

ONE

Identity and Violence

Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life . . . until it has become as it were flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away.

—Peirce

MY CANDIDATE FOR SUCH a cherished idea is the connection between identity and violence, and the hope that understanding such connections might, albeit indirectly, enable philosophy to make a contribution to peace. Rather than waking up one morning to find it vanished, I wrote this chapter to try to rescue at least one clear idea from the rank growth that had sprung up around it. I hope to show that understanding identities as constructions makes it possible to find ways of transforming the brittle, over-rigid identity formations that breed violence. Recent history is generous with examples. Not long ago war raged in what was Yugoslavia, while in Ireland bombs exploded regularly, killing and maiming. In Rwanda in 1994 the world stood by while some half-million Tutsis were slaughtered by Hutus. Only yesterday it seems, Israeli tanks fired shells into market squares in Hebron, while Palestinian teenagers blew themselves up in crowded Jerusalem restaurants. And cars packed with explosives plough into new police recruits in the streets of Baghdad, where Sunni/ Shia rivalries threaten civil war. In Yugoslavia, it was hard to believe that such violence could follow so closely on the heels of the collapse of a relatively liberal, well-educated society. The link between violence and identity is writ large in what is called “ethnic cleansing,” in which forced eviction, terror, and genocide are employed to bring about regional

racial purity. And the tragic Israeli-Palestinian situation in which identity has become a daily matter of life and death makes this connection even sharper. Ethnic difference is understood in terms of the alien, the other, and the deployment of such a category is then used to legitimate extreme brutality. It is as if an entire economy of mutual recognition and accommodation collapses into a tribal, and strictly speaking, primitive economy of rigid identification. The rigidity with which community identity is understood and the resulting fanaticism of identification (allegiance to the group), forces the most disturbing reflections. I put to one side here the possibility that such forms of ethnic fanaticism might simply be ancient myths exploited by evil politicians, though this must play a part. The question I wanted to answer was this: If the quest for identity, its maintenance and enhancement was, and still is, an independent causal factor in bringing about such horrors, what does this tell us about the relationship between personal and group identity, or about the scope of such relationship? More ambitiously, can philosophers say anything distinctive about the conditions under which less rigid identity constructs flourish? It remains my abiding conviction that it is one of philosophy's particular strengths to be able to think productively the ways in which identity is not threatened by difference but bound up with it, woven by it, and so on.¹ My ambition here is modest: to begin to conceptualize certain of the looser shapes in which personal identity is increasingly to be found, and some of the consequences that flow from the range of external conditions on which identity depends.

On reflection, everyone agrees: Identity is not one thing. When philosophers come to consider the question of identity they enter a scene already populated by forensic scientists, genetic engineers, social psychologists, regional politicians, advertising agencies, and customs officials.

We are accustomed to supposing that these senses of identity can all be gathered together under the umbrella of the empirical—but this unreflective homogeneity may well be an illusion. Within philosophy, of course, matters are no easier. Identity figures in different ways in logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. And it is commonly thought indispensable to begin by distinguishing, for instance, numerical and qualitative identity, not to mention personal, social, political identity, etc.

A philosopher will then wonder whether underlying all these senses there might not be one basic conception. Perhaps, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing."² But even in such an innocent formulation, a distinction is already being made. Identity is being defined in opposition to difference. Numerical identity is being identified by *distinguishing* it from qualitative identity, suggesting that there is an intimate connection between identity and difference. Perhaps the bare fact of such intimacy undermines from the outset any simple sense of identity. And the particular way in which some contemporary philosophers have come to understand difference—as (to

speak somewhat unguardedly) a productive principle, generating chains of connections—would bring identity and difference closer together, even as they are “opposed to one another.”

Few philosophers today would insist on the status of identity as a logical or metaphysical primitive; they are much more likely to understand it in terms of a symbolic function. Identity has acquired a life beyond its significance for logic, but it always operates at the symbolic level, where it functions as a site of repetition, overlapping, transformation, condensation, etc. And as such, identity has become complex, internally differentiated, suspended in matrices, constituted, derivative, even dispersed, distributed. Identity has become spiral, even fractal.

