CHAPTER 11

Without Love or Wisdom: On Jean Améry's Reluctant Philosophy

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In the following pages, I sketch a profile of Améry's intellectual persona. Améry is now often regarded as a philosopher; "the philosopher of Auschwitz" has become something of an epithet (cf. Heidelberger-Leonard 2010; Zolkos 2011a). As my remarks will indicate, I do believe there is merit in viewing his work in philosophical light, and, no less importantly, in viewing philosophy itself in the twilight generated by his work. But it is equally important for me to explain that Améry's unique mode, and method, of philosophizing challenges the very meaning of the Greek word "philosophy," and with it, our understanding of why and how it might be practiced.

Philosophia means the Love of Wisdom. In his intellectual persona at least, Améry was too sad and hurt to love, and too overwhelmed by his experiences to admit, or even aspire, to wisdom. In his life and in his work, he presents a profoundly different image of the philosopher and of the contemplative life: the philosopher as not a particularly *good* thinker (or a particularly good person for that matter), and the contemplative life as not a *good* one at all. Instead of love, one finds in Améry a very nuanced

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conception of empathy, and the cultivation of human relationships precisely in those regions in which affinity and fondness are lacking. Instead of wisdom, we find in him a devotion to honesty and the cultivation of thoughtfulness, especially in those "twilight" regions that seem most difficult and unrewarding to thought.

I draw on methodological passages in some of his most accomplished original works: *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (2002 [1966])—*At the Mind's Limits* in the English edition (1980)—*Über das Altern* (2005a [1968]) or *On Aging* (1994), and *Hand an sich legen* (2005b [1976]) or *On Suicide* (1999). These are books, and passages, I find particularly representative of Améry's intellectual personality and method.[1] Through their analysis, I wish to paint the picture that I have come to form of him and of his work; a picture and an intellectual relationship that has had, and perhaps was meant to have, a transformative impact on my self-understanding and on my understanding of the vocation—philosophy—that I have chosen.

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The nature of Jean Améry's work in its mature phase (from the mid-1960s until his death in 1978) is difficult to pin down and categorize. For the most part comprised of series of essays, originally conceived for the radio and later published in print, his work combines intimate autobiographical reflections with critical engagement with scientific, philosophical, and literary sources. It oscillates between philosophy and fiction, between personal testimony and political address. Each series of essays not only takes on a different topic but also a different mode of presentation suitable to it. As a result, Améry's books are scattered across different library shelves—under sociology, autobiography, critical studies, German literature. The reception of *At the Mind's Limits*—the work to which his renown owed most—has largely been restricted to Holocaust Studies. The nonsystematic manner of his expositions, the diversity of style and subject matter, and the fact that Améry's books and essays were often read in isolation, all helped to keep the methodological and substantive guiding thread of his project hidden from sight.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Améry among philosophers (e.g., Bernstein 2015, 2016; Brudholm 2008; Stauffer 2015; Zolkos 2011a, 2011b), accompanied by a renewed acknowledgment of the depth, rigor, and force of his insight. I say "renewed" because such

acknowledgment was there at the very beginning. Adorno was captivated by "Torture," one of Améry's first essays to appear in the intellectual magazine *Merkur*; it is difficult to overstate the extent of Améry's (underacknowledged) influence on *Negative Dialectics*, the book on which Adorno was working at the time. Another intellectual to be struck by Améry was Alfred Andersch, who, with some foresight, wrote to him in a letter (1967): "It will be some time before political and philosophical thinking understands the importance of your book… but it is unthinkable that it will not be understood…" (Heidelberger-Leonard 2010, p. 171).

The reasons for which it took some time for philosophical thinking to understand Améry's importance are multiple. Not least among them is the fact that Améry himself was reluctant to identify as a philosopher. In *On Aging*—perhaps the most methodologically self-conscious of his books—he asks to distance himself from literature and philosophy alike:

> One's intellectual ambition must be surrendered… to the investigation of time. One may be contented even if whatever comes out of it is bad as long as it is right, where "right" [*recht*] cannot mean "correct" [*richtig*], only "honest"… This bad, right thinking [*Das schlechte, rechte Denken*] should only describe its own path. All else would be literature or philosophy, and they are absolutely good for nothing in this matter. (Améry 1994, p. 12; 2005a, p. 32, translation modified)

I count at least three closely related reasons for Améry's aversion to the term philosophy. The first is that he associates it with "sophisticated speculations" (e.g., Améry 1980, p. viii), the sort that are traditionally garbed in dense prose and an air of near-magical profundity. In *At the Mind's Limits*, after stating that his experience in Auschwitz made him neither wiser nor deeper, he seconds the words of Arthur Schnitzler: "Profundity has never clarified the world. Clarity looks more profoundly into its depths" (Améry 1980, p. 20). And elsewhere: "Reality is always more clever than the philosophy that impotently wishes to reflect it" (Améry 1984, p. 141).

