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Living without

On the moral philosophy of Jean Améry

For their testimonial value, Jean Améry's writings are obligatory reading for anyone interested in studies of the Holocaust. But Améry can and must also be read as philosophy, argues Roy Ben-Shai. In Améry's work, the combination of the testimonial and the philosophical constitutes a "twilight", a revolt against the separation of pathos (experience) and logos (the intellect), and a call for the insertion of the victim into philosophical discourse.

My subject is: At the mind's limits. That these
limits happen to run alongside the so unpopular
horrors is not my fault.
Jean Améry¹

Jean Améry, originally named Hans Mayer, was born in 1912 in Vienna, an only child to a Catholic mother and a Jewish father. The fact that his father was of Jewish descent played little or no role in his upbringing. To all extents and purposes an Austrian, he took a degree in philosophy and literature and aspired to become a writer. When the Nazis annexed Austria, Améry's Jewish background was revealed (to him and to the Nazis) and his passport name was changed to Hans Israel Mayer. Upon reading the Nuremberg Laws, Hans Israel Mayer came to realize that he was no longer safe; better said, he realized that safety had been a fragile illusion all along. As he would later write, "nothing can again lull me into the slumber of security from which I awoke in 1935."²

He escaped to Belgium, where (under a false identity) he joined the Belgian resistance. Then, in 1943, he was caught by the Gestapo handing out pamphlets and brutally tortured. They hung him by the arms from a hook on the ceiling — with his arms tied together behind his back. His shoulders were quickly dislocated; while in this state of dismemberment and suspension, he was severely flogged. This event — Améry's introduction to the world of torture, which he would later claim was the very essence of the Third Reich — was a transformative experience for him and would become constitutive of his thought and writing.³

The Gestapo soon discovered their prisoner's "real" identity and sent him to Auschwitz, where he was to spend the greater part of final two years of the war. Upon the liberation of the camps, he returned to Brussels and changed his name (for the second time) from Hans Israel Mayer to Jean Améry, establishing that he was forever severed from his Austrian self, as well as from his childhood and youth. Although he renounced his homeland — his *Heimat* — Améry never pretended to assume another. "There is no 'new home'," he wrote. "Home is the land of one's childhood and youth. Whoever has lost it

remains lost himself."⁴ Améry therefore felt himself suspended in the twilight between a Jewish identity — which he was forced into but could not genuinely inhabit — and an Austrian identity — which he was excluded from but was nonetheless bound to.⁵

A perpetual foreigner to society and self, Améry became a publicist and critic, writing on an array of topics, from politics, American cinema, and jazz to literature and philosophy. In 1966, an acquaintance in Germany suggested that he recount his Holocaust experience before the German public, whose interest in the subject was growing. What ensued was a series of five talks on German radio; these were later assembled and published in book form, under the title *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* [En. trans. *At the Mind's Limits*]. While this book is by far the most important work Améry ever published, it was not his last. Several more books appeared on different topics, also following a series of radio talks. In 1976 Améry published his last book, *Hand an sich legen. Diskurs über den Freitod* [En. trans. *On Suicide*]; in 1978, at the age of 66, he took his own life.

The twilight of Améry's philosophy

Discussions of *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* have mostly been restricted to the context of Holocaust Studies. My reading of Améry, however, insists on treating his work as philosophy, although — it must be said — of an exceptional kind. The state of exception that characterizes Améry's work stems from his personal experiences, or, more accurately, from concrete events personally lived through. At the same time, his work strives to be philosophical; he aims to draw universal truths from his experiences and impart them directly. The tension between the testimonial and the philosophical, along with the explicit care not to neglect either of these poles, constitutes the work's "twilight".⁶

The meta-textual twilight between the personal and universal expresses itself within the philosophical content too; there, however, it is the twilight between *pathos* (broadly meaning experience lived-through, undergone, or suffered) and *logos* (associated with intellect, knowledge, language, reason, *Geist*). Pathos in its most radical appearance is personal, whereas logos is impersonal, desensitized.⁷ Although a tension between the two is rarely felt in our everyday lives, and they can hardly be regarded as oppositional, Améry always takes as his subject matter those exceptional experiences in which logos is almost totally disabled or deprived. Nonetheless, in the very attempt to thematize these experiences as such, to unveil something universally binding about them and from them, Améry insists on salvaging logos. This is not done through an act of appropriation or consummation of these experiences, but through opening them up and maintaining an indeterminate twilight around them.⁸