Is this so new? Did not even Plato have a tripartite account of the soul? Perhaps we are still trying to shake off that sense of the simple self-transparency of the self-as-subject to which Descartes introduced us. At any rate, it has become clear that no account of identity and selfhood will do that fails to acknowledge: that we try to make sense of our lives, that the ways in which we do this are subject to interrogation and doubt both from ourselves and others, that we are mortal and know it, and that we want our lives to be publicly as well as privately intelligible. But more significantly, that the means available for us to make such sense are becoming increasingly ragged, unreliable, fragmentary, and local.

The idea of a soul, an immaterial substance, the essence of me, which never changed, would certainly guarantee identity through time. But even if such a notion were intelligible, it would prove too much, and reveal too little.³ It would prove too much in that it would make the deepest anxieties about personal identity unthinkable. And it would precisely not tell us how our fragile and contingent selfhood is constructed. Essentialism drives out both doubt and complexity.

What then is required is an account of personal identity that offers not just metaphysical security, but real ability to articulate the fabric of our lives. Difference functions as a sign for what we could call a problematizing account of the constitution of identity. The key dimension of problematization is precisely over whether identity is being compromised (at the extreme, destroyed), or whether it is being thought through more carefully, more critically. I lean toward the second view: the issue at stake is not whether something exists or not, in any straightforwardly decidable way. The issue about identity is whether the forms of intelligible coherence that we can still sustain, will do the work we want of them. “Is agency still thinkable for a deconstructed self?” is not a factual question (like “Can a three-legged dog still run?”), it is about what impact certain reflections on the constitution of the self have on the ways we think about agency.⁴

For the sake of argument, I will take for granted that the self must, in one way or another, be thought of as complex, as constituted. I will leave

this sufficiently open even to include the idea that such constitution might take the form of an endless deferral of finality. When Kierkegaard reflected on the question of selfhood, he concluded (in *The Sickness unto Death*) that the question was not whether the self was constituted or not. It was clear to him that it was. The question was whether this process of constitution involved the self alone, or whether it had to pass through a relation to another being. He argued that unless we accept that the self is constituted by another, we cannot account for the existence of that form of despair in which we do not just give up our lives, but carry on, albeit anxiously.

We could not understand how doubt and interrogation about its nature could be part of the weave of our lives. Only an original entanglement with something outside of ourselves would transcend the despair of immediacy; moreover, such constitution would make us no longer transparent to ourselves.

Our age is characterized by the most profound mistrust of the transcendental, of there being deep conditions of possibility for anything. This mistrust is only partly alleviated by the gradual separation of the transcendental and transcendence, to the point at which we realize that conditions of possibility may be met by empirical phenomena, without sacrificing their status.⁵

A HERMENEUTIC INTERLUDE

Are there any “transcendental requirements for identity”? And if so, how can they be met? I would claim that “lived-identity-through-time” has to negotiate some sort of relation to the conditions of continuity. The connection between personal identity and “horizons of continuity” may be obvious, but it is worth filling it out just a little. For each of us to be ourselves, we need to be able to project possibilities, to recall the past and to be able to continue to act and make sense of our relation to the world. When any one of these dimensions is weakened, so too is our capacity for selfhood.⁶ And each of these dimensions is essentially horizontal. To project possibilities is already to take for granted the continuation of technical means, personal connections, one’s own physical and intellectual capacities, desires, etc.—all within the framework of our assumed mortality, for which we have both all the evidence we could want, and none at all. Our capacity and the shape of our capacity to recall the past will depend both on how (adequately?) we originally experienced it, but also, crucially, on the continuity (and sometimes on the discontinuity) of our powers of seeing and understanding.⁷ And these powers are not immune from the loss or transformation of public meaning. Some of these considerations are captured in the claim that if you can remember the ’60s, you weren’t there: Dramatic changes in conceptual or social space can block or transform our capacity to remember, and, just as interestingly, our capacity to draw on the past as a resource for self-interpretation and motivation.⁸ Our capacity to continue to act in particular ways is clearly bound up both with

