

Chapter Seven

Jean Améry on Phenomenology in the Death Camp

It seems that there can be no greater contrast to Gadamer than Jean Améry. While Gadamer uncritically takes over Heidegger's and Husserl's terms and uses them without reflecting on any moral implications, Jean Améry applies them to his experiences in the death camps. The result shocks. It emerges as a desperate attempt to reach the heart and mind of the people who, as we have just seen in Gadamer, twenty years after Auschwitz, still identify death as the most noble pinnacle of existence. Améry claims that only one who went through the Nazi inferno can understand and convey its meaning to the people who were not there. Améry calls his critical dealing with his experience "phenomenology" (Améry 2005b: 258). He entitles the material, the personal experience, to which he applies his critical lens "*le vécu*" (Améry 2005a: 13) and "*situation vécue*" (Ibid: 189): that is, life as it is experienced, or what Husserl calls *Erlebnis*. Thus, lacking that experience, one can talk about the banality of evil only insofar as one sees Eichmann in the glass cage at the court in Jerusalem (Améry 1970: 38). This attitude raises the question we shall later treat about the prospect of writing meaningfully about the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis for people who were not there. Améry himself is skeptical, especially when it comes to the intellectuals' ability to understand. He writes bitterly:

In my incessant effort to explore the basic condition of being a victim, in conflict with the necessity to be a Jew and the impossibility of being one, I believe to have recognized that the most extreme expectations and demands directed at us are of a physical and social nature. That such knowledge has made me unfit for profound and lofty speculation, I know. It is my hope that it has better equipped me to recognize reality. (Améry 1986: 101 / 1970: 119)

Améry expresses mistrust in the intellectuals who failed to stand up for morality. His affinity to Julien Benda's *Trahison des clercs* (1928) (Benda 1978), to whose German translation he wrote the introduction, is apparent.

Améry expresses his attitude toward the superficiality of culture as seen from the perspective of the death camp with the following remark:

A comrade who had once been asked about his profession had foolishly told the truth that he was a Germanist and that had provoked a murderous outburst of rage from an SS man. In those same days, across the ocean in the USA, Thomas Mann, I believe, said, "Wherever I am is German culture." The German-Jewish Auschwitz prisoner could not

have made such a bold assertion, even if by chance he had been a Thomas Mann. (Améry 1986: 8 / 1970: 18)

This remark is complex. It is a critique of the intellectuals outside the death camp for whom business was as usual, despite the horrors that were taking place. At the same time, Améry must presume the presence of some literate intellectual strata, for otherwise his critique could never be heard. The pain and suffering at the beginning of *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* are those of the intellectual in the death camp. Unlike professionals who immerse themselves in their work routine because of their skills (Améry 1970: 12) and hence also in society, the intellectual can hardly integrate.⁷¹ He used to look at the world through logic and reason, but they have suddenly collapsed (Ibid: 20). At the same time, his critique is mainly directed against the hollowness of the intellectuals.

As we have seen in our previous discussion, especially in Gadamer, Heidegger, and Jünger, death is the ultimate possibility of human-existence; the human is hence supposed to face it heroically. This philosophy must change in the death camp, as Améry shows:

The first result was always the total collapse of the *esthetic* view of death. What I am saying is familiar. The intellectual, and especially the intellectual of German education and culture, bears this esthetic view of death within him. It was his legacy from the distant past, at the very latest from the time of German romanticism. It can be more or less characterized by the names Novalis, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Thomas Mann. For death in its literary, philosophic or musical form there was no place in Auschwitz; no bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*. Every poetic evocation of death became intolerable, whether it was Hesse's "Dear Brother Death ..." or that of Rilke, who sang: "Oh Lord, give each his own death." The esthetic view of death had revealed itself to the intellectual as part of an esthetic *mode of life*; where the latter had been all but forgotten, the former was nothing but an elegant trifle. In the camp no Tristan music accompanied death, only the roaring of the SS and the Kapos. (Améry 1986: 16–17 / 1970: 28)

For the prisoner in the death camp, Améry says, there was no poetic death (*Tod*), but only brutish dying (*sterben*).⁷² The intellectual, Améry goes on, was just as occupied as the non-intellectual with the concrete, physical aspects of dying:

