



“The Nonsense that You Cannot Write Poetry After Auschwitz”: Jean Améry, the Interrupted Writer

Oslrat C. Silberbusch

15.1 OPENING

In 1949, while Jean Améry was scraping by as a freelance journalist in Brussels, trying to pick up the pieces of a life that Auschwitz had brutally interrupted, the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno penned the phrase he is to this day most widely remembered by: “Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”. Dubbed “Adorno’s *Diktum*”, this fraction of a sentence plucked from the end of a twenty-page essay quickly became famous, stirring incomprehension and outrage from critics and writers alike. Jean Améry was no exception. Even though he only mentions the *Diktum* itself once, almost thirty years after it was put to paper, his wording doesn’t seem to leave much room for debate: “The nonsense that you cannot write poetry after Auschwitz...” (Améry 2005c, p. 99). *Unsinn*—the verdict is damning. Améry drops it in passing and does not linger on it. The (im)possibilities of art and literature after Auschwitz don’t seem to be foremost on his mind.

O. C. Silberbusch (✉)
Independent Scholar, Brooklyn, NY, USA

15.2 THE OBSESSION TO TELL A STORY

Objectively speaking, he would have had good reasons to react to the *Diktum*. Not only was he an Auschwitz survivor who had repeatedly made clear that he didn't like to be spoken for by armchair philosophers (particularly Adorno¹), he was also one of those very *Dichters*² that Adorno seemed to want to silence. Indeed, when Améry made his laconic statement on Adorno's nonsense, he wasn't only speaking as the critic and essayist most of us know him to be, but as a writer of fiction himself. Three years earlier, Améry had published *Lefeu or The Demolition*, his first substantial piece of fiction since the 1935 novel *Die Schiffbrüchigen* [*the shipwrecked*] (which remained unpublished until recently). Much more than a simple whim of an accomplished essayist trying his luck at another genre, this late return to literature was, as Améry himself put it, the realization of a "very old desire anchored in the far depths of my life" (Améry 1982, p. 172). He speaks of his "*obsession* to tell a story [erzählen zu wollen]" (Améry 1982, p. 172) and calls the book "a *summa*, one that takes stock of my own existence, my own thinking" (Améry 1982, p. 184), "a kind of life work [*Lebenswerk*] in small format".³ For him, this novel-essay, as he called it, was not a side project, but quite possibly his most important work of all. Let us say right away that the critics and readers of his time did, for the most part, not agree with him. As Améry himself noted, the reactions ranged from "half-hearted approval to vicious hatchet job", while "thousands of unsold copies languish[ed] like bricks"⁴ on the shelves of his publisher Klett. The largely indifferent to negative reception was a heavy blow for Améry. Not only because he considered *Lefeu* "the best thing [he had] ever written" (Améry 1992, p. 100), but because the critically acclaimed essayist had never gotten over the *Dichter* he had not become, as he makes quite clear in a letter to his friend Ernst Mayer:

Why is this book [*Lefeu*] so important to me? Because in it, for the first time after so many years, I attempt something like *Dichtung* [literature]. Do you remember how in our youth, we jokingly called each other 'Dichter'? Obviously, I have been more attached to this self-assessment than I have been willing to admit in these past decades as I built myself some reputation as an essayist.⁵

In another letter, he speaks of the "nagging feeling to have done it all wrong": "I think I know now that I was meant to be not a pure thinker, but a thinking novelist [*denkender Erzähler*]"⁶. Why then was *Lefeu* a

failure—or was it? And, if Améry really wanted to be a *Dichter* more than anything else, why did he wait almost forty years after *Die Schiffbrüchigen* to write a novel again? Examining these questions will not only present Améry’s work in a new light but also gradually lead us back to where we started off: to Adorno’s *Diktum*. What, if anything, does Améry’s “failure” as a *Dichter* have to do with the impossibility of writing a poem after Auschwitz? Can Adorno’s meaning illuminate Améry’s struggle—and vice versa?

Let us begin at the beginning. Why did Améry not return to fiction after he came back from the camps? The simple answer to this question is that in fact, he did—or at least, he tried. For the first few years after the war, while he was making a meager living as a journalist, Améry filled page after page with fragments of fiction, apparently attempting to pick up where he left off—quite literally. Indeed, the dozens of fragments, which appear at times only loosely connected, all feature as their protagonist the very same Eugen Althager that Améry killed off at the end of his 1935 novel *Die Schiffbrüchigen*. The fact that he not only took up fiction again but even resuscitated his prewar hero, is a striking testimony to the strength of his desire to reconnect with the past, to throw a bridge across the gulf that separated the Auschwitz survivor from the young, aspiring writer in Vienna. The manuscripts are almost all variations on the same theme: the story of a man who grieves the loss of two women—his dead wife, alternately named Agathe or Beate,⁷ and his lover Odette, who left him for someone else. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard sees the fragments as remnants of an abandoned attempt at a novel (Heidelberger-Leonard, 2008), a theory that seems buttressed by the few traces the manuscripts left in Améry’s correspondence. In an undated letter draft to his childhood friend Ernst Mayer, he writes that he is working on “a novel, whose skeleton is the recent, unfortunate story [die eben geschehene, unselige Geschichte]” (Améry 2008a, p. 544). Those tempted to believe that the “unfortunate story” in question must be that of Améry’s torture and imprisonment are quickly corrected. He notes that this book puts him “into the formidable thematic neighborhood of ‘Albertine disparue’” (Proust’s story of lost love), and in a later letter writes that the manuscript is about a certain “Paulette” and “the mystery of [his] so-called ‘feelings’” for her (Améry 2008b, p. 545). A novel about lost love and heartbreak then, with no trace of Auschwitz, it seems. And not just a casual scribbling, either: In the letter to Ernst Mayer, Améry calls it “the last and uttermost I have to give. If it is good, my life will have had a meaning, if

it is nothing, then I will know that I am a nothing” (Améry 2008a, p. 544). A tall order for a project that never made it beyond a pile of disconnected fragments, and which Améry never mentioned again after 1950. What made him abandon it? And what made him take it up in the first place? At first sight, both questions seem to bear a connection to Améry’s earlier work *Die Schiffbrüchigen*. When he first started working on his new project, he believed the former lost. The fact that many of the protagonists reappear in the later manuscripts suggests a desire to rewrite the lost novel, however differently. In 1949, he chanced upon a manuscript of *Die Schiffbrüchigen* in the offices of a Viennese editor and for a while made a new, unsuccessful attempt to have it published. Eventually, Améry abandoned both—the attempt to publish the novel of the 1930s, and the unfinished manuscripts from after the war. It would be twenty-five years until he turned to fiction again.

Whether or not Améry intended to leave out of his post-war novel the ordeal he had just endured, it did find its way in. While on the face of it, the majority of texts seem to ignore it (with mixed results—more on that below), at least one fragment confronts the experience head-on. Likely intended as a chapter of the novel, it marks Améry’s first attempt to bring to paper the horrors he had experienced. The text, entitled *Journey Around Death: The Fortress Derloven*, tells of Eugen Althager’s imprisonment and torture by the Gestapo in the Belgian fortress Derloven. While the fragment is clearly a fictional predecessor to Améry’s famous 1966 essay “On Torture”, the two have little in common beyond the subject matter. *Journey Around Death* begins with a pastoral description of the Belgian countryside:

Between Mechelen and Antwerp, a gentle countryside unfolds into peaceful meadows and fields, crisscrossed by leafy brooks, pastures, poplar alleys and Flemish farmhouses. The fields are brown, blue, and golden yellow (...)
Carriage horses with aloof, majestic necks march silently along the freshly tilled earth, their beautiful heads tilting with each step. (Améry 2008c, p. 583)

And so on. Améry starts out in a style reminiscent of the *Heimatliteratur*⁸ he had once admired as if to belie the chapter’s threatening title. When we finally arrive at the scene of the crime, the tone changes:

