

## *Revolt against Time: Jean Améry on the Constitution of the Self*

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At the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, around April 2020, Germany was doing very well by comparison, and a lot of the credit was given to the federal agency tasked with the control of the disease. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the equivalent of the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was lauded for its coolheaded approach and seen as one of the reasons why Germany managed to avoid the horrifying scenes that were happening in places like Italy or Spain. Originally named the Royal Prussian Institute for Infectious Diseases, the RKI was named after its founder by the Nazis in 1942. At that point, all Jewish scientists working at the institute had long been dismissed. As part of their extensive research program, researchers at the RKI tested vaccines by infecting prisoners in concentration camps with malaria and typhus. This disturbing history was not recognized until the beginning of the twenty-first century and is still not widely discussed.<sup>1</sup>

A thought experiment: What would be the reaction if instead of the sentence “The RKI registered 9557 new Corona infections and 300 deaths,” the likes of which were reported daily in German media, Germans would open

Research for this project was conducted during an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship at the University of Tübingen. For discussions of various aspects of this article, I am grateful to Monique Scheer, Daniel Smyth, Adam Stern, Marc Volovici, and Elad Lapidot.

1. The results of the RKI's self-study were published as Hinz-Wessels, *Das Robert-Koch-Institut im Nationalsozialismus*.

*New German Critique* 148, Vol. 50, No. 1, February 2023  
DOI 10.1215/0094033X-10140791 © 2023 by New German Critique, Inc.

their weekend newspaper to the headline: “The RKI, which conducted inhumane experiments on concentration camps’ prisoners during the Nazi period to research epidemics, registered 9557 new Corona infections and 300 deaths”<sup>2</sup>? In the midst of their suffering from the pandemic, one could surmise that Germans, the vast majority of whom were born after 1945, would have other things on their minds than this reminder of the past. Yet this reaction would not be new. Already in 1966, Jean Améry (1912–78) noted that Germans were moving on. Describing his travels through West Germany, which at that point had experienced a remarkable economic recovery known as the *Wirtschaftswunder*, Améry insisted that the complete rehabilitation of West Germany was unacceptable. Instead, he imagined “a national community that would reject everything, but absolutely everything, that it accomplished in the days of its own deepest degradation, and what here and there may appear to be as harmless as the Autobahns,” the system of more than two thousand miles of highway constructed during the Nazi era.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to reject a highway? Although the question sounds absurd, it points to the importance of resentment as an emotional response to atrocity.<sup>4</sup> Améry offers a phenomenological account of his own resentment and a unique perspective that understands it as a three-layered phenomenon. First, resentment is toward the perpetrators of the atrocity. Second, as the RKI and Autobahn examples suggest, it is also aimed at the society that wishes to move on while enjoying the benefits gained by the atrocity. Against the readiness to let bygones be bygones, Améry refused to forgive and forget. He insisted on the validity and moral function of his *ressentiment*. Finally, I argue in this article that Améry’s thought also offers a view that highlights the temporal dimension of resentment. Resentment is against time itself, which is on the side of the perpetrators.

A key source for discussions of Améry’s resentment is the essay “Resentment” and the collection in which it appears, *At the Mind’s Limits (Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, lit. *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*). I contend, however, that the way to understand the concept passes through Améry’s theory of violence and the constitution of the self. This article therefore also looks at Améry’s writings on violence and the thought of Frantz Fanon (1925–61). What does

2. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, “RKI registriert 9557 Corona-Neuinfektionen.”

3. Améry, “Resentment,” 78. Améry’s biographer notes that his earliest postwar text, “On the Psychology of the German People,” shows a belief in some kind of reconciliation as possible, indeed desired. See Heidelberger-Leonard, *Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 78–84. By the 1960s this was no longer Améry’s position.

4. On the potential political implications of resentment, see Jensen, *Zornpolitik*, 34, 40.

Améry—an Austrian Jew born as Hans Mayer, who survived torture by the Gestapo and the horrors of Auschwitz—have to do with the Martinican psychiatrist widely regarded as one of the fathers of postcolonial and anticolonial thought? First, Améry made constant references to Fanon in his writings, primarily throughout the 1960s, including an essay titled “The Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence: Frantz Fanon the Revolutionary.” Second, Améry’s writing is influenced by contemporary debates in which Fanon played a major role, namely, the struggle for independence in Algiers.<sup>5</sup> Third, both Fanon and Améry drew on Jean-Paul Sartre to articulate their own conceptual understanding of what it means to be Black or Jewish. Finally, Améry and Fanon used the phenomenological method for thinking about the experience of violence, and specifically torture.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has turned to Améry’s claim that Fanon’s writings helped him understand his own experience. The comparison has been made primarily as a way of arguing for the possibility of bringing together the colonial experience and the Holocaust along the lines of what Michael Rothberg calls “multidirectional memory,” in which the memory of suffering is not a zero-sum game.<sup>6</sup> Less attention has been paid to the role that Fanon’s thought played in Améry’s understanding of the constitution of the self through counterviolence, as well as its limits.<sup>7</sup> One of the causes for resentment, according to Améry, is that counterviolence that could have been enacted did not occur. Such an interpretation shows that the potential influence of Fanon on Améry runs deeper than has been recognized until this point, because Améry’s understanding of resentment’s temporality is intertwined with his philosophy of counterviolence, which was shaped by Fanon. A central aim of this article is to highlight this neglected connection between Améry’s reading of Fanon, both authors’ theories about counterviolence as constituting the self, and the temporality of resentment.

The argument unfolds in four parts. The first section presents Améry’s understanding of Jewishness as a negative condition and shows how it is in line with his reading of Sartre’s claim about the relation between the antisemite and the Jew. As Améry recognized, Fanon’s argument about the constitution of the

5. Diner, “Memory Displaced”; Weiss, “Jean Améry Reads Frantz Fanon,” 170.

6. Gilroy, “Fanon and Améry”; Ribeiro, “Reverses of Modernity”; Fareld, “Entangled Memories of Violence.” On the notion of “multidirectional memory,” on which Fareld relies, see Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*. For a position that presents the limits of the comparison, see Fiedler, “‘Schicksalsverwandtschaft’?”

