CONSTRUCTING /DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

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Motto: "I feel like jumping out of my skin"
(Leon Wieseltier)

Abstract

The present paper explores a different approach to the matter of identity (denied, ignored, deconstructed versus accepted and/or constructed) as revealed in Leon Wieseltier's *Against Identity,* a collection of 74 aphorisms built as an argumentative discourse by means of which the author questions the facets of identity, elaborates on the understanding of the concept, on the limits imposed on it, thus constructing and at the same time deconstructing it.

Keywords: identity, diversity, (re)construction, denial, multiculturalism, the protean self, tradition

Perceived as an attempt to trace back the meaning of individualism, *Against Identity* reflects the tension between escape (even denial: "I feel like jumping out of my skin") and the need for reconstruction that characterizes the multicultural individual's approach to identity. A collection of aphorisms, Wieseltier's book underlines the impression of fragmented identity, apparently lacking coherence, continuity, a disrupted concept typical of our time. Indeed, coherence (continuity) is at stake if the reader, that is the postmodern individual, expects to be given all the clues. What Wieseltier does is to outline a certain path to be walked along in re-thinking/analyzing identity. He attempts to (re)construct identity by means of the aphorisms which are but fragments of the "uninterrupted ethic monologue" Mircea Mihaies refers to in the preface to the translated edition.

The author also elaborates on the American obsession with identity, bringing to the reader's attention the relation individual – community, with a focus on individualism in an attempt to reinvigorate it. But America is seen as a place where the "hardest thing", as Wieseltier puts it, is "to be what one is softly" (1996: 12)*. The multicultural individual becomes a victim, as his identity is partially denied, since the American politics and culture put greater emphasis on the public space, on the priorities of the society, of the community over those of the individual.

In time, identity theorists have defined the concept in different ways, following different criteria: identity understood as a matter of being (an inherit quality, something that is 'given', defined by frames of reference and meaning that are not subject to subsequent change); identity understood as a matter of becoming (the result of our interaction with the others, with the outside of the self, a quality that is subject to change, shaped by our choices that trigger changes; psychological and social factors brought together); private and public identity; a concept of sameness (A=A) and at the same time distinctiveness (A≠B); ethnic, social, national, individual, cultural identity etc.

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Identity is indeed an open concept. It cannot be isolated, as it instantly escapes, a process that Hume (whose reflections on identity Wieseltier elaborates on in his book) sees as the outcome of the changes which our senses and faculties contribute to as well as of the fact that there is no "power of the soul which remains unalterably the same" (1996: 17). The question "what is identity?" is then one whose answer is eternally elusive; it is "an insulation", suggests Wieseltier, but "the bad news (and the good news) is that the insulation is never enough. The borders are permeable, and strange gods sleep across." (6)

Therefore (coherent) identity seems to have become a luxury, although it gives the impression that it is quite at hand; the boundaries are changing, the guidelines often turn out to be misleading and distracting. In "Symbolic Interactionist Reflections on Erikson, Identity, and Postmodernism", Weigert and Gecas (166) quote Sandstron and Fine, restating the fact that postmodern analysis reveals identities as fragmented and incoherent, partially because the self ceases to function. They emphasize the fact that institutions gained an increasing power in (re)defining experience and, consequently, imposing identities on the self, as emphasized by interactionists and postmodernists, which results in the inability to experience identities as "unified, self-same, and continuous because self – the active center of identities – is no longer institutionally supported as such." (166)

In the fluid reality/existence, the individual can no longer grasp the meaning of home, place, center, but at the same time longs for them. And then there is the time we need to find out, to discover the self. Never enough, since "we are unprecedentely distracted and unprecedentely dispersed." (Wieseltier, 1996: 17)

What is identity then? It can be a "matter of courage", says Wieseltier (2000: 495), but only in a "cruel" society, not in an open one, or "an exercise of heroism" as he states in *Against Identity*, underlining that asserting one's identity in bad times is not the same thing as asserting it in good times. Identity is a "fixative" keeping all the pieces/elements of a life together (1996: 67) or it might be just a "euphemism for conformity" (4) in a time when diversity imposes the appropriate language. Identity is not individuality ("Individuality is ancient, identity is modern'), but the "solution to the problem of individuality" (8).

