

Identity and deconstruction*

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An attempt to explain the strict connection between identity and deconstruction. Both are understood as a necessary experience of calling otherness and impossibility to close the borders of 'ego' up. Identity is defined not as a matter of substance but in terms of relationship with others. One cannot discuss identity without a place that is invaded by the other, without speech, which can reverberate with other voices, and without time, where the illusion of the fortified 'I' disappears.

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Introduction

Nowadays, when we are so much troubled by the question 'Who am I? Who are we?' to join identity and deconstruction seems a rather risky gesture. Is identity subject to deconstruction or does it resist it? Does deconstruction ruin or save identity? In other words, does deconstructed identity pose a threat that should be avoided at all costs, or is it hope that opens our eyes? I maintain that remedy lies not in the former, but in the latter solution and I will firmly stand by it. My thesis is the following: identity that does not yield to deconstruction, identity that cannot be deconstructed is no identity at all, but either illusion or an empty word. So as to substantiate my stance adequately, I must explain at the very beginning what deconstruction is and why it cannot be separated from the issue of identity.

Deconstruction

It is generally known that the term 'deconstruction' was introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, but not everybody remembers that it constituted an attempt to find a proper word for Heidegger's concept of philosophy as presented in *Sein und Zeit*.

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‘Among other things I wished,’ said Derrida, ‘to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*. Each signified in this context an operation bearing on the structure or traditional architecture of the fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French “destruction” too obviously implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean “demolition” than to the Heideggerian interpretation or to the type of reading that I proposed. So I ruled it out’ [1].

It must be recalled that when Heidegger used the word *Destruktion*, he primarily referred to a positive goal of ‘aerating the solidified tradition and liquidating the covers formed by it’ [2]. In this sense destruction, which must be clearly stressed, has no negative features, has nothing to do with annihilation or demolition, but provides a way to open whatever was covered, frozen, immobilised by tradition and its thoughtlessness.

So one should think about deconstruction in exclusively positive terms. Derrida himself said:

‘Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an “ensemble” was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end’ [1].

What is the stake of deconstruction is the comprehension of whatever was constructed, that is whatever was specifically shaped by history, tradition and culture, which pretend that this shape was not born throughout the ages but is an inherently natural outcome of a given phenomenon. Deconstruction is then, as if by definition, a historical and critical method whose subject is discourse, i.e. what we say about the world and what we do not, what we proclaim and what we conceal. Therefore its obvious method is to de-construct, to melt the petrified chunk of discourse, to stratify the uniform monolith of utterance, to disassemble the rusted machinery of thought. To what end? So as to provide an opportunity to say and think what hitherto, for various reasons, has been unspeakable and unthinkable, to reactivate speech and thought, to set discourse afloat again. When deconstruction meets with vehement criticism of various circles, it is, I suppose, precisely because the dissolution of discourse fossils, the thaw of mental constriction is unpropitious for those who are actually afraid to think and do not want to undergo the trial, the risk and the experience of deconstruction.

Deconstruction, and this is its second facet, is not only a method, not only a critical and historical technique to analyse discourse, but above all experience. The Polish word ‘doświadczenie’, as opposed to the English or French term, unfortunately does not carry all the meanings that lie in the Latin ‘*experientia*’ derived from the verb ‘*experior*’, that is ‘to face a trial’, which implies a constantly renewed sensation rather than a permanent recognition. Derrida wrote:

‘I like the word “experience”, whose origin says something about transgression. This transgression is connected with the body and with the space that is given beforehand but opens in the course of passage’ [3, 5].

Experience, every experience is first and foremost a trial or traversal that shatters the foundations of our existence, which are unable to support the unexpected, the unforeseen, the unplanned. ‘When experience appears,’ says Derrida, ‘there appears a relation to something else’ [3]. And deconstruction in multiple ways speaks about

this unexpected experience, the experience of the other. Suddenly, when we encounter something different, something that cannot be related to pre-existent knowledge, we enter the area where we have to transgress the boundaries of the self, where we cannot but relate to something other, which in turn constitutes a trial for us and a risk of experience. On the other hand, in the selfsame risky area we find a foretaste of the regained (or only constructed) identity. And I state (and this thesis, I suppose, corresponds with the main subject matter of this symposium) that the stake of deconstruction is nothing else but our troublesome, accepted and unaccepted identity, which distinguishes us from others and which, for good or bad, bonds us with others. Deconstruction is not only a careful reading of philosophical texts or a galvanisation of dead discourse. It is predominantly an *experience* of passage, journey, trial, endurance, traversal, and transgression. This experience is *par excellence* philosophical because its proper sphere is transcendence: the world that goes beyond me, the world that troubles me, the world that tempts me; in a word, whatever makes it impossible for me to withdraw into myself and there, in the safe castle of the 'I', to watch the spectacle of reality. But there is, which you know all too well, the other side to experience when what goes beyond me may become an unbearable burden, when the walls of the 'I' enclose me irrevocably. Then passage, transgression, and journey proceed in the reverse direction and it is very hard to return from this unwanted journey.

