutive for the interpretation of written texts. Rather than being formalized and ultimately all the more contained as an essentially logical *impasse* that bears no relation to the *intended* subject whatsoever, undecidability—in its very modality of a deferral—opens up what Heidegger calls the “horizon” of temporality. Within a metaphysical and Christian matrix—which one cannot simply reverse or negate—semantic ambiguity and undecidability has never been conflated with the complete absence of significance; especially for the romantics, the category of temporality becomes significant precisely through a deferral of reference.

V

As we saw, both Wasserman and Hartman based their discussion of “central” romantic issues on an implicit concept of subjectivity. Each of these issues surfaced more or less as derivatives, often as psychological or aesthetic “options” of sorts on the part of this extra-textual subject. Hartman’s greater sensitivity to the issue of temporality already foreshadowed the potential threat of discontinuity to such a subject, a threat which, as he later realized, he could only avoid by reading consciousness *through* the text, and not *as* a text. Being “more interested . . . in the integrity of the mind than in that of the single poem,” Hartman could only secure that integrity as an eidetic structure, since the disruptive rhetoric “of the single poem” itself would no longer provide a firm ground for a poetic consciousness. With the beginning of “deconstruc-

22. On de Man’s concept of allegory, see Rodolphe Gasché, *SÜ* 40 ff.

tionist" or, to use a less inflated term, "rhetorical" readings, criticism makes for the first time a sustained effort to suspend the premise of a personified and self-identical notion of the subject. As a result, the diction of rhetorical readings displays an ongoing struggle not to attribute the poem's own rhetorical performance to an agency which might resemble concepts such as the "poetic I," "soul," "poet," or "(self-) consciousness." Instead, the romantics' ongoing concern with the imagination, temporality and transcendence (as transcendence of the law, *ad objectum*, namely, "theft") are now viewed as rhetorical crises, rendering the respective poem "a system of figures and its deconstruction" (AR 205) which no longer allows for its extra-linguistic totalization.

It appears, then, that the various aporias of Wasserman, Hartman and of Bahti arise essentially because the very issues at stake are still understood as derivatives of a subjectivity whose intrinsic conditions of possibility remain essentially obscure. For, as we saw, the analysis of certain issues revealed a circularity or paradox precisely when the respective reader would refer his interpretive findings, as intellectual and linguistic *predicates* to a self-identical and transparent subject. Thus Wasserman's subject is at once "affected and yet unrelated" by its other. Likewise, Hartman's interpretation of the imagination as a supervening modification of consciousness, rests on the paradox that it is the imagination itself which provides the condition of possibility ("consciousness at the height of its freedom") and impossibility (the threat of death) for a unified poetic consciousness in the first place. And even in Timothy Bahti's reading, despite his attempts to examine rhetorical structures as the condition of possibility for a subject, a notion of the subject is reinstated—*qua* the "insubstantial" *prosopon* of the allegorical or performative itself—as the self-identical origin of these structures.

The complexity of the "issues" which the romantic subject encounters, and which it seeks to resolve through the process of *reflection and expression*, (what Hartman calls the *via naturaliter negativa*), turns out to undermine the very unity of the subject. In this sense, the imagination, transcendence, temporality and freedom may reveal themselves—pending their proper and careful analysis—as those conditions which delineate the possibility of the subject, and which thus necessarily exceed the scope of the merely thematic. Yet in what sense, one might ask, is it sensible to invest an issue, such as the imagination with a significance beyond that of a dominant "theme" for romantic autobiography? And what could such a shift in significance possibly contribute to our understanding of the romantic texts in question?