"From the perspective of this book", says Mihaies, identity "can be reduced to mere techniques. More precisely, to a cultural method, to the description of human individuality" (1997: 15). Analysing Wieseltier's sentence "we are choking on identity", Mihaies points out that it is not only the other's identity Wieseltier speaks about, but also our own, seen as "a superposition of irreducible entities", a multiple identity that "by ignoring the others, ends up ignoring itself" (15). He goes on by asserting that, from this perspective, the crisis of the American society originates in multitude of identities that suffocate one another and themselves.

Identity is who we are, the way we perceive ourselves, what we know of ourselves, but at the same time what differentiates us from the others and the way in which the others see us. The construction of identity is both a voluntary and an involuntary process, the

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end-product of our choices and of the changes we are willing to or have to make, of the things/people/events etc that change our lives and our perspectives on it, even if the awareness of such a change is tardy.

In Wieseltier's view (1996: 1), identity is a matter of 'being' as well as of 'becoming', not only in terms of "want" resulting in ambiguity ("we call ourselves what we are but also what we wish to be"), but, equally, in terms of "should"("we are never already what we should be"). Still, our ideas of being or becoming may not fulfill our dreams of self in terms of longing.

As pointed out in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, the law of identity which originates in logic (A=A, a thing equals itself) has been the source of debate for anti-essentialist postmodernists who claim that a thing cannot equal itself if/as there is an ongoing process of change that takes place over time. The logical formula should be then the "unspoiled" A = A1+A2+A3…, diversity on the inside as the result of the changes that mould this A. "You are nobody else and nobody else is you", says Wieseltier.

Following a different approach which interprets this logical formula by relating it to similar others, implying therefore a social relation, Wieseltier states that "the ascription of identity is the consequence of a choice among the criteria of identity."(1996: 4), arguing that, since there is not just one criterion of identity, we cannot claim that there is a perfect identity. "An object is the same as all the objects that are like itself and it is different from all the objects that are not like itself. […] Objects that are the same with respect to one criterion of identity may be different with respect to another criterion of identity." (4) A=A would be just "a euphemism for conformity", while identity would be, as Mihaies underlines (1997: 16), a matter of choice, a "process of selection".

"A=A. Big deal", concludes Wieseltier, reflecting thus the irony of the postmodernist attitude towards identity perceived as sameness. Indeed, asserting identity in terms of sameness has become a commonplace, an old-fashioned reality. It is an ironical, unadorned, somewhat unmannered way of saying that in the modern world the focus is on A ≠ B, on diversity, on the individual in relation with the others.

The way we see ourselves, what we know of ourselves is referred to as private identity, an entity limited to the 'inside' of the self. On the other hand, public identity sends to the 'other' and is seen as the 'image' the others perceive whether it is our intention or not that the 'outside' of our concept of the self be perceived in such a way. Nevertheless, in *Against Identity* Wieseltier states that, seen from the perspective of individuality, identity can be only public, whereas private identity is nothing else but "an oxymoron" (13). Instead, one can talk about "secret identity", understood as a "reflection of outward realities" as well as "a stratagem for survival", an attempt to clarify his point of view by relating it to the issue of minorities "in danger".

Another topic the author focuses on is the relation between the inside and the outside. He claims that except the body and the soul which relate to the inside, everything else is outside (the family, the people, the country one belongs to), a result of circumstance, not of choice. The individual's choice is the relation he establishes with the

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outside, which implies bringing them "from the outside in" if one looks beyond the circumstance and only if one is "to love them for more than circumstance".