our sense of self and with conditions that exceed each of us. We desire not just self-images but the capacity to earn a living, and the whole pattern of our productive engagement with the world derives from our being able to continue to act in certain ways. This is why unemployment is so devastating, striking at the heart of our being-in-the-world, effecting a discontinuity over which we often have no control. And it is not surprising that with loss of productive engagement with the world comes loss of self-worth. I would also mention here those possibilities of action and interaction bound up with friendships and loved ones, the loss of which can force a renegotiation of one's self-understanding, and *in extremis* our willingness to carry on.

Moreover, there is the horizon sustained by our capacity to make sense of our relation to the world. We rely on our grasp both of what, in broad terms, is happening out there, and on what it might mean, in being able to define the intelligibility of our behavior. In an extreme form, experiences of religious conversion, for example, can transform the self because they transform the ultimate horizons of significance. And these can of course be positive and revelatory as well as deeply unhinging.⁹

Finally I would add to this brief sketch of the essential horizontality of our being, the importance of place.¹⁰ A place is a site of both public and private memory. To dwell in a place is to engage in a continuing exchange of meaning through which one's identity becomes, at least in part, a kind of symbiotic relationship with where one dwells. This is true not just of those places of whom people speak fondly, but of bleak, inhospitable places too. Place here is another way of talking about past and future, about opportunities for action and interaction. The more we accept the importance of place (and correlatively "home," and even the sacred) for the construction of identity, the more we will grasp the full significance of "homelessness," "loss of nationality," and the worldwide problem of refugees. Clearly, there are powerful nomadic possibilities of identity construction. While some are simply tied to place in an extended sense, for others, traveling, wandering, "going places" clearly serves as a rich narrative resource in itself.¹¹

To sum up here: Self-identity is constituted rather than given and our capacity to construct it depends on all sorts of openness to and being sustained by "horizons of continuity"—in which material conditions and existential and hermeneutic functions coincide.

If such horizons of continuity do provide the conditions for projection, sustaining meaning, self-worth, self-understanding, and self-location in ways I have suggested, it is equally clear that it is impossible to separate the question of continuity from questions about the predictability and guarantees of such continuity. For the greater the dependence of selfhood on these horizons of continuity and intelligibility, the more one has to lose if they are disrupted, and the more one will invest in mechanisms by which such horizons can be guaranteed. Complex social life rests on a mix of legitimate expectations and

guarantees of constancy—which generate a kind of “second nature.” Common language, patterns of civility, a common range of values, laws, a stable currency—these are all interconnected. Some are maintained by habit, some by informal personal interaction, some by market mechanisms, some by strong state management.

If “lived-identity” is dependent on this whole range of legitimate expectations and guarantees of constancy—horizons of predictability—then the disturbance of these conditions, these horizons, can be expected to precipitate an identity crisis.¹²

I have implicated a range of institutions from the state downward in the maintenance of horizons of permanence that make lived-identity possible. This relationship is often indirect and partial. Our capacity to enter into exchange relationships with others depends on a common currency, and on some control over inflation. But how far this is, can be, or should continue to be a state function is a matter of considerable debate, for example in Europe, where questions of national identity are now loudly debated. Equally, those institutions of state and civil society (army, local government, the press, schools, universities) that one might have hoped would buffer state crisis or disintegration can be so heavily dependent on the state that they fail too. The return to ethnic or religious loyalties is a return to identity-bestowing affiliations that have one vital ingredient—they are reliable, and promise an end to what turned out to be a fragile dispersal of identity functions. Linking faith and power, such identity providers guarantee or claim both horizons of ultimate significance and the stable material conditions by which identity is sustained.

