

"I is an Other"

Delusions of Identity

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The word "identity," like too many abstract words, has become a repetitive slogan in contemporary usage, sometimes even a resolute exemption from feeling and thinking. Identity is sacred; it is evident; we can only be for it.

We use this little abstract word none too seriously. We rush to build ideological camps on it. However, it conceals abysses that the greatest minds since Plato have sought to explore. We can read in the *Timaeus*, with respect to being and by opposition to becoming: "It is a solitary and unique circle, but because of its excellence capable of living alone with itself, without needing anyone else, and with respect to relations and friends, it is self-sufficient."

Such is identity, closed onto itself, in the absolute. Its current incantatory usage outside of the metaphysical circle wants to create a premature and dangerously pretentious evidence. The pretension can quickly become nervousness and aggressiveness. Everyday and everywhere we hear nations, provinces, religions, sects, ethnic groups, sexual groups, claiming their identity, branding it like a totem, proclaiming it as menaced, and declaring a more or less holy war to save it from the attacks or deadly insults of which it is the object. Since Erikson's book published in 1968 (*Identity, Youth, and Crisis*), the refrain of identity can also be heard in the language of individual psychology, where it is learnedly a question of "quest," "crisis," "construction," "claim" of identity.

This inflation of identities creates a singular cacophony. Such is the charge of violence, muffled or declared, that "identity" takes on everywhere it is invoked – to the extent that we cannot simply turn a deaf ear. Justly because "identity," in its current usage, outside of its original circle, supposes as solved the true difficulty that the con-

tents of this notion imply, it is worth at least determining the outlines. And then there is suffering, as much as there is blindness in such a compulsive and common usage of a word. This suffering at least is true even if the slogan/symptom that reveals it sometimes diverts and often dispenses it from knowing and freeing itself.

Identity is a word of late and scholastic Latin: *Identitas*. It comes from the language of metaphysicians, dreaded and detested by the humanists of the Renaissance. They wanted to replace it with a Latin of poets, of masters of wisdom, and of orators. It is to this attempt to escape from metaphysics that we owe modern literatures. For the scholastics, *identitas* defines the character of being-in-itself, the *semper idem*, the Same (*le Même*), unaltered by inconstancy in time; another character of this being-in-itself is the *semper unum*, the One, unaltered by multiplicity in space. For this Same, there is no Other. For this One, there is no plural. As Socrates attributes to Diotima in the *Symposium*, Eros's myth supposes that the son of Wealth and Poverty, who governs the human heart, is by definition without *identitas*: he *desires* the plenitude of being that is withheld from him, and it is this desire, impossible to satisfy, even imperfectly, without the collaboration of others, that renders him alive and fertile. It should be noted that the theological dogma of the Trinity spares the Christian God the metaphysical abstraction of the "Supreme Being" of deistic philosophers: the absolute identity of such a Being would render Him perfectly foreign to the desire and suffering of humans, and His perfect self-sufficiency would have in fact dispensed Him from going outside of Himself to create existences dependent on Him and to suffer from love the Incarnation of the Son. The Trinity tears the divine away from identity and opens its dialogue with the mortals.

Identity (as for unity), transcendental trait of Being-in-itself, can become the principle of a tragic misunderstanding when it alleges leaving its metaphysician laboratory in order to describe the human phenomenon. If Plato invented the Eros myth, if sensible theologians believed it a good thing to introduce plurality into the God of love, even more so the moralist must state that humans – and the societies they form – are divided against themselves, dependent on others: everything human exists on the mode of the successive, of the elusive, of the multiple. In the eighteenth cen-

tury, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume devoted himself to a radical critique of the notion of identity abusively applied to human experience. He prefers the notions of uniqueness or singularity, more in accordance with our situation in the flux of time. Uniqueness and singularity convey the resemblances that we believe to recognize in order to draw out from empirical experience, to our measure, the *relatively* stable figures, though devoid of all identity in the metaphysical sense: starting with the "self." To take these resemblances for identity is to confuse the multiple, mobile, elusive, metamorphic, intertwined reality that is ours with the fixed representations that we make of it, and with the arbitrary divisions that we impose on it: these representations and divisions are always tempted to harden into metaphysical entities. We project a phantom of being-in-itself where there is only, by definition, becoming, passages, and repetitions. This essentialist projection introduces nonetheless a dangerous and deceptive "false environment" in the knowledge that we can have of ourselves and of things of human life in general.