In the middle of this countryside... stands the fortress Derloven. Derloven was a battlefield of death. Of slow death and galloping death; death of hunger and death of cold; of sudden-fear-apoplexy, spinal-cord-death and

broken-neck-death; of death by the wheel of torture, by rifle butt, or by kicking boots; and finally, of the comparatively humane death by the orderly firing squad. (Améry 2008c, pp. 583–586)

In its clinical matter-of-factness, the list could have been penned by the murderers themselves: *Angst-Apoplexie, Genickbruch-Sterben, Stiefeltritt—Tod...* There is something singularly strained about both the bucolic description at the outset and this unwieldy, aseptic list of ways to die. Yet Améry seems undeterred: When he finally turns to Althager’s (i.e., his own) ordeal, he doubles down, almost drowning the experience in words. His detailed description of the torture tools and of the act itself leaves nothing to the imagination, ironically calling to mind what Améry himself would much later write about a painting by Dürer: “And absolutely diabolical is a dignified naturalism which represents the torments of hell and makes sure that no fleck is left empty, which, with an incomparably skillful hand, puts even the emperor’s pinscher into the representation of the hellish roast and meticulously draws every single hair” (Améry 1971). Améry is not Dürer, but there is something of that “diabolical naturalism” in his meticulous rendering of barbarity. The malaise deepens when, as the story progresses, the primary plot of love and deception gradually takes center stage again. Suddenly the description of torture appears as little more than a literary foil, a suffering evoked so as to magnify the protagonist’s true trial: the loss of the unfaithful lover. When the fragment breaks off, Eugen Althager is planning a trip to Venice to reconquer Odette, and Améry is turning his back again to the experience that had, in this particular fragment, so forcefully tried to assert itself.

There is little doubt that Améry’s failure to turn into literature the experience that he would twenty years later so brilliantly relate in an essay, is at least partly due to the difficulty that lies at the heart of his criticism of Dürer. There is something “diabolical” in the effort of the artist/writer who turns agony into art, and no artist, not even the most talented one, can completely avoid that trap. The moment suffering is turned into *material* for an artwork, even if it is to honor the victims, the honor due is already partially betrayed. Adorno spells out the aporia in a passage on Schönberg’s “A Survivor from Warsaw”:

By turning it, despite all its brutality and irreconcilability, into an image, it is as if the dignity of the victims was violated. Something is made out of them, artworks prepared for consumption by the world that killed them. The so-

called artistic rendering of the naked bodily pain of those bludgeoned with rifle butts holds, however remotely, the potential to squeeze out pleasure. Morality, which obligates art not to forget even for a second, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. By virtue of the aesthetic principle of stylization (...), the unthinkable fate appears as if it had some meaning: it is haloed, something of its horror taken away. By this alone, injustice is done to the victims, while no art that avoids their plight could pass the test of justice. Even the cry of despair pays its dues to the despicable affirmation. (Adorno 2003d, pp. 423–424)

There is something of that aporia in *Journey Around Death*. Even if the potential to squeeze out pleasure seems “however remote”, it is implicitly contained in the “so-called artistic rendering of the naked bodily pain”, in Améry’s effort to find the right turn of phrase, to integrate his story into the greater plot—“the aesthetic principle of stylization”. The fact that his style seems at times awkward only underscores the challenge of *any* stylization of atrocity.⁹ Yet while Améry no doubt felt that challenge acutely, his struggle seems to go far beyond the actual literary *representation* of suffering. As I pointed out, *Journey around Death* was an exception, its intended place in the novel unclear. For the most part, the post-war fragments ignore Eugen’s broken body to focus on his broken heart. That did little, however, to save the novel. The reader who takes the time to decipher the stack of mostly handwritten pages now archived as “Eugen-Althager-Komplex” in the German Literary Archives in Marbach, is struck by the sense of loss that emanates from them. Not only is there constantly question of loss: love lost, lives lost, dreams lost, but the author himself seems lost. Far from the masterful stylist Jean Améry of later years, the writer Hans Mayer¹⁰ is at a loss for words. Pages and pages of beginnings, snippets, crossed out paragraphs and unfinished sentences, where the same words, the same story return again and again, even if the names sometimes differ. And just in case the repetitiveness and scattered nature of the manuscripts aren’t enough to convey a feeling of helplessness, Améry integrates his sense of failure into the text, by having his alter ego protagonist repeatedly deplore the writer he has not become. He speaks of his “bungled poetic calling [*verpatztes Dichtertum*]”,¹¹ mourns his “first novel”, and asserts wistfully that he “could have become a writer”.¹² In one grotesque yet poignant passage, the main character (and through him Améry) is cruelly mocked by the specter of Karl Kraus:

Well, he had begun to work as a journalist, despite the fact that way back in his youth, there had been a consensus that he possessed the authentic, true soul of a poet. Yes, he had become a miserable newspaper slave, and at night, he was frequently visited by the German [sic] carnival figure Karl Kraus, who stood at the foot of his bed and read newspaper articles with a soul rending snicker, dropping comments and [*illegible*] with incredibly contemptuous gestures. Which woman would be stupid enough to climb up into his drafty attic, to a poor heartbroken fool, who was on top of it a traitor, a traitor to the *Geist*? That's right. Hadn't the Cain's mark of the newspaper scribbler long been imprinted on his forehead?¹³

There is a lot of suffering in these scattered pages, but it is not the one that would later come to define—for better and for worse—Améry's career. The newspaper slave, the widower, the betrayed lover—but the survivor? Only incidentally. If torture and imprisonment are mentioned outside of *Journey around Death*, it happens casually, sometimes cryptically, without any importance to the flow of the story: one of the protagonists is—in passing—identified as a survivor,¹⁴ Améry's Auschwitz prisoner number is found on the spine of a book,¹⁵ or there is a very brief mention of torture.¹⁶ This sidelining of an obviously traumatic experience, which finds itself grafted like a foreign object onto texts that desperately try to ignore it, only exacerbates the feeling of helplessness the manuscripts convey.

15.3 “*MAN SCHRIEB SCHÖN UND SPIELTE PIANO...*”

How is Améry's literary struggle related to the experience he could neither work in nor leave out? The post-war manuscripts seem to suggest that the actual representation of that experience is only one piece of the puzzle. How else did the shadow of the recent past prevent Améry from being the *Dichter* he longed to be? A comment in his 1967 essay on “Life with books” gives us a clue, one that reads like a belated condemnation of the efforts of the writer Hans Mayer:

Literature erstwhile termed ‘beautiful’¹⁷ irritates me.... ‘One wrote beautifully and played the piano’, Karl Kraus once said.... There can be no such thing today as writing beautifully and playing the piano: the state of our times and our civilization does not allow it.¹⁸

Remarkably, the last sentence appears almost identical in *Lefeu*, except that there, the author quoted is not Karl Kraus but—Hans Mayer. Jean Améry cites Hans Mayer as an example for the kind of literature that is no longer possible—without revealing to the reader that he is, in fact, disavowing himself: “For now you are sleeping. And my heart is heavy [*Denn nun schläfst du. Und mein Herz ist schwer*]—which is true, but which cannot be said anymore, for the state of *Geist* and culture does no longer allow it. There are no lullabies left, Irene” (Améry 1982, p. 81). The two first sentences are taken from a poem that Améry published in 1934 in the journal *Die Brücke*, and took up again in his novel *Die Schiffbrüchigen*: “Are you sleeping Lili? My heart is heavy [*Schläfst Du schon Lili? Mein Herz ist schwer!*]”¹⁹ It is hard to imagine a greater disavowal than this veiled self-criticism.