But one might ask: Is not the risk of death a serious objection to the claimed reliability of such affiliations—to those young men who join factional armies? The answer, of course, is absolutely not. If anything, the risk of death, as Hegel knew, is precisely what such identification deals with best. At this level, the risk of physical death is wholly secondary to the risk of loss of self. As Nietzsche put it, man would rather will nothing, than not will. And it is no accident that both religious belief and the military ethos give death the highest significance (death with honor, self-sacrifice), by which not merely through identity, but as a hero or martyr, one obtains a permanent place in the hall of fame. Only in such a disturbing light can we make sense of suicide bombers. The promises of heavenly bliss and expected payments to one’s family may lubricate the wheels. But it is surely no secret that under conditions of extreme material deprivation a challenge to one’s sense of identity can trump even one’s fear of death, and is not to be suppressed by tanks and humiliation.

There is no doubting a kind of “logic” connecting death, identity, and sacrifice.¹³ One version is played out in Lévi-Strauss’s account of cannibalism as a symbolic relationship, one in which a young man can acquire a name

(and hence an identity) only by killing and ingesting an existing name-bearer. Hostile reviews of books in journals might suggest that such a way of making a name for oneself lives on in a symbolically transformed way.

There have certainly been societies or circumstances in which such patterns of behavior have made a positive contribution. The transformation of death into sacrifice really does make something out of nothing.¹⁴ But if we can acknowledge that with all its grotesqueness such economies are still human, we can still ask: To what problems do they constitute a solution, and what alternative solutions are there? And if we think of them as “logics,” “economies,” or even “forms of life,” we must not forget how the bright young faces of the Bosnian, or Serbian, or IRA soldier, or member of the Al-Aqsa martyr’s brigade triangulate death, identity, and sacrifice in a space they help to replenish with pain, suffering, starvation, violation, etc.

Questions of identity are powerfully implicated in the recent politics of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. If anything like the analysis I have given is correct, we would be led to accept that the role of the other in the constitution of identity is far from being a matter of transcendental social psychology, but is of the deepest political importance. On our account, the story of the conditions on which we develop a distinct and individuated self is one in which the shape of our bonds to the community and to the state is of crucial significance. It would not be too perverse to treat Kafka’s novels as explorations of an identity to which the state’s contribution has become an overwhelming problem. But what for Joseph K. is a nightmare and the peoples of Eastern Europe an unthinkable horror does not allow us to describe our contemporary position as bearers of a distributed identity in the classical language of alienation. If I am right, the fact that our developing identities are made possible by their dependence on external guarantees is a description of the human condition. The fact that in Western countries it is often an array of state and other apparatuses that sustain this order rather than a local community bound together by a common faith,¹⁵ creates both deep potential instabilities but also new possibilities of identity and selfhood.

The real justification of Western democracy as a political system is that it promotes and guarantees freedom to its citizens. But there is an obvious gap between formal, legal freedom and what Isaiah Berlin long ago called positive liberty. The communitarian approach both to identity and to social values—the tradition from Aristotle through Burke, Hegel, Marx, Taylor, MacIntyre, Sandel, and Walzer—makes this point even more clearly. The “unencumbered self” is a fiction blind to its own social constitution. Treating social relations as instrumental is an epistemological error, as well as moral myopia, even in those societies that seem to encourage it. Many if not all the goods we seek are essentially relational goods. It may be important to recognize, if only to understand the attractions of the liberal alternatives, that the *illusion* of individual autonomy—not unlike what Nietzsche called “active forgetting”—may well at

times be productive for a community. To be able to choose is not just a formal condition, but one deeply dependent on other (e.g., material) conditions. If our own society is not to become riddled with pockets of violence, it has to provide above all opportunities for selfhood—that is, for recognition,¹⁶ individuation, and development.¹⁷

NARRATIVE AND THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY

I want now to return to the question of the constitution of identity. Suppose we agree that identity, or selfhood, is not given, not simple, but constituted, complex, dependent, etc.—without necessarily at this stage agreeing on a particular analysis of this. Suppose we add that identity is a distinct, often overriding human concern¹⁸ and that whether and how such concerns are met can be of enormous political significance.¹⁹

Given these premises, what can we learn from contemporary philosophical discussions of identity—particularly those that would deny it, or deconstruct it? My view is that deconstruction quite as much contributes to the highly traditional philosophical task of interrogating the nature of the self as to any denial of selfhood. And one suspects that some of those most hostile are not philosophers at all, but the very same kind of people who found Socrates' questioning tiresome.

