

Authentic Ressentiment? The Polemics of Jean Améry

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ABSTRACT: Following Nietzsche, we can discern two types of therapeutical voice on resentment, which find themselves in a polemical relation to one another: The philosopher and the priest. In this paper, I turn to a third polemical voice, embodied by Jean Améry, namely that of the victim who bears witness to his own resentment. A dialectical reconstruction of this standpoint within the polemical triangle contributes to the Améry reception in three ways: (1) It is no longer necessary to justify his tactlessness through the exceptional context of the objectively recognized lived experience of victimhood. (2) It shows that Améry's assumption of his "authentic resentment" is not just "anti-Nietzschean" (Jameson, Žižek) but first of all anti-pastoral. (3) Beyond the question of (in)authenticity, this also implies that the political significance of Améry's testimony lies in its literary and conceptual systematicity no less than as a description of lived experience.

KEY WORDS: resentment, poleemics, Améry, victimhood, negative dialectics, good sense, time, Nietzsche

According to an ancient trope in political thought, an overdeveloped sense of victimhood poses a threat both to society and to personal well-being. Since the nineteenth century, this threat has often been thematized in terms of "resentment." Following Nietzsche's diagnosis of its foundational role in the Judeo-Christian "slave revolt in morality," we can discern two types of therapeutical voice on resentment: "The philosopher" (Nietzsche's own, exceptional position) holds resentment to be a meaningless condition that one should stay away from; "the priest" (a much more general type that includes most of social science and "English psychologists," i.e., the discourse of liberal political theory) builds his career on the pretense of being able to organize and

heal it. Whereas both stake a claim to the role of physician of civilization, the philosopher puts his bets on the contingent irruption of healthier modes of subjectivity, while the priest seeks to contain resentment by fixing it historically and giving it a psychological meaning, a religious task which in modernity has been assumed by the secular technologies and sciences of governance.

What matters from the philosophical point of view is the asymmetry of this difference. In fact, it is only against the background of his contest with the priestly type that the problem of resentment becomes relevant for Nietzsche (van Tuinen 2018). As the subtitle of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “a polemic,” indicates, each attempt to distinguish between high and low ancestry implies a struggle over the legitimacy and origin of this distinction. The diagnosis of resentment is itself not free from this polemical drama as it always concerns the base motivations of others, never our own. But whereas the priest derives his standing from a denial of difference in the name of protecting the peace, the philosopher exacerbates it.

For as Nietzsche shows, *the priest* suffers from the very disease he pretends to cure, and therefore prefers moral reasoning over open political conflict. Social upheavals, ethnic and religious tensions, the rise of populism, PC and cancel culture, and ordinary political skirmishes all provide occasions for invoking resentment to stigmatize incorrigible enemies beyond the pale of negotiation. Yet it is precisely those who discern resentment everywhere who also depend on this very resentment for their own authority. As Fredric Jameson will later write, they harbor a “resentment of resentment” that makes for double standards in diagnostic discourse (Jameson 2002: 189, 192–93).

The task of *the philosopher* is precisely to recover the antagonistic sense and affective charge of the concept of resentment. If, before it refers to an objective state of affairs, the concept is used to discredit an adversary, this is not a shortcoming, since the struggle for the meaning of words is an immediate political struggle. Resentment is an exemplary case of what Carl Schmitt called “political concepts (*Kampfbegriffe*).” Thus it is one thing to diagnose resentment, but it is another to answer the question: who has the right to wield the concept of resentment? An a priori difference vis-à-vis resentment has to be made by the diagnostician themselves, one that remains transversal to social divisions between rich and poor, man and woman, white and black, colonizer and colonized, and so on.

This paper expands the polemical situation with a third voice, that of the victim who bears witness to their own resentment. In his essay “Resentments,” originally titled *Ressentiments*, in *At the Mind's Limits*, Jean Améry shifts the perspective from third person description to first person narration. Confronted with the trauma experienced by intellectuals in the Nazi concentration camps, he claims the exclusive authority over the moral interpretation and evaluation of his suffering. This claim puts him at right angles with both the philosopher and the priest.

By means of a reconstruction of his position as part of a polemical triangle, the aim is to contribute to the recent reception of Améry in emphasizing his anti-pastoral stance: (1) Whereas Améry's more tepid suitors such as Thomas Brudholm or Didier Fassin explain and exonerate his resentment through the exceptional context of the objectively recognized and morally superior lived experience of victimhood, Améry's revolt against the irreversible past is more radical in that it zealously refuses all rationalization and fully assumes its illogical, toxic and absurd nature. (2) Whereas Jameson and Slavoj Žižek find in Améry a rudimentary articulation of a radical politics of emancipation and in this sense point to the anti-Nietzschean weight of what they call his "authentic resentment," Améry's polemical assumption of his own resentment in fact supplements Nietzsche's concept, even if he inverts its polemical sense and never ceases to struggle with the "infelicity conditions" of its use. (3) Going beyond the question of the (in) authenticity of his resentment implies that we move beyond the restrictions of the phenomenology of victimhood and that we look for the political significance of Améry's resentment in its literary and conceptual systematicity no less than in the description of lived experience.

AUTHENTIC RESENTIMENT?

Despite their incommensurability, the philosopher and the priest agree in two respects. First, they both emphasize the surreptitious, self-deluding and self-defeating nature of resentment. Whatever the moral judgments it spawns, they cannot be trusted. For Nietzsche, the critique of resentment lies at the basis of his attack on metaphysics as rooted in Platonism and monotheism, culminating in modern nihilism. For the priest, the task has always been to channel and manage resentment, for example by psychologizing it as envy or a sour grapes syndrome (Scheler 1972: 29). But they both approach resentment through a hermeneutics of suspicion. Second, they agree that resentment, at least in its outward, recriminating form, should not and cannot constitute the basis of justice, or of social life. For the Nietzschean philosopher, the only adequate response to resentment is to speculate on its self-exhaustion and self-overcoming (to reclaim innocence), while for the priest the answer is to reorganize it in a pacified form (to plead guilty). But for both, unmediated resentment, although an intrinsic part of society, can never sufficiently ground the values we live by.