7. On violence in Fanon and Améry, without directly addressing the question of resentment, see Steiner, “In Extremis”; and Marian, “Redemptorische Gewalt.” For an exception that identifies the connection between violence and resentment, see Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 88–102. I discuss Cheyette’s argument below.

colonized by the colonizer is based on a similar logic. Yet this is not the only way to constitute the self. The second section develops the claim that for Améry, as for Fanon, counterviolence has value as an intrinsic self-assertion. The third section moves to the question of revenge and resentment, showing the problem of temporality in counterviolence. The paradox of resentment in Améry's thought is that counterviolence cannot be retroactively enacted, even though it is only through violent revenge that resentment can be overcome. The last section shows that Améry believed this paradox is bound to be resolved through the passing away of the victims. In this sense, resentment is also a revolt against time, an attempt that is bound to fail.

### *The Negative Constitution of the Self*

By his own account, Améry did not think about his Jewishness much until the racist Nuremberg Laws of 1935. As he puts it succinctly in a conversation with Ingo Hermann: "Hitler invented me as a Jew."<sup>8</sup> In defining Jewishness negatively, that is, as determined from the outside, Améry explicitly follows Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946).<sup>9</sup> There Sartre famously claimed that "the Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew . . . for it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew."<sup>10</sup> Some commentators, such as Jonathan Judaken and Elad Lapidot, identify Sartre's position as anti-anti-Semitic and criticize it for replicating stereotypes. They see it as a wrongheaded attempt to erase Jewish difference and distinguish between assimilated, universalizing Jews as "inauthentic" and "authentic" Jews who recognize the irreducible fact of their Jewishness. Others, like Sarah Hammerschlag, claim that Sartre's theory of antisemitism opens a vision of pluralism by maintaining the place of Jewish otherness.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to these recent readings, Améry offered a rather straightforward interpretation of Sartre as understanding the power of the oppressor to mold the psyche of the subjugated. He thought that Sartre's thesis that antisemitism "forced the Jew into a situation in which he permitted his enemy to stamp him with a self-image" was "unassailable."<sup>12</sup>

8. Améry and Hermann, *Jean Améry, der Grenzgänger*, 86; see also Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84–85. In 1978 Améry elaborated that this realization through the Nuremberg Laws, whose text he "soon knew by heart," was the culmination of a process that had started after his move to Vienna, "where antisemitism was a reality and the swastika a threat" ("Being a Jew," 14–15).

9. Améry was a great admirer of Sartre, but later in life he rejected aspects of Sartre's philosophy and politics. See Heidelberg-Leonard, *Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 217–28.

10. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 49.

11. Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*, 128–46; Lapidot, *Jews out of the Question*, 70–83; Hammerschlag, *Figural Jew*, 68–93.

12. Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86, 92.

Sartre's reflections on the Jewish question also influenced Fanon, who paralleled the construction of the Jew by the antisemite in his discussion of racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon argued that "it is the racist who creates his inferior."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), for which Sartre wrote the preface, Fanon declared that "it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence."<sup>14</sup> Fanon used Sartre's discussion, in other words, to expose the workings of racism and the harmful impact of the colonizer on the colonized.

The parallel between the Jew and the colonized does not suggest, however, an equation of their conditions. Whereas Jews can potentially hide their Jewishness, Fanon insisted in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the Black subjects about whom he writes are defined by the unchangeable fact of skin color:

All the same, the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. . . . Granted, the Jews are harassed—what am I thinking of? They are hunted down, exterminated, cremated. But these are little family quarrels. The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance.<sup>15</sup>

One might have expected that Améry would reject referring to the Holocaust, less than a decade after its end, as "little family quarrels," but he cites these lines approvingly as words that "roused a naïve white man [Améry] from his contented slumber."<sup>16</sup>

In Fanon's argument, it is not an abstract colonial gaze that defines the other from afar. It is also a hand, physically enacting violence on the body of its victim. The creation of the native, he wrote, was "marked by violence," and the exploitation of the colonized was achieved "by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons."<sup>17</sup> Améry similarly emphasized physical violence, describing his torture by the Gestapo as turning the person "into body by the other"; he called it the "inversion of the social world . . . in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him."<sup>18</sup> The first blow of torture shatters the prisoner's trust in the world in an irremediable

13. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 69; see also Gibson, *Fanon*, 18–24.

14. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

15. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 87. For a discussion of the idea of the Jew in Fanon's thought, see Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 54–61. As Yfaat Weiss suggests, the Jew for Fanon is always white, a notion that can be contested ("Jean Améry Reads Frantz Fanon," 167).

16. Améry, "Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence," 13–14.

17. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

18. Améry, "Torture," 34–35; see Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity*, 75.

way. Améry used several terms to define this feeling of fundamentally breaking with the world, calling it “extreme” or “boundless loneliness.”<sup>19</sup> Jill Stauffer proposes to name this condition “ethical loneliness,” the experience of isolation that one feels, “having been abandoned by humanity.”<sup>20</sup>

Some scholars, as mentioned above, turned to the comparison between Améry and Fanon to move past a competition of suffering toward a multi-directional memory.<sup>21</sup> Améry’s own position, however, is more cautious in this regard. Although he expressed an intellectual debt to Fanon, Améry insisted that the Jew’s ethical loneliness is unique, and arguably worse than that of the colonized. First, there is the relation to the oppressor. Following a common understanding of colonialism, he argued that the goal of the colonist was the complete exploitation of the colonized. Its dehumanizing mechanism, what I call the negative constitution of the self, is meant to turn native populations into cheap labor. Because of this, Améry claimed that the colonized people were still needed, if only for their labor. For Nazism, on the other hand, the exploitation was secondary to the murder of the Jews, which was the primary goal.<sup>22</sup> The alienation, it is implied, is therefore more radical. Second, in Améry’s analysis, the colonized and the oppressed received solidarity from others. Algerians revolting had the sympathy of Tunisia and Morocco, some of the Western world, and even people in France. Similarly, Blacks in the United States had the support of the Third World. “Not so the Jew in the Nazi-German ghetto,” he wrote. Even Polish or Ukrainian partisans did not help Jewish rebels. At best they ignored them. The Allied forces, he insisted, were not free of antisemitism and promised their people that the war was not waged to save Jews. “The Jew,” Améry concluded, “was alone with his task of negating the negation.”<sup>23</sup>