⁷¹ "Der Intellektuelle suchte, zumindest im Anfang noch, ständing nach der Möglichkeit sozialer Kundgebung des Geistes. In einem Gespräch mit dem Bettnachbarn etwa, der umständlich vom Küchzetteln seiner Frau erzählte, wollte er gerne die Feststellung einschmuggeln, daß er selbst daheim viel gelesen habe. Wenn er aber hierauf zum dreißigsten Mal die Antwort erhielt: 'Scheiße, Mensch!', ließ er es bleiben." (Améry 1970: 17)

⁷² Compare Adorno (1997: 117): "Was da in höherer als bloß empirischer Gewißheit sich ankündigt, reinigt ihn [i.e. den Tod] so falsch von Elend und Gestank des animalischen Krepierens wie nur ein Wagnischer Liebes- oder Erlösungstod, ähnlich dem Einbau des Todes in die Hygiene, den Heidegger den Uneigentlichen ankreidet."

Then, however, the entire problem was reduced to a number of concrete considerations. For example, there was once a conversation in the camp about an SS man who had slit open a prisoner's belly and filled it with sand. It is obvious that in view of such possibilities one was hardly concerned with whether or *that* one had to die, but only with how it would happen. Inmates carried on conversations about *how* long it probably takes for the gas in the gas chamber to do its job. One speculated on the painfulness of death by phenol injections. (Améry 1986: 17 / 1970: 28–29)

Contrary to Heidegger, who conceives death as the highest possibility of the human being for realizing his genuine existence if he relates to it resolutely and authentically, in the death camp the experience of dying reduces the human being to an indistinct brute entity lacking distinctive characteristics. Thus Améry writes regarding Heidegger:

Occasionally, perhaps that disquieting magus from Alemannic regions came to mind who said that beings appear to us only in the light of Being, but that man forgot Being by fixing on beings. Well now, Being. But in the camp it was more convincingly apparent than on the outside that beings and the light of Being gets you nowhere. You could *be hungry, be tired, be sick*. To say that one purely and simply *is*, made no sense. And existence *as such*, to top it off, became definitively a totally abstract and thus empty concept. (Améry 1986: 18–19 / 1970: 30)

“To-be-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein*) is a term which Heidegger uses in *Being and Time* to describe the basic ways in which the human Dasein exposes the entities in their Being in his daily life. The human Dasein finds himself in familiar surroundings in which he relates to the entities *not* as bare-objects, but rather as tools to accomplish tasks. Tools and work are the mode in which the human Dasein encounters entities in his daily activities in a mode of occupation and not of scientific observation. “World” denotes the projected organized complex of working, collaborating to accomplish tasks, and using tools, which the human Dasein finds himself encountering in his daily life. “World” does not refer to an object or a sum of objects. It is rather the basic mode in which entities encountered in daily life are familiar and trustworthy. Hence Heidegger says that the *world* is *Existential*, namely, a mode of existence. Trust and familiarity characterize this mode of existence, and they allow the human Dasein to immerse himself in his tasks and accomplish them intuitively, without reflection or meditation. If “world” is existential, then it should be the daily mode of existence, regardless of place and time. Améry makes a caricature of this suggestion:

I don't know if the person who is beaten by the police loses human dignity. Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call “trust in the world.” Trust in the world includes all sorts of things: the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise

blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference. But more important as an element of trust in the world, and in our context what is solely relevant, is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me, more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical and with it also my metaphysical being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel.

At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down. The other person, *opposite* whom I exist physically in the world and *with* whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the partners. (Améry 1986: 28 / 1970 40–41)

To-be-in-the-world turns out to be not existential, but rather a description of a normal way of life in times of peace. In times of war, human existence loses the characteristics of familiarity, trust, and collegiality. Améry writes regarding the torturer:

He had to *torture*, destroy, in order to be great in bearing the suffering of others. He had to be capable of handling torture instruments, so that Himmler would assure him his certificate of maturity in History; later generations would admire him for having obliterated his feelings of mercy. (Améry 1986: 30 / 1970: 43)

The human Dasein, Améry says, is tortured to death by his fellow man. The torturer tortures his fellow man in order to enhance his own personality, to become a semi-God (1970: 49). The one who is tortured loses forever his trust in the world.