'I am not portraying being,' wrote Montaigne four centuries ago, 'but becoming' [4]. This sentence expressed a strong conviction that one's identity is not a given, but that it is formed in the experience of passage; it does not lie in *l'être*, but in *le passage*. This passage shatters the safe boundaries of the 'I', within which I feel at home; on the other hand it makes me open to what I do not understand and what I would like to understand in order to know myself better.

Identity

If I were to say in one sentence what deconstruction is and how it is connected with identity, I would not use Derrida's words at all, but rather turn to one of the most insightful Polish philosophers Witold Gombrowicz. In his *Journal*, Gombrowicz put down such a declaration:

'I cannot be myself, yet I want to be myself and I have to be myself: an antinomy of the irreconcilable kind (...); so do not expect from me remedies for incurable illnesses' [6].

Since I have to and want to be myself and at the same time, as univocally stated by Derrida and Gombrowicz, I cannot be myself, then at the point when I establish myself as myself, somebody else enters my place and somebody else starts to invade me within me. This unavoidable clash of the same and the other, the clash called identity, is not an incident that one could eschew. Identity is not provided beforehand, it does not close like a fist, although some people can conceive it only in this way. It is formed under the pressure of the other, which is not alien and external but exists here within us and does not allow us to separate from the world. We are ourselves inasmuch as we cannot be ourselves and inasmuch we continue to open ourselves to

the other, which does not allow us to rest in our own, sealed interiors. To be oneself means to keep looking into the gap which separates one from oneself. It is impossible to be somebody but by differing from somebody else. It is obvious, but ceases to be so when we place the difference not outside, but inside the 'I'. It turns out then that the other that allows me to be myself does not stay outside but within me, is a part of me as irreplaceable tissue that builds up my body. If you wish me to, I will speak straightforwardly: if I am a Pole because I am not a Jew (and vice versa), I am a Pole also because I cannot free myself both from being Jewish and being Polish, because Jewishness hallmarks me for good and for bad. Near the end of his beautiful and wise text about Levinas, Derrida quoted a memorable sentence by James Joyce: 'Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet' [8]. What I am saying does not mean that, as in Joyce, extremes meet, but that the difference between me and the other, between a Pole and a Jew, lies not between us but within us and it cannot be expunged from us.

As I said in the above, deconstruction is a philosophy of experience, passage, trial, and opening the borders for the unpredictable. And what is the most unpredictable? The other man, of course. (S)he is the most elusive and least submissive, although on the other hand (s)he imposes him(her)self upon me and waits for my answer. I cannot get too familiar with him/her, I cannot appropriate him/her and own him/her, because (s)he will lose then his/her otherness; simultaneously, I cannot leave him/her alone, beyond my horizon, since then I will not meet him/her at all. This constitutes the paradox of identity. Otherness is inscribed in the structure of Identity as the primary condition of its possibility (i.e. if I were not different from others, I would not be myself). Yet Otherness is also the primary condition of its impossibility, because when I mention others so as to speak about myself, I lose my autonomy and forfeit the opportunity to create my own language. The condition for the existence of the possibility of Other (when the other appears on my horizon as somebody different from me) is the condition of its impossibility (because he appears on my, not on his horizon). This is the incurable antinomy mentioned by Gombrowicz: identity should not be conceived as a given, as something which exists in an absolutely perfect way, carefully separated from the world and from everything different. Identity is not a matter of substance but of economy: I have to relate to something different from me in order to be myself, but at the same time my self falls apart and I cannot distinguish within me between what is my own and what is alien and strange. This economy may be indispensable (as I would not be able to distinguish myself from others without it), however, it is also appalling. Due to the relativity of identity, all I considered my very own I have to share with others, and not only with those who, just as myself, answer the question 'Who am I?' (I am a Pole, I am a Jew), but perhaps primarily with those who answer this question in a different way.

Let us return for a while to the core experience of deconstruction, which I called the experience of passage and transgression. In no manner can one dispose of it while thinking about identity, which thus becomes subject to constant trials of otherness. To be able to think about myself, I have to yield to what is different from me, I have to transgress the boundaries of the self. But is it possible? Can the world that conditions my existence hide a total otherness, in which I will not be able to save myself but will

have to yield, totally, to the other?