This ethical loneliness is central to Améry’s conception of resentment. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, when Germany lay in ruins, he—a Resistance fighter, Jew, and victim of Nazism—was in sync with the world.<sup>24</sup>

19. On trust, see Améry, “Torture,” 27–28. On loneliness, see Améry, “Resentment,” 70; and Améry, “Im Warteraum des Todes,” 471.

20. Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, 1.

21. Lutz Fiedler parses out a distinction between Améry the resistance fighter and Améry the Jew. Whereas the former offers in his reading a potential connection to Fanon through the notion of counter-violence, the latter focuses on the uniqueness of the Jewish case because of the impossibility of resistance during the Holocaust. See Fiedler, “‘Schicksalsverwandtschaft?’” For an insistence on complicating the distinction, see Fareld, “Entangled Memories of Violence.”

22. Although Améry argues polemically against Hannah Arendt on other points, their positions are quite close here. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt describes the stateless as in a more dire position than the slave, for the latter is still needed for labor (297).

23. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 35.

24. Améry, “Resentment,” 64–65.

Yet the reincorporation of West Germany among the Western nations and East Germany in the Eastern Bloc quickly brought with it disillusionment. He was alone in his resentment. Or rather, resentment emerged as an individual stance that only reinforces one's loneliness. Améry was out of sync not only with the majority society but also with fellow Jews who were willing to forgive.<sup>25</sup> Améry did locate, however, a potential site for redemption, or reincorporation into humanity. Following Fanon, Améry's thought offers the idea of counter-violence as a positive determinate of one's existence.

### *The Positive Constitution of the Self*

Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* begins with the chapter "Concerning Violence," in which violence is sanctioned not only on pragmatic grounds of ending the presence of the colonizer in the land but also on existential grounds. The colonial world, explained Fanon, is a Manichaeian world of colonized and colonizer. After hearing for so long that they understand nothing but force, the colonized decide to speak that very language.<sup>26</sup> The work is bookended by the claim, echoing but rejecting Christian discourse, that decolonization would lead to the creation of a new human being, indeed of a new humanity. If in the opening chapter the creation of a new man through decolonization is described as emerging out of violence by the colonized, its end is about the creation of new social and national structures not just for the sake of Algeria or Africa, but "for Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity."<sup>27</sup> These lines, and Fanon's oeuvre as a whole, have been subject to many interpretations. In the 1960s Fanon's thought was taken up by liberation movements in Africa and Black Power in the United States, and its revolutionary character was emphasized. Since the late twentieth century postcolonial and posthumanist interpretations emerged that arguably tamed Fanon's insights and took away the sting of their meaning for contemporary discussions.<sup>28</sup>

Améry's reading of Fanon is in line with his contemporaries—most notably Sartre in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*—in assigning a crucial role to violence.<sup>29</sup> In "The Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence," violence emerges as a historical and existential category. According to Améry, Fanon, "as an author well trained in phenomenology and as a personal victim and bearer of violence," understood that counterviolence is necessary to move

25. Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 95; Améry, "Resentment," 72.

26. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 84, 36–37.

27. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 316.

28. See the critical summary in Gilroy, "Fanon and Améry," 17–18.

29. Sartre, preface, 21.

the wheels of history.<sup>30</sup> This view in turn leads to Améry's claim that violence is existential in the sense that it defines and gives meaning to human existence: "Revolutionary violence is the affirmation of the self-realising human being against the negation, the denial of the human being. Its negativity has a positive charge. Repressive violence blocks the way to the self-realisation of the human being; revolutionary violence breaks through that barrier."<sup>31</sup> The self, in other words, is constructed both negatively through outside violence and positively through the enactment of counterviolence.

There are two misperceived notions of violence, in Améry's mind. The first, as Melanie Steiner-Sherwood notes, is that of Georges Bataille's glorification of violence as a radical rejection of the other.<sup>32</sup> This is the colonizer's perspective. Améry, by contrast, left the constitutive power of counterviolence to the oppressed. The project of decolonization resists a dialectical sublation. The colonized turned to violence to transform a split world into a unity, one in which the colonizer had no part. There can be no conciliation, according to Fanon, "for of the two terms, one is superfluous."<sup>33</sup>

The second misinterpretation of violence for Améry was that of Hannah Arendt, who in *On Violence* criticized Fanon and offered a theory that separated power (*Macht*) from violence (*Gewalt*). In opposition to Arendt, Améry highlighted power discrepancies and suggested that it is time to put to bed false claims about the symmetry of power. Police brutality is not the same as that of the demonstrators; the French army's violence was not the same as that of the National Liberation Front (FLN). The police and French army used repressive violence that denied equality. Revolutionary violence, on the other hand, was "eminently humane" in Améry's view.<sup>34</sup>

By describing counterviolence as "eminently humane," Améry highlighted its power to self-realize the subject. In the act of physically resisting the oppressor, the victim can claim their dignity. Bryan Cheyette called this "the art of returning the blow" and claimed that whereas Primo Levi relegated revenge to the realm of fantasy, for Améry resentment "remains seemingly unmediated and inscribed on the body."<sup>35</sup> Cheyette's insight can be expanded

30. Améry, "Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence," 15.

31. Améry, "Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence," 16.

32. Améry, "Torture," 36; Steiner-Sherwood, "Ver-rücktes Universe of Torture."

33. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

34. Améry, "Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence," 16; Améry, "Hannah Arendt, Macht und Gewalt: Bücher im Gespräch." Radio manuscript, March 21, 1971. RFS: AA. Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. At times Arendt reads Fanon as "more doubtful about violence than his admirers," but in general she is critical of the idea of counterviolence. See Arendt, *On Violence*, 14n19; for a discussion of Arendt's critique of Fanon, see Cocks, *Passion and Paradox*, 62–63.

35. Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, 101.



in two ways. First, it has to be shown exactly how the “art of returning the blow” and its embodied experience function. Second, a clearer conceptual distinction between revenge and resentment is needed for Améry’s full account to emerge. Below I deal with the first point. In the next section I show how the conceptual separation exposes the question of temporality in resentment.

One can recognize at least three ways in which counterviolence functions in Améry’s thought. The first is through individual resistance. This position can be traced to Améry’s pre-Holocaust writing and his first novel, *The Shipwrecked* (*Die Schiffbrüchigen* [1934–35], published posthumously in 2007). Near the end of the novel, the protagonist Eugen Althager challenges a member of a Fascist student body to a duel, a fight which he has no hope of winning. Althager dies in the duel, as expected. It is a seemingly banal and unnecessary death, but one in which he was master of his own fate.<sup>36</sup> About a decade later Améry himself risks something similar. After being hit by the Polish foreman Juszek, Améry returned a blow, which was his “open revolt. . . . My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw.”<sup>37</sup> Améry knew that he did not stand a chance against the physically imposing Juszek, and he was beaten harshly in response. Whereas in *The Shipwrecked* the duel could still be read as a romanticized version of a gentlemen’s disagreement, in *At the Mind’s Limits* Améry describes it as the clear realization that he is a body and nothing more. And it is the suffering, hungry body that reacts and, in so doing, turns into an “I.” “In the punch,” wrote Améry, “I was myself—for myself and my opponent.”<sup>38</sup> In “In the Waiting Room of Death” (1969), Améry calls this type of self-constituting counterviolence the “reattainment of dignity,” which is essentially “the freedom of choosing death,” not as suicide—at least not at this point in Améry’s intellectual development—but as the violent assertion of one’s self despite the knowledge that one is likely to die in the process.<sup>39</sup>

In 1966, the same year *At the Mind’s Limits* was published, Améry reflected on the redemptive power of violence in his reviews of the controversial book *Treblinka: The Revolt of an Extermination Camp*, by Jean-François Steiner.<sup>40</sup> Steiner’s book, a historical novel that was grounded in research but offered a semifictive description of the events, climaxed in the uprising of the Treblinka inmates in August 1943. Améry wrote approvingly of the novel,

36. Améry, *Werke 1: Die Schiffbrüchigen*, 374–75.

37. Améry, “On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew,” 90.

38. Améry, “On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew,” 91.

39. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 28. Améry completed a phenomenological account of suicide in 1976 and took his life two years later. See Améry, *On Suicide*.

40. On the controversy around Steiner’s book, see Moyn, *Holocaust Controversy*.

noting that like Fanon, Steiner was offering a theology without God. In the novel, “revolt and violent action [*Gewalttätigkeit*] have redemptive character there, where previously the human was nothing but a suffering object of the historical event.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Améry was suspicious of attempts to praise armed resistance in a way that belittled those who did not resist, as he felt Simone de Beauvoir did in her preface to *Treblinka*. The title of one of Améry’s reviews, “. . . Like a Herd of Sheep?” (1966), can be read as a reply to this claim. It is a rhetorical question that brings to the forefront the dichotomy between heroism and sheep going to the slaughter. Améry’s answer was nuanced. On the one hand, he rejected attempts to externally judge the Jews who suffered in the ghettos and concentration camps. On the other hand, he celebrated violent resistance, as is evident in the above discussion and the title of another of his reviews of *Treblinka*, “Redemption in Revolt” (1966).<sup>42</sup> Put differently, Améry’s position does not condemn the prisoners who did not participate in revolts but elevates those who did.

The second aspect of self-constitution through counterviolence is evident in Améry’s discussion of collective resistance. The conditions in the ghettos and concentration camps, with their overcrowding and the constant presence of death, made solidarity hard.<sup>43</sup> Working with Sartre’s distinction between a series of individuals that merely share a space and a group as having a sense of unity and shared cause, Améry wrote that Jews in the camp were part of the former. Ethical loneliness is the feeling of being alienated not just from the world at large but also from the only people with whom one shares an understanding. In Améry’s case, these would have been the fellow camp prisoners. In revolt, there was a shared cause, the determination for revenge, which turned them into a group, thereby breaking their isolation.<sup>44</sup> This group formation is similar to Fanon’s argument that in the revolt and enactment of violence individuality disappears, because under these conditions, in which everybody is suspect by the colonial forces, a shared interest is formed between disparate individuals, from the urbanized intellectual to the farmer in the mountains.<sup>45</sup>

41. Améry, “. . . Wie eine Herde von Schafen? (1966),” 408.

42. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 32–33; Améry, “Erlösung in der Revolte.”

43. This claim is corroborated by other accounts of ghettos and camps, among them the observations of the historian H. G. Adler and the psychologist Emil Utitz, both of whom were prisoners in Theresienstadt. See Adler, *Theresienstadt*, 560, 576; and Utitz, *Psychologie des Lebens im Konzentrationslager Theresienstadt*, 14.

44. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 24

45. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 47, 99, 199–200.