Well before Hume, Montaigne's *Essays* (sum of the humanism of the Renaissance) had shown that the human "self" is a "passage," all the more supportable and pleasant that it doesn't have any illusion about its multiplicity, its metamorphoses, its dependence on others, its mortality. If our spirit has the idea of an ontological "identity" and "unity," this idea is but the shadow of the changes and the multiplicity that govern the reality of our mode of existing. What goes for the individual "self" also goes for the political communities. The "conservative" Montaigne perfectly sees that the form and the religion of the Kingdom of France (pulverized by the civil wars) comes close to "custom," and not to the metaphysical *idem* and *unum*. But this custom, created by a long habit, anchored by the imagination, is the singularity of the kingdom; it favors its uniqueness; it is preferable to this violent state which shines a bloody light on the little reality of these institutions, on the bottom of the river that carries all human things. Montaigne thus creates the ground for the Edit de Nantes.

But he would have been sorry, as were his best seventeenth century readers, if he could have seen the grandson of Henri de Navarre, Louis XIV, impose on the kingdom an identity and a

unity of metaphysical type, with the pretext of forever avoiding (as if "forever" was something other than a postulation itself metaphysical) disorder and civil war. Louis XIV's "The State, is me" is indeed the other excess that menaces mortals, as violent in its order as the anarchy and chaos in which are dissolved their singularities and uniqueness extracted with difficulty from time: the vanity of metaphysically freezing their "self" or their "state" into an architecture closed onto itself in the image of the Supreme Being, despite everything that we know of humanity, of its relation to itself and with the divine. Socrates's humility ("What do I know?"), for the individual as for the politician, is the best beginning of wisdom. Proust is in accordance with the humanists of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when he writes, in *Time Regained*: "The memory of the most successive being establishes for him a kind of identity and makes it that he would not want to fail to keep the promises that he remembers."

In memory, in retrospection, in the superimposition of memories, Proust discerns the single principle of this "type of identity" of which humans are capable, an entirely relative identity, but which founds, with fidelity to a given word, the possibility of a moral and social life. Identity crops up in human life only as a lack. It is only manifest in memories (*le souvenir*), and in the will that depends on the resemblances observed by memories.

Identity cannot take part of the definition of mortals. It applies to them only metaphorically, fictitiously, at the price of a crafting of the imagination and of memory that are very similar to poetic invention. When this crafting vainly wants to state to the industry and put metaphysical identities into serial circulation, the forgetting of metaphor, the denial of fiction, the abusive ontologization of memories, leave the ground of reality and human common sense. The sublime egotism of the Supreme Being moves from the empyrean where He can at least enjoy Himself in peace; He spreads out as bits and pieces of the absolute, and in the terrestrial atmosphere, He makes the impression of these small steel balls that terrorists enjoy placing inside their home-made bombs, in order to multiply its deadly effects.

Civil and judiciary identity, inscribed on those "identity papers" that play such an important role, comical and tragic, in

the life of modern individuals, the objective "description" established by anthropometry that permits police officers, if need be, to "spot" us, are themselves juridical *fictions*, most foreign to the experience that we have of ourselves: it happens that we dangerously depend on this arbitrarily divided "being" in our multiple and singular reality. It is fallacious and absurd to represent as an "identity crisis" that which is, in reality and all the contrary, a difficulty in assuming with ease and humor the plasticity and the fleeting indetermination of our nature. We will see nonetheless, in accordance with the implacable logic of this language, administered cures to this type of crisis, according to various techniques, create a confectioned character and superpose it on the troubled patient: this rented identity resembles the new faces constructed by aesthetic surgery, it is fragile and fixed like a clay or plastic mask. National, ethnic, or sexual "identities" summarily defined, thing-ified, essentialized, which we are tempted to reclaim to make the right impression in the universal demand, are just as much ridiculous and dangerous alibis which we have recourse to in order to escape the "passage" described by Montaigne and of which he teaches us the difficult yet smiling good usage.