A second problem was philosophy's traditional assumption of a universal or impersonal stance. Améry's own thinking, by contrast, as conveyed in the passage just cited from *On Aging*, means "only [to] describe *its own path*" (Améry 1994, p. 12, italics added). Doing so was particularly important in "an era when intelligence is turning away not only from what is immediately given by consciousness but from *the person* altogether

[*Menschen überhaupt*]—in whose place systems and codes appear as the subject of inquiry." To counter this neglect of the person, he chooses to keep "entirely to what has been lived: *le vécu*" (Améry 1994, p. xxi; translation modified).

Lastly, "philosophy" is also taken by him to name the professional discipline and self-enclosed discourse, with which he had, and wanted, little to do. As he notes in *On Aging*, he perceives of his thought as treading the thin line between "two danger zones, both of each are equally fatal":

> On the one hand, we are threatened by dull ruminations and dilettantish brooding. On the other, we have the technical language of the specialist in the discipline of philosophy, which, in sounding learned, strives to prove its own significance more than the value of its knowledge. (Améry 1994, p. 4)

It matters, in this respect, that Améry's major essays were originally conceived and delivered as radio talks. The audience he had in mind was not a select group of the initiated but a broader public of thoughtful listeners with whom he could speak, and whom he could impact, directly.[2]

Now, what concerns me in this essay is a fundamental point of contention between Améry's mode of reflection and traditional philosophy, which can be gleaned from the general spirit of his work and his personality as a thinker.

From its inception, philosophy has associated itself with the mythical figure of Eros, or Love. Plato, in his *Symposium*, offered a memorable account of Eros—the bastard son of the divine Poros (literally, resource, or wealth) and the human Penia (literally, poverty). Taking after his mother, Eros is

> always poor, and he's far from being delicate or beautiful (as ordinary people think he is), instead, he is tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed… always living with Need. But on his father's side he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter… intense in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom…. (Plato 1997, p. 486)

Thus, "by nature neither immortal nor mortal," Eros

> now springs to life… [and] now he dies—all in the very same day. Because he is his father's son, however, he keeps coming back to life, but then anything he finds his way to always slips away, and for this reason Love is never completely without resources, nor is he ever rich. He is between wisdom and ignorance as well… (Ibid.)

I take this as a reflection about the human condition, similarly caught in in-betweenness (*metaxy*) and, while always grounded in this place and in this time, is always driven by the Erotic desire for self-transcendence: toward the absolute, the unconditional, the divine. The epitome of this erotic drive is the Love of Wisdom, philosophy.

As unrequited as this Love of Wisdom may be, it is not without *hubris*. Aristotle famously recommended it—philosophy, the contemplative life—as the happiest kind of life, and also the most divine. If "reason is divine in comparison with man," he wrote,

> …[then] the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. [And] we ought not to follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything… (Aristotle 2001, p. 1105)

It is precisely here that the example set forth by Améry is so unique and defiant. For it is, I believe, in direct contrast to such amorous and self-rewarding labor, that he professed the need to *surrender* "[o]ne's intellectual ambition," to dedicate oneself instead to the investigation of *time* (Améry 1994, p. 4). Time—especially in the context of a study of aging—connotes all that distinctly pertains to the finitude, and indeed poverty, of human existence.

From Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*, his first major book—which studied the conditions of victimhood and forced exile—to his last book on Charles Bovary (1997 [1978])—subtitled "Portrait of a *Simple* Man"—Améry remained utterly devoted to Eros's human mother Penia (poverty). Never the "manly" hero, the protagonist of his philosophy is characteristically "shriveled and shoeless and homeless," helpless and "living with Need…" (Plato 1997, p. 486). If philosophy traditionally drives us upwards, Améry's brand of thinking *methodically pulls us down*.