> Identity is toasty. It imparts a feeling of the inside; but this feeling is imparted to us from the outside. The inside, the outside: they *must be properly mapped*. The country to which I belong is outside, the people to which I belong is outside, the family to which I belong is outside. Inside, there is only my body and my soul. From the beginning, I recognize this family as my family and this people as my people and this country as my country; but not in the way that I recognize this body as my body and this soul as my soul. I am not estranged from my family and my people and my country, but neither are we the same. *I must bring them from the outside in, if I am to love them for more than circumstance*. And circumstance is a poor reason for love. And the inside is vast, too. (22, italics mine)

Being a certain way triggers a certain attitude towards the world as a consequence of the world's attitude towards your being this way. And this attitude carries difference within.

But difference presupposes or triggers isolation. This "insulation", as Wieseltier calls it, defines the time and space that one needs in order to find out who he/she is, therefore conditioning introspection known as vital in the process of defining oneself. A different point of view would be the one that presents isolation as a consequence of the assertion of difference in relation to the others, which might be perceived as offensive. I.e., a social, but not sociable identity.

Should we presume that this is the reason why "the hardest thing in America is to be what one is softly"?

> A=A. This is also a way of saying that A≠B. Which might bruise B. There is solace, of course. It is that B=B. But this is also a way of saying that B≠A. Which might bruise A. Identity is very social, but it is not very sociable. (5)

The author draws attention on the American "accomplishment", called "the multicultural individual", and states that in America identity is mistaken for the diversity multiculturalism promotes (38). He further argues that the contradiction lies in the fact that identity implies "simplicity", whereas diversity implies "complexity", which denies identity seen as "a promise of singleness". According to Mihaies (1997: 22), what Wieseltier suggests is "diversity in unity" as opposed to the traditional "unity in diversity".

Rachieru (1999: 333) asserts that diversity (undermining homogeneity) is encouraged by fragmentation which, in the postmodern world, leads to multiplicity, an abundance of private worlds and local identities that exacerbate or, we might add, deny/annihilate individualism. He (319) also speaks about "the postmodern disease" which "glorifies a schizophrenic existence, simultaneously living in 'two worlds' " and which condemns the old concepts of totality, homogeneity and unity. It is precisely this schizophrenic existence worsened by the perception of reality that eventually brings about the fragmentation, confusion, identity collapse of the individual.

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In the article "Împăratul e gol", Ioana Copil-Popovici suggests that our need for defining identity is in fact a need for coherence, but, as she underlines, it may also be the need for imaginary that the individual needs to satisfy. She goes on by drawing attention on the fact that "the game becomes dangerous only when we think of Ricoeur's theories, according to which the limits between identity and ideology disappear in modernity." Bringing up Wieseltier's multicultural individual, Copil-Popovici asserts that the need for identity may hide the schizophrenia that characterizes this individual and concludes that "the positive incoherence of human biography eventually turns any theory and generalization into a sandcastle." And so it does.

Tradition is again brought to the reader's attention and it is to be seen as a key-reality in defining identity (the self and the others) as it offers continuity and roots (a vital dialogue between the past and the present), giving the individual a sense of belonging; it also implies a certain, let us say, affiliation to a group, community, people. However, what Wieseltier underlines is the fact that "affiliation is not an experience", it is a rather *passive* understanding of identity, whereas identity is subject to change which the active apprehension of experience provides (1996: 10) He first flirts with the idea of "the glamour" of an identity that is received (consequently, a passive one) and offers continuity, only to later stigmatize it as "a conceit, and an expression of indolence": "It is a part of the glamour of identity that it is received. Otherwise one could not enjoy the sensation of being a link in the chain of transmission. But this passivity is a conceit, and an expression of indolence" (62). Tradition must not be reduced to "being given" — it has to be perceived as a matter of "becoming" as well. It cannot be only passive, for it will soon disappear; it also has to be receptive. Still "it is not the receptive attitude by which traditions grow" (62), but by "intentions and exertions", intentions transposed into actions – a dynamic approach.