To hold both extremities of the chain, between the fleetingness of our existence in time and our relation to others, and the continuity of this poetic fiction which is our "I" and always requires to be taken up again, such is the measure to be found for each individual as for each social group. The worst and most costly solution is to liberate oneself of this task of invention and balance by taking up an identity wholly exterior and prefabricated, as clamorous as it leaves intact, under the mask, individual or collective, the painful interior turmoil that agitates it, that it purports to liberate, while its worry is fertile. It is a resignation of human profession, of which the consequences are always harmful. It is a very tempting and common resignation: anthropometric identities, personal or communal, summons of the "universals" of medieval metaphysics are now for sale in large numbers, like as many fake identification cards, in the modern political forum, as in the commercial market of "ways of life."

This temptation, and the ideological industry that answers to its demands, have both been legitimized by Western metaphysics:

forgetting Montaigne's and the Renaissance's lessons, it employed itself again, since Descartes, to rehabilitate the language of the Being to state the human and think the political and the moral. Descartes's "Cogito" freezes the identity of the "self" in the downstream exercise of a thought applied to inert matter, but dispensed from knowing itself upstream, as Montaigne had done it. When Kant, interpreted by Gilson, wants to see in the person "the identity of a thinking substance that remains the same through all the acts it exercises and for whom its own unity predestines to immortality," like Descartes, he projects on the "I" the characteristics that the metaphysical laboratory confers to Being-in-itself, and he warns it to invent itself on the mode that suits it: the poetic mode, the open mode.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropology asks Rousseau (and his "I feel, therefore I am") and not Descartes for its founding thought. Also anthropology confronted itself with the great misunderstanding that separates the societies without writing from what is hastily named "Western thought." The former, unconcerned with the principle of contradiction, "savagely" plays on what Lévy-Bruhl called "prelogical participation" which comes from rather generalized metaphoricization, between the animal kingdom, human society, and the world of gods. The clear and distinct identity that metaphysicians since Descartes got us used to is diverted by this ease, called "primitive," to be both oneself and an animal, oneself and a god, and to find in it "a type of identity" to a certain extent more in conformity with the one described by Montaigne (great apologist of "animal mirror" for the human "know yourself, yourself") than with the axiomatic one that Descartes and his posterity state. The "primitives" like poets and like Montaigne know that everything human is metaphorical and not metaphysical, and that the singularity, the uniqueness of all humans and all groups are a fiction protected by a mnemotechnic, and not by an identity essence.

"Western thought" is fortunately not reduced to the metaphysical idealism for which the modern abuse of the word "identity" unconsciously holds its prestige and legitimacy. La Fontaine's *Fables* are Western; Rousseau's *Reveries* are Western, and his *Profession du vicaire savoyard*, which makes compassion, identification

with the other, and not identity, proper to mortal man projected in time and not sufficient to himself. Rimbaud's "I is an other" is Western. Equally Western is the humanism of the Renaissance that asks the symbols, which signify in several directions and permit to think together the contraries, to seize and orient the little "identity" that humans are capable of without altogether obliterating their diversity, their multiplicity, their contradictions, and their salutary worry. This entire side of "Western" thought and poetry (in conflict with its metaphysics) is by definition hospitable to the symbolic experience of other peoples: this experience, and the interpretation it is susceptible to, in reality comforts that which, in the West, resists the tyranny of metaphysical realism, and its ideological diminutive, the most greedy, the sharpest, the most menacing: the modern fury of "identities."

Nothing is more urgent in this ending century than to meditate on conflicts related to identity. These have been for a long time internal to Western history, but now they have expanded over the entire world. They have ravaged the closing twentieth century, and leaves us now at crossroads. To go back over this century, ours, is not easy. We are tempted to add it to the sun and death of which La Rochefoucauld said that they cannot be viewed fixedly. For the moment, in the annals of humanity, this century is the most unspeakably and monstrously inhuman that we have known. We can ask ourselves if the abuse of metaphysical "identity" in the language of things properly human is not largely responsible.

The greatest historians and thus the most bitter, Tacitus and Taine, seem to be retrospectively spoiled children or princesses of peas when they soberly comment on the cruelties exercised by Neron on the Roman senatorial elites, or the Jacobin's blood thirst during the French Revolution. These great generous intelligences, when they evoked the premodern political tyranny and its deadly craft, were capable of keeping enough distance and cold blood to give to their testimonies an eloquent form, and to maintain hope that this eloquence would not be useless. *Historia magistra vitae*, Cicero wrote with an optimism that has left us.