It is in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that the *imagination* is recognized to have a function which reaches well beyond the merely psychological

or aesthetic capacity of a given subject to reproduce certain objects or ideas in their absence. While Kant retains such a "reproductive imagination" as indispensable for certain cognitive transactions of a subject, there is another imagination which reveals itself to Kant and his successors as veritably constitutive of this subject. As is well known, Kant's explication of the "conditions of possibility for synthetic judgments a priori" involves the harmonious interplay between intuition (*Anschauung*) and understanding (*Verstand*). Yet in order to be receptive to concrete empirical intuitions of objects, one implicitly takes recourse to what Kant calls the "pure intuitions" of space and time and the pure concepts of understanding, also known as "notions" or "categories." Still, even on such a "pure" and transcendental level, the question concerning the possibility of such a synthesis between the sensible and intelligible remains, a question whose importance reaches beyond a mere philosophical technicality, for it concerns the very unity *qua* synthesis of the Kantian subject ("transcendental apperception") itself.

In what proves a crucial and critical chapter in the first Critique, the "transcendental imagination" is introduced as that "function" which furnishes the necessary unity of the subject through what Kant calls "schemata." Kant also refers to them as "pure images" or "monograms" of the transcendental imagination. It is only through these intrinsically non-referential icons that the subject attains the unity among its faculties of intuition and understanding which permits it to be a *transcendens*, that is, to have a relation to the outside world. Being itself subject to no other determining structure or entity whatsoever, Kant's "transcendental imagination" possesses an, as it were, absolute ontological freedom.²³ Rather than being a mere function of a subject, it is this imagination itself which stakes out the possibility of a unified subject of experience. In this context, Wasserman's phrase that the subject "is affected by object and yet unrelated to it" might be understood to be more than a paradoxical statement about a poet's affective memory. For Wordsworth's ode ("To a Highland Girl") seems to explore how the imagination must negotiate its (ontological) freedom to project a unified self with its

23. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1965). In his interpretation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heidegger analyzes how, in the "Transcendental Deduction," the imagination becomes veritably constitutive of the transcendental synthesis of pure intuition and pure thinking, that is, of transcendental apperception. Heidegger also shows how Kant, having become increasingly uneasy about the dependency of subjectivity on the imagination, eventually revised his text, deleting in the second edition numerous crucial references to the imagination.

obligation to remain sensitive to an alterity with which this self wishes to enter into a harmonious relation.

The imaginative projection of a sense of its unity, however, has the subject not only transcend toward an "other"—acting as a *transcendens* which itself remains a self-identical, encapsulated consciousness (*immanens*)—but in its intentional relation to alterity, the poetic consciousness inevitably transcends its own sense of identity as well. As Sartre puts it: "By intentionality consciousness transcends itself. It unifies itself by escaping from itself."²⁴ Understood in this "ontological" sense, *freedom* and *transcendence* provide the positive conditions of possibility in the romantic "quest" for subjectivity. By contrast, the category of *temporality*, challenging both the continuity of self-reflection and self-expression, appears more as a negative condition of possibility, insisting again and again on the finite and provisional character of selfhood. The scope of these conditions is progressively determined by the imagination which, as Shelley would say, is both "at the center and circumference" of consciousness. Hence, those readings which merely understand the imagination, transcendence, freedom as properties of a subject fail to recognize that the "figures" which their interpretations privilege respectively (such as, history, religion, politics, aesthetics) constitute but the dimension wherein the *existential import* of these *Esistenziale* themselves is made *intuitable*.

As has been noted by Meyer Abrams, Wordsworth's greater lyrics, including most episodes in *The Prelude*, are characterized by a binary structure of "experience" and "reflection." Indeed, moments such as the "boating episode" (among other theft scenes), the crossing of the Simplon-pass, the section on the French Revolution, and the "spots of time" involve usually a transition from their ostensible "themes" to concerns about the self. This transformation occurs through a *process of reflection* (which we must not simply ascribe to a reified *self*) wherein the existential import of these incidents for a self becomes apparent. In its acts of theft, for instance, a consciousness not only "transcends" an established order but also its own status within this order, thus recognizing

24. Jean Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday, 1965) 38. Sartre's radical application of Husserl's notion of intentionality leads him to a very similar understanding of transcendence as developed by Heidegger in his 1928 lectures on the *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik, Gesamtausgabe* 26 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978): 204–13. For a literary study (within a psychological framework) of transcendence, see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, "Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence," (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).

