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Ghostly Past. On Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the importance for the reflection on identity in history of the considerations of the Austrian writer of Jewish origin, Jean Améry.[1] I mean the reflections in the book *At the Mind's Limits*, published in 1966.[2] This book consists of five chapters, which can be divided by the reader into two parts. In the first three chapters (chapter 1: *At the Mind's Limits*, chapter 2: *Torture*, chapter 3: *How Much Home Does a Person Need?*), the Author analyzes different types of discontinuation in historical experience. In the next two chapters (chapter 4: *Resentments*, chapter 5: *On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew*) are analyzed the

[1] Améry's testimony, *At the Mind's limits*, is often compared with the testimonies of two other prisoners of the Auschwitz-Monowitz camp, Primo Levi's *If this is a man* and Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's search for meaning*. The literature on his testimony is enormous. The reader can find a list of books and articles on the subject in the latest collection of articles on the writer's work: *J. Améry. Beyond the Mind's Limits*, eds. Y. Ataria, A. Kravitz, E. Pitcovski, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019, pp. 345.

[2] J. Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2019 (11th edition), pp. 173; English translation: *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*, translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980, pp. 101; Polish translation: *Poza winą i karą. Próby przełamania podjęte przez złamanego*, [transl.] R. Turczyn, [afterword] P. Weiser, Homini, Kraków 2007, pp. 244. In this article I am using the English version of the text. However, English translation requires careful interpretation, especially when translators render German "Heimat" through English "home," not "homeland," which would be more precise. In Polish translation, the title of the third chapter is: *Ile ojczyzny potrzebuje człowiek?*, pp. 103-143. Cf. Jean Améry, *Die Tortur*, Ein Film von Dieter Reifarth, Absolut Medien, Fridolfing 2018 (DVD); J. Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, hörbuch gelesen von Peter Matic, HörEdition der Weltliteratur, NDR Kultur, Grosser & Stein, Hamburg 2007, 4 CD.

consequences of the experienced discontinuation for the further life of the individual for his identity.

The task of the book is therefore to describe *conditio inhumana* and its consequences. In the first chapter of the book, the Author writes about discontinuation in history associated with the failure of intellectual culture and spiritual culture in confrontation with the reality of the Auschwitz death camp. In the second chapter, he presents an analysis of the collapse of the world as a result of surviving death during torture received in the Fort Breendonk near Antwerp in Belgium.[3] The third essay of the book consider the problem of losing the past during escape and emigration.

In this article I focus on the third essay on the book, *How Much Home Does a Person Need?*, which I think has a dual character. On the one hand, it is a testimony of the Author's personal fate in 1933-45 and later, on the other hand, it is a philosophical reflection on this testimony. Améry tries to capture the fate of his own identity in the years of exile. He focuses on the relationship between the past and the future in the refugee experience. Going beyond individual experience, the author attempts to universalize its meaning. He asks himself about the significance of his experience as an exile for thinking about the fate of man in a society that is undergoing rapid modernization changes related to the development of modern technologies. His text was published in 1966, but the meaning of his reflection and its importance is the same today as it was then. We can see ourselves today in the light of the writer's beliefs and the conceptual distinctions on which they are based.

Améry was born in Vienna in 1912 as Hans Mayer in a German-speaking Jewish family. He spent his childhood in Austrian Tyrol. In those years, he recalls, he usually wore a local folk costume and spoke a local German dialect. In 1933, after Austria's annexation to the Third Reich, he illegally emigrated to Belgium. He lived in Brussels until 1943 and joined the anti-fascist movement there. This year he was arrested, tortured, sent to the Auschwitz death camp. He was one of the survivors of the extermination. After the war, he was an essayist and novelist, as well as an author of philosophical texts. Writing in German - which is vital for my further considerations - he tried to understand the experience of totalitarianism, including the experience of escape and emigration.

In Améry's considerations, the experience of escape and emigration of a German-speaking Austrian of Jewish pedigree is analyzed in his difference from two other experiences of escape or emigration. The first of these differences occurs between the fate of such people as Améry (German-speaking Jews)

[3] https://liberationroute.pl/belgium/spots/n/national-memorial-fort-breendonk-spot212

and the experience of Germans expelled from the eastern Länder of the pre-war German Reich by the Red Army in 1945. In their case, places were lost, a certain space in which they lived. The perpetrator of the expulsion was an alien force. The loss was the result of another force, another power, using a different language. Another of these differences occurs between the fate of Améry and German immigrants from the Reich who were not Jews. They emigrated not because they had to emigrate to protect their lives, but because they opposed politically and culturally national socialism. Such emigrants could think, just as refugees from the former East, that their country was for some time controlled by a force that was foreign to authentic German culture. That is, controlled by national socialism. They may have thought that the real mission of the emigrants was to preserve the true German culture until the National Socialist regime collapsed.

The fate of the German-speaking Jews who were in exile was utterly different from that of the other two groups. In the light of Améry's testimony, much more tragic. This fate meant the loss of home understood as the home country (homeland) and at the same time, the loss of the native language, mother tongue. In addition, Améry, in considerations that belong to the field of philosophy of memory, indicates that refugees like him have also lost their past. It all meant a sense of loneliness, which expresses a poetic picture of someone homeless in a snowy winter space. Ultimately, all these losses, not compensated for by the hospitality of the new country, mean loss of identity and weakening of the desire to live. Améry died in suicide death in 1978. The considerations of the analyzed text partly explain this final act of withdrawal from life.