The horror of the twentieth century at this point exceeds the limits of literary and historical description that no Gibbon felt capable of evoking, in its monotonous immensity, the industrial triumph of

death in the twentieth century. Homer can narrate Hector's death or Hugo the massacre of the Guard "who dies and doesn't surrender." Hippolyte Taine can show the massacres of September, or Louis Madelin the battlefield of Eylau. These tragedies remain on the scale of imagination, feeling and power of human words. At the mere idea of the excessive and quasi universal horror of the twentieth century, language must concede defeat. It is not in fact innocent with respect to this apocalypse.

No one had let it be heard with more silent desperation than Samuel Beckett. We can without a doubt, drawing a boundary in the sacred terror, give ourselves a chance to describe one circumscribed moment of the modern slaughter: rendering it thinkable and imaginable, isolating from general horror, we also take the risk of making it common ground. Outside of the silence of *Endgame*, only the numbers, in their countable nudity, in their inhuman coldness, can elusively convey the extent of human ossuary erected by the twentieth century in the face of an appalled sky.

This dark age of all of the ages started with the Armenian genocide, pursued itself in the massacre of the 1914-1918 battlefields, it continued in crescendo following the collective and programmed assassinations that declaimed the history of the USSR well before 1940 (the 1929-1932 collectivization, ten million deaths, the 1933 Ukrainian genocide, five million deaths, the 1934-1938 Great Terror, three million deaths). This gigantic fury of murder found a second wind during the Second World War atrociously murderous in and of itself, but during which Nazi Germany committed the genocide of more than six million Jews, and the collective assassinations of many Slav and Gypsy populations. Immediately following the end of the war, the USSR liquidated at the very least five million prisoners and deported persons. Since the war, the rhythm and extent of the massacres has not diminished: the 1962 Chinese "Great Leap" forward cost thirty-five million lives and the 1968 "cultural revolution" cost perhaps three million. The aftermaths of the Vietnam war were even more bloody than the war itself: Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, the red Khmers' Cambodia, were the theater of internal liquidations that also number the millions. Africa has paid its tribute, in Biafra, Rwanda, Liberia, and now in Algeria, proportionally more modest but no less atrocious, to the bloody

Fury that has sculpted this century, and which hasn't either spared Latin America.

We have lived in the century of technology. With its large scale efficiency, technology has made it possible to promote murder up until now craft-like to the ranks of large yield industry. The flying fortresses that in successive waves smashed Dresde with their bombs, the two black suns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that in a few seconds killed or hurt the populations of entire cities, arrived safe and sound by men concentrated on their machines: technology introduces a comfortable cleavage between compassion natural to humans, and the agony that they can inflict on their own kind, destroyed from afar and in mass without their murderers seeing them nor hearing them die. Technology endows with protective masks the elite teams recruited and trained by Death.

Our century is also that of organization. Organization knows to make of humans the well oiled wheels of an efficient collective mechanism, state, army, party, office, factory, laboratory, camp, specialized team. These human mechanisms are able to crush, without a creaking wheel, millions of human lives, as if it were about inert matter. Hannah Arendt has admirably analyzed the bureaucratic phenomenon and the modern taylorism that eventually know how to reduce the murderous fury to a regular routine, and banalize atrocity.

Technology and organization are means. They explain to rigor how certain forms particularly hypocritical and ferocious of the massive twentieth century barbarity could have operated coldly and efficiently. They are no less characterized by their essential moral indifference, of a dreadful neutrality without a doubt but unqualifiable in and of itself. They indifferently make themselves the auxiliaries of the aggressors who want to multiply their arms and of the aggressed who refuse to let themselves be struck down. Crime as much as legitimate right can put them into action. They can be the *instruments* of modern tragedy. They do not detain their interior fate. Modern tragedy is not the atrocious privilege of countries with an "advanced" technological equipment and with efficient organization. Numerous large-scale massacres took place in countries where neither technology nor organization were perfected, where the antique firearm and even the archaic blade

weapon, brandished by undisciplined assassins, have killed or tortured defenseless crowds: no sophisticated office or arsenal screen protected their consciences or anesthetized their compassion.

We can divide the difficulty, we can isolate every tragedy, we can discover motives at each modern massacre as well as singular means, each clearly distinct from one another. This partition is legitimate. It imposes itself on the specialized historian. It has the fault of compartmentalizing the landscape of the century, of debiting the money of evil from the absolute that it has. This method prevents the modern Montaigne, haunted by the spectacle of a civil war of man against man spread now across the planet, from seeking in himself, to uproot himself, the principle which, at the origin of all these unbearable monstrosities, armed the arm of the killers, triggered the storms of steel, started the murderous mechanisms.