Looking more closely at the passage from *On Aging* cited earlier, Améry tells us there that, when thinking forfeits its intellectual ambition (*Ehrgeiz*), it becomes *impoverished*, *weak*, even *bad* (*schlecht*). What motivates thinking to take up a task that weakens it so is not the pursuit of honor (*Ehre*) but a commitment to its less assuming relative, honesty (*Ehrlichkeit*). Thinking here does not aspire to the self-fulfilling Wisdom (or to being "correct"). In fact, it is content with being "bad." When the

subject is the poorest, and at times the worst facets of the human condition, it is fitting (*recht*) that thinking should be poor or bad as well. When thinking, for example, about the condition of a person undergoing torture, there is a limit to how clear-sighted one can be.

Now, I maintain that his personal reservations notwithstanding, Améry is nonetheless (if not all the more) a *philosopher*, insofar as we understand by it a person whose vocation is thinking or contemplation (the term *geistiger Mensch*—person of mind—is ordinarily translated with the more high-sounding "intellectual"). Although he never finished high school (not because he was a rebel, but because he routinely caved under the stress of taking exams), Améry was not only a self-taught polymath but doggedly devoted to reflection and study. Even in Auschwitz, as he attested, "only rarely did thinking grant itself respite. [Although] it nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders" (Améry 1980, p. 19).

This mental determinant of his existence is most explicit at the beginning of *On Aging*, where Améry notes that what compels and drives him in writing the book is "nothing more than an inclination to be contemplative, and perhaps to practice being so" (Améry 1994, p. xxi). As I see it, it is precisely this fact that accounts for his need to distance himself from "philosophy." If his vocation were not so inherently close to philosophy, he would never have regarded it as one of two "danger zones" into which he runs the risk of straying (Améry 1994, p. 4).

It is equally important to recall, however, that watching for the other "danger zone," the risk of falling into "dilettantish brooding," keeps him also from straying *too far* from the philosophical pole. His hope therefore remains that, despite "every self-restriction," and despite being limited to the description of its own path, the results of his investigation could nevertheless "be transformed into something universally binding" (Améry 1994, p. xxiii).

Améry's cautionary notes-to-self about the hazards of philosophical *hubris* are something that philosophy itself might do well to pay heed to, especially because of its concern for truth, universality, and even wisdom. As long as Eros has his back turned toward his mother side, his origin, his urgings may end up perpetuating, rather than negating, our state of ignorance and immaturity.

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I have suggested that one of the benefits to reading Améry philosophically is that it can help bring to view the unity of his project and method, against the reduction of his work to a variety of "specialized disciplines" and its consequent fragmentation. And I have just hinted at what I perceive to be the main thrust of Améry's "philosophy," namely, the methodical effort to pull the intellectual gaze "*downward*"—below the human condition, or toward its underbelly, so to speak—rather than "upward." I will now elaborate a bit more about the kind of method involved, and about the significance of this "downward" movement.

At the Mind's Limits is perhaps the first work to fully display Améry's distinctive philosophical approach. Right at the beginning of the first essay, he announces to his readers: "My subject is: At the Mind's Limits. That these limits happen to run alongside the so unpopular horrors is not my fault…" (Améry 1980, p. 1). This statement makes the order of his priorities unequivocal: what is essential to him is "At the Mind's Limits," *not* "the horrors" ("The Holocaust," as we refer to it today). It is important that we bear this in mind, since a proximity to horror is pervasive in Améry's intellectual work, making it is easy to mistake it for the thing itself. Nevertheless, the appeal to the horrors is certainly not arbitrary or incidental. Hannah Arendt once wrote, very suggestively, that "the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring" (Arendt 1994, p. 445). I do not know whether the questions of philosophy "*spring*" from speechless horror, but the point, for Améry, seems to me that, at the mind's limits, these questions, and the answers to them, are significantly modified. It is this kind of exigent engagement with, or testing of, philosophical questions, rather than the horrors themselves, that occupies Améry.

One of the consequences of the failure to understand the philosophical nature of Améry's project is that this crucial fact about it has often been overlooked or misunderstood. Even Primo Levi (2017) scoffed at Améry for choosing (as if arbitrarily) to focus on the figure of the "intellectual" in his study of Auschwitz. Addressing such a calamity through such a lofty lens seems almost inappropriate, and certainly irrelevant to the vast majority of the victims. This objection fails to heed two things: first, that the intention is precisely to *deflate* (or rather, to honestly record the deflation of) the intellectual *hubris* that Améry considered his prewar self to be guilty of, and rightly supposed some of his readers might be as well, and not to reify or to reenact it. More importantly, Levi's objection fails to

heed Améry's express proclamation that Auschwitz is *not* the main subject of inquiry, whereas the "intellectual," as he defined this figure, *is*. In other words, Améry has something to tell his readers—the philosophically minded among them, especially—about *themselves*, calling their own self-understanding and the understanding of their vocation into question.