While Améry described his work as a "phenomenological description of the existence of the victim,"⁹ a better term to capture his particular mode of philosophizing may be "pathological description". Regarding pathology as a peculiar form of philosophical discourse suggests a subversion of the habitual connotations of the term "pathology", i.e. "mental illness"; "deviation from the norm"; "the anatomic or functional manifestations of a disease"; or "the scientific study of the nature of disease". This subversion will become more suggestive when it comes to Améry's struggle to legitimize his "sickness" and articulate its symptoms in terms of a "moral truth" and a demand. Améry's attempt to turn the "disease" from an exceptional, personal, psychological, anatomical, or biological matter into a universally binding one constitutes the

bulk of his endeavour.

In what follows, I suggest an overview of the philosophical unfolding of *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*. This, I believe, provides a useful introduction to the reading of the essays in the book (and in this case, the fourth essay, "Resentments"). If such an overview is necessary, it is because a unique characteristic of Améry's style of writing is that while each essay has a life of its own (unlike a chapter in a book), and even refuses to be fused into the whole, it stands to lose a great deal of its force and meaning if dissociated completely from the course of the general unfolding.

Améry, like others before him, believed that if there is to be a proper discussion of morality or ethics it can come only after a radical critique of the intellect. However, in Améry's case this "critique" is not accomplished by an intellectual move — deliberately set up and carried out — but rather due to pathos which he happened to undergo — not by his choice, not to his merit and not to his fault. The challenge for us readers — since the same cannot be said of us, and therefore we cannot properly share in this pathos — is to figure out the right manner of approach to the text; a manner that would help maintain the twilight (an intimate proximity and unbridgeable distance) between us and the author's voice, continuously resisting what is almost unavoidable: the collapsing of this twilight in a move of reconciliation or appropriation.

Reality: At the mind's limits

Améry arrived at Auschwitz as a self-proclaimed intellectual, and what he experienced there was the deprivation of what he held most dearly and had come to take for granted, namely the intellect. In the first essay, "At the mind's limits", Améry claims he has set out to examine the confrontation of Auschwitz and the intellect, that is to say, to examine what it was in Auschwitz that offended the intellect and brought it to the point of limit. Améry finds more than one way in which this confrontation took place. I will survey a few of these ways under the general title of "dismemberment".

Améry writes of Auschwitz: "Nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy."¹⁰ And he adds: "Even in direct experience everyday reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality."¹¹ There is a subtle catch to this notion of reality: we need always to keep in mind that what we experience when reading is not such a reality. For when reading, we are already engaging our intellect; it is also likely that we feel relatively comfortable and at ease. This, however, is not a mere deficiency. It is indispensable that such a reality be experienced in the form of absence, since what characterizes its pathos is that it has passed unthought, and for that reason is forever unthinkable. Perhaps out of modesty, but perhaps also out of awareness to this problem, Améry deliberately refrains from speaking in the first person, or, in his phrase, "using the little word I". Instead, he mostly uses the phrase "the intellectual in Auschwitz". What is conveyed in this mode of referring to oneself in the third person — a theme that in his later book *On Aging* he will explicitly explore as being "a stranger to himself" — is precisely the deprivation of the narrator position; the deprivation, that is, of the "primordial" position of a thinking, appropriating, "worlding" subjectivity.

In forcefully inflicted solitude, through the sensation of radical fear and loss of trust, of total insecurity and loss of control over the course of events, one's inner time-sense is inevitably distorted.¹² This pathos, which Améry terms the "disordering of time", can also be seen as a mode of dismemberment. In the event of torture, the orderly processes of recollection, projection, remembrance, and association become disrupted; this creates a peculiar pathos that does not allow for transcendence (in Heideggerian language, "ex-istence" or "ex-stasis") but only for an ongoing, all-consuming passage of time. This entails, as previously cited, standing "face-to-face with the event".¹³ This experience is something that cannot be assimilated; it cannot be forgotten and cannot be remembered. While it is true that what was once dismembered can always later be re-membered, what cannot be remembered, according to Améry, is the pathos of dismemberment itself. And yet it is there, as he suggests, like a birthmark:

It was over for a while. It still is not over. Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting, and accusing myself. In such an instance there is no "repression". Does one repress an unsightly birthmark?¹⁴

