

## **SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE:**

### **Representing the Holocaust in the verbal, visual and plastic arts**

University College of London, 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> June 1997

#### **Guia Risari: *Primo Levi and Jean Améry***

In the interesting essay “Mosaics”, Stefano Levi Della Torre distinguishes between *Judaism*, as a sum of religious and ethical laws, and *Jewishness*, as a Jewish condition in a wider sense. This distinction allows neither an easy identification, nor a complete separation. Speaking of Jewish identity in the context of European Culture, then, is maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between various and often antithetical elements. Hence, in Levi Della Torre’s words, “*Jewish identity presents itself in its variations as an undetermined specificity*”<sup>1</sup>.

Vladimir Jankélévitch too had underlined the mobility of Jewish consciousness, identifying it with a “vocation to the alibi”, to the elsewhere. To the Jew belongs an inner contradiction: the desire of cancelling the difference and that of keeping it. In sum, fear for and pride of his condition. For many, the Jewish identity was, more than the starting point, the result of traumatic events: the war, the persecution, the negation of their origins. So, refinding an identity was the outcome of a previous negation, better, of a self-denial<sup>2</sup>.

This is also the case of Jean Améry, deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and author, in 1966, of “At the Mind’s Limits: contemplation by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities”. He elaborated for himself, an Austrian citizen that the Nuremberg Laws had defined the Jew, the paradoxical formula of “*non-non-Jew*”. This double negation, that in itself is more problematic

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<sup>1</sup> S. Levi Della Torre: “Mosaici”, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 1994, (p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> V. Jankélévitch: “La coscienza ebraica”, Giuntina, Firenze, 1986.

than a simple identification or distinction, expresses a solidarity on principle with the Jews, while also the sad consciousness of a detachment.

*“I cannot - confesses Améry, after hearing the “Survivor from Warsaw” - be a Jew in the emotions, but only in the anguish and anger”<sup>3</sup>.*

Améry did not receive a religious education, nor ever attended the Jewish community. For him, the necessity, or better, the moral and historical duty of belonging took the shape of polemical claims.

Hans Mayer, after the war Jean Améry, was born in October 1912 in Vienna. He grew up in the nostalgic and muffled atmosphere of the Austrian province. In Vienna, he woke up from his dreamer attitude: he attended the lectures of the Neopositivistic Circle, while collaborating with some magazines and Universities. His intellectual references were the very core of Middle-European culture: Thomas Mann, Musil, Canetti, Herman Broch. Not completely aware of the political situation, he immersed himself in a study of the worst anti-Semitic production. Immediately, he realised the urge of fighting against Nazism, but he did not want to do it as a Jew. He desired to contrast that nasty regime with a political idea, a national reason, not a “race”. This is the reason why he entered in the National Austrian front, a group of Resistance-fighters active in Belgium.

Retrospectively, Améry admits to have been victim of that process well described by Sartre as “self-denigrator”. He had internalised the stereotypical image, spread by the Nazi propaganda. In this way, in exalting the universality of reason, Améry had tried to escape from his destiny. The following events would have confirmed Sartre’s thesis:

*“The authentic Jew is the one who asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him”<sup>4</sup>.*

It was, in fact, in Auschwitz, that a terrible community of suffering occurred which created a relation between Améry and his people. Auschwitz cancelled the meaning of his previous life, making him a stateless. If he could not believe any more in his Austrian passport, could he become Jew, without any notion of Judaism?

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<sup>3</sup> J. Améry: “At the Mind’s Limits”, Schocken Book, New York, 1995, (p. 160).

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Sartre: “Anti-Semite and Jew”, Schocken Book, New York, 1965, (p. 91).

The paradox of his situation was the following: he had to accept the extraneousness as his intimate peculiarity, while refusing the familiar as non-authentic. Although he could not be a Jew, he nevertheless had to be so. *“It is an obligation, to which not only I obey, but I explicitly claim as a part of me”*<sup>5</sup>.