Why can there be no such thing in 1967 as writing beautifully? Why can the poem Améry wrote in 1934 not be said anymore? At a primary level, it seems to be once more the aesthetically pleasing that is at stake here. Even when it isn’t squeezed from the pain of the victims, it can wrong them, as Adorno notes in a text written in 1944 in the shadow of the horror unfolding in Europe: “Even the tree that blossoms lies the moment one perceives its bloom without the shadow of terror; even the innocent ‘How beautiful!’ becomes an excuse for the infamy of a reality that is different” (Adorno 2003a, p. 26). Just like Adorno, Améry struggled with this “lie”—with the glaring dissonance between the beautiful prose and the piano playing, and the very different reality he had himself experienced. Améry’s assertion that “the state of *Geist* and culture” no longer allow to write like that, however, goes beyond the visceral rejection of the too beautiful to point toward a more complicated truth: the fact that both the culture, and the horrors of Auschwitz that seem to negate it, are fruit of the same tree—and the inevitable implications that has for the culture in question. That Améry was aware of these implications early on becomes clear in another post-war fragment that, like *The Fortress Derloven*, stands apart: a fictitious letter addressed by Eugen Althager to a friend. Entitled “Letter into Uncertainty” and dated September 1945 (which is likely when it was written) the letter anticipates some of the reflections—even some of the wording—that Améry would use in *At the Mind’s Limits* twenty-one years later. For our purpose particularly significant is what the letter says about culture and its civilizing power—or lack thereof:

‘Culture is differentiation.’ Do you remember this definition that I gave in our 1935 journal ‘Die Brücke’? Well, by God! These fates between bombs and concentration camps, between standing in line and desolation, these millions of lives caught between mass graves, hunger, cold and homelessness are diabolically and despicably simple. I have been there, and I have not become deeper nor dumber, smarter nor more frivolous, I have not become better or worse. (...) The soul, dear friend, or the spirit [*Geist*] have nothing to do with this bloody movie. And neither does art.²⁰

With the same self-irony that will distinguish the later essayist, Améry declares nothing less than the bankruptcy of culture. Through the mouth of his alter ego, he rejects with a disillusioned “Well, by God!” the highest ideal of Enlightenment: culture’s ability to differentiate, and to make a difference. Six years before the publication of Adorno’s *Diktum*, Améry denies art the competence to say anything about the German catastrophe—and thus, ultimately, to say anything of significance altogether. Even if he is not as explicit as Adorno will be in 1949, his text contains in nuce the idea with which the Frankfurt philosopher will scandalize—that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. For the claim that art and *Geist* “have nothing to do in this bloody movie” has at least three implications: (1) that art and *Geist* were not able to prevent these “diabolically and despicably simple” atrocities, (2) that art and *Geist* are incapable to grasp this horror, and (3) that art and *Geist* are incapable to express it, to represent it, to explain it, with all that this means for the future of art, literature, and philosophy. *They have nothing to do in this bloody movie*. There is only a small step from Améry’s laconic phrase: “And neither does art” to Adorno’s *Diktum*. In fact, it is Adorno who will spell out, twenty years after Hans Mayer, what the latter only alluded to:

[Culture’s] palace, as Brecht says in a magnificent passage, is built from dog shit. Years after this passage was written, Auschwitz has irrefutably demonstrated the failure of culture. That it could happen in the midst of all the traditions of philosophy, art and enlightening sciences says more than simply the latter’s inability to move and transform people. It is in these traditions themselves, in their emphatic claim to autarky, that the untruth lies. (Adorno 2003b, p. 359)

The disillusionment voiced here almost certainly played a decisive role in Améry’s abandoned novelistic attempts after the war. Beyond the trauma that kept creeping up on him, his early struggle points to the broken

promises of the *Geist* and the culture he had once adored, to what they (and therefore the *Dichtung* he believed himself destined to) claimed to stand for and so utterly betrayed. While this failure will be a central topic of *At the Mind's Limits*, it is only in *Lefeu*, his return to literature forty years after *Die Schiffbrüchigen*, that he—quite literally—spelled out what this means for art *after* Auschwitz, and for himself as the writer trying to create it.

15.4 LEFEU OR THE DEMOLITION

Lefeu is a book as hard to retell as it is to pin down. The main plotline is simple enough: Lefeu, an unsuccessful painter in his sixties, lives in a run-down Paris garret room where he paints dark, austere paintings of Parisian streetscapes. He faces expulsion because a real estate developer wants to replace his building with a luxury apartment tower. Meanwhile, Lefeu is courted by agents from a German art gallery who have set their eyes on him and are hoping to “launch” him “with big publicity pomp and under the heading ‘metaphysical realism’” (Améry 2008d, p. 650). Lefeu resists both, refusing to do what the world expects from him, his saying no [*Neinsage*] an existential response to the word of glittery ruin [*Glanz-Verfall*] he abhors. His girlfriend Irene, an avant-garde poet, resists in her own way, her disintegrating poems mirroring her own disintegrating self. The recent past is a constant presence in the book. On a trip to the outskirts, at the sight of large factory chimneys, Lefeu is overwhelmed by the memory of his parents who were deported and gassed, and it suddenly dawns on him why he has his entire life said no to the world. At the end, he sets his garret room on fire, with his paintings and himself in it.

Lefeu or The Demolition is far from a conventional novel. The book is written as one long and almost uninterrupted stream of consciousness by Lefeu himself, which makes the “story” less of a story than a reflection on the story. While the details of the plot are often “shrouded in an ambivalent darkness”, as Améry himself puts it, the reflection drives the book forward, a sign of “the author’s commitment to human reason in the face of the unreason of being” (Améry 2008d, p. 651). To top it off, Améry ends the book with a chapter (which he explicitly wanted to be a chapter and not an afterword) entitled “Why and How”, a “kind of *Entstehung des Doktor Faustus (toute proportion gardée,*^{21*} of course)”,²² a “reflection of the reflection” (Améry 2008d, p. 659), where Améry analyzes his own writing process and reflects on the result. The novel-*essay* is indeed just

that, and as it strings together Lefeu’s free-wheeling associative monologues, with frequent literary references, French asides and barely a paragraph break, the reader breathlessly follows along—or doesn’t. Indeed, the novel’s distinct form and style were precisely what many critics objected to. “Bantering”, “incoherent”, “a literary degeneration”,²³ “obtrusively autobiographical”,²⁴ “literature is only ‘signaled’”,²⁵ “no confidence in the narrating word”,²⁶ “this non-thing and non-concept of a novel-essay”²⁷—these are just some of the critiques leveled against *Lefeu*. Even more positive reviewers pointed out that the book is “not ‘readable’ in the conventional sense”²⁸, that it will need a “focused” and “courageous reader”, and they questioned whether the reading public “will persevere”.²⁹ That the book is not an easy read seems to be the one thing all critics agree on. Those who praise it (and they are more numerous than Améry’s own assessment of the reception suggests) speak of an “enormous problematic nexus”,³⁰ a “very dense tapestry of language and thought”, a “highly intellectual” book that “cannot be remotely paraphrased”.³¹ This novel, so the consensus, is not really a novel—at least not a novel as we know it. Some swiftly conclude that Améry has “no talent as a fiction writer”,³² that he has succumbed unprepared to “the temptation of fiction [Reich-Ranicki uses the German *Belletristik*, from the French *belles lettres*, beautiful literature...]”.³³

Is that really it? The novel itself and Améry’s own reflections on it suggest a different story. If Améry didn’t write the *Belletristik* Reich-Ranicki and others wanted to see, it seems to have less to do with a lack of talent than with what he called, in the book itself, “the state of *Geist* and culture” in his day. To examine this hypothesis, let us start with his own reflections on how *Lefeu* came about.