Auschwitz, and the intellectual's experience in it, thus stands as a radical counterpoint—a contrasting gravitational center—to the mind's erotic flight to the divine. And while "it was not the case that the intellectual—if he had not already been destroyed physically—had now become unintellectual" (Améry 1980, p. 19), it was no longer clear what it meant to *be* an "intellectual." "The axes of its [the intellect's] traditional frames of reference [were] shattered. Beauty: that was an illusion. Knowledge: that turned out to be a game with ideas…" (ibid.; Améry 2002, pp. 51–52, translation modified). Even the Good, which marks the indisputable horizon of all human activities for Plato and Aristotle, no longer appeared relevant. The questions are thus beckoned: What now is thinking to be? How should it respond? And why?

Approximating the limits of the mind is essentially a matter of incurring self-awareness and self-examination. To be sure, self-examination has always been regarded as the primary philosophical task, and self-consciousness as the goal, and achievement, of every enlightenment. And Améry, indeed, was always a staunch advocate of the enlightenment and an equally fierce opponent of the anti-enlightenment sentiments which he anxiously saw emerging in postwar German Left and more markedly in the French Left of the 1960s and 1970s (in thinkers like Barthes, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault). In what he bleakly described as "the modishly gesticulating, arrogant, but wholly unsound argument that [the enlightenment] is 'outdated'" (Améry 1984, p. 141), he detected a growing tendency toward irrationalism, which he feared would up end up serving neofascist impulses. The "enlightenment," as he wrote against this tendency, "was no seamless doctrinary construct but rather the constant illuminating dialogue we are obliged to conduct with ourselves and with others…" (ibid.). He thus maintained that "it was not the Enlightenment that failed, as we have been assured ever since the first wave of the Romantic counter-enlightenment, but rather those who were appointed its guardians…" (Améry 1984, p. 136).

These general proclamations notwithstanding, in his original work Améry did suggest an effort to *revise* the self-understanding of the original architects of the "enlightenment," especially in Germany. Thus, in his call

to approximate of the mind's limits, we are looking at a very different type of self-awareness, and a very different sense and sensibility for rational thinking. In one of the most revealing, and striking, methodological statements in his oeuvre, in the second preface to *At the Mind's Limits*, he explains that "the concept of the enlightenment," as he understands it,

> [embraces] the will and the ability to speculate phenomenologically, to empathize, to approach the limits of reason. Only when we fulfill the law of the enlightenment and at the same time transcend it do we reach intellectual realms in which *ratio* does not lead to shallow rationalism. *This is why* 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, no matter how much I strive to attain the clarity necessary in order to lend them contour. However—and in this I must persist—enlightenment is not the same as clarification [*Aufklärung is nicht gleich Abklärung*]. I had no clarity when I was writing this little book, I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would also amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history. My book is meant to aid in preventing precisely [that]…. (Améry 1980, p. xi, italics added)

The refrain about "clarity" (*Licht*) is a recurring theme in Améry's work and among the most decisive features of his thought. It conflicts not only with the most obvious connotation of the term "enlightenment," but with the entire tradition that, at least since Plato, equates reason to *light*: the bright light of the sun. For Améry, such brightness is not the most conducive to a reflection concerned with the human condition and human relations. Between the full light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance lies the twilight of reflectiveness. "Day and night," as he puts it in *On Aging*, "cancel each other out [*heben einander auf*] in twilight" (Améry 1994, p. 52; 2005a, p. 80).

Along the same line, he warns his readers in *On Suicide*: "one can't get through this [subject] *with clear thinking*" (Améry 1999, p. 23, italics added). With an eye to Wittgenstein, who once declared against mystical thinking that "the riddle does not exist," Améry insists that, when it comes to the phenomenon of suicide, it *does*: "It is imperative to reflect upon this mystery in talk that is circular—or, more exactly, half-circular—repetitious, struggling constantly for precision though never attaining it. One may talk without clarity about that to which the light of clear language…

does not shine. And [yes,] the riddle exists" (Améry 1999, p. 24).[3] The premise of *At the Mind's Limits* is similar: "Evil really is singular and irreducible in its total inner logic and its accursed rationality," he wrote; "For this reason, all of us are still faced with a dark riddle…" (Améry 1980, p. viii).