The problem is of course that these two therapeutic positions exclude what patients themselves have to say about how they interpret and evaluate their condition. Neither Nietzsche nor the priest are much interested in this, since the "men of resentment" are a priori disqualified from interpreting their own resentment—the self-reflective experience of resentment and the existential condition of resentment never fully coincide. What is at stake is the integrity of our relations

to our values, which is hard to discern in the hysterical gestures of those who can only exist in the eyes of others, and therefore need to draw attention to themselves with constant provocations. As can be learned from Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, not even the admission of one's own resentment is a sign of its overcoming, but merely deepens it through a false sense of superiority. It is simply impossible for the man of resentment to recognize his own base desires, since, as Nietzsche put it, "his soul squints" and "loves to hide" (Nietzsche 2006: I.10).

But what help is this condescension to the men of resentment themselves? They are either informed that their very being is an inescapable tragedy, or they are told to submit to the clinical overcoding of their own experience. The result may be the same in both cases: a deep and insurmountable ambivalence. Subjectively we feel guilt and paranoia, objectively most likely still more resentment. Does this mean that no authentic reflection about, let alone emancipation from or empowerment through, resentment is possible? Does resentment, as the philosopher argues, really have no constitutive role to play at all in questions of justice? And does it follow that, as the priest concludes, it is illegitimate even as a lived condition in itself?

It is not only the men of resentment who disagree with this assessment, but so do those invested in emancipatory struggle. While he is critical of the ideological use of the concept, Jameson points to another type of resentment, its "final form," which he labels authentic resentment: an "unhappy consciousness too absolute to find any rest in conventional snobbery," a pool of "mixed feelings" that no bourgeois reader can sustain (Jameson 2002: 193). So far it has seemed obvious to interpret the inauthenticity or self-alienation of the man of resentment as the wavering of an inferior character. But wouldn't it be possible to rehabilitate it positively as a dialectical mediation between consciousness and substantial identity, one that can be stabilized through social recognition even if it can never be fully satisfied? Whereas society tends to naturalize itself and frame any desire for change as a caricatured evil resulting from powerlessness, resentment, after all, keeps open a utopian dimension. An appreciation of this dimension would involve turning the sociopathy of the soul, its very capacity to distort and fabulate but also its inability to forget, to an actual critical use that lies beyond the scope of either the philosopher or the priest.

Following Jameson, Žižek too suggests the possibility of an authentic resentment in the form of a "heroic resentment" (Žižek 2006: 80, 159) that he finds in Améry's essay. For who would deny someone who is reminded daily of the past by the number on his forearm the right to resentment? It is part of their very condition that victims of genocides or of mass violations of human rights cannot receive compensation for what was done. For them, the promise of reconciliation with their perpetrators is no less irrational than the idea of revenge. Should we therefore condemn them for their "wounded attachments," for "wallowing" in grievances,

or for remaining “prisoners of the past”? Or are there circumstances when asking for forgiveness is itself a promise of relief that is morally and politically abject?

It is crucial not to confuse the victims with the executioners. Primo Levi had already summarized this problem in terms of the shame of being human. There is a lot of shame in submission and the impotence to respond, in feeling the aches of resentment—a feeling that reaches backward towards injustice and injury as much as it is the sense of indignity resulting from one’s own complicity in one’s condition. Yet this is hardly an experience that the victims have entitled us to dismiss or discard, no matter how practically urgent such a closure of the past may seem in so-called post-conflict societies. On the contrary, the very perspectival existence of resentment can be used to make the crime a reality to, and to spread self-doubt in, a society that wants nothing more than to let bygones be bygones. Even if no vindication of resentment is possible, we can therefore still describe its role in history without continuing the power discourse of the philosopher and the priest.

Žižek is right to point to the “anti-Nietzschean weight” of this authentic resentment. Contrary to the vitalist celebration of a health that is assumed to lie in the active overcoming of resentment, Améry claims the exclusive expertise over his suffering and thereby renders victimhood productive for critical theory. In fact, Theodor W. Adorno had already recognized in Améry the attempt to enlighten us about a suffering that is total, and knows no end. Just as society and history want to take the memory and identity of the victims away, remembrance is “the one thing that our powerlessness can grant” (Adorno 1986: 115). It is impossible to remember; nonetheless, one has to.

But even more than an anti-Nietzschean stance, Améry’s lucidity about resentment is anti-pastoral. Améry finds in resentment precisely the source of morality that society is lacking. Instead of seeing resentment as a problem that needs to be dealt with, Améry offers a painful exposure that defies bad conscience. His unwillingness to abandon resentment is not (just) a symptom of his private indulgence, but also reveals the indifference of his contemporaries. By showing how a “public use of resentment” is possible, he makes of it a kind of a concrete universal outside the totality of recognizable or sociable partialities (Zalloua 2012). Améry frequently speaks on behalf of victims in the plural (Améry 1980: viii-ix, 63, 80), identifying them as “Shylocks” who are “not only morally condemnable in the eyes of the nations, but already cheated of the pound of flesh too,” (Améry 1980: 75) and argues that his work “could concern all those who wish to live together as fellow human beings” (Améry 1980: xiv). Whereas justice in the usual (liberal) sense is too “hypothetical,” (Améry 1980: 64, 81) as the *vae victis* of its appointed guardians is never far away, the function of resentment is thus in the exposure of injustice and the stubborn holding on to a necessarily utopian demand (just as somatic abhorrence, for Adorno, had become the principle of the new categorical imperative that Auschwitz never repeat itself (Adorno 2005: 365)).