The challenge Améry takes us through is first to face the impossibility, or absence, of this pathos and not to push it aside. In other words, the acknowledgment of a failure on our part to understand or experience this kind of reality should not silence Améry's account; on the contrary, it should bring his voice and testimony to the fore. Besides, it is a very similar experience — the incapacitation of the intellect — that Améry himself testifies to in his reflections on Auschwitz. I take it, then, that a certain mode of "being all ears" is a way to approach the theme of dismemberment. Améry writes:

In the camp the intellect in its totality declared itself to be incompetent. As a tool for solving the tasks put to us it admitted defeat. However, and this is a very essential point, it could be used for its own abolishment, and that in itself was something. For it was not the case that the intellectual — if he had not already been destroyed physically — had now become unintellectual or incapable of thinking. On the contrary, only rarely did thinking grant itself respite. But it nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders.¹⁵

I take it that Améry came to value the ability of the intellect to turn against itself, of thought to nullify itself. As opposed to the empowering function of the intellect, Améry wishes to bring us to a place of aporia, or at least to pathologically describe such a place, in which thought is dispossessed and helpless. What is it good for? Améry seems to believe that only given an experience of reality, or encountering the absence of reality, can we step out of our normalized, and often indifferent or apathetic mode of experience, in which we advance in constant motion of appropriation, recollection, and forgetfulness. The true passion for the intellect, for the self, and for a society of fellowship is acquired when all these are deprived. Améry wants therefore to regain the sense of logos lost during his Auschwitz experience, to regain it passionately, carefully, not as a neutralizing function of objectification, but as a biased, passionate, and moral process. The dignity of logos can only be salvaged, he believes, if it is used to turn the wound into a universally binding statement.

Morality: Resentment

Before looking more closely at the fourth essay of the book, "Resentments", which contains the crux of Améry's moral statement, let me say a few words about the essay that precedes it, "How much home does a person need?", and the role this essay plays in providing a transition from reality to morality.

Améry describes the experience of not having a home — in the strong sense of the word [*Heimat*] — to return to. He describes his homesickness [*Heimweh*] as being different from "traditional homesickness", which is directed towards a home that is there though not here. In *Heimweh*, the home is gone, like time lost. "Home" is no longer a "place"; it is buried under the ruins of the past. "My, our homesickness," he says, "was alienation from the self. Suddenly, the past was buried and one no longer knew who one was."¹⁶

In order to better sense the transition from the pathos of homesickness to that of resentment, we may consider Améry's description of the twilight of his situation as being: "hung for ever on the torture hook between fear and anger". The exile's feeling of homesickness and lack of security, combined with the victim's twisted past, produce a perpetual state of fear and distrust: "When in order to attain dignity — fear transforms itself into anger."¹⁷ Améry re-establishes his sense of self and his dignity vis-à-vis society, not by re-assimilation, but through resentment. In resentment he remains irreconciled, at the limit of society, which he relates to by way of reproach: his address asking to become a (concrete/loud/vocal) call of conscience — one that arrives neither wholly from "within" nor wholly from "without".

Améry uses the French word *ressentiment* in the title of the fourth essay to invoke an association with Nietzsche, who coined this usage in his groundbreaking statement on the subject, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche's work was subtitled "a polemic"; Améry's essay is in part meant as a response, a counter-polemic, reaffirming the pathos of resentment over and against Nietzsche's devaluation of it.¹⁸ While Nietzsche's work (as well as that of other thinkers who influenced Améry, including Heidegger and Sartre) is ultimately future-oriented, Améry refuses to contemplate, plan, prophesy, or fantasize about the future. His work is latched onto the past he had personally experienced, even though it is always engaged in a struggle to go beyond mere assertion or description of experience.

Améry realizes that when discussing his resentments he is advocating an emotion that has been "condemned by moralists [Nietzsche and Scheler] and psychologists alike". He writes:

The former regard it as a taint, the latter as a kind of sickness. I must acknowledge it, bear the social taint, and first accept the sickness as an integrating part of my personality and then legitimize it. A less rewarding business of confession cannot be imagined, and in addition it will subject my readers to an unusual test of patience.¹⁹

The patience Améry asks for in order to allow him to properly convey his moral message and response to Nietzsche is to suspend the tendency to "psychologize" his work or to diagnose his situation as "pathological", in the banal sense of the word, or under any other "objective" criteria. Such characterizations are at once too objective, in so far as they are "disinterested" and disregard the (absence of) pathos; and too subjective, in so far as they place their focus on Améry's mental state, disregarding both the moral and historical context to which it refers and the moral context in which it is situated

(i.e. the peculiar hermeneutic situation at hand). Améry's task is to communicate and legitimize this pathos as significant and binding — as a source of morality. If he is indeed sick, he says, then the idea of being "cured" from this disease, which he calls a "moral time sense", is nothing but immoral. Indeed, finding a cure, he believes, is not impossible; if anything is impossible, it is to remain uncured.