Améry sees himself as a “Jew not positively determinable, the Jew of the catastrophe”. As such, he is condemned to live his Jewish existence without God, without history and Messianic hopes. His relation with the Jews of all the world is a cruel and indelible tattoo on the arm. This tragic link was not without consequences on Améry’s personality. In 1977, one year before he surrendered to his “inclination to death”, he wrote: *“Being Jewish (which I didn’t choose) without a Judaism (which descent and early surroundings would permit me to choose only at the price of an existential lie) leads to a melancholy, that I must live through daily”*<sup>6</sup>.

In Jean Améry, the acceptance of the reality is always accompanied by a strong rebellion against it. So much that his position was labelled as “unbearable”. Améry’s works as writer, occasional contributor and speaker can be all seen as a struggle against the forgetting and forgiving.

In many occasions, Améry speaks of the necessity of “returning the blow”, especially when dignity is reduced to a physical dimension. Moreover, for Améry, the gap between the victims and the murderers is an unbridgeable abyss. The same is true for the distance separating individual and society. Améry finds the psychological definition of “concentration camp syndrome” an inadequate generalisation. In relation to the historical or sociological explanation, then, Améry rejects any qualification of the extreme evil as “banal” or a “by-product of capitalism”.

The reactive tendency of the author is well expressed in a text, commemorating the revolt of Warsaw’s ghetto. Améry reads this insurrection as the first true human vengeance, based on justice. The world of the Nazi ghetto was, in fact, an anti-world, dominated by the anti-logic of

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<sup>5</sup> J. Améry: “At the Mind’s Limits”, op. cit., (p. 136).

death. In these circumstances, the revolt becomes something more than a simple rebellion of the oppressed. Being the negation of a negation, it appears rather as the more desperately human negation of the Evil.

*“It was the inmates of the ghetto who had paid the price so that the humanity could seize the opportunity to deliver itself from evil (...) Possibly it will be said someday that the history of a more human humanity begun amidst the inhumanity of the ghetto”<sup>7</sup>.*

But Jean Améry is not only a witness of the past: he also keeps an indomitable attitude towards his time. So in the `70's, he criticises the “respectable anti-Semitism” of the Left, which disguises itself as a wholly political anti-Zionism.

Besides, against some positions of the avant-guard, he reminds us of the dangers of irrationalism. In this way, he submits to a severe criticism not only some art directors, such as Liliana Cavani and Louis Malle. He is also suspicious of Structuralism, the “anti-Oedipus” of Deleuze and Guattari; even Adorno’s “Dialectics of Enlightenment” is a misinterpretation for him. In relation to it, Améry declares: *“I profess loyalty to enlightenment - as a **philosophia perennis** that contains all of its correctives (...) I believe that even today (...) knowledge leads to recognition and recognition to morality”<sup>8</sup>*. In his opinion, it was not Enlightenment that failed, but its guardians.

In “The Drawned and the Saved”, Primo Levi comments on Améry’s extremism and his philosophy of “returning the blow”. In some respects, Levi conceives his essay as a comment, a critical discussion, a paraphrase of the “bitter and icy” book of Améry. In doing it, Levi recalls the episode of Améry and the Kapo. The latter was a Polish criminal who took pleasure in beating the Jews. He hit Améry in his face, with no reason and Améry, the

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<sup>6</sup> J. Améry: “Being a Jew: A Personal Account”, in “Radical Humanism”, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, pp. 11- 20, (p. 20).

<sup>7</sup> J. Améry: “In the Waiting Room of Death: Reflections on the Warsaw Ghetto”, *ibid.*, pp. 21-36, (pp. 35-36).

<sup>8</sup> J. Améry: “Enlightenment as Philosophia Perennis”, *ibid.*, pp. 135-141, (p. 136).

intellectual incapable of any physical work, concentrated all his dignity in a punch, which he paid for with additional violence.

The Italian writer shows comprehension and esteem for his companion; yet he can not help remember that the existential consequences of that gesture were tragic. They led Améry to desperation, progressive bitterness and perhaps to his suicide. *“Whoever punches the whole world refinds his dignity, but he pays for it with a very high price, for he is sure to be struck down”*<sup>9</sup>.

More recently, Tzvetan Todorov has opposed Levi and Améry. In the first, the critic sees the capacity of overcoming hatred and resignation; in the second, he sees a sterile desire of revenge<sup>10</sup>.