(upon reflection) itself to be what de Man calls the "agent of its own instability."²⁵

Now, issues such as the romantic imagination or that of temporality remain—even when viewed as existential foundations for the romantic subject—always and irreducibly "language-issues." We cannot but read these *Existenziale* (as Heidegger calls them) according to the structure of their appearance, that is, as moments within written narrative. To grant any one of them a status independent of its textual articulation would amount to an unwarranted Platonic ideation and obscure the essential romantic question which, in the most general terms, concerns *the relation* between structures of consciousness and those of language. To the extent that they define the existential conditions of possibility of the romantic subject, rhetorical and existential properties have to be understood as coextensive in the strictest sense. In the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin characterizes a relation similar to that between the existential and the rhetorical when he states that one "cannot regard such a fact as certain until its innermost structure appears to be so essential as to reveal it as an origin."²⁶ Rather than a proleptic conceptual commitment, it is only the expressive manifestation of imagination, freedom, transcendence and temporality in a text which can secure and disclose the conditions of possibility of the romantic subject. Only a text can lay bare these conditions because, *qua* writing, it obtains a permanence which allows an expressive consciousness to measure and revise its intentions of an integral selfhood.²⁷ Written rhetorical structures reveal themselves as the most intensive "dwelling," as Wordsworth calls it, of the conditions for a subjectivity.²⁸

25. Paul de Man, "Criticism and Crisis," *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1983) 19. Henceforth cited as *BI*.

26. Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977) 46.

27. The deconstructionist conception of a text and a subtext dates back at least as far as Hegel's speculative dialectics in the *Phenomenology*: "But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean." *Phenomenology of Spirit* 16. According to Hegel, language (*qua* writing) facilitates the revision of a self-conception (*Meinung*) held by the natural consciousness. That is, the explication of "truth as a subject" coincides with the absolution of language from the referential in the direction of the self-referential. For a distinction between deconstructionist and post-structuralist readings, see also Tilottama Rajan's lucid article, "Displacing Post-Structuralism: Romantic Studies After Paul de Man," *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985): 451-74.

28. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. Frank Capuzzi, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (New York: Harper, 1977) 193.

VI

However, even though it is necessary to understand these conditions of possibility for a subject as intrinsically and strictly linguistic, they are, in another sense, not “merely” linguistic. Recent “rhetorical readings” of romantic literature have frequently equated the undecidability of rhetorical structures with the general impossibility of a “denominative” or referential language, a linguistic state where nothing would make a difference because nothing would cohere to begin with.²⁹ Such a radicalization of the “figure” of undecidability—even though it may be performed with the (romantic) “spirit of irony”—has led to the infelicitous reduction of “all” literary texts into two categories, those which “tell the story of the failure to read” and those which “tell the story of the failure to denominate” (AR 205). Thus Paul de Man can claim elsewhere that “technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable” (RT 20). Such a position seems legitimate, irrefutable and inevitable precisely when, as readers, we are no longer concerned with the *intentions* of a poetic text. Romantic autobiography could no longer be viewed as an intent of linguistic self-constitution but merely as the allegorical narration of this attempt’s “denominative aberrations” into the delusory field of thematics—an allegory, to be sure, which cannot foreclose its own deconstruction either.

Yet by invoking the notion of “intentionality” as a category central to the text itself, we seem to surrender the “insight” of rhetorical readings that “the indeterminacy of reference generates the illusion of a subject” (AR 162). To what agency, we must ask, can we possibly ascribe any intentions of as well as “reflections” upon its potential selfhood, if not to an already posited transparent and extra-linguistic subject? If, as we saw, romantic autobiography ostensibly explores certain “themes” which, upon reflection, prove themselves as the conditions of possibility for an autobiographical subject, then romanticism breaks with the 18th century for which the subject was characterized by its “having” a language. Rather, the advent of romanticism seems to be characterized