Although one may do better to go through life without resentments, Améry believes that to do so, in the light of what happened and recurs repeatedly, would be immoral. For Améry, resentment (and here his conception of it significantly deviates from Nietzsche's) arises from a state of disharmony with society that is forced upon an individual. What constitutes a moral person, he believes, is precisely this imposed disharmony. It harbours within it both the power to resist and an overwhelming feeling of dependency (the "moral person" for Améry is by no means an "authentic" or autonomous being).

The loss of resentment — which is a first-rate moral sentiment for Améry — is total and hazardous. But resentment is not self-sufficient, nor must it remain self-enclosed. (We can perhaps suggest, with Nietzsche, that strictly internalizing resentment is "poisonous".) If resentment wishes to make sense, then it must make sense to those at whom it is directed. "I preserved my resentments. And since I neither can nor want to get rid of them, I must live with them and am obliged to clarify them for those against whom they are directed."²⁰ Heatedly he says:

You don't want to listen? Listen anyhow. You don't want to know to where your indifference can again lead you and me at any time? I'll tell you. What happened is no concern of yours because you didn't know, or were not born yet? You should have seen, and your youth gives you no special privilege, and break with your father.²¹

This is a taste of Améry's mode of philosophizing: it refuses to be objective, indirect, or indifferent and demands the same of his listeners, though never at the expense of reason. Améry realizes the illogicality of his demand to "break with your father", since he knows more than any one not only how painful, but how impossible it is. "It did not escape me that resentment is not only unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition [...] Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around [...] it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened."²² But, however absurdly, the nullification of the past is precisely the kind of pathos Améry conveys in the preceding essay: it is the ground for his homesickness for a past and a home that are not.

The question whether he is mad or suffering from what "objective scientific method, in its lovely detachment", diagnosed as "concentration camp syndrome",²³ does not elude him.

Once again I must ask myself the question [...] am I perhaps mentally ill and am I not suffering from an incurable ailment, from hysteria? The question is merely rhetorical [...] I am not deranged and was not deranged, but rather [...] the neurosis is on the part of the historical occurrence. The others are the madmen, and I am left standing around helplessly among them, a fully sane person who joined a tour through a psychiatric clinic and suddenly lost sight of the doctors and orderlies. But

since the sentence passed on me by the madmen can, after all, be carried out at any moment, it is totally binding, and my own mental lucidity is entirely irrelevant.²⁴

If Améry sets to argue for the sanity and legitimacy of his resentment, it is not as an end in itself, but with the purpose of making it clear that society as a whole is capable of madness. Such a claim or judgment about society as a whole can only be passed by morality (voiced by the moral person), as that which is excluded from (or is never wholly restricted to) the confines of social existence (although it has barely any meaning without direct reference to it). It is only disharmonized, pathetic morality that can question the authority, indeed the sanity, of "the normal". We should therefore understand why the judgment of the disharmonized moral person is not to be judged according to standards of "objectivity" or "objective justification". Madness, or immorality, cannot be defined, says Améry, as that which is the exception to the rule. It cannot be defined only on the basis of intellectual agreement, understanding, legislation, or objective analysis. Defiantly, he states:

I [...] am not "traumatized", but rather my spiritual and psychic condition corresponds completely to reality [...] I experienced in my existence and exemplify through it a historical reality of my epoch, and since I experienced it more deeply than most [...] I can also shed more light on it. That is not to my credit and not because I am so wise, but only because of the chance of fate.²⁵

The claim that "he is not traumatized" is not to be taken at face value. Surely, Améry's case is a "test-case" in trauma, and he is well aware of that. But what he means to say here is that his trauma cannot be isolated from the maddened reality in which it was inflicted. The wound is a historical one; if Améry is a moral person, as he says, it is only because he happens to bear it.