Despite these interpretations, the radicalism of Améry is not so unilateral; it is rather the sign of a deep laceration, of an inward split. There are in Améry two movements: one is the negation, the reaction to the given; the other is the conciliation with destiny. Paraphrasing the title of Améry’s essay on aging, we could talk of “revolt and resignation”.

Améry reacts to a society which is indifferent to the individual’s destiny, which is only interested in general wealth. His option of revolt is profoundly moral; his need of witnessing is driven by the resentment.

With a brilliant intuition, Améry reclaims the original meaning of “*ressentiment*”, rejecting the common definition, which goes back to Nietzsche’s condemnation and any psychological definition of that mood.

Resentment is not simply a sick hatred, a blind and unjust impulse for revenge. It is rather an *“emotional source of any authentic morals, which was always the moral of the oppressed”*<sup>11</sup>.

Resentment is an ambivalent condition, which rebels against the past, while at the same time, wanting to preserve it. So, in Améry’s words: *“resentment is not only an unnatural condition, but it is also logically contradictory. It*

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<sup>9</sup> P. Levi: (p. 110).

<sup>10</sup> T. Todorov: “Di fronte all’estremo”, Garzanti, Milano, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> J. Améry: “At the Mind’s Limits”, op. cit., (p. 136).

*nails any of us to the cross of our ruined past. It absurdly demands that the irreversible is reversed, that what happened is cancelled*"<sup>12</sup>.

In this way, resentment is an obstacle to any project, any future dimension. But what is this time which demands to overcome the past, to heal the wounds? This so-called natural time which only preserves the social and biological continuity. It is not a moral time; on the contrary, it is extra-moral, anti-moral. Améry opposes it with a moral sense of the time, or, better, a moral "suspension of the time".

What neither Levi, nor Todorov grasped in their critiques was the importance of this new conception of resentment. For Améry, resentment is the legitimate and natural rebellion of the victim, faced with the injustice. Besides, it stimulates a moral sensibility which takes into account the importance of the past, before any judgement on the present and project for the future.

Finally, resentment is also introspective, "retour sour soi" in search of a new foundation of the self, which unifies sensations and thoughts, memories and present. Hence, resentment is nothing but a perceptive and reflective consciousness. In this sense, the resentment shows the relation with its etymological roots. The French *ressentiment*, in fact, derives from the verb *ressentir*, which is a synonym of feeling again, reliving past emotions or situations.

The various meanings of resentment are all present in Améry's writing, especially in what Pier Paolo Portinaro called the "*trilogy of the injured life*" and also "*autobiographical essays of deconstruction*"<sup>13</sup>. These are three essays: "At The Mind's Limits", "On Aging: Revolt and Resignation", and "Raising the Hand against oneself". In all these works, the protagonist is the individual, escaping from the catastrophe, whether it is the extermination, the process of aging or, even, that of living. The heroes of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., (p. 119).

<sup>13</sup> P. Paolo Portinaro: "Il sopravvissuto e la morte. La testimonianza di Jean Améry", in *Comunità*, mag. 1988, (pp. 169-198).

Améry are always defined through negation: they are the “non-man” of the camps, the aged dispossessed of time and vitality or the suicide lacking the desire of living

They also represent the spirit of contradiction: the camp survivor denies the logic of extermination; the old man the logic of the future; in the end, the suicide reverses the universal faith in life itself.

In conclusion, resentment plays a central role in Jean Améry. It is not only an individual response to trauma, nor just a source of literary inspiration. In relation to the Holocaust, it is, above all, an ethical-political category, which underlines the primacy and the value of remembering. From this point of view, Améry agrees with the conclusion of the historian Yerushalmi, but also with the philosopher Jankélévitch.

*“Where nothing can be ‘done’, it is always possible to restlessly ‘ressentir’ (...). Resentment can also be the feeling, renewed and completely relived, of the inexpiable event; (...) it keeps the sacred flame of restlessness alive and the faith in invisible things”<sup>14</sup>.*

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<sup>14</sup> V. Jankélévitch: “Perdonare?”, Giuntina, Firenze, 1987, (p. 49).