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. (Améry 1986: 40 / 1970: 54)

Being at home with one's own language and culture is an important component in German philosophy. *Heimat* or homeland in English surfaces in the literature each time the effort is made to point out what makes up the essence of German; and this long before the appearance of Nazism, as for example in Richard Wagner's text *What is German?* (Wagner 1883: 51–73). Améry claims that

Therefore, once again very clearly: there is no "new home." Home is the land of one's childhood and youth. Whoever has lost it remains lost himself, even if he has learned not to stumble about in the foreign country as if he were drunk, but rather to tread the ground with some fearlessness. (Améry 1986: 48 / 1970: 63)

Hence, homesickness (*Heimweh*) turns out to be self-destruction, longing for the lost self (Améry 1970: 66). Likewise, the native language becomes hostile exactly as the *Heimat* does (Ibid: 68). Once one is deported and banned from one's fatherland, one will understand that homeland cannot be a mode of existence—in the sense of language and familiarity—without an actual fatherland (Ibid: 70). In addition, if you are a Jew, you find that you have never really had one (Ibid: 65).

The experience of one's finitude implies an experience of time, according to Heidegger and Gadamer. Time can be experienced inauthentically as an infinite span, or authentically as the temporally finite meaning of one's existence. This is the *Ereigniss*, *καίρως*, or the "fulfilled time" (*erfüllte Zeit*) as Gadamer calls it. It is a messianic intervention in the infinite temporal span which lets one experience one's existence as finite. This is the apex of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and of Gadamer's hermeneutical experience.⁷³ The theme time is also the apex of Améry's discussion, which is dedicated to resentment. Améry claims that resentment implies a traumatic past which prevents one from proceeding to the future (Améry 1970: 84). The traumatized person is chained to his past with resentment. His temporal sense is distorted (*ver-rückt*) because he wants the impossible; that is, he wants the traumatic past to be revoked. Améry focuses here on the moral aspects involved in the experience of time.

What happened, happened. This sentence is just as true as it is hostile to morals and intellect. The moral power to resist contains the protest, the revolt against reality, which is rational only as long it is moral. The moral person demands annulment of time—in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed. (Améry 1986: 72 / 1970: 87–88)

It is hostile to morality because the human being must revolt against the elapsing time and remember who was his torturer. The tortured and dishonored person can reclaim his basic human dignity only by revolt against the temporal chain, against historic destiny (Améry 1970: 106). This argument must be personal and impulsive, for morality, unlike revenge, cannot be based on personal recollection, and justice cannot be dependent on the victim's memory; we want the perpetrator to be properly punished, even if the victim can no longer remember what happened or is no longer alive or cognitively sound.

This issue should lead to a general evaluation of Améry's main claim—that the survivor is the only legitimate messenger of the meaning behind the terror and horrors perpetrated by the Nazis—which Giorgio Agamben (2003) and Primo Levi (1990), who write on the experience of prisoners in the death camp, also present. In general, it is a question to what extent and to what degree we can

⁷³ See Segev 2003.

share our experience with other people, as demonstrated in the practical case of the doctor who needs to reconstruct in his mind the pain of his patient in order to understand him. We may lack the appropriate framework for meaningfully posing and answering this question. As for the Holocaust, if Améry is right and only the survivor can understand the horror of the death camp—and in some cases, maybe the attentive reader as well—then we are all potential cold-blooded torturers who consume books and films on the death camps as thrillers, which can also produce catharsis. Another question is whether *any* survivor can give testimony, or only one who was in Auschwitz; and then, whether it can be *anyone* who was in Auschwitz, or only one who was there at a given time and place and played a given role (i.e., can a Jewish survivor who cooperated with the Nazis provide reliable testimony, or not?).

Detlev Claussen expresses this difficulty in *Grenzen der Aufklärung* when he speaks about the “Holocaust” concept as an artifact, which is the attempt to give it meaning and form, as the movie *Schindler’s List* does. Any transmitter is an abstracted artifact which can be transcended insofar as we are gripped by the anxiety that Auschwitz introduced to the world, Claussen claims (Claussen 1997: Introduction). The artifact or symbol is indispensable for transmitting meaning. But the artifact must at the same time be destroyed in order for the meaning of the report to come across. This is a precondition for properly understanding Améry’s and Levi’s reports from the death camp. Thus Améry describes the unclear parameters separating safety and danger, culture and barbarity:

A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the *World as Will and Representation*—into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter. (Améry 1986: 35 / 1970: 49)