It is important to stress that what concerns Améry as a philosopher is not simply this or that event (he does not wish to "become lost in it"), but whatever in human experience and history pushes the mind to its limits, disabling its habitual activity and casting doubt on its habitual assumptions and frames of reference. This concern with the mind's limits, and with the mode of reflection and self-awareness they occasion, remains the constant in later books—most notably in his treatises on aging and suicide—whereas the Holocaust no longer plays an explicit part.

To read Améry as a philosopher is thus to have an eye, beyond particular essays and themes (the Holocaust, torture, resentments, aging, suicide), to the guiding principles of his thought—his *method*.

I have identified three methodological principles:

1. *Always proceed from the concrete event but never become lost in it.*
   When an event is painful or horrific, the mind (*Geist*) prompts us to transcend it in various ways and directions—causal explication, symptomatic or symbolic analysis, prevention, solution, redemption, forgiveness, and so on. Remaining grounded in the concrete event *itself*, and keeping to it as a standard, is a manner of *countering* this prompting; resisting transcendence; remaining close to the edge of the immanence of the event and of its experience. Thus, resisting both the call of the heavens and a complete descent into hell, thinking remains in the twilight.
2. *Keep to, or gravitate toward, the lived-experience* (le vécu) *and its description.*
   Wherever there is an experience there is a person. Gravitating toward lived-experience is not only a matter of "keeping it real," but also a matter of maintaining the interpersonal context of reflection. Being as honest, nonsentimental, and nonjudgmental about the experience as one can be, renders its inner features available to the reader in a way that—although the experience is not *appropriable*—it can nonetheless become *binding*; somehow indicative of the human condition more generally.

3. *Strive toward and approximate the limits of your mind.*

   Experientially approximating the mind's limits involves an *increasing* hardship and impoverishment of thought. This hardship is partly the result of resistance, or pushback, from two sides. The first resistance is from the subject matter itself; when the experience (e.g., torture) is of a sort that is not already mediated by the categories of perception and understanding, it defies the possibility of thought; it deprives the mind of its most "basic quality," which Améry, following the French existentialists, called "transcendence" (Améry 1980, p. 7). It becomes very difficult to think clearly. The second resistance is from the mind's own desire (Eros) to *resume* or *reclaim* this transcendence, for example, through the search for redemptive meaning.[4] The mind, as Spinoza once argued, "endeavors to think only of the things that *affirm its power of activity*" (Spinoza 1992, p. 135). It certainly does not endeavor to think of things that impoverish it, and, indeed, why would it?

What, then, accounts for this concern with the impoverishment of the mind? The simple answer has already been alluded to. It belongs to what Améry calls "the law of the enlightenment" (Améry 1980, p. xi). Thinking at the limits is quintessential to the kind of activity that Immanuel Kant called a "*critique* of reason," and thus to the courage to know and the fight against dogmatism, ignorance, and superstition. But there is also another, more specific, merit to thinking at the limits, a *phenomenological* one, of which I now want to expand: it seems to serve the goal of describing *essences*.

Thus, for example, while grounded in his personal experience, *At the Mind's Limits*, and especially the investigation of torture, brings us to reflect on the essence of *victimhood*. "Confessing and meditating," as he writes in the preface, "I arrived at an examination or, if you will, an *essential description* [*Wesensbeschreibung*] of the existence of the victim [*Opfer-Existenz*]" (Améry 1980, p. xiii; Améry 2002, p. 21; italics added, translation modified). Similarly, *On Aging*, while commencing with his personal experience, is, as already noted, an attempt to inquire into the essence of *time*. Finally, *On Suicide*, again revolving around his own and others' personal experiences, reaches for the essence of what Améry calls, "the logic of life" (perhaps rationality itself). Put together, these three books, and others by Améry, join in a sustained reflection about what it means to be human.

But why is it that asking philosophical questions of essence must go through an interrogation of limit-situations and experiences that are so *extraordinary* and difficult to generalize from? Why does one need to think of aging or dying in order to think about time? Why must one think of suicide in order to think about rationality? And how do lived experiences as extreme as Nazi torture and extermination camps—which Améry himself regards as a *conditio inhumana* (Améry 1994, p. vii)—tell us something essential about victimhood, let alone about the human condition?

Améry's texts suggest two answers to these questions. First, as he notes in *On Aging*, "it's a rather cheap truth to say that our condition [*Befinden*] generally gets noticed only when we are out of condition [*Misbefinden*]" (Améry 1994, p. 34). Améry's approach, in this respect, can be regarded as a kind of extroverted phenomenology: interrogating a condition *from without*, or more precisely, through the *experience* of being out of it.[5] This approach is nowhere more patent than in the third essay of *At the Mind's Limits*, where Améry interrogates the significance of *Heimat* (homeland) via the peculiar *Heimweh* (homesickness) of German-Jews like him, who were not only permanently exiled from the *Heimat*, but at the same time were forced to realize that they never really had one to begin with (Améry 1980, p. 48).