LEGITIMIZING RESENTIMENT

At the Mind's Limits (1980) is the English translation of Améry's eponymous collection *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1966, literally "Beyond Guilt and Atonement"), and also the title essay. Whereas the German title indicates Améry's direct engagement with Nietzsche, the English title conveys the impossibility of the long-standing exercise to which he has committed perhaps most of his literary production: the attempt to make an at first glance shameful and semi-conscious resentment transparent to itself. This task is set out most clearly in the aforementioned essay on resentiments, but it is also reflected in the almost exclusively autobiographical approach and relatively slight narrative content of the essay form. As a careful reader of Nietzsche, Améry is not only aware of the contradictory nature of his undertaking but affirms it from the outset. "Mistrustingly, I examine myself" (Améry 1980: 63). Refusing to delegate the hermeneutics of his resentment to others, he immediately puts himself in the subjective position of the deviant victim and assumes his "retrospective grudge [*Groll*]," even if this implies treating it more as a stubborn and distinct intuition than as a clear concept. He thus resists all final historical, psychological, sociological, and political explanation (Améry 1980: xi).

The problem of interpreting resentment is not just the problem of avoiding a false description of resentment. Given his "paradoxical and contradictory undertaking," (cited in Brudholm 2008: 89) as Levi calls it, Améry cannot simply claim its truth from the first-person perspective. He knows well that it would be impossible to refute the suspicion that he is "drowning the ugly reality of a malicious instinct in the verbal torrent of an unverifiable thesis" (Améry 1980: 69). In fact, every objective recognition of resentment presupposes an intersubjective understanding that makes it generally valid, and it is precisely this commonality in moral judgment that was destroyed in the Nazi camps. Instead, Améry adopts the radically subjective perspective proper to his role as a witness. For what sense does it make to demand objectivity from those who were tortured and betrayed? Objectivity may pertain to "facts" in a physical system, but not to "deeds" in a moral system. This also means that not all perspectives are equal and not all moral sensibilities are common. What must be kept open at all cost is the moral chasm between victims and hangmen, a chasm that will be bridged only when the victims die out.

But how to stand by our resentiments when we are so obviously "biased"? Precisely by not writing as a social scientist corroborating the concept of resentment with empirical claims, but by defending its moral or transcendental necessity in a particular historical situation—the exigency of a subjective memory of the totalitarian regime that proceeded "objectively," that is, under which the dignity and integrity of the individual were worth nothing. "Only I possessed, and still

possess, 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” (Améry 1980: 70).

The personal grievance of the moral witness is the limit of the criticism that pathologizes resentment as symptom of an inner conflict that poses a danger to its environment (Fareld 2016). Améry sees his resentment not as a mental sickness waiting to be treated. The neurosis is on the part of historical occurrence, not the subject: “I know that what oppresses me is no neurosis,” writes Améry, “but rather precisely reflected reality” (Améry 1980: 96). And for this reason, “I am not ‘traumatized,’ but rather my spiritual and psychic condition corresponds completely to reality” (Améry 1980: 99). Améry’s overarching aim is therefore phenomenological: a *Wesensbeschreibung* of the irreparable existential dominant of the victim, hostilely withdrawn in himself, to be arrived at through “introspection” (Améry 1980: 64, xiii) of his own lived experience (*le vécu*).¹

Améry’s reclaiming of the understanding of resentment is as much a rebellion against the “pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation” (Améry 1980: 65) that he encountered even among fellow Jews, as it is a rebellion against the presumption of those who judge the victim’s unyielding distrust and refusal as spiteful. Not that by assuming his own resentment Améry claims some kind of honor for himself. In the prisons and camps of the Third Reich he had already come to scorn himself. There is nothing to be gained or learned from his suffering, nor is his revolt a Camusian one of a potent will to freedom (Améry 1980: 19, 68). What doesn’t kill him, never ceases to overwhelm him. Besides his own interpretation, he also needs to give a new kind of evaluation for his own inglorious condition:

My personal task is to justify a psychic condition that has been condemned by moralists and psychologists alike. The former regard it as a taint, the latter as a kind of sickness. I must acknowledge it [i.e., resentment], 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. (Améry 1980: 64; see also 71)

A confession that is at the same time a justification cannot derive its authority from the confessor (the priest). It must be authorized by the one who speaks and defies the right of others to judge him. At stake is a “*conditio inhumana*” (Améry 1980: vii) that lies beyond guilt and atonement, the latter having “only theological meaning” (Améry 1980: 77).

Améry proceeds with his justification in two steps. He begins by emphasizing that his resentment is not about the fact that he, personally, had to endure all the horrors visited on millions. In fact, describing the situation immediately after the end of the second world war, he says that the situation hardly allowed for resentment to form. He initially trusted the world to recognize his identity as a

victim and put the culprits behind bars. In other words, Améry admitted to and espoused vengefulness, which guaranteed a “mutual understanding between me and the rest of the world.” Precisely because revenge was a social reality, however, there was no ground for resentment to form. In tune with public opinion, Améry “felt just fine in the entirely unaccustomed role of conformist” (Améry 1980: 65).