The last aspect is self-realization as a breaking of ethical loneliness through counterviolence. Discussions of Améry's writings on resentment have highlighted the idea that resentment is a demand to be recognized, even if scholars disagree on how this demand is to be interpreted. Dennis Klein suggests that Améry's account of resentment points toward a desire for recognition and coming to terms with the past by prescribing a condition for potential reconciliation in the remembrance of the crime by the perpetrator. Amir Engel rejects this position and argues that for Améry, "the idea of a shared humanity is truly and finally lost."<sup>46</sup> Améry's account of violence challenges both these interpretations, for counterviolence allows one to be integrated, to be perceived as a human, at least for a moment, but in a way that does not seek reconciliation as harmonizing. The freedom of choosing death broke for Améry the "ring of total isolation" by showing that death "was not only suffered but also meted out."<sup>47</sup>

Améry was at pains to explain that Jewish counterviolence, unlike Fanon's liberatory violence, was not meant to achieve a pragmatic aim. The hope for liberation did not really exist, and revolt was pure and simple revenge. In his rejection of the pragmatic need for revenge, Améry also explicitly rejected attempts to diagnose his resentment as a psychological condition. Rather, revenge was moral and existential, what he called *humane vengeance*.<sup>48</sup> Put differently, the function of revenge, in Améry's thought, was the incorporation of the victim back into the fold of humanity. Through it the human being becomes human once more. He celebrated the counterviolence in the revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto or Treblinka death camp, because in it Jews were being reincorporated into humanity, if only temporarily. That is, even if it is futile on the individual level, Améry suggested that counterviolence might have collective value.

Améry identified the state of Israel as one site for such a collective sense of incorporation into humanity. In his staunch support for the state of Israel, Améry was in line with other Jewish thinkers of his era, such as Elie Wiesel, Emmanuel Levinas, and Emil Fackenheim. Part of Améry's challenge, however, was his relation to intellectual circles in the French Left, where the prevailing attitude toward Israel changed dramatically in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967). In those circles, Jews were no longer seen primarily as victims, and the state of Israel was increasingly criticized as an occupying

46. Klein, "Resentment and Recognition"; Engel, "Between Consequential Memory and Destruction," 16.

47. Améry, "In the Waiting Room of Death," 28.

48. Améry, "In the Waiting Room of Death," 26. For the rejection of the claim that it is a psychological wound, see Améry, "Resentment," 68; and Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 99. Cf. Itkin, "Against the Natural Consciousness of Time," 261.

force. Améry, for his part, insisted that beyond these views lurked antisemitism disguised as anti-Zionism.<sup>49</sup>

The state of Israel has a twofold meaning for Améry. First, it has a political-pragmatic role, as a place of refuge in case tides against Jews rise again or change, which Améry considered a real possibility.<sup>50</sup> Second, the state of Israel has an existential meaning. The relation of the world to the state of Israel reflects, in Améry's view, the abandonment of the Jew in the world. It is for him a space that allows Jews to come to terms with the ethical loneliness. The state of Israel is existential for Améry in yet another sense. For Améry, Israel gives Jews the opportunity to return the blow. Reflecting in 1976 on his sole visit to Israel, Améry described a conversation he had with a young soldier of North African heritage, who would generally have been referred to as a Mizrahi Jew. "I don't like to fight," the soldier said. "But I want to live—so I shall fight." According to Améry, who did not feel emotionally connected to the country, whose climate, language, and culture were not his own, it all boiled down to this fight, for which he did not see a solution or peaceful resolution.<sup>51</sup>

Esther Marian provocatively contends that the relation between Améry and Fanon regarding violence allows a view that sees in the state of Israel an act of redemptive violence.<sup>52</sup> This suggestion goes too far. First, Fanon was, and is, more likely to be read by postcolonial thinkers and activists in solidarity with the Palestinian people. In light of Fanon's philosophy, the state of Israel nowadays is the oppressor rather than the oppressed. Second, while Améry indeed expressed solidarity with the state of Israel on multiple occasions, he did not use the term *redemptive violence* when it came to it, as far as I have been able to ascertain. This is not coincidental. I have pointed out above that counterviolence and the violence of the oppressor are categorically different. Redemptive counterviolence is an option reserved for the oppressed. Améry, while attempting to defend it against critique from the left, admitted that the state of Israel played the role of the occupier, and "every occupier is simultaneously also an oppressor."<sup>53</sup>

49. Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1969)," 133; Améry, "Die Linke und der 'Zionismus' (1969)," esp. 147–49. See also Steiner, afterword, 645–47; and Marian, "Redemptorische Gewalt."

50. Améry, "Die Linke und der 'Zionismus' (1969)," 144; Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1976)," 195. See also Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1969)," 135–36; and Améry, "Being a Jew," 20.

51. Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1976)," 199.

52. Marian, "Redemptorische Gewalt," 125–26. For other analyses of Améry's understanding of the state of Israel, see Fiedler, "'Schicksalsverwandtschaft'?" 160–64; and Steiner, afterword, 645–47.

53. Améry, "Die Linke und der 'Zionismus' (1969)," 145. For some of his critiques of Israeli politics, see Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1976)," 198–99; Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1969)," 134; and Améry, "Being a Jew," 19.

It is therefore perhaps best to conceptualize the state of Israel in Améry's thought as a condition for the possibility of Jewish counterviolence. The policies of the state of Israel can be criticized, suggested Améry, but it nonetheless encapsulates the potential of Jewish resistance.<sup>54</sup> Améry committed suicide in 1978. It is a moot question whether he would have held this position after more than fifty-five years of ongoing occupation, or whether he would have recognized an inflection point in which counterviolence becomes the bare violence of the oppressor. The main point remains, however, that his relation to the state of Israel is informed by his broader philosophical concern about counterviolence and Jewish self-constitution.