It is precisely this risk of negation that constitutes the incurable antinomy of identity, as described by Gombrowicz. Following Derrida, we could talk here not about antinomy, but about *aporia* as a place from which there is no exit, from which one cannot remove [5]. By summoning the other (in order to distinguish myself from him/her) and by defending myself against him/her at the same time (so as not to allow him/her to overrule), I remain at the borderline, at the threshold, immobilised by the impossibility of passing to what is totally different. This is exactly, and literally, *the impasse of identity*: I have to move over to what is different and simultaneously to remain in the same place. Identity is *aporia*; it is the source experience of the border and of remaining at it, as well as the border itself, where, according to Derrida,

‘We are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other’ [5].

Delivered to the other and yet closed towards him, subject to his mercy and yet hiding from his possessiveness. How to remain at the border, how to endure the ‘naked uniqueness’, when no support is provided in the form of a ready-made label that we often mistake for a sign of identity? This question must be asked whenever we enquire, ‘Who am I? Who are you?’ If this question is really to remain a question and not a camouflaged, formulated answer, we should at all times keep it at hand, it should wait for us, ready to be asked, revised, phrased in a different language. It should put us off the obvious and off self-knowledge, which has nothing in common with identity.

It is in this positive, affirmative sense that identity cannot escape deconstruction, while deconstruction has to pertain primarily to identity. Thanks to this indissoluble bond, at the border between me and him, in the question for which there is no ultimate answer, the future opens before us. For identity is not only a matter of tradition and the past (which appears to be clear) but also, which we should not forget, of the future, of being open for the unforeseeable.

Place, speech, time

From among many possible definitions furnished in the recent years, one deserves special attention. It was put forward by Charles Taylor, the author of a monumental book about the appearing of the modern self, *The Sources of the Self*. He said:

‘My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question “Who am I?” This question derives its primary meaning from interpersonal discourse. I define who I am by defining the place from which I speak, the place in genealogy, social space, in the geography of social position and function, in intimate relationships with people I love, and, which not less important, in the space of moral and spiritual orientation inside which I enter the relationships that are the most crucial to define my life’ [8].

Identity for Taylor is then a ‘place from which one speaks’. It is not enclosed within the interior space of the ‘I’; contrariwise, it enables any discourse directed towards the other. I will not deny I like this definition as encompassing, in my opinion, three other aspects that are indispensable in thinking about identity. They are *place, speech*

and time.

Firstly, identity is a *place*. Let us say it right now that it is not a separate place, fenced off with barbed wire, inaccessible to others. Quite the opposite, it begins only when it is opened up for the approach of the other: without the other it is nothing, it is a blank with no name. This place is not situated within or without. As I said earlier, it lies at the border between the interior and exterior. As such it is the border that prevents the passage towards the other and towards the self, and the reason why our identity is so difficult an experience.

Secondly, identity is a place from which one *speaks*. And because one always speaks to somebody else (even if one is the interlocutor oneself), perfect autonomy in this place is impossible, because the conversation that I join with my words has lasted forever, and it accounts for the fact the 'one cannot be oneself completely autonomously' [8]. This means that identity cannot be discussed in one language which is uncontaminated by other languages, other idioms. Let us make it out clearly: if I can't be identical with myself until I start to speak about it (and language is never a private matter), it is quite obvious that my identity filtered by language will never encapsulate me, shielding me from the world. My identity can only be spoken of. While speaking, I allow others to build it.

Finally, the third aspect is *time*. Of course it is connected with speech, which naturally flows in time. However, I do not refer here solely to the temporal nature of speech, but to much more. Time is a sign of transcendence, of what goes beyond here and now; it cannot be reduced either to the status of a physical phenomenon or, as some philosophers suggest, an internal function of consciousness. It was Levinas, the greatest Jewish philosopher of the last century besides Derrida and Rosenzweig, who was the first to state that time is above all the 'relationship with the other.' In his early book from 1947, *Le temps et l'autre*, Levinas wrote that his task, to which he remained devoted throughout his lifetime, consisted in 'thinking about time not as a degradation of eternity, but as the relationship to something that, being impossible to assimilate and absolutely different, would resist assimilation through experience, or as the relationship to something that, being infinite as such, would be inconceivable and incomprehensible' [9].

Time is born from asymmetry, from the discrepancy between me and the absolutely different. I understand it in the following way: if identity were to exclude the other, it would be sentenced to the destruction of time, i.e. to self-destruction. Time cannot be stopped, arrested or inactivated not because it is independent from us, flows beyond us and belongs to the world of physical phenomena which is alien to us. There occur moments when time ceases to flow. This happens when man closes his world from others, when he eliminates otherness from his life, when he begins to discuss his identity, paying no regard to what is going on outside.

One cannot discuss identity without a place that is invaded by the other, without speech, which can reverberate with other voices, and without time, where the illusion of the fortified 'I' disappears. As long as we do not understand it, identity will be an empty word and our life will end before it begins.

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