At the same time, Améry repeatedly emphasizes that he does not live under the illusion that revenge could compensate for his suffering. The attitude of defiance and the refusal of oblivion do not imply that one is giving in to the pleasure of punishing. On the contrary, Améry seems to agree with Nietzsche that there is no necessary relation between punishment and guilt (Nietzsche 2006: II.14). Only this time, the argument is not that the active pleasure of punishing precedes any equivalence between deed and consequence, but that the pain itself knows no exterior legitimization. Although he certainly felt content in the knowledge that the country of his tormentors was in ashes, the idea of personal revenge appears to him nonsensical as a response to the Holocaust—that is, as a response to a crime that had occurred once and ought never to occur again: no “sane person among us [would] ever venture the morally impossible thought that four to six million Germans should be forcibly taken to their death” (Améry 1980: 70).

Rather, the problem is that, as the *Wirtschaftswunder* was taking shape, his belief in the possibility of a world that would do justice to his suffering started to wane. “I thought I was right in the middle of contemporary reality and was already thrown back onto an illusion” (Améry 1980: 66). And: “Every day anew I lose my trust in the world” (Améry 1980: 94, see also 28, 40). It is at this time that society became less interested in the abhorrence of the past and more in glossing over it. Germany was not turned into a “potato field,” as US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. had once recommended. Rather, it was accepted by the UN and “dispassionately reckoned with in the power game.” The world, in other words, forgot and forgave the Germans and the victims became a nuisance. “Suddenly there was good reason for resentment” (Améry 1980: 66).

A good reason for resentment, then, is not the impossibility of revenge but the impossibility of intersubjective recognition. Revenge is still a conciliatory gesture that reenacts a minimal trust in the present instead of problematizing it. The humiliation of the victim continues in the compensation proceedings themselves. What causes his resentment is the new consensus that society has no place for people like him. “At stake for me is the release [*Erlösung*] from the abandonment [*Verlassensein*] that has persisted from that time until today” (Améry 1980: 70). In the victim’s loneliness, the unceasing suffering begins feeding on itself in opposition to a world that moves on. As the murderers that were convicted formed only a small portion of a multitude, an “inverted pyramid” of SS men, SS helpers, officials, kapos, and medal-bedecked generals still weighs on him and drives him into the ground. Worse still, society or history itself is this inverted pyramid,

since outside of statistics, it knows no such thing as collective guilt, only collective innocence (Améry 1980: 72–75). Nobody knows exactly how many Germans recognized, approved of, or committed the Nazi crimes, or simply let them happen: “I am burdened with collective guilt, I say; not they” (Améry 1980: 75). The very experience of the other, indeed the experience of time itself, becomes “an existential consummation of destruction” (Améry 1980: x).

In many ways Améry’s problem is therefore precisely the opposite of that of the priest, whose task is to socialize resentment. Unlike, say, a lone-wolf terrorist, he is not a psychiatric case. Nevertheless, a point has been reached where the existential is no longer limited to one’s private life. Society may well want to prevent crimes from recurring, but the victims are ultimately the only ones who can claim the right to decide what to do about the offenses. Remembrance and rancor have the moral function of keeping alive for the perpetrators the meaning of what they have done in a way that far exceeds mere historical or factual remembrance: “My resentment is there in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept (*hingerissen*) into the truth of his atrocity” (Améry 1980: x). The response to trauma “can be a matter neither of revenge on the one side nor of a problematic atonement on the other”; it is rather a question of “permitting resentment to remain alive in the one camp and, aroused by it, self-mistrust in the other” (Améry 1980: 77).

This dissemination of resentment is not a question of personal triumph over the perpetrators, moreover, but a way of dealing with the immorality of social life as such, which places politics on one side and life on the other, as if what is said on one side is not real and what is lived on the other cannot be said. Instead of socializing resentment, he wants to “ressentimentalize” society. If the victim’s truth hurts, this is because it must be forced upon the non-victims. Whereas his environment frames resentment as an irrelevant grievance or a sign of mental illness, Améry requires his subjective resentment to remain an objectively lived reality for generations to come. His greatest worry is that “Everything will be submerged in a general ‘Century of Barbarism.’ We, the victims, will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the antihistorical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word, and in the end it will seem like a technical mishap that some of us still survived” (Améry 1980: 80). The “moral power to resist” is at work, as is “the moral truth of the conflict” that the perpetrator doesn’t know and society doesn’t care about (Améry 1980: 70, 72, 120).

AMÉRY’S POLEMICS

Améry’s resentments are directed against both his torturers and a society that becomes more and more indifferent to his fate. At several points Améry directly addresses the young Germans, the new generations eager to leave the

past behind. But who are the immoral “moralists and psychologists” that Améry turns against? He identifies his double enemy quite precisely and fights the social judgment implicit in both: “I must delimit our resentments on two sides and shield them against two explications: that of Nietzsche, who morally condemned resentment, and that of modern psychology, which is able to picture it only as a disturbing conflict.” Whereas Améry feels obliged by resentment itself, Nietzsche warns against its contagious nature, while the priest disseminates it under the pretense of disarming it. Insofar as they value health over sickness, the philosopher and the priest vindicate suffering instead of accepting its taint. They still share this basic good sense or “healthy straightness” (Améry 1980: 68) with society at large and, by implication, cannot but confuse the victims and the executioners.

It is with Améry’s total rejection of the good sense of those who place the healthy—the health of individuals or the health of society—above the sick, that the polemical nature of the concept of resentment returns in all its vehemence. Améry’s authenticity lies precisely in the fact that he consistently wants his resentment to be judged only for itself and refuses all external criteria of health or moral uprightness. It lies in the rejection of exactly that good sense stronger than any resentment, which implies that, in the painful transition of resentment from private to public, there is no expectation of release, just an open wound: “natural time will reject the demands of our resentments and finally extinguish them. . . . Germany will not make it good, and our rancor will have been for nothing.” The victims will be seen as the “truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones,” and hence “[t]he fears of Nietzsche and Scheler actually were not warranted. Our slave morality will not triumph” (Améry 1980: 79–81, ix).