29. A passage from Paul de Man’s reading of Shelley’s *Triumph of Life* may illustrate this tendency to erode all potential for critical differentiation: “*The Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence,” “Shelley Disfigured,” *Rhetoric of Romanticism* 122. See also Rodolphe Gasché’s forthcoming essay, “In-Difference to Philosophy: De Man on Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche,” *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Wlad Godzich and Lindsay Walters (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P).

by a certain *dependency* of subjectivity on language. Language (*qua* writing) constitutes the “ground” of the subject. Yet precisely this *dependency of the subject on the linguistic* needs to be reconsidered with great care. “Rhetorical readings” tend to consider the subject a delusory “figure” which, in the course of the text’s own performance, cannot but disseminate into the differential structure of this very texture. By arguing that the positional metaphor of a self will eventually reveal itself as its own allegory—as a state of suspension between the literal and the figural—“rhetorical readings” implicitly come to understand the subject’s relation to its text as one of absolute and fatal dependency.

There exists, however, since the critical philosophy of Kant a distinction between absolute and ideal dependencies, that is, between those notions strictly dependent on an antecedent being (*ratio essendi*) and those dependent on a structure—such as Saussure’s language as play of differential relations without positive terms—for the purpose of self-cognition (*ratio cognoscendi*).³⁰ It is on the basis of this classic distinction that a certain notion of consciousness and intentionality can and indeed should be retained as a critical category for the study of literature. Particularly in the case of romantic autobiographical narratives, such a consciousness (which is not posited as self-identical) explores its possibility to become a coherent self through a sequence of reflection, writing and revision. It does so by taking recourse to the differential structure of language; for the balance of its identity and difference, however preliminary it may be, can only be struck within a medium on which consciousness is dependent not in a factual but in an ideal sense.

In his Essay *La Transcendence de l’Égo*, Jean Paul Sartre characterized such a non-positional, “non-egological” conception of consciousness.³¹

30. “I will only remind the reader that, though freedom is certainly the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the latter is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobs Merrill, 1956) 4. See also J. G. Fichte’s distinction between *Realgrund* and *Idealgrund*, *Science of Knowledge* (1795), trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970) 145–47. In the present context of a post-structuralist approach to language and the question of the subject, this distinction has been reinstated by Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983) 360 f.

31. See also Aron Gurwitsch, “A Non-egological Conception of Consciousness,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1 (1940–41): 325–38. Sartre, insisting on its pre-reflective character, shelters his notion of consciousness also from critiques (such as that of Post-Structuralism) which understand the subject as a “figure” which, *qua* reflexivity, wishes to coincide with itself and thus hopes to escape the threat of a discontinuity brought on by its temporal status. On the problematic reduction of the category of the subject to a reflexive model, see also Manfred Frank 257 f.

Sartre shows how consciousness, which he understands strictly as intentionality (consciousness of something), can bifurcate itself in the process of reflection. It can either content itself with the retention of the intentional object or—and this is what we usually observe in the romantics' greater lyrics—it *can reflect itself*. When doing the latter, for Sartre, consciousness is indeed reflecting, but it is still not reflexive; that is, it now relates to itself just as it previously related to its object, namely, *qua* intentionality. Thus the process of reflection is not governed by an integral and self-identical subject. Instead, by exploring the conditions of possibility for such a self (what Husserl calls “reflection in memory”), consciousness proves in an “ideal” sense dependent on the structure of language through which alone it can *represent* its previous intentional “states” (as Sartre calls them).³² As Manfred Frank characterizes this dependency of consciousness on language: “The idea of an autonomously understood differentiability [i.e., language] simply cannot explain the *existence* of a consciousness *for* which signifiers can have meaning.”³³ Hence, to observe that “selfhood is not a substance but a figure” (AR 170) is well justified, yet such claims acquire relevance only if, as readers, we relate them to a distinct consciousness whose quest for a notion of self might be affected by this suspension between the figural and the literal.