The "cheap truth" that being out of condition tells us something about the condition itself seems to coincide with the common saying that "the exception proves the rule." But this is not, in my view, what Améry has in mind. The exception here does not serve to *prove* the rule but, on the contrary, to *limit* its application, to call it into question and doubt. Unlike ordinary phenomenological work, in which the reader is always called upon to appropriate the position of the author/investigator (the transcendental subject, or Dasein), in Améry's work, an insurmountable fence is established between reader and author, and between both of them and the experience or event discussed. In the preface to *At the Mind's Limits* he calls it an "unbridgeable chasm" (Améry 1980, ix).

Thus, the experience of the German-Jew serves as an inverted mirror for the German audience, insofar as the members of this audience do have, and are secure in, their *Heimat*. It brings the security and comfort of their *Heimat*, which some of them would sooner deny or understate, into awareness, *together* with some vague consciousness about its precarity and limits. The experience of the intellectual in Auschwitz similarly serves to de-mirror the condition of his readers, who, while reading, are well within

their element, enjoying that very same transcendence whose loss is being attested to.

Améry had an operative name for this type of reflection-through-contrast: *Widersprüchlichkeit* (contradictoriness). In *On Aging* he explained:

> … we have to take… contradictoriness upon ourselves, have to take upon ourselves absurdity and the risk of every thought-contortion [*Gedankenverwirrung*] when we meditate on our condition [*Befindlichkeit*]. *It is aging that exposes us to that kind of consciousness and makes us capable of it.* (Améry 1994, p. 51; 2005a, p. 79; italics added, translation modified)

In other words, what is otherwise a horrible experience is what enables a particular mode of reflection at the limits, whereby one gets to think of oneself, as it were, from or through the outside. The "enlightenment" suggested here is neither in the pursuit of knowledge nor a matter of securing room for rational faith. It is, rather, the cultivation of what Améry elsewhere called *self-mistrust* (Améry 1980, p. 77), a significantly modified ("contorted") form of self-consciousness that is mediated not by transcendental subjectivity or reason, but by the experience of people living in profoundly different conditions than one's own. This mediation/contradiction increases awareness not only to the essential features of one's condition but also to their essential precariousness, to their limits and outer edges.

The last point brings me to the second significance of thinking at (or approximating of) the mind's limits. By persistently focusing his studies on the experience of the underdog, the oppressed, the dehumanized, the fatally ill, Améry problematizes the possibility of *relation* and *trust* between author and reader. In this vein, the epigraph of *On Suicide* (taken from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), reads: "The world of the happy person is a different world than the one of the unhappy person. Just as with death the world does not change, but stops." Do they even share a world? Can they meaningfully communicate at all? Améry's readers often find themselves sharing (or demanded to share) intellectual space with someone who refuses to either help them or to be helped by them. The victim of torture, Améry tells us, not only lost all trust in the world, but, moreover, resents all those who would try to regain or reestablish that trust for him. The subject of *On Suicide* is not only resolved to take his own life, but resents all attempts to dissuade him or even make sense of his decision.

And yet, despite all that, in the conclusion to the original preface of *At the Mind's Limits*, he insists that, if only his study should meet its aim, then it would "concern all those who wish to live together as fellow human beings [*die einander Mitmenschen sein wollen*]" (Améry 1980, p. xiv). How so?

When relations are experienced with difficulty, when they are all but impossible, they are experienced as a problem that is *lived*; they are experienced *in person*. In a revealing passage in *On Aging*, he notes to this effect:

> time is not a personal problem for anyone who is living for the world—until, of course, the moment when one realizes, 'Alas, where have all my years gone'. Only then, when one becomes aware of what has disappeared and gone beyond recall… settling down by the wayside, does one understand time as a question *directed at oneself*. (Améry 1994, p. 13)

Améry wants his audience to experience relationality, *Mitmenschlichkeit* (being with other humans) and the existence of trust, as a question directed at themselves, which he aims to achieve through withdrawal, resistance, and refusal. This, I believe, brings us to the very crux of his work: its aspiration to cultivate care, and meaningful relations, beyond love, friendship, affinity, and mutual benefit. This is the aspect that he finds most lacking in traditional enlightenment: "Where is it decreed that enlightenment must be free of emotion? To me, the opposite seems to be true…" (Améry 1980, p. xi).