Deeply inspired by the uncompromising negativity of figures such as Georges Bataille and Emil Cioran, Améry openly vents and fulminates. Without identifying as a Jew in any positive form of cultural heritage or religious ties, he assumes without reservation the role reserved for him as “a vehemently protesting Jew” (Améry 1980: x, 75). He consciously leaves behind all tact and gives only a half-hearted attempt at rationalization: “Emigration, Resistance, prison, torture, concentration camp—all that is no excuse for rejecting tact and is not intended to be one. But it is a sufficient causal explanation” (Améry 1980: 63). Against the priest, Améry makes it known that forgiveness granted socially and objectively will inevitably bring back the past as return of the repressed in the form of neurotic forms, fear, hatred, and guilt. Against Nietzsche, Améry defends the right not to forget and to let the past ulcerate the present and the future. No matter how functional forgiving and forgetting are for society at large, there is justice only in the permanent accommodation of the perspective of victimhood and the unremitting denunciation of injustice. This places Améry outside the moral framework of the commonly possible and the socially acceptable.

Exposing one's own resentment is by definition a tactless thing to do, since it cannot but be perceived as a moral hazard. But in Améry's case, even tactlessness is a form of tact, as it offers a basic intuition or orientation (Heyd 2014). In the form of an implacable passion of militancy and rebellion, he finally renders resentment politically relevant for itself. It is emancipated from both the Nietzschean philosopher's bio-medical problem of the degeneration of the human species and the priest's psycho-sociological problem of the sociopathic individual. Améry presents us with the physiologically lived experience of resentment; his work is the very embodiment of the wound as it spreads its impact on society.

It is precisely this visceral defense of immoderation that Améry shares with Nietzsche. This is because they both speak of resentment in an anti-pastoral fashion. Justice is not defined through the problem of social (in)equality just as resentment is not defined through envy. There is no hidden meaning to resentment and no criterion of proportionality or truth. Améry's immediate opponent is the priest who asks for ascetic values and moderate responses such as amnesty and pardon for what cannot be forgiven:

We victims of persecution, the high-soaring man says, ought to internalize our past suffering and bear it in emotional asceticism, as our torturers should do with their guilt. But I must confess: I lack the desire, the talent, and the conviction for something like that. . . . I do not want to become the accomplice of my torturers; rather, I demand that the latter negate themselves and in the negation coordinate with me. The pile of corpses that lie between them and me cannot be removed in the process of internalization, so it seems to me, but, on the contrary, through actualization, or, more strongly stated, by actively settling the unresolved conflict in the field of historical practice. (Améry 1980: 69)

But if this restoration of the past has nothing to do with nostalgia, just as the refusal to forgive does not mean that revenge is enacted, then what does it mean for a crime to be re-actualized? It means that the victim's past must be relived and shared by those who would prefer to leave the past behind. This is the paradox: Whoever says that people should move on, obliterates the proximity of perpetrators and victims precisely by suggesting they are the same. While the perpetrators are forgiven, the victims are forgotten. Internalization is the pacification process by which the priest redirects the outward accusations of resentment. But for victims, what this really comes down to for victims is isolation. Améry wants to restore proximity both socially and temporally. For it to remain clear who the torturers were and who the victims, the perspectival distance between them must be bridged. This won't rescue the victim from self-estrangement, but it saves him from facing it alone (Zolkos 2007: 32). Améry wants to actualize the conflict for everyone. "Where there is a common bond between me and the world, whose unrevoked death sentence I acknowledge as a social reality, it dissolves in polem-

ics. 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" (Améry 1980: 96). His resentment is itself a historical fact that should be universalized, that is, it must be externalized, socialized, moralized and politicized—only this time by the man of resentment himself.

The aim of this externalization is to convert the perpetrator to the position of the victim.

When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with me—and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I to turn back time, to undo what had been done. When they led him to the place of execution, the anti-man had once again become a fellow man. (Améry 1980: 70)

This is no assumption of power on Améry's behalf. Where no compensation for suffering is possible, all he wants is for others to want to reverse the flow of time as much as he does. It is only once the perpetrator comes to share his past and once it is clear that there is no future for either that forgiveness becomes thinkable for Améry. Forgiveness here is about the common consummation of resentment, not about the annulment of guilt through the rituals of atonement. Its purpose is to bind the criminal to his deed in a suspension of time outside any official social platform for reconciliation. A genuine reconciliation with the past presupposes this undoing of the past. It's not about the SS man's enlightenment or the reintroduction of the *jus talionis*. Améry pursues a consistently non-pastoral conversion. His aim is to constantly re-actualize a conflict that knows no societal triangulation, only the dyad between victim and executioner.²

This coordination in negativity without mediation is not only how Améry sees the relations with his torturer, but also how he relates to society at large. It was, after all, the participation and passivity of an entire people that made the Holocaust possible. Therefore, Améry craves a society-wide but no less fantastic "revolution" catalyzed by resentment, in which the "realized," "total negation" of the Third Reich is finally relived and thus relieved:

On the field of history there would occur what I hypothetically described earlier for the more limited, individual circle: two groups of people, the overpowered and those who overpowered them, would be joined in the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history become moral. . . . The German revolution would be made good, Hitler disowned. (Améry 1980: 78)

As opposed to the French revolution, Heinrich Heine famously prophesied a revolution springing from German philosophy, in which the word becomes flesh. While many liberal historians draw an immediate relation between the fanaticism of will found in Fichte and the romantics on the one hand and later

Nazi terrorism on the other, for Améry, resentment here has the revolutionary function that the priest seeks to avoid at all cost. It performs not just a negation, that had already been done by the Nazi crimes, but the “negation of the negation” (Améry 1980: 79) by which its historical consciousness would displace German history. Only when the overturning of history is complete does it become moral and resentment become unnecessary. As long as this doesn’t happen, society must live with its negation. In Hegelian terms: the resentimental consciousness is that of a determinate negation that is paradoxically also a form of “unemployed negativity,” insofar as it blocks the speculative affirmation of sacrifice in the name of historical progress. That is to say, it is a positive relation, a relation that posits its own objectivity, but only in the form of perennial strife in which the dialectic comes to a standstill.