After linking *Lefeu* to his “obsession to write fiction”, Améry turns to the historical events unfolding while he was working on his manuscript—and immediately relates them to the latter:

In the days in which I wrote my first chapters, the completely unacceptable happened in Vietnam: the cities Hanoi and Haiphong were “erased” by Nixon—just as Hitler had promised to do with the cities of England, with the difference that in 1972, the rodomontades had become reality, moreover accompanied by slick freedom chatter. A profound disgust came over me that hasn’t lifted since. There is no doubt that his disgust went into the work. Let me come back here to the word “glittery ruin [*Glanz-Verfall*]” Wasn’t it the land of glittery ruin par excellence that in

Vietnam horribly revealed itself as enemy of the world and humanity? Wasn't it the reality of our times that triumphed there with B-52 bombers? (Améry 1982, p. 181)

Améry goes on to denounce the “very real global conspiracy of capitalism”, voices his conviction that the “literary and artistic America of protest” is not “the contradiction ... but rather the luxury waste product [of the murderous one]” (Améry 1982, p. 181), and adds that, given the reports coming in from “the countries calling themselves socialist”, he had “no concrete hope to oppose to [this] outrage” (Améry 1982, p. 182). The only thing left is Lefeu's “*Neinsage* [saying no]”—a complete refusal to be part of it, to the point of self-extinction.

Is it all about capitalism, then? Is Lefeu's *Neinsage*, and through it Améry's refusal—or inability—to write the “beautiful” novel that is expected of him, a reaction to the ravages of imperialist late capitalism? It is, and it isn't. It isn't in a one-dimensional way, but it is in the sense that for Améry, these ravages are closely linked to the slaughter he himself only narrowly escaped. In a world where a bloody war, far away and mostly invisible, is contrasted and justified by economic comfort and consumption at home (and its supposed endangerment), Améry sees the entanglement of money, power and murder, and senses the intimate connection between the war-mongering and the race for profit and power (be it small-scale—Lefeu's real estate developer, or big scale: Nixon's America) of 1972, and the horrors that happened thirty years earlier—the coldness, indifference and greed that are the conditions of possibility of both. There is no straight line from capitalist crimes to Nazi atrocities, but they are connected through the reification, dehumanization, and greed that fed (and feed) them. In remarkable affinity with Adorno's critical theory of society, Améry points to this nexus in a paragraph of “Why and How” that spells out the relationship between Vietnam, Auschwitz, consumerist society and his (and Lefeu's) struggle, and reads as a devastating indictment of a post-Auschwitz world that continues business as usual—not so much because it has forgotten Auschwitz, but because the latter was never more than a small hiccup in the forward march of the glittery ruin:

But there are a few things that I do grasp, and they have to do with Lefeu and my stronger than planned identification with him. As my disgust with the political events of 1972/73 grew, I felt suddenly certain, with obsessive intensity, that Hitler and his Reich of ignominy had opened the trap door

through which humanity had fallen into the void of its own negation. Back when I longed, battered and shivering, in five to six different German KZ for a day that never came, the infamously famous ‘qualitative jump’ must have occurred. There was no more *Jasage* [saying yes] since: the realm of death had opened up in the world. One could not survive it. Only lemurs had arisen from this night. Or, as it is written in *Lefeu*: One did not have the right to survive the survival. The absurdity of my existence stood there in front of me. Why did I continue to play the game long lost? Why did I correspond with publishers and radio stations, took ridiculous daily worries stupidly serious? Why did I play writer, me, who should have taken my place in a mass grave long since grown over? And how could a world of shameful affluence dare to admire its reflection in the phosphorescent laughter of the glittery ruin? (Améry 1982, pp. 186–187)

For Améry, there is no doubt: Auschwitz was the end of the world, the world as we knew it (or thought we did). As humanity fell down the trap door of its own negation, “history ended with the tombs in the air” (Améry 1982, p. 187), Améry writes in a nod to Celan. Adorno had come to the same conclusion thirty years earlier: “Karl Kraus was right to call his play ‘The last days of mankind’. What happens today would have to be called ‘After the end of the world’” (Adorno 2003a, p. 60), he wrote in 1944 in *Minima Moralia*. The world, however, sees it differently. Giddy with “shameful affluence”, it blithely continues on its path as if nothing had happened. Rather than stand petrified, the world of glittery ruin, built on the mass graves barely grown over, rears its head with the phosphorescent laughter of someone who has not only survived their own end but gotten stronger from it. The French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas powerfully evokes the shock of the survivor who, after witnessing the pillars of Western civilization crumble, realizes that outside, the world has not ended: “We expected a new sky, a new world ... We were infinitely naive.” He speaks of the “perplexed looks” exchanged among survivors when they realized that “there was no apocalypse”, of their “stupor at the impassibility of a world that continued business as usual” (Lévinas 1984, pp. 319–320). Améry echoes a similar sentiment in his autobiographical *Unmeisterliche Wanderjahre* (addressing himself): “You suffered ... because of a real, car-driving, house-building, factory-creating Germany whose force and obvious placidity you begrudged. More than anything, you were irritated by its intellectual hustle and bustle, in output and potential almost equal to its economic counterpart. Incapable of grief, these people did not mourn. They were here, forcefully affirming their

existence” (Améry 2002b, pp. 301–302). Mankind had fallen through the trap door of its own negation, but it obviously didn’t care. What Améry and other survivors experienced like a complete caesura, with a before and after separated by an abyss, seemed not to have shaken much the people in whose midst it happened. One of the few who was as shocked as Améry and Levinas was Adorno: “The thought that, after this war, life could go on ‘normally’ or that our culture could be ‘rebuilt’—as if any rebuilding of culture weren’t already its negation—is idiotic. Millions of Jews were murdered, and this is supposed to be a mere intermezzo and not the catastrophe itself. What exactly is this culture waiting for?” (Adorno 2003a, p. 61). Améry, as we have seen, suffered greatly from this disconnect. The culture that had shaped and nurtured him had brought forth an evil so great that it put into question everything that culture stood for, and with it the claim, as Althager/Améry had written, that culture can make a difference. And as if the fact that it happened wasn’t bad enough, the post-Auschwitz world, instead of confronting the apocalypse (and thus keeping alive the possibility of some sort of mending), continued business as usual, not even seeing that the glittery ruin was a ruin. Améry’s *J’accuse*, “And how could a world of shameful affluence dare to admire its reflection in the phosphorescent laughter of the glittery ruin?”, is echoed by Adorno’s stark verdict in *Negative Dialectic*: “All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage. By restoring itself after what happened in its world without resistance, it has fully become the ideology that it potentially always was” (Améry 2003b, p. 359). This state of affairs, quite possibly more even than the memory of the traumatic past, is what made Lefeu/Améry unable to “survive his own survival”.³⁴ By continuing as if nothing had happened, the world effectively erased the experience of the survivors, making them silenced outcasts in a world that did not want its forward thrust hampered by any kind of reckoning with the past. By failing to acknowledge the magnitude of the disaster, it perpetuated the conditions that had brought it about in the first place. The culture that saw it happen “in its world without resistance” eschewed the self-reflection that alone could have saved it. That makes most its productions henceforth garbage, if not outright barbaric—because if you write poetry after Auschwitz as if nothing happened, you become accomplice of the evil that relies on precisely that forgetfulness.