The state of Israel's use of violence raises another important point regarding the endorsement of counterviolence. Counterviolence comes at a price. The first chapter of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, "Concerning Violence," celebrates the emancipatory power of counterviolence. Yet the last chapter, "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," shows the psychic effects of enacting any kind of violence.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Améry wrote that it was "horrible to be defeated, but it is also not pretty to have to play the victor."<sup>56</sup> For all his support of counterviolence in specific historical instances, Améry cautioned against turning it into a fetish, a counterpart to the fetish of law and order.<sup>57</sup> When violent resistance turns into "abstract violence," it loses its legitimacy. For such unjustified violence he identified a few criteria. First, it is abstract if it is not embedded in the political reality, which is to say, it does not contribute to the raising of political consciousness among the oppressed. Second, if counterviolence is not perceived as having a clear political aim by society as a whole, then it is too abstract. Finally, a counterviolence that is abstract is evident by the fact that it is not initiated by or does not represent the oppressed minorities.<sup>58</sup> As Stephan Steiner notes, the problem of these vague criteria is inherent to the exercise of counterviolence, which is oriented in praxis and not in theory. Yet they help explain Améry's views on political counterviolence in the 1960s, when he endorsed certain aspects of the 1968 student movement and cautiously supported for a time the Red Army Faction (RAF), while criticizing organizations like the Maoist Gauche Prolétarienne in France for enacting violence that did not lead to any concrete social and political change.<sup>59</sup>

54. Améry, "Der ehrbare Antisemitismus (1969)," 134; Améry, "Being a Jew," 19.

55. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; Cocks, *Passion and Paradox*, 64.

56. Améry to Heinz Robert Schlette, in Améry, *Werke 8: Ausgewählte Briefe*, 234.

57. Améry, "Konter-Violenz als Not-Wehr," 493.

58. Améry, "Grenzen politischer Gewaltphilosophie," 477–78.

59. See Steiner, afterword, 658–60.

***The Open Wound***

The above analysis of self-constitution through counterviolence exposes a tension between two facets of resentment in Améry's thought, namely, resentment against past atrocities and against the attempt after the fact to diminish their importance and continue as if nothing happened.<sup>60</sup> Some of the clearest cases of justified, indeed necessary, counterviolence for Améry are the Algerian revolt against the French, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the Treblinka uprising. In all these cases, counterviolence served an existential purpose, because it allowed for reintegration into humanity. The problem arises when this option for self-constitution is no longer available, and society refuses to grant validity to one's resentment.

The prisoners of the camps and ghettos knew that the act of revolt had no pragmatic purpose. Like Améry's punching of Juszek, an uprising would most likely lead to their further suffering and death. They acted nonetheless. The story about Juszek can be seen as an accompaniment to another incident in *At the Mind's Limits* in which Améry described how the Flemish SS-man Wajs beat him with a shovel on the head. Wajs paid with his life for his crimes, which led Améry to feel a sense of unity and reintegration: "At that moment, he was with me—and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I to turn back time, to undo what had been done."<sup>61</sup> At first glance, there are important parallels between the narratives. Both individuals physically abused Améry, and the fact that they suffered as well meant for him the regaining of his humanity. In the case of Wajs, however, it is not Améry who returned a blow, and the punishment was not meted out immediately. These two distinctions, which can be described as the questions of who and when, are central for an understanding of Améry's concept of resentment.

First is the question of who returns the blow. Améry was convinced, as shown above, that acts of counterviolence "absolutely and clearly had a redemptive character" and were perceived as such not only by the revolting inmates but also by other prisoners who heard of their resistance.<sup>62</sup> While the news of such attempts had a redemptive character for him, Améry admitted that "he never got over the fact" that he did not take up arms and fight his oppressor but was instead liberated by the Allies. Fanon, Améry argued, would not have accepted Algerian liberation through another colonial power, and the same applied to the survivors of the camps and ghettos, because "freedom and dignity must be attained by way

60. Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 113–16.

61. Améry, "Resentment," 70.

62. Améry, "Erlösung in der Revolte," 416–17; Améry, "In the Waiting Room of Death," 23–24.

of violence, in order to be freedom and dignity.”<sup>63</sup> A cause for resentment, according to Améry, is therefore the inability to strike back directly. This is not to disregard the importance of punishment by proxy, as enacted on Wajs. It did lead to a moment in which Améry felt united with the world. This type of punishment, however, does not serve the same existential function in Améry’s understanding of the constitution of the self. Furthermore, the fact that many others got away with impunity and could continue their lives only increased Améry’s feeling of being in disharmony with the world, which was another cause for his resentment.

There is an interesting corollary between Germans and Jews in the need for revolt. Aleida Assmann notes that in “Resentment,” Améry identified the cause of postwar German shame in the fact that Germans did not revolt against Hitler but relied on the Allies to overthrow this regime.<sup>64</sup> A potential working through the past would be this recognition of complicity and a desire that it would have been otherwise, a wish to turn back time. In that way, Améry wrote, “the German revolution would be made good, Hitler disavowed.” It is in this context that Améry, while claiming that he “is not a German and it is not for him to give advice to this people,” suggested the absolute rejection of the past, including the Autobahn (and one can add the RKI).<sup>65</sup> The causes and related affective responses of Germans and Jews, however, are different. For the Germans, it is shame resulting from the fact that they could have rebelled but did not. For the Jews who did not revolt, it is resentment. Overpowered, Jewish revolt would not have led to a different historical trajectory, but it would have been of existential significance for those who took up arms and for other Jewish prisoners in camps and ghettos.

In a visceral metaphor, Améry wrote that the fact he did not liberate himself was a “very painful, constantly reopening wound.”<sup>66</sup> Referencing his torture, he turns once more to this idea: “When we are handcuffed and slapped in the face, do we suffer trauma? That too, but not only that. Rather, something happens to us that can no longer be dealt with rationally. Metaphorically speaking, a wound is torn open, which only scars over [*vernarbt*] as soon as we, freed from our shackles, strike back.”<sup>67</sup> When this essay appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, it was given the title “The Wound Scars Over after the Counter-strike,” thereby making this metaphor central.<sup>68</sup>

63. Améry, “Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence,” 16.

64. Assmann, “Two Forms of Resentment,” 127.

65. Améry, “Resentment,” 78.

66. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 27.