While the need for externalization sounds vaguely Nietzschean, it is also obvious that Améry does not share Nietzsche’s condemnation of resentment as the reliving of a morally deficient past. He is precisely the neurasthenic type singled out by Nietzsche, for whom passive memory inevitably recalls past torments, whereas active forgetting would be the doorkeeper of mental peace and social order. While for the priest, forgiveness is essential for a future-oriented society, for Nietzsche forgetfulness is a function of political futurity. Améry’s revolution, by contrast, is entirely oriented towards the past. His demand that others coordinate with him in negation in order for the past to remain current couldn’t be further removed from the thinker of affirmation. For Nietzsche, the future is an extra-moral category (“the innocence of becoming”). For Améry, by contrast, time is “antimoral” (Améry 1980: 72). He pursues a moralization of time out of the rancor against time’s “it was.” All his work constitutes a *nachdenken*, a “personal protest against the anti-moral natural process of healing that time brings about” (Améry 1980: 77). Time as natural process is a time that flows, or flies like an arrow in a straight line from past to future. This is the social and biological sense of time as healer of all wounds. Contrary to this “objective time,” Améry posits history not as neutral and objective, but as irreducibly subjective. The moral person refuses to go with the flow and demands the cancellation of time “by nailing the criminal to his deed” (Améry 1980: 72).

In order to appreciate the full extent of Améry’s ill will towards good sense, one must therefore begin with his demand for the impossible. Pinned to the past, with the exit to the future blocked, he wants to turn back time: “[I]t did not escape me that resentment is not only an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition [*Zustand*]. It nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone” (Améry 1980: 68–69). Of course, Améry knows well that the past cannot be nullified. He is no Tertullian fanatic believing in the face of absurdity. The demand of an undoing of the past is as absurd as the demand directed to German

society, since the social is precisely “a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history.” (Améry 1980: xi) Yet his demand for the absurd is not so much predicated on a distrust of the natural consciousness of time, as it is time itself which forces the survivor to survive that which it becomes increasingly impossible to survive (Ben Shai 2010). His polemical tactlessness makes for a reckless immoderation and unsociability as much as for the cultivation of a certain out-of-sync-ness with the demands of the present. To remain a victim is to revolt against the very difference between past and future; it is to inhabit a time out of joint, a “twisted” (*ver-rückt*) temporality in which the spirits of the dead walk the earth. The German subtitle of his book, *Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* says it all: attempts to overcome by one who has been overcome. Real resentment is not something that can or wants to be overcome or administered (*bewaltet*). On the contrary, as a remnant of Auschwitz it comes with the moral exigency that others negate themselves in the active remembrance of what is constantly forgotten and that they confront ceaselessly that which it is impossible to undo. The revolt against time is the same as the revolt against the unworthy attitude of false conciliatoriness.

Such is the total reversal of the Nietzschean account of resentment that Améry brings about: Nietzsche wants to live, Améry wants to survive. In the simplified vitalist schema of a tension between life and morality, Améry chooses morality. Similar to the demand for justice through revenge that typifies the slave revolt, Améry claims universality beyond what is currently possible. Yet it is a universality without (false) content. Justice is not based on a secretive and parasitic reversal of older valuations of unforgiveness and rancor into Christo-bourgeois values such as altruism and selflessness. Rather, Améry’s “principled revolt” (Améry 1980: xi, see also 72) consists of a reinterpretation and revaluation of resentment itself as just. This self-presentation is not the hallucination of the weak’s hypocritical will to power, but rather, mirroring Nietzsche’s sovereign individual, the victim’s sovereign answer, namely his will to remember and his capacity to make promises. In other words, his revaluation of the values of reconciliation and overcoming is as much a revolt against life as it is an honorable reaction to those who fail to be outraged over massive injustice. His demand that time be reversed is not merely the fanciful demand of a subject left behind by society but effectuates itself as a real state of the world—as something defined by Adorno as a “difference with respect to what exists” (Adorno 1986: 313). Whereas Nietzsche’s man of resentment hides behind the fiction of a culpable agent and compassion with others in order to find temporary relief from suffering, there is nothing abstract about Améry’s agonal energy and intellectual vigor. Placed in polemical opposition to the world by forces that exceed him, his very agitation is the wager by which he seeks to unite with the suffering and anger of others who are equally lost and at risk of being buried in the past. Despite the unseemly nature of his means and the utopian nature of

his claims, Améry in this way embodies a universal demand for solidarity with all those who fall under the wheels of history in opposition to those who ask of them this sacrifice. It may not be recognized as objectively possible or true, but perhaps it is all the more plausible for that.

What is interesting, however, is that all these reversals nonetheless leave the entire Nietzschean edifice of resentment and the slave revolt intact. Améry's self-description stays true to Nietzsche's characterization of resentment in its raw state as "a piece of animal psychology" (Nietzsche 2006: III.20)—more still than the cultivated resentment of ancient Judaism—but likewise makes an active, instrumental use of it. Instead of being predicated on a bourgeois culture of envy and comparison, his resentment is of a pure, Nietzschean kind, as it is directed solely against the passage of time. It is as if he accepts the entire Nietzschean edifice, except the notion that time always wins in the end. The belief in healing is as ideological and fictional as the belief in original sin (Ben Shai 2014). This is the core of Améry's polemics against good sense. It takes him one step further than Nietzsche, who saw physiological entropy and moral decadence as irreversible, whereas the Christian priest still left a possibility of turning against the reality principle in the form of the Last Judgment.³ The passing of time brings decay to most things, but precisely not to resentment. This passionate fidelity is what makes it moral. For Améry, for the victim, there can be no common sense without nonsense (Améry 1980: 150).