Lefeu, in all its unwieldy intensity, is the product of Améry’s struggle with that reality. In “Why and How”, he repeatedly speaks of Vietnam and of its effect on his writing. The reason Vietnam shook him to the core is

because in it he saw at work, in a different form, the same evil that had brought forth Auschwitz—in a world which once more showed mostly indifference, thus allowing that evil to “continuously engender [more] evil”: “Inevitably, as my identification with the main character grew, I came to a point where I saw all the issues of our times centered around this evil that continuously engendered more evil. One may object that this is falsification of history, even historical blindness, and ask what on Earth the glittery ruin has to do with the murderous spectacle that killed Lefeu’s parents” (Améry 1982, pp. 187–188). One may ask, but for Améry, the intimate entanglement is not in doubt. The Nazis lost on the battlefields, but the evil that they brought to a paroxysm is not defeated. While Améry did not attempt to theorize the social and historical roots of this evil nor its different incarnations, he understood intuitively its embeddedness in a cultural, socioeconomic, and political framework that at first sight seems to have little to do with it. What Lefeu denounces: the greed, the callousness, the marketization, and commercialization of everything (notably art), and the violence that undergirds it all—in other words, the *Glanz-Verfall*—is simultaneously the condition of possibility of the evil in question, and part of its manifestation. As mentioned, this realization was more intuitive for Améry than the result of reflection. He speaks of “subjective evidence” and concedes that “to ascribe the current misery to the evil that he experienced and to the non-sense of his survival, betrays the reason that avoids metaphysical Hegelian leaps and sticks nicely to the path of common sense” (Améry 1982, pp. 500–501)—in other words, the very reason that Améry had for the most part of his life passionately defended. For his claim that the glittery ruin is linked to the “murderous spectacle that killed Lefeu’s parents”, he has “as good as no argument, just this one: that everyone in history experiences their own story, and that the subjective evidence (a feeling, no more, a feeling that freed itself from objectifying historiography and overcame it) claims its right to exist, against all rational objections” (Améry 1982, p. 500). Maybe Améry would have been pleased to know that the illustrious philosopher he despised had a lot of arguments to support his subjective feeling and connect the glittery ruin—modern capitalist, or as Adorno called it: *bourgeois* society—with the murder that happened in its midst. Here is not the place to explore them in depth, suffice it to say that Adorno’s analysis of the deadly core of capitalist-bourgeois society points to numerous (interrelated) factors, many of which are prominent in *Lefeu*: the dominance of scientific-rational thought over a more broad way of engaging the world, the compartmentalization

of society (which, amongst other things, turns art into an inconsequential leisure retreat), the rejection of difference (which is quickly “subsumed” at best, eliminated at worst), the increasingly transactional nature of social interactions and the experiential paucity and coldness that go with it, and so on. Calling coldness the “fundamental principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible” (Adorno 2003b, p. 356), Adorno asserts that if the people were not “profoundly indifferent toward whatever happens to everyone else except for the few to whom they are closely bound, possibly by tangible interests, Auschwitz would not have been possible, people would not have accepted it”. He goes on to pinpoint “the inability to identification [with the other]” as “without doubt the most important psychological precondition [for Auschwitz]”, one that is connected to the economic substructure of society, to what Adorno calls “business interest: that one pursues one’s own advantage before anything else” (Adorno 2003b, p. 687). It goes without saying that this economic substructure defines the world of the *Glanz-Verfall* Lefeu abhors and plays a prominent role in its violence. It is also central in the swift return to the aptly termed “*business as usual*” after the horrors of Auschwitz. The latter were never allowed to earnestly put into question the “car-driving, house-building, factory-creating” society, lest they undermine its very foundation.

Realizing that the *Glanz-Verfall* not only accommodates itself with the murdering and inhumanity past and present, but feeds on it, Lefeu/Améry concludes that his “survival was countensensical”, that it “must be taken back” (Améry 1982, p. 501)—for that survival was implicitly tethered to the hope that the world would rise from its ashes *transformed*, that it wouldn’t simply go back to the way it was before because it *could not*—because it is impossible to write a poem after Auschwitz. Améry shared the shock Adorno’s *Diktum* tried to give voice to, and the conclusion that stemmed from it: that everything the culture which had produced and enabled such horror was built on, everything it took for granted, had to be rethought, reassessed, questioned. Améry was aware (at first dimly, later acutely) that this included the literature he held dear: the old masters that shaped him as much as his own attempts to create literature. We see it not only in his early struggle to pick up the threads of his interrupted life and become a *Dichter*, but also prominently in *Lefeu*, and in *At the mind’s limits*, where the impact of Auschwitz on the culture that preceded it is omnipresent. Thus for example in the chilling passage where Améry recalls how, during a long and cold *Appell* in Auschwitz, the sight of a flag flapping in

the wind made him murmur “as if by mechanic association”: “The walls stand speechless and cold/In the wind, flags clatter”—the end of one of Hölderlin’s most famous poems, “*Hälfte des Lebens*” [Life at midpoint]. Result? “Nothing”. The association doesn’t evoke the “spiritual and emotional model that I had for years associated with this poem by Hölderlin”. Auschwitz superimposed itself on Hölderlin: “So and so and the kapo yells left and in the wind, the flags clatter”. The verse does not call forth the images hoped for—it calls forth absolutely nothing. The reality, whose horror exceeds the imaginable, has deprived the words of their capacity to affect imagination: “The poem no longer transcends reality” (Améry 2002a, p. 32). It is as if the Nazi hell had made reality intranscendable.

15.5 THE DISAVOWED HERITAGE

If reality had indeed become intranscendable, one of the first victims of that new state of affairs would be literature—any literature created after the event (which leads us straight to Adorno’s *Diktum*, and to Améry’s various fictional attempts), but also, in hindsight, any literature that preceded it.

In *Lefeu or The Demolition*, literature’s lost innocence is omnipresent. It is brought to evidence through the countless quotations that are, more or less overtly, woven into the text. There is something obsessive, almost desperate, about their ubiquity, as if Lefeu/Améry wanted to hold on to them at all costs as if he was conjuring them up in the hope of some redemption. But the hope is vain: Just like Hölderlin’s poem, the literary evocations no longer have the desired effect. On the contrary, they disturb. They become “word dams that block the view on reality” (Améry 1982, p. 124), singularly out of place—at best. At worst, they take on a cynical or ironical connotation that was certainly far from their authors’ intentions. Let me give just a few examples. Hofmannsthal: “(...) hit by the certainty that he couldn’t survive his survival, after all of his name and kin, had, with *the weariness of peoples quite forgotten* [*samt ganz vergessner Völker Müdigkeiten*], gone up in flames in the furnaces of the germanized East” (Améry 1982, p. 148). Hölderlin, again: “*The world’s pleasures I enjoyed while they did last, the joys of life, long gone! long gone! are past* [*Das Angenehme dieser Welt hab’ ich genossen, des Lebens Freuden sind, wie lang, wie lang, verflossen*”] (Améry 1982, p. 57). And then there is Mörike, of course, whose poem “The Fire-Rider” serves as the book’s leitmotiv: “*Thronging crowds and carriages turned back home from all the*

horror [*Volk und Wagen im Gewühle kehrten hein von all dem Graus*], and started diligently to rebuild, thinking neither of the fire-rider nor of those who croaked” (Améry 1982, p. 128). Quoting The Fire-Rider’s “*Hush! There it flaked into ash [Husch, da fiel’s in Asche ab]*” (Améry 1982, pp. 128–129), Lefeu goes as far as to accuse the poet of sacrilege: “There it is: survival was countersensical, and as much sacrilege [*Frevel*] as the fire-rider’s discussion of the embers” (Améry 1982, p. 131). And finally there’s von Platen: “*He who has seen beauty with his own eyes [Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen]*. Or something like that. But that doesn’t touch my soul anymore. These are propositions to whose meaning I strictly adhere. *To suck poison from every whiff of air and to smell death in every flower [Jedem Hauch der Luft ein Gift entsaugen und den Tod aus jeder Blume riechen]*: that means what it says” (Améry 1982, p. 54). The reference to the gas chambers is hard to miss.

Even the writer who Améry arguably admired more than any other, Thomas Mann, cannot escape Lefeu’s reassessment. He comes up when Lefeu tries to give himself a pep talk: “Hang in there [*Durchhalten*], Gustav von Aschenbach said, it was even his favorite word” (Améry 1982, p. 9). Even if Lefeu did find some consolation in Mann’s irony, one can only hope that Améry himself did not quote the hero of his favorite author when he “longed, battered and shivering, in five to six different German KZ for a day that never came” (Améry 1982, p. 186)—inevitably, the weary bourgeois’ motto would have become cruel cynicism. Just like the same Gustav von Aschenbach’s ‘heroism of weakness’ would have turned into sarcasm in the face of the “SS doctor who, in 1944, palpated my bones to see if I was already ripe for slaughter” (Améry 1982, p. 192).