When I admit that in deliberating our problem I am "biased" I still know that I am captive of the moral truth of the conflict [...] Only I possessed, and still possesses the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull, and for that reason I am more entitled to judge, not only more than the culprit but also more than society — which thinks only about its continued existence.²⁶

Let us then acknowledge this demand, and suspend judgment regarding Améry's lucidity. Serious questions must be asked. What kind of truth is this moral truth? And what is to be done with it? What does Améry mean when he demands that time be turned around and that what was done be undone? What does it mean that people who were not yet born should have done something, should have seen? What is this if not a reactionary or hysterical sentiment?

The moral power to resist contains the protest, the revolt against reality, which is rational only as long as it is moral. The moral person demands annulment of time — in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed. Thereby, and through a moral turning-back of the clock, *the latter can join the victim as a fellow human being*. [Italics R. B. S.]²⁷

This statement contains the very heart of Améry's moral philosophy. Améry is

not after vengeance. If he wishes that criminal to be in the same state as he, it is not for some petty pleasure in witnessing his destruction. I want to suggest the contrary: what Améry describes in this passage is *reconciliation*. Meeting the executioner as a fellow human being is not achieved within a strictly legal sphere (although Améry, always the realist, does not undermine the importance of such legal acts). This is not all he means by "nailing the criminal".

"Fellowship" cannot be achieved in mutual forgetfulness or ignorance, nor in forgiveness or ethical condemnation. Only if the criminal accepts the deed as irrevocable and irrevocably his and revolts against the lack of reason that determined his action and the passage of time that renders it an irrevocable historical fact can he join the victim as a fellow human being. This revolt unhooks the victim; sanity and trust are restored and consequently the crime itself is dissolved. This meeting *is* the turning back of the clock (it is not achieved *by* it) — it annuls history, exceeding its objective factuality. As such, this call is not irrelevant to younger generations so long as they refuse the temptation to undermine their deep-seated relationship to their homeland and past.

"Beyond guilt and atonement", we may even suggest, Améry will have his home back; Germany will no longer be tainted by its past, a past that, like an unsightly birthmark, cannot be repressed. Améry does not regard this "regressive" reconciliation, or joining in fellowship, as an "overcoming", because if anything is to be overcome it is the victim as such. And this, from the point of view of the victim, if not from that of society, is simply a reaffirmation of the crime. Only through a mutual bond not to forget or ignore, that is, to overcome the overcoming — to fervently swim against history's current — can peace be genuinely restored, and not as war forgotten.

All this, nevertheless, is impossible. Genuine morality, with Améry, is a striving to overcome a defeat that is doomed to be defeated over and over again. This is conveyed already from the (tellingly circular) subtitle of the work: *Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* [Attempts by one defeated to overcome]. For one thing, as Améry repeatedly tells us, "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured."²⁸ Moreover, we know that overcoming in this context can mean nothing but defeat. Is this not precisely the "moral truth" of the conflict? But the contradiction entailed here is neither to be mystified nor sublated. The contradiction, Améry instructs, is not anti-logical, at least in so far as it is moral. It is not a contradiction between philosophical arguments but a contradiction between necessity (duty) and impossibility: the very contours of philosophy. The "ultimate question", with Améry, is not what *is* the case but what *must be* the case, even if this is impossible (and in the last part of this statement we witness an important deviation from Kant). This does not mean that impossibility is effaced or denied. What is necessary is precisely the revolt against the impossible contradiction, which, in a certain respect, already implies going beyond the contradiction, if only to arrive at an "uncertain twilight" and to remain therein.

Concluding remarks

The rupture or conflict between the personal and the universal is largely what characterizes the moral for Améry. The confrontation with reality is essentially personal, although this reality has nothing "subjective" to it. If anything, it is a deprivation of subjectivity. At the same time, there is nothing "objective" to it, since it is not given to and by a subject. The confrontation with reality, at least in the cases Améry describes, is brought about within a moral context. The "real" is not some brute materiality, independent or prior to human

intervention; on the contrary, it is a pathos inflicted by human brutality.