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE NEGATIVE

The uncompromising revolt of morality against nature and history, and the full assumption of incurable alienation set Améry apart not just from Nietzsche and Scheler, but from all philosophical and pastoral discourses on resentment. For example, it puts him at odds with a moral philosopher such as Avishai Margalit, who argues that "[w]e do not in general owe forgiveness to others, but we may owe it to ourselves. . . . This duty stems from not wanting to live with feelings of resentment and the desire for revenge. Those are poisonous attitudes and states of mind" (Margalit 2002: 207). According to Margalit, Améry's authenticity is equivalent to self-betrayal. Restlessly tarrying with the negative, the resistance to change and his masochistic nursing of grievance recall the Freudian death drive. Améry's attitude is a poisonous one, rooted in pure despair. Does this mean his utopian fantasies are doomed to remain fruitless?

As a testament to this general prevalence of therapeutical good sense over political reason, Améry's radical polemic has also proven resistant to interpretation by some of his most careful readers. The problem is that they fall into the trap of wanting to rationalize and exonerate resentment, whereas Améry has no difficulty in taking on its illogical and absurd nature. Thomas Brudholm's study on Améry,

for example, is permeated with pastoral good sense when he blames Améry for being “unnecessarily polemical” (Brudholm 2008: 93). At the same time, he also regards it as his task to save Améry from his own excessiveness. He thus describes the particularity of Améry’s ressentiment as being exempt from envy, blindness, self-centeredness, revenge, indeed, from ressentiment: “Améry’s attempt to rehabilitate a special kind of ressentiment is connected to a notion of reconciliation or re-creation of human community; this connection alone makes the effort to read the essay worthwhile” (Brudholm 2008: 66, see also 174). The problem is that re-creation and reconciliation are not the same. For Améry, they are even opposed. Brudholm emphasizes Améry’s forward-looking considerations and reassures us that he “does not want a fellow sufferer but a fellow man” (Brudholm 2008: 166, see also 126). But what Améry wants to re-create is precisely the proximity of torturer and victim that characterizes the past alone and can never define his relation to his (future) contemporaries. He is not enduring his ressentiment and isolation in the hope that they will eventually be redeemed (cf. Brudholm 2008: 158). His rehabilitation of ressentiment is much more zealous than that.

Brudholm defends ressentiment as an ethical stance of a minority who explicitly believes that their position cannot shake the complacency of the majority. In this attenuated understanding, justified by an exceptional context of an objectively recognized and morally superior victimhood, ressentiment would be justifiable, whereas true Nietzschean ressentiment is only its toxic counterpart. Yet if the careful Nietzsche reader Améry had intended something different than Nietzsche’s phrase, then what prevented him from inventing a new term?

Against all rehabilitation over time for the executioners, against the guilt of the survivor, and against the goodwill of his tepid defenders and his contemporaries, Améry wants recognition of his ressentiment, for what it is in all its ugly reality. Does this lead to the kind of victimization and identity politics that prevent the very possibility of mutual recognition? As Jameson and Žižek remind us, the very idea that there could only be an emancipatory politics if we leave our wounded attachments behind is utopian. Instead, we need to find a way out of the testimonial problem. For the man of ressentiment, it is the very impossibility of the satisfaction of his demands to the world that makes his entrapment in the past chronic and inescapable.

Améry is well aware of this aporia in his politics of remembrance and does not claim innocence. While resisting the therapeutic dissolution or sublimation of his ressentiment, he has no illusions of ever convincing his contemporaries to join him in negation. On the contrary, in his polemical struggle for fraternity, he willingly collaborates with them in the commodification of his own lived experience (Améry 1980: 80). As a disconnected individual he gets paid to leave his isolation and sell his tactlessness on the radio and in the feuilletons for consumption as a literary curiosity. Having wanted to turn himself into a moral event, a thorn in the side of

society, he became a media star who anticipated the contemporary fetishization of victimhood instead. In short, Améry knew well that it is impossible to relate authentically to one's own alienation.

Would a contemporary Améry be on Twitter or Instagram? The general tendency towards self-sabotage inherent to resentment, while ignored by Jameson and Žižek, further complicates the question that is central to almost all Holocaust literature, namely that of the integrity of moral and political engagement. Did Améry really only refuse reconciliation or did he actually want to preserve his entitlement to victimhood indefinitely? (Brudholm 2008: 131, 133) Is his another case of what Scheler dismissed as "resentment criticism," "the growing pleasure afforded by invective and negation" with no interest in actually improving its conditions or having its wishes satisfied? (Scheler 1972: 51)

Perhaps Améry's whole idea of emancipation could be said to culminate in the refusal to fully integrate the personal in the social and in the attempt to save the reality of his own experience by writing. If, for Hegel, this refusal of the unhappy consciousness is only a necessary subjective moment in the development of an objective system shared with others, Améry does not allow his existential anxiety to be fixed and dissolved within a larger whole. For him, negativity is the very mode of existence of consciousness in its situatedness in the world, such that an authentic relation to the empirical other is blocked from the outset—hell is other people. This gives his work an ascetic quality without being self-renunciative, since it is also the basis of an authentic, albeit outlandish hope that resists being turned into guilt before collective mores, or worse, the general interest.