The twentieth century was not only that of technology and organization: it was also that of slogans that make the masses, "developed" or not, walk. A slogan is the obsidianal, abstract, and short idea, the idea/idol that stays, once the towers of wisdom fall into ruin for which humanity, protecting itself against itself, creates for itself livable homes within its reach. Every edifice of wisdom, whether it takes the form of oral or written tradition, whether made up of stories or sentences, of prayers or maxims, whether it comes under mythology, religion, philosophy, or folklore, is by definition a delicately articulated symbolic organism, accorded to the things of life: it is the fruit of experience of numerous generations along which clever and well-meaning spirits relayed themselves, anonymous or glorious, that looked to perpetuate and update this visible or invisible house of education where children learn to take human form and live decently among themselves and with others. Such is the nutritive environment where the uniqueness and singularity of a group or an individual can manifest themselves in a natural way. These symbolic edifices (durable because constantly revived, at the same time very different in surface and converging in depth) can undo themselves and wither: none surely is the Truth, but all, in their way, archaic or modern, with local or universal vocation, have in common to give candidates for humanity a reason and an orientation of being. Once these edifices crumble there crops up a word without a sen-

tence, a short idea, that coagulates *en masse* the formless and scattered individuals surviving their forgotten house: it gives neither sense nor form to the new believers, but it pushes them to share the same fear and the same hatred together, hiding their nudity under a shield of absolute righteousness.

These abstract words, these short but mobilizing ideas, have multiplied across this century, like biblical grass-hoppers. They have parasitized entire languages like the phylloxera did in the last century with the vines. They did not content themselves with governing imperiously the spirit and the will of numerous masses, to which they gave the illusion of reforming a community: they dominated men and women using all the means of independence and judgment and nonetheless gave their pride as an example of this sacrifice of intelligence and of heart.

We can enumerate some of these slogans: nationalism, national-socialism, fascism, communism, fundamentalism. We can analyze the conceptual and imaginary crystallization, often more than summary, sometimes tortuous, always deceptive, that gave the appearance of life and a durable contagion to its generators of stereotype. All have as a substrate, in the last analysis, an idea of death: identity. Social class identity, racial identity, national identity, sectarian religious identity: as many retracted and impersonal "selves," tetanized by the aggression they deem themselves victims of, that seek to prevent, avenge, or turn upside down this aggression by suppressing the supposed aggressors. The blood thirsty Fury that has traveled across our century, modern figure of the antique allegory of Death armed with its scythe, has found ardent accomplices everywhere where has triumphed, in one guise or another, the funerary idea of identity.

Thankfully the word "identity," even in the imprudent usage that some moderate minds can make of it, is not always charged with this sinister meaning. It is often a regrettable vagueness that means *singularity*. If "identity" hides a dreadful background, singularity on the contrary is inseparable from humanity itself, diverse by definition, and taking on forms that do not resemble one another.

These forms created by experience, individual or common, transmitted by habit, custom, and memory, often tested by dura-

tion, are as many vehicles permitting the "I" or the "group" to traverse time without corrupting themselves in Heraclitus's river. Language, myth, religion, public and private behavior, symbolic systems, these groups of fictions (with a more or less large plasticity, with a more or less vivid power of adaptation) cannot be described or understood as immutable essences. When this happens to them, it is that they have already ceased to be beneficial and salutary, that is, alive and supporting the path of mortals.

The hardening of these lively singularities into a barren "identity" spiked with defenses is always the final stage of their withering, of their drying out.

It is the vitality of singularities, individual or collective, it is their naturalness, refound and exerted with prudence, with pleasure, that alone preserves from falling into the violent demand of identity.

The slogans of "globalization," of "homogenization," of "pluriculturalism" without face or memory, by which we imagine ourselves today answering to the demands of identity, stir up on the contrary new furies. Let us cultivate and love our singularities without clenching, make sure that our patrimony of uniqueness remains well alive, learn to make irrefutable and lovable to others that which distinguishes us all the while admitting and loving ourselves that which distinguishes them: we will traverse "globalization" without feeling obliged to escape it, to close ourselves in the grave of identity.