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with Thomas Mann’s “ironical objectivism”, as he himself called it. It is when placed in the context of the death camps that it inescapably turns into sarcasm, cruelly exposing the abyss between the Germany where Mann wrote *Death in Venice* and created his persevering bourgeois, and Nazi Germany where persevering was not only a question of life and death but generally not enough to survive. As Améry writes in *At the mind’s limits*: “There was no bridge leading from death in Auschwitz to the ‘Death in Venice’” (Améry 2002a, p. 47). Adorno comes to the same conclusion in a 1947 comment on Rilke’s poem “Oh Lord, give to each his own fitting death”. “Rilke’s prayer about an own, fitting death is but a deceit over the fact that nowadays people only croak [*krepieren*]”, he writes, after reflecting on what “the Nazis inflicted on millions of people, the selection of the living as dead”, and on death

“administratively decreed over innumerable lives” (Adorno 2003a, p. 266). He repeated the accusation in a 1967 open letter to Rolf Hochhuth: “Rilke’s verse of the own, fitting death, which you refer to, has become bloody cynicism [*Hohn*] in the face of those murdered in the camps” (Adorno 2003e, p. 593). In the meantime, Améry had seized upon the same verse to illustrate the aestheticization of death that Auschwitz had made unbearable: “Unbearable was any literary evocation of death, be it Hesse’s ‘Dear Brother Death’ or the death of Rilke, who famously sang: ‘Oh Lord, give each their own fitting death’” (Améry 2002a, p. 47).

What both Améry and Adorno denounce here is not so much the inadequacy of the words as the poet’s detached gaze on a reality that bears no transcending. By putting himself above reality, he betrays it. In a world where death is “administratively decreed, where ‘it is no longer the individual that dies, but the exemplar’” (Adorno 2003b, p. 355), Rilke’s prayer becomes a fraud. The blatant disconnect between Rilke’s meditations, and the reality Adorno and Améry see, unmasks the potential immorality in the gesture of any artist, who contemplates “in a world in which the contemplative attitude has become cynicism [*Hohn*]” (Adorno 2003f, p. 46). Art, “through its distance from action, in the face of the deadly threat, through harmlessness, has by its form alone, even before any content, become ideology” (Adorno 2003c, p. 371), Adorno writes, and Améry, reflecting on his favorite literary heroes, comes to a similar conclusion: “The human you long for and who you cannot find in contemporary literature or philosophy or sociology, was—you should at least consider it—maybe never anything else but ideology: be it Faust, or Adrian Leverkühn, or wise Nathan, or Roth’s Hiob” (Améry 2002b, p. 334).

What makes art potentially ideology “by its form alone” is, paradoxically, what makes it art in the first place: the fact that it rises above the down-to-earth, transcends reality. If reality can no longer be transcended, does that mean that art is no longer possible? That is of course precisely the question that Améry and Adorno grapple with. Both are acutely aware that the situation is aporetic. Adorno, in fact, spells it out in the very same sentence that contains his *Diktum*. Taken in its entirety, the sentence reads: “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno 2003h, p. 30). In other words, the claim that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric may be just as barbaric. He puts it even more explicitly in *Negative Dialectic*: “He who

pleads for maintaining the radically guilty and shabby culture becomes an accomplice, while he who rejects culture directly promotes the barbarity that culture turned out to be. Not even silence escapes the vicious circle” (Adorno 2003b, pp. 359–360). This is precisely the aporia that Lefeu the painter, and *Lefeu* the novel, are caught up in. Améry knew that “schön-schreiben” was no longer possible, that, as Adorno wrote, “culture in the traditional sense is dead” (Adorno 2003i, 455). Two years before the publication of *Lefeu*, he wrote in a letter to his friend and fellow writer Rudolf Hartung: “[I have] the feeling that the aesthetic sphere is falling apart, that art and literature have come to an end”.³⁵ The literary quotations that haunt the pages of *Lefeu* are epitaphs to the culture that is no more. Yet at the same time, Améry longs to be a *Dichter*, and senses intuitively that the promise literature, and art in general, hold (as much as they may have betrayed it) is the only thing that has the potential to prevent the *Glanz-Verfall* from having the last word. In other words, art’s ability to transcend reality, the very trait that makes it problematic, is at the same time what gives it its power and its subversive potential.

This is the context in which Améry wrote *Lefeu*, and the novel-essay not only reflects his struggle but also “the state of *Geist* and culture” it inscribes itself in. The mixed reviews now appear in a different light, particularly if we consider that the broken culture sits “on a heap of debris where even the awareness of its own brokenness is broken” (Adorno 2003g, p. 285), as Adorno put it. “Literature is only ‘signaled’”,³⁶ one reviewer complained, while another called the book “a literary degeneration”.³⁷ Could it be anything else, given what we have just discussed? The “temptation of *Belletristik* [literally: beautiful literature]” that Améry allegedly succumbed to unprepared also reads differently now, not to speak of the review that deplores his lack of “confidence in the narrating word”.³⁸ The latter is outright baffling and makes one wonder whether the reviewer even read the book. For the gradual loss (or rather, the gradual realization of the loss) of that confidence is the thread that goes through the entire book, until in the end, the trust in words is as demolished as Lefeu’s home, and with it Lefeu’s ability to go on pretending that he has survived his survival. For Lefeu/Améry, this linguistic demolition (incidentally, it becomes clear that the *Abbruch* in the title refers to much more than just real estate) carried enormous weight. Language had always played a prominent role in Améry’s life. It was a reflection on language, through the philosophy of Fritz Mauthner, that ended the love affair between the young Hans Mayer, “a foolish and

blind petty bourgeois” (Améry 2002b, p. 189), and the nationalistic *Heimatliteratur*. It led him to the Viennese Circle and to positivism, which he remained attached to until the very end, even if he became more critical as time went by.³⁹ “The meaning of a sentence is the method of its verification”⁴⁰—this statement by Wittgenstein, widely relayed by the positivists, became Améry’s favorite weapon against all metaphysics and jargons, notably Adorno’s “jargon of dialectic” (see Améry 2004). It is omnipresent in his essays, articles, and letters—and in *Lefeu*. There, however, its fate seems to have turned, as becomes clear from its very first occurrence. Criticizing his avant-garde poet girlfriend Irene, Lefeu points out that “one has to stick strictly to the meaning of a sentence”—until here, all is well—“*trusting that there is one*. One can say of this meaning that it is the method of its verification” (Améry 1982, p. 8). And it is all downhill from there. From this first questioning of the meaning of the sentence, Lefeu/Améry gradually loses all hope “that there is one” until in the end, the *Sinn* [meaning] of the positivists is defeated by the *Widersinn* [countersense] of survival. In between, Améry, “carried and led along by language” (Améry 1982, p. 179), has words and meaning disintegrate. “Deutschl. (...) Man kann darüber spr.” (Améry 1982, p. 29), we read in the second chapter, baffled to see such language debris come from the pen of Améry, unconditional champion of the integrity of words and virulent critic of experimental poetry. That it is the word Germany, and the statement “One can speak about it” that are the first to fall apart, is, of course, no coincidence. The reflection follows, and soon Lefeu wonders aloud (in a concession to Irene) whether “certain forms of poetry that renounce (...) first the meaning of words, then that of sentences, are the cause or the *consequence* of alienation” (Améry 1982, p. 70). The confidence in words gradually diminishes, as Lefeu muses that even “in crucial moments of one’s existence” the “words that offer themselves have become worn out by documentary and literary use (‘a tomb in the sky’)” so that one has no choice but to “push away the importunate word constructs—in disgust” (Améry 1982, p. 122). Finally, reflecting on the deportation of his parents, Lefeu concludes that all one is left with is a sarcastic smirk at the “impotence of word and paintbrush in the face of reality” (Améry 1982, pp. 122–123), and that “words, whatever their relationship to reality may be, must be suppressed: for the sake of reality’s deadly honor”. The same goes for “literary evocations, which only delegate the impotence of one’s own word and feeling in order to bear witness. No place for Celan” (Améry