It is vis-à-vis the vexed question of authenticity that Améry's existentialist background resonates most strongly with Adorno's negative dialectics. With revolution farther away than ever, perhaps we should say that resentment coincides with the critical stance par excellence. It is the politics of reconciliation, and not that of resentment, that is essentially intolerant and totalitarian. As Améry tells the priest: "Whoever submerges his individuality in society and is able to comprehend himself only as a function of the social, that is, the insensitive and indifferent person, really does forgive" (Améry 1980: 71). And as he could have reminded Nietzsche: Only a plastic individual such as Mirabeau, someone whose careless and carefree sovereignty is founded on the absence of pain, can socially afford to forget, if at the cost of a "self-overcoming of justice" (Nietzsche 2006: I.10, II.10). None of this applies to those who have been cast out of society without being able to escape from it. What Adorno says of his own "sad science" of objectivated experience under late capitalism, a fusion of subjective dismay and objective participation in the "hardened world," fully applies to the singular universality of Améry. "Only what does not fit into the world is true" (Adorno 1974: 15–16).

Ultimately it is not up to good sense to decide on the emancipatory potential of this self-exposition of resentment, since resentment, precisely if it is to express

itself authentically, can only be consistent in its polemical inconsistency. It would be good sense to accept that demanding the absurd is justified in the limited case of victims of mass atrocities, but not in less severe cases (“what were the other options?”). However, Améry is much more rigorous: *ressentiment* must be embraced for what it is, a self-legitimizing and self-perpetuating negativity independent of its objective trauma or its present commercial environment. His writing on *ressentiment* is that of a self-validating “performance” (Hunt 2010: 11). It is neither in bad faith nor, for that matter, in good faith. We may conclude that the ideal of authenticity still bears the imprint of a priestly vivisection of conscience, something which *ressentiment* has no natural interest in, at least not with regard to itself, and is not a precondition for universal emancipation at all.

This also implies that we need to move beyond the restrictions of phenomenology and interpret and evaluate Améry’s *ressentiment* as the conceptual construction of a writer no less than as a description of lived experience. For Adorno, art is one of the last redoubts of negativity, bearing within itself the power to resist the norms of social life. Writing operationalizes a “more” of language with respect to the actuality that traps individual consciousness (Adorno 2004: 106). Or as Améry points out, it takes “literary decorum” (Améry 1980: 63) to render plausible concrete experiences that take place “at the limits of the mind.” If we are interested in authenticity or consistency, then despite his constant use of “the little word ‘I’” (Améry 1980: 2) we must look to the text more than to the person. For while one’s individual fate may be insurmountable, literature and politics are not opposed. There is solidarity in pure negativity and distrust, not just in shared victimhood. The function of polemical discourse is to produce a language that “sticks,” that shares a rigid attitude of concernedness with others. This is how Améry gives suffering a validity that exceeds the reification of the subjectively lived and of historical facts.⁴ He claims the right to denounce what society makes of the traumatized when it labels them as paranoid, but also what society makes of literature when it contrasts artistic sublimation with unconstructive and pathological *ressentiment*. Instead of an opposition between ethics and literature, the latter must be understood as a literal transformation of life—not its cure but its moralization.

For society, Améry’s work is quite literally the return of the repressed. It is as a writer more than as a victim that Améry positions himself as what Sara Ahmed calls an archetypal “killjoy” (Ahmed 2010: 33, 58–59). His exposure of *ressentiment* is less the fetishization of trauma, than what Ahmed calls “the work of exposure”: the narrating that makes grief visible and that, in reminding us of the necessity not to forget, makes us rethink the relation between present and past and returns our wounded attachments to actuality. Retelling the past is a seriation of resonances beyond lived experience. For what returns in *ressentiment* is not just a memory but the future reverberations of the past, and thus the possibility

of a redistribution of our historical sense of the present. Améry ostensibly has no stake in the future. His demand that that which has been, not have been, violates the law of contradiction. This nevertheless implies that a radically new thought and a new society are not impossible. He insists because only repetition gives him the power to connect with other exiles and other becomings, which come back from the future as so many unrealized possibilities retrieved from the past (cf. Baugh 2015). In this sense, at least, resentment is not primarily an existential pathology but a political pathos that enforces the destruction of good sense and the affirmation of a different orientation towards time.

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NOTES

1. Following Sara Ahmed and Jan Slaby, the phenomenology “of one’s own cause” (*in eigener Sache*) turns into political activism. The “thing” (*Sache*) is precisely the assemblage of the social reality that affects us and our own affective state. Both as a feeling and as a descriptive word, resentment immediately generates insights, impulses for action and solidarity between kindred spirit (Slaby 2016).
2. Zolkos rightly emphasizes the strictly dyadic (as opposed to triangular or social) structure of victim versus perpetrator of Améry’s resentment (Zolkos 2007).
3. “What people did not use to know, what people these days do know, can know—, a *regressive development* or turnaround in any way, shape or form is absolutely impossible. This is something that we psychologists, at least, do know. But all priests and moralists have believed that it was possible” (Nietzsche 2005: 217). What makes Nietzsche a moralist in Améry’s eyes is that he too—and contrary to his popular image as an individualist—regards the individual only as an affront, a functionless survivor of himself and society, who preserves himself without growing, thereby decomposing unity into multiplicity, order into chaos, and sense into nonsense.
4. The artificiality of his writing affords the belated revolt against the lived continuity with his pre-war self, Hans Mayer, aptly described by Roy Ben Shai as “the unsuspecting Austrian, agnostic, liberal, self-proclaimed intellectual . . . that self which is still immersed in the natural time sense, whose childhood memories continue to engulf him as if nothing ever happened” (Ben Shai 2010: 89).

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