The theme of relationality helps explain why he seems to regard the notion of approximating the mind's limits as almost synonymous with *empathy*. To recall, his understanding of the enlightenment, as he puts it, embraces "the will and the ability to speculate phenomenologically, to empathize, to approach the limits of reason…" (Améry 1980, p. xi).

A couple of passages in *On Suicide* may provide us better insight into the nature of this link between empathy and limit. Under "certain impossible conditions," he writes there, "it is necessary to think 'toward' things that are… unthinkable." (Améry 1999, p. 28) Here, the phrase "to think toward" suggests the now familiar task of approximating the mind's limit. But earlier in the book we find a similar expression. We are "on our way," Améry tells us, "*not away* from persons annihilating themselves, but *toward* them" (Améry 1999, p. 4). Thus, thinking "toward" the mind's limits is at the same time thinking toward another person, another experi-

ence, perhaps another world. What is added here is the thought that a limit is not necessarily an *end* but, just like a twilight, an in-between. Like a fence, it is both a separation, even a chasm, and a point of meeting.

* * *

Life of Bryan, Monty Python's parody of the life of Jesus, ends with a song sung in choir by a group of people hanging from crosses: "Always look on the bright side of life…." The parody hits at something essential to the Christian ethos, with which Améry was intimately familiar from his childhood and upbringing. Looking on the bright side goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the redemptive power of Love. As noted in the beginning of this essay, the union between love as a communion of souls, and love as the flight-upward to the divine is already embedded in the figure of Eros as described by Plato. And, as also suggested, while Love is intimately associated with thinking-up, the kind of thinking toward espoused by Améry is always a thinking-*down*. By way of conclusion, I would like now to return to this theme.

I have mentioned Aristotle, but it is not only in him that the concern for happiness furnishes the horizon for thinking as a whole. This tradition is alive in Stoic philosophy, Judeo-Christian Theology (as well as in Buddhism), early modern rationalism, in psychotherapy (including Viktor Frankl's), and, in a more popular form, self-help literature. The potential problem with the philosophical, and even the political, quest for the good or happy life and community is that this quest may discourage honest attention to whatever undermines or stands in the way of such prospects, as, for instance, the experience of past victims who refuse to reconcile, heal, or be rehabilitated. There is a tendency in such cases to pathologize damaged life and resentments or to reduce them to weakness of character.

Hegel, for example, attributed the dire circumstances of European Jews to their refusal to assimilate, and more generally, to a stubborn attachment to finitude (or, rather, a resistance to infinitude) which he found emblematic of their religion and "fate." The "circumstances of the Jewish people," he wrote,

> up to the mean, abject, wretched circumstances in which they still are today, have all of them been simply consequences and elaborations of their original fate. By this fate—an infinite power that *they set against themselves* and could never conquer—they have been maltreated and will be continually maltreated

> until they appease it by the spirit of beauty and so annul it by reconciliation. (Hegel 1996, pp. 199–200, italics added)

We are to gather from this that the Jews' refusal to reconcile to the (Christian) spirit of beauty—in other words, to renounce their unique experience—ensues, like self-punishment almost, in their being maltreated. It might be said that Nazism put the seal on this hypothesis, since, as far as it was concerned, it mattered little whether a Jew was willing or unwilling to assimilate. Moreover, it was perhaps the self-same "spirit of beauty" that, in Nazism, sought to actualize itself, not only by getting rid of the Jews, but ultimately of *all* things that are abject, unhealthy, and unbeautiful. If Améry entertained any illusions or aspirations of assimilation prior to the war, the conflicted Jewish identity he ended up adopting in its aftermath—that of "the Catastrophe Jew," as he called it (Améry 1980, p. 94)—along with his categorical refusal to forego his resentments and reconcile, was at least in part a matter of defending victimhood (abjection, wretchedness) *as such* against all endeavors and pretenses—however well-intentioned—to "cure" it.

A revolt against the happiness and health-oriented tradition can hardly become as popular or seductive as that which it rebels against. It is not only unpopular but non-popularizable. Améry therefore apologizes to his readers that he must impose upon them a reflection on all those "unpopular horrors" they perhaps would rather leave in the past because they can. But philosophy has always, and again from its earliest days, pitted itself *against* the popular. If philosophers do not take upon themselves the task of inquiring into the abject facets of the human condition—a task which impoverishes the mind, and which the mind is therefore naturally inclined to reject—then who would?