67. Améry, “Konter-Violenz als Not-Wehr,” 485.

68. Améry, “Die Wunde vernarbt nach dem Gegenschlag.”

The painful, open wound that would not scar reads as a counterclaim to Hegel's statement that "the wounds of the Spirit heal and leave no scars behind."<sup>69</sup> Although Améry appreciated the foundation Hegel laid for strands of thought such as Marxism or the philosophy of Sartre, he recognized reactionary elements in Hegelian philosophy. Hegel, in his view, deified the state as the sublation of oppositions and, as such, the manifestation of reason. According to Améry, regardless of what an intellectual in Auschwitz previously believed, in the camp the intellectual "became a Hegelian: in the metallic brilliance of its totality the SS state appeared as a state in which the idea was becoming reality."<sup>70</sup> When writing about his resentment and the open wound that would not scar over, Améry went against a Hegelian interpretation of history as the dialectical progressive unfolding of the Spirit. Instead, he drew the attention of his readers to the suffering body of the victim, who refused to move forward with the *zeitgeist*.

Resentment stands in contrast to how most people experience time as geared toward the future. "The time-sense of a person trapped in resentment," Améry wrote, "is twisted around, dis-ordered, if you wish, for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened."<sup>71</sup> The terms *twisted* and *dis-ordered* recall Améry's essay "Torture," in which he described his twisted body under torture and the derivation of the word *torture* from the Latin *torquere* (twist).<sup>72</sup> The use of these terms connects the body to his understanding of temporality. The one who was tortured refuses to look toward a happy future. Although the past cannot be undone, resentment and the refusal of reconciliation keep the horrors of the past present in society. This, Améry claimed, was the moral stance to take.<sup>73</sup>

Several scholars note this connection between resentment and torture, but they overlook the role counterviolence could have played in the alleviation of resentment.<sup>74</sup> At the moment of his execution, Wajs once more became a fellow human. Améry hopes that Wajs, at that instance, wanted the same turning back of the clock. Theoretically, Améry left open the possibility that such a position can be extrapolated to society at large. In other words, it is conceivable that the two groups, the overpowered and the oppressors, "would be joined in

69. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 407. I thank Daniel Smyth for drawing my attention to this allusion.

70. Améry, "At the Mind's Limits," 12; Améry, "Hegel—Befreier oder Oppressor?," 346–47.

71. Améry, "Resentment," 68.

72. Améry, "Torture," 32–35.

73. Améry, "Resentment," 72.

74. Ben-Shai, "To Reverse the Irreversible," 74–78; Fareld, "Ressentiment as Moral Imperative," 57–59; and Steiner-Sherwood, "*Ver-rücktes* Universe of Torture," 145.



the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history become moral.”<sup>75</sup> The discussion of revenge enacted by proxy, however, complicates this theoretical position. The returning of the blow is impossible on a societal scale; the necessary conflict that offers the potential for such joining together is no longer available.

At times, Améry implies that counterviolence demands absolute retribution. As horrific as it sounds, and Améry is fully aware that his introspection was provocative, he insists in “In the Waiting Room of Death” that for the prisoners of the camp revenge meant nothing short of *jus talionis*, an eye for an eye.<sup>76</sup> It might therefore be comforting for some readers when Améry rejects this idea in “Resentment,” saying that “nowhere else could the *jus talionis* make less historical and moral sense than in this instance. It can be a matter neither of revenge nor of a problematic atonement,” a theological concept that is irrelevant for him. Nor can it be “a matter of resolving it by brutal means [*Brachialmitteln*], which is historically unthinkable anyhow.”<sup>77</sup>

Améry takes this point for granted, but it merits closer scrutiny given his praise of counterviolence. A comparison with Nietzsche, for him the thinker of *ressentiment* par excellence and “the man who dreamed of the synthesis of the brute with the superhuman,” is helpful in this regard.<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche condemned *ressentiment* as part of the slave morality. The weak, unable to react physically to the power of their oppressor, develop a fantasy of revenge, which was essentially reactive because it emerged not from within but only externally, a result of the damage inflicted by the stronger party.<sup>79</sup> Améry rejected this Nietzschean account for two reasons. First, unlike Nietzsche, for whom *ressentiment* was a despicable position and part of the slave morality, Améry insisted on the moral value of resentment. The same is true for forgiveness. For Nietzsche, forgiveness, as a brushing off of an offense, is part of the master’s morality.<sup>80</sup> Améry, as we have seen, refused to forgive and found fault among those who in his opinion forgive too quickly.

75. Améry, “Resentment,” 78.

76. Améry, “In the Waiting Room of Death,” 27.

77. Améry, “Resentment,” 77, 73–74. Translation amended.

78. Améry, “Resentment,” 68. The relation to Nietzsche is evident in the original titles. Améry calls his essay “Ressentiment,” and the title of the collection in which it appears is *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, further recalling Nietzsche’s *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. See also Ben-Shai, “In Sickness and Health”; and Fareld, “Ressentiment as Moral Imperative.”

79. Améry, “Resentment,” 68; Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 36–37.

80. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 39. Such an emphasis on the morality of forgiveness is still present in contemporary philosophical discussions. See Horsbrugh, “Forgiveness,” 270; and Ben-ziman, *To Forgive and Not Forget*, 26–29.

Second, Nietzsche argued that resentment is a result of the weaker party's inability to strike back. It is a fantasy. For all his attempts to distinguish his position, Améry's recognition of the power imbalance between perpetrators and victims comes close to this Nietzschean idea about the source of resentment.<sup>81</sup> Yet Améry concluded that the type of resentment he experienced is nothing Nietzsche could have known. An important distinguishing feature of Améry's position is that counterviolence is not mere fantasy but rather a missed possibility. It is a potentiality not actualized and no longer actualizable. That a few did resist shows that counterviolence was in fact an available mode of action.