To ask whether constructed (or de-constructed) selves are adequate substitutes for the genuine variety is of course deeply question begging. I propose to assume, heuristically, that selfhood is best thought of as constructed, and in some important sense incomplete and relational. We can then return to our question as to what if anything contemporary accounts of the self teach us.

First, however, I would like to bring narrative on stage. In recent years there has been a strong sense that narrative could supply for the identity of persons and states what a metaphysical self could no longer underpin. And moreover, that it would do so in a way that was flexible, open to development, and knitted together the personal and the social, experience and language. Surely, in principle at least, narrative would provide a softening of the outline of a viable identity, one that would reduce those grounds, at least, for violence. Matters are not, of course, that simple. One of the most interesting aspects of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* for example is that narrative is presented not so much as a way out of the violence of essentialist identity, but rather as the plane on which struggles take place. He writes:

[S]tories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world . . . they also became the method colonized people use to assert their own identity, and the existence of their own history . . . as one critic has suggested, nations are themselves narratives.

If the main battle in imperialism was over land,

these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative . . . [and] the power to narrate, or to block other narrations from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them.

I shall return to Said shortly. But first I discuss the distinctly different approaches of both Ricoeur and Derrida to the status of narrative, looking in particular at those readings Derrida gives of Nietzsche and Blanchot that probe the silent identity framing, and hence exclusion, that makes narrative construction possible.

Identity is a product not an origin. And it is important epistemologically as well as politically to grasp the constructedness of narrative; it matters that the construction of narrative intelligibility is a selective process, and leaves things out. Exclusion from representation, marginalization, and indeed elimination in the name of a narrative—collectivization, racial purification, liberation, Westernization, perhaps even enlightenment itself—are central concerns on every agenda. But there is another side to this: Narrative is not just a vehicle for generating silence and forgetting but often an indispensable aid in the service of memory and commemoration—helping others who were not there understand what happened.²⁰

There are two straightforward arguments for continuing to take narrative seriously, and for treating the deconstruction of narrative as what, after Wittgenstein, we might call a reminder.

First, there is a strong sense in which what is forgotten or left out by one narrative calls not for skepticism about narrative but another narrative, for it to be adequately represented. Much political activity in both Argentina and the former Yugoslavia has centered on recording the stories of those whose sons and daughters, husbands and wives have disappeared. To fit the Holocaust into the story of Germany may be to compromise its singularity. But we must not forget that it is often precisely because dead men (and women) don't talk, tell no tales, that they are killed in the first place.

Second, it is arguable that even being forgotten or left out is itself a status we can only understand and then try to correct, because it too has a comprehensible narrative form. What then would be the force of the reminder that the deconstruction of narrative constitutes for us? It could transform our reading, listening, understanding. We would begin to see the framing as well as the frame, just as we have to learn to read advertising, and see how we are being manipulated. We might simply bear in mind that there are "always many sides to the story," that a plurality of stories can be told of the same event (think of the film *Rashomon*, or *Groundhog Day*, or of Kierkegaard's retellings of the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling*). We might keep our eyes peeled for squashed marginalia, the failures of history, the things that did

not happen, but could have, the awkward facts that remain unaccounted for, the events that cannot be made part of history without having their singularity threatened.

But these suggestions are all compatible with the thesis that narrative in some broad sense is the inescapable space within which even its own failures are represented. Moreover, it would follow that narrative is never itself the problem. The problem is its mode of presentation—how we understand its scope, etc.

Ricoeur's position here is interesting. He understands man as a self-interpreting being. Through narrative we configure and, when we apply this to life, refigure this process of self-interpretation. Ricoeur could be said to be offering a solution to the following question: If to be a self is to somehow synthesize, bring together, the private and the public dimensions of the self, then in the absence of the package deal provided by religious community, how is it that through language, myth, fiction—a whole range of public forms of intelligibility—we weave selves?