For Socrates, who was notoriously unhandsome and uncompromisingly agnostic, philosophy was a matter of self-examination, and education for self-examination, in the name of social justice rather than authentic individualism or altruistic love. His publicly oriented and essentially relational practice annoyed and disturbed the public more than it seduced it; provoked its fears and aversions more than it catered to its desires, fantasies, and aims.

In line with this Socratic tradition, Améry's mode of thinking consisted, as seen, in a methodical defiance of and revolt against natural and conventional impulses.[6] This is why I see in him an exemplary image of the philosopher and the contemplative life; exemplary not for being attractive,

happy, virtuous, or wise (in all these respects he deemed it a "failure"), but for having the courage to methodically suspend all such considerations in the interest of honesty and empathy. He thus decoupled the true from the good, being thoughtful from being well.

Améry's voluntary death some 40 years ago was clearly less an act of revolt than of resignation, less a matter of cultivating relations than of simply renouncing them. But the fact that he put to voice and paper his experience "in the moment before the leap" (Améry 1999, p. 13) is more representative of his intellectual personality. Like Améry's other major works, *On Suicide* marks his resolve to remain at the mind's limits, challenging us—those more fortunate than him—to approximate them.

Notes

1. In the context of this essay I do not engage comprehensively with Améry's many writings about figures or movements of the philosophical canon (the sixth volume of Améry's *Werke* [2017] contains the bulk of his essays on philosophy, some of which have been translated and compiled in *Radical Humanism* [1984]). I have done more in-depth comparative studies of Améry and various philosophers in my dissertation (2012), and more specifically on his relation to the enlightenment in Ben-Shai 2014a and 2016; to Heidegger, Kant, and Wittgenstein in Ben-Shai 2010, 2011, and 2016; to Nietzsche in Ben-Shai 2014b, and to Arendt in Ben-Shai 2007.
2. In "Jean Améry takes his life," Susan Neiman 1997 comments on the affinity between Améry's variant of rationalism and writing style and that of French Enlightenment thinkers. It can be added in the context that Améry endorsed that enduring image of the public intellectual in France, as a social critic especially in support of the oppressed groups—a figure or function he found woefully lacking in Germany, especially during the war. This image was epitomized for him in Emile Zola's "*J'accuse!*" which he echoed in his *Charles Bovary* (1978), a book in which he defends the "simple man," and in general the petite bourgeoisie, this too in the spirit of the enlightenment. It is for the same reasons that he particularly admired the French existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir, whose efforts to balance between philosophy and literature on the one hand, and between individualism and political resistance on the other, he aspired to reproduce in his own life and work.
3. Améry's relationship to Wittgenstein, I should note, is complex, and by no means as oppositional as this citation makes it sound. The "neopositivism inspired by Wittgenstein," he admits, "is always simultaneously right and wrong" (Améry 1999, p. 24). Améry had a personal relationship to this brand of "positivism," since during the 1920s he attended some of the

meetings of the Vienna Circle. The group's commitment to public, and informal venues of study accorded with its social democratic ethos, which Améry held in favor, just as he was suspicious, as I noted above, of some of the anti-positivist channels of continental thought. The type of thinking Améry espouses, in any case, while it challenges the absolute dominion of ordinary rationality—what he calls "the logic *of life*"—does not for all that undermine, or purport to ground, the logic of life or logic itself, nor does it venture into a "beyond."

4. It is useful in this context to observe that Améry's approach to Auschwitz, as his general intellectual ethos, is diametrically opposed to that of another famous survivor, Viktor Frankl (2006 [1946]). Whereas Frankl insists on the capacity to establish meaning (and "optimism") even in the most adverse or "tragic" of conditions, Améry insisted, and fought to show, that this capacity is *limited*, and better so. Since the premises of Frankl's work are very much in tune with French existentialism (the decisive common influence on both being Nietzsche), the contrast to Frankl is also an opportunity to observe the decisive limits of Améry's indebtedness to Sartre. His emphasis in *At the Mind's Limits* on victimhood runs counter to the almost exclusive valorization in French existentialism of action and freedom.
5. The idea that something about the human condition only gets noticed in an *inhuman* condition is echoed by South-African novelist, J.M. Coetzee, who, in his fictional narrative of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, wrote: "My torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body that can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well … They did not come to force [a] story out of me … They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal …" (Coetzee 1982, p. 113).
6. For example, "suicides tear to pieces a prescription of nature…" (Améry 1999, p. 13).

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