In discussing the problem of the identity of tradition over time, Jones Gracia (2003: 33-34) proposes a classification that differentiates between four fundamental types of identity: *achronic* (identity seen as irrespective of time), *synchronic* (identity applying at a particular time), *diachronic* (applying at two or more, but not all, times) and *panchronic* identity (applying at all times). He relates tradition with diachronic identity, emphasizing the fact that this particular type of identity applies only to entities to which the passage of time applies and asserts that it is necessary to determine some conditions that make a thing the same over time, more precisely at two or more, *but not all times* (which makes change, i.e., difference possible).

"Who are you? Even if you know the answer it is not an easy question", states Wieseltier in his book. But does one really know the answer? The borders of an identity that brings together what we are and will be, what we wish to be, and what we should be, are "permeable". In a changing repertoire of coordinates, it has become a tremendously difficult task to grasp personal identity, in a world where even the memory that Hume felt as conferring continuity "is disappearing under the assault of associations", as the author ascertains.

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Wieseltier advances the idea of identity as a recipient, a "basket", as he calls it, we are in need of, for "we are carrying too much. We are falling out of our hands. " (17), an idea rediscovered in his *Kaddish* (2000: 565) "I am always gathering myself up and carrying myself to where I am". It is in this recipient where our "obsessions, confusion and existential chaos" are "collected and ordered" (Mihaies in Wieseltier, 1997: 19).

The writer extends the (apparent) similarity between "the protean self" (19) and identity, a similarity based on the positive connotations of flexibility, adaptability, versatility that the protean self has and that identity requires as it is permanently subject to change, but at the same time he warns that this protean self has come to characterize postmodernism in terms of "being slippery" and avoiding answering the questions. Therefore, Proteus is to be seen as an *evader***,** "a fine post-modern god of the sea" whose objective is the *external* change of shape whereas identity fundamentally implies *internal* change and adaptability. That is perhaps why Wieseltier states that identity is "the enemy of 'the protean self'", its aim being not that of evading questions but of answering them, which is to be seen as an identity must.

Going back to the denial-of-identity path, we might assert that the postmodern denial of identity is seen as a result of the multiculturalism it promotes. All that postmodernism does in the name of identity or, let us say, its rehabilitation (as we like to think) turns, in fact, into an involuntary, somewhat unconscious approach against identity, as Wieseltier argues in this book. On the one hand, it is this postmodernist approach that denies identity as it imposes multiculturalism as a (misconstrued) means of defining identity (an approach which involuntarily works against identity). On the other hand, it is Wieseltier that is "against" this suffocating identity, therefore he denies/rejects it if only at the level of the written word, of the book written for those who "are not like me" and those who "are like me". "If I cannot explain myself to people who are not like me, I lose my pleasure in explaining myself to people who are like me." (52)

It is in this postmodernist context that leads to "selflessness" ("it means that you have been drawn out of yourself")(70) that one of the voices of an imaginary dialogue says "I feel like jumping out my skin"(73). Whether the reason is self-hatred or not, if we were to connect the aphorism with a previous one, knowing the answer means having an identity and knowing it. The voice is a postmodern one, and it can no longer stand the burden of its (multiple) identity, an identity that it consequently denies. But then the other voice's answer "and so you should" triggers diversity, multiplicity, what the postmodernism tends to celebrate; a vicious circle. However, jumping out of one's skin is essentially followed by getting under another skin: self-denial, rejection and rediscovery (Mihaies in Wieseltier, 1997:25).

Wieseltier himself felt like jumping out of his skin, longed for it, maybe suffering from what he calls "the opposite of homesickness" which is "more than sickness of home. It is a desire to concentrate oneself without references, to vibrate in a featureless environment, entirely out of one's powers, with an energy that owes nothing to the energy of origins. There is such a longing" (26). He felt like jumping out of his skin and so he did when he

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denied (in terms of ignoring, not following, not contributing to its becoming, just accepting the passive "being") his identity as a Jew, as the son of a Jewish father. A rejection of the roots that turned into a rediscovery, a homecoming brought about by death and the tradition of mourning (in his extraordinary diary-lament for the death of his father, *Kaddish*).

Note:

* In referring to Leon Wieseltier's *Against Identity*, the numbers in brackets indicate the aphorism and not the page.

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