1982, p. 123). No poetry after Auschwitz. And yet, as much as the word “destroys” reality, the latter, “if it is to be grasped, apprehended, depends on the word”—“to remain silent means to silence” (Améry 1982, p. 125). Améry is conscious of that aporia and painfully aware that by insisting on the inadequacy of the word, the impotence of literature (and culture more broadly), he is pulling the rug under his own feet: “As I kept rereading the parts I had written, I had more and more the feeling that I had caused my own defeat” (Améry 1982, p. 191), he writes in “Why and How”. A defeat that goes far beyond that of Améry the *Dichter*—for, as we know, there is only a small step from the *Unsinn* of words to the *Widersinn* of survival. Lefeu, after confessing that he “wished, with unbearable intensity, to see the Glanz-Verfall, or any of its symbols, go up in flames”, after realizing that “everything [he] did, everything [he] omitted to do, was determined, since 1945, by the fact that [he] couldn’t survive his survival” (Améry 1982, p. 161), concedes defeat and sets his little garret room on fire, and with it himself, the fireman (“Lefeu recte Feuermann” [Améry 1982, p. 123], as he reminds us). In his self-reflection, Améry will take the *Widersinn* of survival a step further, going as far as to declare that “one *has no right* to survive one’s survival” (Améry 1982, p. 186). Without knowing, he is echoing once again Adorno, who wrote in 1955: “The only way we have a chance to withstand the experience of the last decades is if we never forget for a single moment the paradox that after what happened, we continue to live” (Adorno 2003j, p. 142). And in *Negative Dialectic*, in yet another unconscious nod to Améry/Lefeu (and in what was often falsely read as a retraction of his *Diktum*), Adorno will draw a line from the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz to the impossibility of survival: “Perennial suffering has as much right to express itself as the tortured has the right to scream. That’s why it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz, one could no longer write poetry. Not wrong, however, is the equally cultural question whether one can still live after Auschwitz, whether he who escaped by chance and should have been murdered even has the right to do so” (Adorno 2003b, p. 354). For Améry, the question was not rhetorical. For him, just like for Adorno, questioning words, culture, the literature he so loved, was tantamount to questioning life, and when he wrote that in writing *Lefeu*, he had defeated himself, he meant it. On February 16, 1974, he finished the manuscript of *Lefeu*. On February 20, a mere four days later and long before the first negative reviews came in, Améry tried to kill himself with sleeping pills. A friend found him in

time and he was “saved”. Two years later, he wrote in *On Suicide*: “The rescue, which the doctor was so proud of, is one of the worst things ever done to me—and that says something” (Améry 2005a, p. 265).

15.6 EPILOGUE

In the end, and despite his own intentions, *Lefeu, or The Demolition* was not the last word of Améry the *Dichter*. In 1977, he wrote *Charles Bovary. A country doctor*, another novel-essay where he tried to give a voice to Emma Bovary’s deceived husband and where once again, reflection and fiction interweave. More revealing, however, is Améry’s very last project, a novella of which all that remains is a plot summary of a dozen pages. Little to go on, in other words, but enough to be struck by the very different nature of this novella compared to what preceded it. *Rendezvous in Oudenaarde*, thus the title, seems to be far removed from *Lefeu or The Demolition*, at least at first sight. No more criticism of the *Glanz-Verfall*, no more *mise en scène* of saying no—this time, it is the novella itself that says no. *Rendezvous in Oudenaarde* is a flight into the past, a return to the other side of the abyss. As Améry explains in his exposé, it is the story of an “alienation”:

The main thought is the power of imagination (...) The imaginative has a dreamlike as well as a literary character: The reality of literary figures will be solidified. Hans Castorp is more real than any uncle; Niels Lyhne is a better companion than any acquaintance; there are characters from Hermann Bang, Proust, Flaubert, Joyce, Musil, Thomas Mann, etc. (...) They all symbolize the dream as life. (Améry 2003b, p. 11)

It is a fully accepted alienation—a novella as they are no longer written, according to Améry’s own conclusions in *Lefeu*. As if the writer who had made “permanent revision” one of his mantras had set out to contradict himself one last time, Améry resuscitates the literature whose end he had declared. The plot has once more autobiographical aspects: it is the story of a certain Vanderleyden (whose Flemish name evokes the German “Leiden”, suffering), who goes on a search for his dead wife Litta after she appears to him in a dream and tells him to meet her in the small town of Oudenaarde. During his journey, he meets many a literary hero, all “more real than any uncle” (Améry 2003b, p. 11). The dreamlike nature of the narrative is fully intentional: “Life as dream and the dream as life become congruent” (Améry 2003b, p. 22).

Rendezvous in Oudenaarde has something of the condemned man's last cigarette. Améry allows himself everything, giving himself completely to a world that no longer exists, and writing as he always wanted to, had the state of *Geist* and culture not prevented him: *er schreibt schön*. As Irene Heidelberger-Leonard notes: "In this furious flight forward, the idealist [*Weltverbesserer*] Jean Améry turns his back to the imperfections of the present and focuses fully on the literary beyond" (Heidelberger-Leonard 2004, p. 320). Does that mean that Améry revises his verdict on the impossibility of *Schönschreiben*? Not exactly. The end of the dream as life suggests that Améry knows that the literary beyond will forever be out of reach. After a long quest, Vanderleyden finally finds Oudenaarde. He sees Litta, she smiles at him, he runs toward her, but collapses in a hail of police bullets before reaching her—before reaching Litta, who, as the narrator told us earlier, "was, due to a whim of her amateur writer father, in fact named Littera" (Améry 2003b, p. 12). Does this ending mean a reunion, as Heidelberger-Leonard reads it? "Reunion of Vanderleyden with Littera—in death: *unio mystica* with literature. Améry has arrived home, here he is safe" (Heidelberger-Leonard 2004, p. 322). It seems unlikely to me that the atheist Améry would find comfort in the idea of a *unio mystica* in the afterlife. Even if there was such a union, confining literature to the realm of death could hardly have been a victory for somebody who considered death "absolute negation" (Améry 2005b, p. 148). I am inclined to put the focus on the fact that Vanderleyden collapses before reaching Litta-Littera. Vanderleyden-Améry fails—literature eludes him, one last time. The sentence that Améry planned to put at the end of his novella, Litta-Littera's last words to Vanderleyden/Améry, seems to corroborate this interpretation: "'You are too late, you were always too late...' (Finis)" (Améry 2003b, p. 22).

Too late to write *Rendezvous in Oudenaarde*. Améry can't help but destroy his dream as life and confirms in doing so what his work incessantly proclaimed: in our life that is not a dream, literature, as it used to be, has come to an end. Hans Castorp, Herbert Törless, and Eugen Althager cannot be resuscitated. Henceforth, in a world after Auschwitz, the only poetry possible is one that assimilates its own impossibility—one which, like *Lefeu*, never forgets for a single moment the paradox of its own existence.