Another difference between Améry and Nietzsche is that Améry's position is a quantitative argument that turns into a qualitative one. Nietzschean resentment, he suggests, was limited in scope but Wajns was "only one of a multitude."<sup>82</sup> The vast majority of Germans did not revolt. In a vague statistical calculation, Améry argues, almost all Germans were part of the Nazi system, whether as active perpetrators or bystanders, and one should add to this tally members of other nationalities who cooperated and collaborated. Revenge is impractical, in his thought, for the sheer quantity of perpetrators and those who assisted them. It is also morally wrong, because one cannot direct retribution against those who did not harm them directly. Finally, such revenge would be qualitatively different. An eye for an eye in this case would leave a large portion of the world blind. Properly taking revenge for the Holocaust, in other words, might turn for Améry into abstract violence, which he opposed.

### ***Resignation in Revolt***

Resentment occurs because of the acts of perpetrators in the past and because of society's willing forgetfulness of atrocities in the present. Yet there is another source of resentment in Améry's thought, which the discussion of counterviolence, revenge, and *jus talionis* helps expose. This is resentment aimed at the passage of time itself and the impossibility of counterviolence. Like rejecting the Autobahn, this sounds illogical at first, because we tend to perceive resentment as directed only toward other agents.<sup>83</sup> Améry's thought, however, forces us to reconsider that the category of time is unique in this regard by connecting it to the two other types of resentment.

81. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 36. Some scholars read Améry in light of this idea and treat resentment as a counterfactual. See Fareld, "Entangled Memories of Violence," 64; Hirsch, "First Blow," 367; and Hückmann, "Beyond Law and Justice."

82. Améry, "Resentment," 71.

83. Benziman, *To Forgive and Not Forget*, 49.

The adage that time heals all wounds is wrong, in Améry's view. The damage done through the perpetrator's violence negates the victim's self in a way that serves as "a precursor to death." One's "lived time is accelerated alone toward death." Time cannot heal the wounds, but Améry believed that counterviolence could have. With counterviolence, wrote Améry, "my existence, hanging on the scales of time, has been weighed down toward death by the aggressor and is lifted. The scales' beam is balanced."<sup>84</sup> When it is impossible to enact counterviolence, time continues to accelerate more quickly toward death. This is an acceleration of an unstoppable natural process.

In an essay written near the end of his life, Améry called regaining his human dignity by striking back in Auschwitz a "mistaken belief" and claimed that he recognized that "it made no sense."<sup>85</sup> He understood, I suggest, that although the scales might be more balanced, nothing can be done against the natural movement of time. All humans age, and as they do, they come closer to death. The subtitle of *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (1971), which Améry's editor, Hubert Arbogast, thought could also be called "Revolt in Resignation," expresses this position.<sup>86</sup> Revolt against biological time is connected to the ever-opening wound, as Améry made clear in the preface to the first edition of *At the Mind's Limits*:

For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory. What happened, happened. But that it happened cannot be so easily accepted. I rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. Nothing has healed, and what perhaps was already on the point of healing in 1964 is bursting open again as an infected wound.<sup>87</sup>

At first, Améry still had hopes for some kind German recognition of the past, but by the mid-1960s these had already vanished. His wound, which "scars over after the counter-strike," remains open because society and survivor are no longer aligned in their rejection of the past, and the possibility of counterviolence has been foreclosed.

Améry insisted that forgiving simply because time passes is immoral. Rather, he argued for a moral right "to be in disagreement with every natural

84. Améry, "Konter-Violenz als Not-Wehr," 486–87.

85. Améry, "Being a Jew," 18.

86. Améry, *On Aging*, 33; Ben-Shai, "In Sickness and Health," 144–45. On the alternative title suggestion, see Heidelberg-Leonard, *Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 173.

87. Améry, "Preface to the First Edition," xi.

occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about.”<sup>88</sup> This revolt against time is inherent to Améry’s dynamic of resentment. The self, Améry learned from Sartre and Fanon, is constituted in the tension between being defined from the outside and striking back at the oppressor. He therefore saw redemption in counterviolence, which balances the scales of temporality. Améry recognized, however, the limits of revenge. He believed that the German youth should not get to enjoy the fruits of German culture and science without fully and continuously recognizing that these fruits may have been planted, or at least poisoned, by the Nazis.<sup>89</sup> This is not the same, however, as a revenge that constitutes the self, because self-constituting counterviolence can only be enacted against the perpetrators, not against their descendants. Instead of unrealized revenge, Améry’s resentment functions as a constant admonition not to normalize the past with the passage of time.

Resentment emerges from this analysis as a threefold commitment: first, against the atrocities and those who committed them, and the inability to counterstrike at that time; second, against the fact that contemporary society is still benefiting from past crimes, that is, against the Autobahn or the RKI; and third, against the passage of time itself. Améry’s vaguely statistical calculation of collective guilt and the number of perpetrators changes as time passes by, making revenge nonsensical as it loses its immediacy and object. In the absence of counterviolence, too late and impossible to enact, all that is left for Améry is resentment as a moral stance, a constant reminder by the victims of their presence against the attempt of society to move on.

At the end of “Resentment” Améry concedes defeat. As dependent on the victim, resentment presupposes the person who resents, which must be the one to whom injustice was done. From this, it emerges once more as a revolt against time, intertwined with profound resignation. Améry told his readers that time puts down its weight on the side of the perpetrators. Soon resentment will be finished, “in the sense that the KZ argot once gave to the word ‘finish,’” namely, to kill. “Soon we must and will be finished. Until that time has come, we request of those whose peace is disturbed by our grudge that they be patient.”<sup>90</sup> The victims of the Holocaust would eventually all pass—Améry wrote this in the 1960s, and it is of course even truer today—and with them the resentment they feel. Time will make sure of that. Resentment is an attempt to maintain dignity not only in the face of a society that is all too willing to

88. Améry, “Resentment,” 72.

89. Améry, “Resentment,” 78.

90. Améry, “Resentment,” 81.

move on but also against the passage of time itself. Améry teaches us that the attempt is always a rearguard battle, one that is always already lost but that nonetheless, in his view, must be fought.

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