The atrocity as atrocity has no objective character. Mass murder, torture, injury of every kind are objectively nothing but chains of physical events, describable in the formalized language of natural science. They are facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system.²⁹

Deeds and emotions constitute the moral sphere. While essentially personal and experiential, they are only meaningful in so far as they are relational. Furthermore, in so far as it is essentially relational, the "personal" is never self-determined or well-determined (it remains, even for the author himself, "expropriated" and disowned). In a circular (tragic) movement of struggle, Améry tries to rescue the position of "the victim" which captures (or is captured) within such indeterminacy. The struggle to sustain victimhood against the current of time entails the achievement of dignity and an act of revolt, as well as a fulfilment of responsibility and obligation towards society (indeed, towards the culprit). This position — or imposition — of the victim is absent for the most part from political or philosophical discourse. When present, it tends to be psychologized, medicalized, or placed within grand narratives of subject-object (master-slave) power struggles; narratives which perform a rationalization (even if not for rationalization's sake) of an essentially irrational and ungraspable situation. These discourses, while not redundant, will not suffice.

Nonetheless, the scarcity of the victim's voice, qua victim, is not accidental. That's why I maintain that the state of exception is a structural feature of Améry's philosophy. We cannot possibly banalize or normalize (I use these terms technically, not just as pejoratives) such a position, precisely because it is at the limits of *Geist* and is there to stay; precisely because it is not a standpoint we may choose for ourselves, or a mode of philosophizing we may think of as "best". We cannot, in fact, be the narrators of such philosophy. Pathology is conducted and written by him; this is what it meant by "exceptional" — that it is abnormal and unnormalizable. But we can listen and lend a hand in pulling the text towards its philosophical pole without "appropriating" it altogether. The meeting point, the fence, between reader and narrator can be reached through a mutually expropriated zone, that of the "victim", remaining in third person.

Améry's revolt is directed against an ongoing play of powers; this he considers to be entailed in the "natural" (if dialectical) course of time and to be a self-perpetuating mechanism of self-destruction. If we try to characterize him as a pessimist, or, for that matter, an optimist, we miss the proper meaning of "revolt". A revolt does not speculate about the future, though it may emerge over and against such speculation. Améry's revolt is always double edged — on one hand, in the name of intellect, it turns against past and reality (indeed, against the testimonial body of his own text); on the other hand, in the name of reality, it turns against the tendency of the intellect to transcendence and normalization (the capacity for which is already afforded it by the very conditions for its possibility). This double-edged revolt prefigures in Améry's pathology. Pathos must be constrained by logos (and vice-versa). The end, for Améry, is not to affirm reality but to revolt against it: to reverse its irreversible fate.

In contradistinction to Descartes's *Meditations*, the "Archimedean point" in Améry's text is, in a sense, a torture, a twist, a collision of two bodies: that of

the anti-man, with his hand holding a whip, and that of the sub-human, with his dislocated arms, suspended from a hook. There are no "subjects" in the torture room, no fireplace, and no doubt. According to his testimony, Améry's subjectivity was, to a large extent, determined by his "anti-man", when this person literally invaded his personality, his person, his body, beyond the thin protecting layer of his skin, and twisted, irreversibly, his inner time-sense. Traditionally, the "inner time sense" is the fortress of subjectivity, or, in Heideggerian terms, the temporalizing activity which allows for the irreducible possibility of authenticity and appropriation. We can therefore begin to appreciate how Améry's text (his pathos), by radically shifting the grounds of investigation, manages to call into question the universality of Heidegger's statement that "No one can take the Other's dying away from him."³⁰ In other words, it undermines the characterization of the nature of human subjectivity as essentially solitary, autonomous and impenetrable.

Now, we could, of course, pack the insights afforded us by Améry into a briefcase and carry it around, in a polemic, say, against Descartes or Heidegger, or against modernity, and in the process perhaps even advance slightly in the project of enlightenment and self-knowledge. This would be a significant achievement in and of itself itself. But let us bear in mind that such "packing" is what Améry calls "abstraction" or "normalization". We take the idea and divorce it from the testimony, from the exception in which it is grounded — from this person's experience. And then we must ask ourselves: what kind of truth may this abstracted idea express? Can it remain the moral truth that the author claims it to be, and that we want it to be?

Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne opens with the words "take care". "Take care, a well-meaning friend advised me."³¹ Améry was advised to take care not to overbear his listeners with tales of the horrors; they have grown weary of tales of this sort. Améry takes this advice to heart. He seeks a grey path, a twilight, which might somehow manage to avoid both brooding sentimentality and playful, detached rationalism. Accordingly, he calls not for "empathy" or "identification" (a monadic, appropriative meeting in the "I"), nor for "unification" (a reconciliatory coming into a "we"). In an effort which is in itself helpless, Améry tries to "twist us", so to speak, to pull us toward the limit of the mind. Regardless of whether this can be fruitful, or is doomed to fail, his work needs to be encountered in person, and with care.