Probably no one was more keenly aware of this *ideal* dependency of consciousness on language than the romantics, and specifically the earlier Wordsworth. The frequently noted liminal status of consciousness during moments of most intense experience evinces its dependence on a preexisting cultural and symbolic order which it must transcend in a productive manner so as to articulate a sense of self.³⁴ And it is precisely on account of its original non-identity with itself, that consciousness *can* transcend these systems, and thus itself, so as to found meanings of

32. See Sartre (TE 43) and his reference to Husserl's lectures on the *Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness*. Coleridge states this constructive—or, as Sartre calls it, non-positional—relation of consciousness to itself as a potential subject as follows: “It is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject.” *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1983) 273.

33. Frank 363 (translation mine).

34. “This ek-static, non-identical Being of the self is indeed the premise for the structurality of the structure; for the latter requires, so as to be not a mere ensemble of natural differences, a transcendent interpretation in the perspective of which the in and of itself meaningless being of signs is illuminated and explored on behalf of its (cultural or, if you wish, symbolic) value,” Frank 364 (translation mine).

selfhood. Still, the constantly present horizon of temporality causes a consciousness, reflecting and writing on its potential selfhood, to remain at all times provisional. Yet this incapacity of consciousness to make its founded meanings of self-hood coincide with itself *does not challenge its factual existence* as consciousness but merely *causes a deferral of its intended, unified referent: the self*.³⁵ Thus Sartre's claim seems justified that "everything given to us by our intuitions of the ego is always given as capable of being contradicted by subsequent intuitions" (*TE* 75). His observation also contains the kernel for a deeper understanding of the pervasive poetic revisionism which characterizes so much romantic autobiographical narrative.³⁶

As the peculiar overlapping of romantic and contemporary thinking on the relation of subjectivity and language indicates, romanticism is anything but a remote literary epoch reserved for narrow and somewhat esoteric scholarly pursuits. On the contrary, it is with the advent of romanticism (beginning, perhaps, with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) that the humanistic question of "what is man?" is fundamentally reassessed. For the romantics, man is no longer adequately characterized as that being who "possesses language," a being which relates to the *logos* like a determinant grammatical subject to its object. Rather than being the origin of expression, the subject—in a highly tentative and provisional sense—presents itself *as the referent* of expressive acts of a consciousness. In its figuration of an integral self, consciousness seeks shelter from its inherently discontinuous existence as mere "awareness of" a self-sufficient nature. As an essentially non-egological agency, expressive consciousness exists always and irreducibly within a differential and highly sensitive structure of language. Even though its existence does not coincide with this structure, this language constitutes the "ground" on which alone consciousness can determine itself as a subject. Such "perfectibility," as Rousseau and Kant call it, not only allows consciousness to transcend itself toward a potentially greater autonomy

35. This deferral of significance is also central to what Tilottama Rajan proposes as the "supplement of reading." Such readings, she writes, do "not ground the stability of the text any more than does rhetorical reading, [but] they assume (or perhaps create) for literature the affective and referential functions that rhetorical reading suspends," "Displacing Post-Structuralism" 469. In this context, we would have to consider the reflective act of poetic revision by the romantics themselves as a particularly instructive form of "self-reading."

36. "Being related as ek-static to the object of its projections, the subject never fully coincides with its Being (i.e., with its "having-become"); yet it certainly has a consciousness of itself as a projection that does not coincide with itself," Frank 366 (translation mine).

qua subject, but it simultaneously exhibits the purely differential play of linguistic structures to be more than the formal aggregate of a “system of figures and its deconstruction.” If romanticism teaches us that subjectivity can be thought only as a linguistic and thus provisional projection by an intrinsically unstable and non-identical consciousness, then the study of romanticism will have to relate the significance of this fact to the always fundamental question concerning man. In an early essay, entitled “Criticism and Crisis,” Paul de Man seems to have intuited the “privileged” status of romanticism when he suggests that “from this point on, a philosophical anthropology would be inconceivable without the consideration of literature as a primary source of knowledge” (*BI* 19).

State University of New York at Buffalo