What is extraordinary about Ricoeur's work—and this appears near the end of both *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*—is his recognition that the various dialectical processes that he sets in train—between the reflexivity of the self, the opposition between selfhood and sameness, and filling the self/other relation—are never resolved. Aporia, and indeed tragedy, remains, and he leaves us with a vision of peace marked by the possibility of ineliminable conflict. We will return to these issues in the next chapter.

For Kierkegaard, Hegel, and others, selfhood requires a constitutive relation to an other, a Power. And we can translate Kierkegaard's remarks about despair into Ricoeur's terms: Selfhood deprived of the symbolic resources to weave a narrative of self-interpretation will know only desperation. A selfhood for whom such resources are available may still feel despair but that despair will be mediated by a symbolic engagement with the social. Kierkegaard's despair at willing to be oneself—what I have called desperation—is one in which the horizon of the future has withered away, as the tracks of symbolically mediated self-interpretation have been torn up. Despairingly willing to be oneself—carrying on, albeit in despair—is continuing this process of self-interpretation even when the story seems bleak, or the story line implausible.

What our translation of this problematic into Ricoeur's language opens up is the whole area of what we might call anxiety about the self, and its relation to the forms of temporalizing engagement available. For if narrative self-interpretation offers an interweaving of the private and the public, one that fuses both symbolic and temporal horizons, this articulation of what narrative provides also allows us to thematize how it is that less complex or completely satisfying forms arise, and may indeed have become the norm.

I am taking it as axiomatic that selfhood requires some sort of identity through time. It is a well-worn position that bodily continuity is not suffi-

cient. Nor is the continuity of memory. One common objection to memory playing this role is that it is question-begging. “Whose memory?” we might ask. But it is not clear whether that should count as an objection or rather a spur to recognize the necessity of some sort of fundamental hermeneutical circularity. And the kind of questions we have run into would have to be drawn into those broader considerations. Memory is not simply a private phenomenon. Its public dimension is to be found not just in the importance of its being corroborated by others, it is a memory woven with public symbols—places, names, times, conversations—which locate it in various series and matrices of meaning. I do not have to sustain the clock, the calendar, the map of the earth, the lexicon of names. I freely draw upon these in my weaving. I have suggested, too, that if we take into account the role of economic and institutional factors, there are further orders playing a normative role—such as exchange rates, national boundaries, shared and contested histories, different levels of industrialization, and access to communication networks. I mention these kinds of “material” factors again simply to keep them on the agenda, for the capacity of such “systems” to supplement the traditional resources for identity construction and maintenance presents philosophical thinking with both a challenge and an opportunity.

If we understand nihilism as the disintegration of all absolute values, and of any transcendental grounds for identity formations, and if we accept that what Nietzsche called nihilism captures if not the state of things today, at least a pervasive concern, or tendency, then our contemporary challenge is that of coping with the *contingency* of identity, as Rorty would put it. Identity will have to be woven from whatever material is available rather than from a kit in which everything is provided. This is not simply a problem for philosophy, it is increasingly a problem for humanity. Certainly within cultural studies, and queer studies, new concepts of multiple and decentered subject formations, dispersed identities, are being forged to cope with this phenomena conceptually. The question I would like to pose, finally, is what limits there are, if any, to our ability to imagine substitute identities, bricolage identities rather than those logically engineered, to rework a Lévi-Straussian distinction.

RENEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Identity is so often treated corrosively, skeptically, not because the young bloods of philosophy have got hold of powerful weapons they don't really know how to handle, but because the shapes that identity takes today reflect a massive and general externalization, decentering, dehiscence, and articulation of all constituted beings. If there is any longer any sense in talking about the meaning of history, its latest phase is surely a ruthless penetration, or at least threatening, of all established boundaries, and their dynamic reconstitution in accordance with diverse economies.²¹ I have great sympathy with

Gilles Deleuze when he talks of philosophy as having the task of inventing new concepts, and hence of tracking, as far as this makes sense, the contours of contemporary experience. The truth is no longer the whole, as Hegel would say, or rather the whole has to be understood as diverse, and plural, with many centers of order and significance. When Kristeva suggests in “Women’s Time”²² that we need to think of time as cyclical and monumental, as opposed to the standard linear time—of progressive and ends-oriented time—she is in effect talking about alternative local ways in which identity trails are set up. There need be no grand synthesis of how all these fit together.

The thought that we can entirely eliminate what we might call transcendental questions is misplaced. For there is an inevitable tension between new formations of identity—to which we have to respond—and our continuing sense of the transcendental as the background against which such formations take place. And this issue is bound up with questions we cannot relinquish—of the intelligibility of a human life. We cannot let go of these questions, because—and here Kierkegaard and Heidegger were right—*anxiety* accompanies us at every stage of our lives and of our endeavor to make sense in the absence of a priori guarantees. At the very least, we owe ourselves a discourse, a language, perhaps even a conceptual scheme in which to think the very fragmentation we have adumbrated.

To return, then, to violence. While there will always be violence only accidentally connected to identity, my hypothesis is that there is much that is deeply internally connected to it. The violence referred to in Derrida’s discussion of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” is the violation of the other, the violence toward the face of the other, brought about by a metaphysical or ontological neutralization of all being, which would eliminate the essential asymmetry of human relating. But we need not swallow this formulation whole to see that if identity is concerned with the boundaries and sequencings of the self, threats, or perceived threats, to those dimensions will be threats to our very being. And these will be understood as threats of violence, and will provoke violence in their turn.

It has been recently suggested to me²³ that identity today is just a negotiable commodity, to be bought and sold, that identities are just various forms of investment. When I hear this, I am challenged, because I have already talked about subjects, selves, being located within various economies. It is easy to respond to such a model by asking “for whom” is identity a negotiable commodity, as Ricoeur asks of Parfit “for whom” is identity no longer the issue.²⁴

But if I am honest there is something chillingly premonitory about this suggestion. Are we, as Julia Kristeva suggests the first civilization to witness the widespread breakdown of the family, and hence the breakdown of those Oedipal forms of strong identity cathexes that went with it? Or are we wit-

nessing the (re-)emergence of a diversity of forms of family life that deserves support and encouragement? Is there perhaps a positive rather than a merely nihilistic sense in which we can think the negotiability of identity?

Amartya Sen, for example (see his *Reason before Identity*, Oxford University Press, 1999), reaffirms the Rawlsian position that a universal sense of justice trumps a slavish respect for local moralities. And as a corollary, that cultural and political identities are not just bestowed upon us, but can in part at least, be chosen or, as we have put it, “negotiated.” It is tempting to think we need to choose between a liberal and a communitarian position here, or else to attempt some general synthesis of the two. It may be more productive, however, to recognize that one of the common (but not unprecedented or universal) consequences of globalization (see chapter 10) is the dislocation of populations, as well as destabilizing cultural invasions of populations more geographically static. And while there are obvious opportunities for new historical processes—such as cultural hybridization—for individuals caught up in these changes, identity must often present itself as a choice, as a matter for negotiation. But this is not a choice of a wholly autonomous independent unencumbered being. It is rather the choice of a multiply encumbered being thrust into conditions in which one’s social constitution is no longer just a matter of a single tradition. Sen’s own position as an Indian academic, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, would seem exemplary. But we do not surely have to understand choice here in terms of the agency of some abstractly rational being. The agent here is multiply embedded. And the grounds for identity choice may be, but need not be some universal principle of reason. It may well be true that, if you are in the business of weighing and adjudicating the competing claims of local moralities, at *some* level universal principles are unavoidable. But this is a logical not an ethical truth.