¹ J. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, [trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld], Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. I would like to thank the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies (TCDS) in New York for providing both intellectual and financial support for the writing of this essay. I would also like to thank Richard J. Bernstein and Simon Critchley for their inspiration and useful suggestions. And finally, a special thanks to Victoria Fareld, who helped edit this essay, for her encouragement, patience and insight, and in particular, for the title.

² J. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*. This biographical sketch draws largely from the "Afterword" to this translation by Sidney Rosenberg (104–111).

³ We can already register, provisionally, at least three main characteristics of this particular state of torture: *dismemberment* (in general, a mark of incapacitation and helplessness), *suspension* (from the hook, which can also be related to twilight and estrangement) and finally the *twist* (from the Latin for torture — *torquere*). All these elements come to play symbolic functions in the manner and content of Améry's text — almost as if the text itself was in a constant state of torture.

⁴ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 48.

⁵ Améry liked to describe himself as "not-not a Jew".

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The concept of *twilight* can be thought of as a peculiar variant of "reconciliation" — one which resists the unification (and for Améry, forgiveness and forgetfulness) implied in dialectical sublation (*Aufhebung*), while at the same time passionately struggling against complete opposition or dissociation.

- 7 It is helpful, perhaps, to think of the term "*personal*" in the strong sense of the word (from "person") as *bodily*, physical, and *not* in its more common connotations as "private" or "subjective", since in many ways subjectivity and privacy are rather destroyed or oppressed in *bodily* pathos. In this essay I consistently use the term "*personal*" in this strict sense.
- 8 In his preface he writes: "I always proceed from the concrete event, but never become lost in it; rather I always take it as an occasion for reflections that extend beyond reasoning and the pleasure in logical argument to areas of thought that lie in an uncertain twilight and will remain therein."
- 9 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, xiii.
- 10 *Ibid.* 19.
- 11 *Ibid.* 26.
- 12 I use here the term "loss". I should emphasize that the *loss* of trust of the victim is to be contrasted with the *lack* of trust of the skeptic, in very much the same manner that Améry's "realism" — which arises from and through experience — should be contrasted with what we call "naive realism" or "the myth of the given". The latter define "the real" as something pre-given, independent of, or prior to, human experience and involvement. For Améry, "the real" only surfaces with all its might well within a human (all too human) context of brutality — not as the object of perception, but as the pathos of captivity and torture. A similar differentiation will arise again later around the subject of "homelessness", where the loss of home (homesickness) — which is the concrete experience of the foreigner in forced exile — is contrasted with the existential (metaphysical) affirmation of a lack of home (homelessness) — as constitutive of the "human condition". These differences are to be registered if we are to understand how Améry's work claims to exceed the metaphysical, the transcendental, the generalizing and the normalizing.
- 13 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 26.
- 14 *Ibid.* 36.
- 15 *Ibid.* 19.
- 16 *Ibid.* 43.
- 17 *Ibid.* 100.
- 18 Note that the reaction against Nietzsche, and this is typical to Améry, does not occur by positing a positive statement to contrast with Nietzsche's, or by identifying flaws in Nietzsche's argument. It is rather a counter-enactment of the very same stance (or at least that's the contention) that Nietzsche himself characterizes as "slave morality" and subjects to devaluation. That, I believe, is what Améry means when he describes himself as a reactionary "in the exact sense of the word". What the philosopher in question condemns, he affirms and fights for. What the philosopher affirms and celebrates, he devalues. It is a philosophy in revolt. In general, the difference between "critique" and "revolt" is something we need an ear for.
- 19 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 64.
- 20 *Ibid.* 67.
- 21 *Ibid.* 96.
- 22 *Ibid.* 68.
- 23 *Ibid.* 68.
- 24 *Ibid.* 96.
- 25 *Ibid.* 99.
- 26 *Ibid.* 69–70.
- 27 *Ibid.* 72.
- 28 *Ibid.* 34.
- 29 *Ibid.* 70.
- 30 M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, [trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson], San Francisco: Harper and Row 1962, 284.
- 31 *Ibid.* 1.