NOTES

1. For an example of Améry’s criticism of Adorno, see Améry, J. (2004). Jargon der Dialektik. In *Werke, Band 6*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
2. The German word *Dichter* is used indiscriminately for poets and novelists, and it is in this sense that I use it here.
Likewise, for Adorno, “poem [*Gedicht*]” stands not only for literature broadly speaking, but ultimately for any artistic creation (see below, and my discussion of the *Diktum* in Silberbusch, O. (2018)).
3. Jean Améry to Ernst Mayer. 17.1.1975. Fonds Jean Améry, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, HS.2002.0083.
4. Jean Améry to Inge Werner. 3.3.1975, Fonds Jean Améry, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, 86.784a/58.
5. Jean Améry to Ernst Mayer, 26.1.74. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach.
6. Jean Améry to Ernst Mayer, 16.11.71. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach.
7. This part of the plot is—like most others—based on Améry’s life. His wife died of a heart attack in 1944, which he found out only after months of uncertainty. See Heidelberger-Leonard, I. (2004).
8. *Heimatliteratur* is a genre of pastoral, often nationalistic literature of Germany and Austria that came into vogue at the end of the nineteenth century and was later enlisted by the National-Socialist blood-and-soil movement.
9. Twenty years after *Journey around Death*, Améry will denounce the stylization of horror in a review of Michel Tournier’s critically acclaimed novel *The Ogre*, calling out the book’s “aestheticism of barbarity” and accusing the author of “conveying exotic charm to the morally unbearable” (Améry 2003a, pp. 174–175). While Améry’s early attempts to bring his own suffering to paper have admittedly little in common with Tournier’s tableau of horrors, the ‘estheticization of barbarity’ seems to have played a role in his struggle.
10. Jean Améry was born Hans Mayer. After the war, he translated the German Hans into Jean and turned Mayer into the French-sounding anagram Améry.
11. Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.). *Grenzwanderungen*. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
12. Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.). *Der Schierlingstrunk*, Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
13. Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.). *Fritz Griebner und die Mühsal des Sterbens*. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach.
14. See Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.) *Beate, Die Eingemauerten, Grenzwanderungen, Fritz Griebner und die Mühsal des Sterbens, Eine*

- europäische Tragödie, Prosa o. T.*, or as “Prisoner of war Nr. 172364” in *Die Selbstmörder*. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
15. Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.). Pierre 172364, A la recherche du temps perdu, In: *Filmskript o. T.*, Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
 16. Mayer H. [Améry, J.] (n.d.). *Heinrich Greyt, Dornenkroner der Liebe*. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
 17. In German, *schöne Literatur* used to designate what in English is simply called literature. The term emerged in the nineteenth century, as a translation of the French “belles lettres” and as a way to distinguish literature from scientific literature and nonfiction. Today, the term is dated.
 18. Améry, J. (1973), “Leben mit Büchern”. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1275.
 19. Frühwirth, P. [Améry, J.], “Beim Einbruch der Nacht” in *Die Brücke*, Mai 1934. DLA Marbach. 81.1354.
 20. Mayer, H. (n.d.) *Ein Brief ins Ungewisse*. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1349.
 21. * in French in the original.
 22. Letter to Rudolf Hartung, 12.12.1973. Fonds Jean Améry, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, 81.1593.
 23. Reich-Ranicki, M. (1974). Schrecklich ist die Verführung zum Roman. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1.6.1974.
 24. No Author (1974). “Trümmerhaufen der Ideen”, in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10.7.1974.
 25. Henschen, H. (1974). Auf der Suche nach dem Roman. In *Die Zeit*, 21.6.1974.
 26. Wolken, K. (1974). Leben und Sterben des Malers Lefeu. In *Die Welt*, 12.9.1974.
 27. Kraus, W. (1974). Der Tod des Glasperlenspielers. In *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, 23.6.1974.
 28. Altwegg, J. (1975). “Jean Améry schrieb einen Roman-Essay in zwei Sprachen”, in *Tages-Anzeiger*, Nr. 186, 08/14/1975.
 29. Bettinger, S. (1974). Nein-Sagen oder Kompromisse? In *Tribüne* 13 (1974), 5799.
 30. Herzog, S. (1974). Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. In *Rias Berlin*, 18.9.74.
 31. Wallmann, J. (1974). Zwischen den Stühlen. Jean Améry’s “Bilanz der eigenen Existenz”. In *Rheinischer Merkur*, 19.4.1974.
 32. Günther, J. (1974). Jean Améry: Lefeu oder der Abbruch. In *Neue deutsche Hefte* 21, 598.
 33. Reich-Ranicki, M. (1974). Schrecklich ist die Verführung zum Roman. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1.6.1974.
 34. This puts him in the company of not only his creator Améry, but also of Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Jerzy Kosinski, Piotr Rawicz, Tadeusz Borowski,

- and Bruno Bettelheim, to name but a few (well-known) survivors who committed suicide.
35. Jean Améry to Rudolf Hartung, 30.1.1971. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, 81.1591.
 36. Henschen, H. (1974). Auf der Suche nach dem Roman. In *Die Zeit*, 21.6.1974.
 37. Reich-Ranicki, M. (1974). Schrecklich ist die Verführung zum Roman. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1.6.1974.
 38. Wolken, K. (1974). Leben und Sterben des Malers Lefeu. In *Die Welt*, 12.9.1974.
 39. Gerhard Scheit speaks rightly of Améry’s “gratitude” to positivism (Scheit 2004, p. 607), which “remained all his life the reference point of his thought” (ibid., p. 613).
 40. The statement was first made by Ludwig Wittgenstein, then taken up by the Viennese Circle, which explains that it is often falsely attributed to Carnap, Mach, or Schlick (see Wittgenstein 2001, p. 79).

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (2003a). *Minima Moralia. GS Bd 4*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003b). *Negative Dialektik. GS Bd 6*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003c). *Ästhetische Theorie. GS Bd 7*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003d). Engagement. In *Noten zur Literatur. GS Bd. 11* (pp. 409–430). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003e). Offener Brief an Rolf Hochhuth. In *Noten zu Literatur. GS Bd. 11* (pp. 591–598). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003f). Standort des Erzählers im zeitgenössischen Roman. In *Noten zur Literatur. GS Bd. 11* (pp. 41–47). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003g). Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen. In *Noten zur Literatur. GS Bd. 11* (pp. 281–321). Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003h). Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft. In *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft. GS Bd. 10* (pp. 11–30). Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003i). Die auferstandene Kultur. In *Vermischte Schriften. GS Bd. 20* (pp. 453–464). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003j). Wird Spengler recht behalten? In *Vermischte Schriften, GS Bd. 20* (pp. 140–148). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Améry, J. (1971). Absolut teuflisch ist ein gediegener Naturalismus. In *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 3(7), 71.
- Améry, J. (1982). *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (1992). *Der Grenzgänger. Gespräch mit Ingo Hermann*. Göttingen: Lamuv.
- Améry, J. (2002a). Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. In *Werke, Bd. 2* (pp. 7–177). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

- Améry, J. (2002b). Unmeisterliche Wanderjahre. In *Werke*, Bd. 2 (pp. 179–349). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2003a). Ästhetizismus der Barbarei. In *Werke*, Bd. 5 (pp. 174–187). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2003b). Rendezvous in Oudenaarde: Projekt einer Novelle. In *Werke*, Bd. 5 (pp. 11–23). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2004). Jargon der Dialektik. In *Werke*, Bd. 6 (pp. 264–296). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2005a). Hand an sich legen. In *Werke*, Bd. 3 (pp. 173–343). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2005b). Über das Altern. In *Werke*, Bd. 3 (pp. 7–171). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2005c). Die Zeit der Rehabilitierung. In *Werke*, Bd. 7 (pp. 90–102). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2008a). Brieffragment, vermutlich an Ernst Mayer [undatiert]. In *Werke*, Bd. 1 (pp. 544–545). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2008b). Brief an Maria Leitner [10. Mai 1949]. In *Werke*, Bd. 1 (p. 545). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2008c). Die Festung Derloven. In *Werke*, Bd. 1 (pp. 583–608). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Améry, J. (2008d). Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. Konzept zu einem Roman-Essay (1972). In *Werke*, Bd. 1 (pp. 649–660). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Heidelberger-Leonard, I. (2004). *Jean Améry*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Heidelberger-Leonard, I. (2008). Editorische Notiz. In J. Améry (Ed.), *Werke*, Bd. 1 (pp. 514–520). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Lévinas, E. (1984). Tout est-il vanité ? (1946). In *Cahiers de la nuit surveillée. Emmanuel Lévinas* (pp. 319–321). Paris: Verdier.
- Scheit, G. (2004). Nachwort. In J. Améry (Ed.), *Werke*, Bd. 6 (pp. 607–642). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Silberbusch, O. (2018). *Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical. Thinking as Resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis: Gespräche aufgezeichnet von Friedrich Waismann*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.