One’s first reaction to a boundary threat, a continuity threat, can be expected to be a violently defensive one in which it is the rigid form of one’s identity, so to speak (the paranoid self), that is responding. It is, precisely, a reactive response. But if boundaries and horizons are constituted, then, at least in principle, they can be transformed. The subject of such a reaction may not be the self in its dynamic aspect, but rather a boundary guard. Negotiable identity does not mean that every boundary has its price. But it does mean that a more mobile capacity for identity formation and transformation can plausibly be regarded as a better “defense” than the unconditional maintenance of rigidities. If we apply the principle proposed earlier—that we must will the conditions of what we value—then we must ask under what conditions such negotiable identity could best flourish. It may be said that our contemporary rich diversity of stories, languages, cultural symbols, etc. is no substitute for tradition, that one cannot just buy and sell roots, tribal bonds, etc. But one serious response here would be that a culture of dynamic identity modification is a culture, a tradition itself.

I claim, then, that identity is a construction, that narrative supplies the most powerful forms of such constructedness, that narrative does not eliminate but elaborates and restages the possibilities of violence and confrontation, and that a certain “deconstruction” of narrative serves to moderate its capacity to be harnessed for violent ends.

If I understand Derrida’s readings of Nietzsche and of Blanchot correctly, he is arguing, as did Nietzsche himself, for the fictionality of the identities constructed through (say) autobiographical writing, and the fragility of the narrative unity wrought by a text. And this fictionality operates through the proper name, through the idealizing functions of names themselves.²⁵ What this suggests is something of a double strategy: the affirmation of the move away from essentialism toward narrative, but at the same time, the maintenance of a certain interrogative space within which narratives operate. This would argue for the necessity of Narrative, but also for the pitfalls and dangers of taking any one narrative too seriously.

Edward Said emphasizes the heterogeneity in every culture. Once spoken, it is obvious, but its enabling power rests on the fact that the construction of identity involves positioning oneself within countervailing identities. And at this point the elision of differences within the other culture is almost automatic. A *critical political culture* (and it is this above all that is needed) would have to think *against the grain*, it would deconstruct these illusory unities, and keep open the dynamic possibilities of narrativizing. Such a political culture would not just preserve a multiplicity of narratives and encourage differential articulations within perceived unities, it would also have to recognize and promote what we could call the critical space of narrative, which is not “just another narrative.” If it is a narrative, it is a narrative about the limits and scope and significance of narrative. And if the Enlightenment escapes the charge of being just another grand narrative, it is because it can be understood as a principle regulating, moderating, even deconstructing the pretensions of individual narratives. If Said is right about the intrinsic heterogeneity of every culture, we might perhaps take that a stage farther and argue that versions of this recognition of a critical space of narrative, as I have called it, can be found everywhere. It would not, then, be a matter of imposing some Western concept of enlightenment, but of seeking out and encouraging local forms of such a space wherever it appears. This would not be just another grand narrative, because the plurality of narrative calls for interpretation for its possibility even to be intelligible. If the intrinsic heterogeneity of any culture will sustain a plurality of narratives, this is not so much another “grand” narrative as an account of how this intrinsic plurality of narratives is to be understood.

This is no more another grand narrative than was Lyotard’s original thesis about the end of grand narrative.²⁶ The explanation we give is in terms of the non-natural constructedness of identity, which opens up the plurality of grounds.

By the critical space of narrative I do not just mean the space of scholarship, but that dimension of any culture that acknowledges and affirms the constructedness of its artifacts, and does so without falling into an ironic consciousness.²⁷ For it is this fate that haunts every attempt to acknowledge plurality. Once we hold our deepest beliefs in the same spirit as we wear brand-name T-shirts, once our deepest beliefs become mere matters of taste, something essential has been lost.

I am now in a position to complete the quotation from Peirce with which I began, for its true scope has become apparent. Recall his description of the man who has for years cherished some vague shadow of an idea; he continues:

[A]nd then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it.

The question we face, putting Peirce into bed with Nietzsche, is whether the essence of a life is reconstructable now that the chimeric Melusina, the beautiful fable of a strong and coherent self-identity, has vanished.