The author points to several dialectical tensions in the existential experience of refugees like him. It seems that realizing these tensions, looking for any solution to them, in practice meant recognizing how hopeless the conditions of life ware. These tensions in the author's text are expressed by characteristic locutions, such as "hostile homeland" or "inimical, hostile mother tongue." These expressions, in a short form, contain a contradiction between the moments of the real existence of German-speaking Jewish refugees. The most important of these tensions occurs between two types of what the author describes homesickness. There is, in his opinion, traditional homesickness, which can be explained as a longing for the home country, and something that can be described as a new type of homesickness. This new kind of homesickness is a kind of hatred for the home country and for the self from the past in the home country.

The explanation of this difference requires an understanding of how the author defines homeland, that is, the native country. For him, this concept is related to the category of security. The latter term is associated with

the category of familiarity. This category, familiarity, is explained by the difference between the spontaneous as if thoughtless understanding of the signs surrounding us and their understanding through intellectual effort.

> Home is security, I say. At home we are in full command of the dialectics of knowledge and recognition, of trust and confidence. Since we know them, we recognize them, and we trust ourselves to speak and to act—for we may have justified confidence in our knowledge and recognition. The entire field of the related words loyal, familiar, confidence, to trust, to entrust, trusting belongs in the broader psychological area of feeling secure. One feels secure, however, where no chance occurrence is to be expected, nothing completely strange to be feared. To live in one's homeland means that what is already known to us occurs before our eyes again and again, in slight variants.[4]

As children, we grow up in a specific culture that belongs to a specific homeland. We then achieve familiarization with signs belonging to this cultural space, allowing for a non-reflexive, spontaneous, automatic understanding of these signs. This happens when the acquisition of an understanding of the world is simultaneous with the acquisition of speech expressing this understanding. This is the relationship between homeland and mother tongue; the latter is the language that constitutes the experience of the former.

In the author's opinion, one cannot get a new homeland just as one cannot choose a new language to be one's mother tongue. The experience of emigration is the experience of losing the sense of security associated with living in a homeland. There, in a homeland, the signs are recognizable because they are previously known. An individual in a homeland lives in a well-known and domesticated cultural space. During escape and emigration, the sense of security disappears, the signs are unclear and hardly recognizable. Améry writes that in time of exile, cultural space can be as non-decipherable as the Etruscan script. Besides, this state of alienation will never be repaired. This is because a new language cannot become a new mother tongue, and a new country cannot become a new homeland. In exile, the place of security felt in a homeland is occupied by fear, which accompanies the survivor to his end. Even if to some extent he gets used to the new living space. The contradiction mentioned above between two types of homesickness lies in the tension between longing for homeland and hatred of it. This hatred is manifested in rejection of the past and in forgetting that what was and was lost. The author expresses this contradiction using the difference between self-pity and self-destruction. Self-pity is an effect of traditional homesickness and its emotional excitement. Crying for the home country ends with some kind

[4] J. Améry, *At the Mind's…*, p. 47.

of consolation and alleviation of longing. The new type of homesickness is cutting off in self-consciousness all ties with the past in homeland and all ties with the self from the past.

> Genuine homesickness, Thomas Mann's "Hauptwehe," if, with due respect, I am permitted to steal from him, was of a different kind and afflicted us when we were by ourselves. Then there were no more songs, no effusive evocation of lost landscapes, no moist eye that at the same time winked, asking for complicity. Genuine homesickness was not self-pity, but rather self-destruction. It consisted in dismantling our past piece by piece, which could not be done without self-contempt and hatred for the lost self. The hostile home was destroyed by us, and at the same time we obliterated the part of our life that was associated with it. The combination of hatred for our homeland and self-hatred hurt, and the pain intensified most unbearably when, during the strenuous task of self-destruction, now and then traditional homesickness also welled up and claimed its place.[5]

The tension between both traditional and new homesickness is painful. The effect of this dialectical process of longing and separation is the loss of memory of the past and the loss of homeland, that is, the loss of rootedness. The author writes that after years of new homesickness, little more remains in his memory than the reminiscence of Auschwitz, the reminiscence of the tortures to which he was subjected, the memory of his return from the death camp. The remaining past has been almost removed from consciousness. The past was reduced to the spectral presence of the ancestors:

> There was only a line of ancestors, but it consisted of sad landless knights, stricken by an anathema. In addition, they had been subsequently deprived of their right of residence, and I had to take their ghosts along into exile.[6]

The contradiction between the two types of homesickness is a neurotic tension. There is no psychoanalytic cure for this kind of sickness. According to the Author, the only effective remedy could appear as a result of a revolution in real history. This revolution would mean that homeland – which was, in reality, a deadly threat to refugees – expressed the wish that they would return. No such revolution took place.

The second contradiction of the existential experience of German-speaking refugees of Jewish origin concerns the tension between their socially recognized past and the subjective sense and feeling of having a past. The Author's reflection on this contradiction is based on some assumptions that belong to the field of the philosophy of time. In Améry's thinking, the

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

philosophy of time shares common presuppositions with the philosophy of language. The most important of these assumptions, as I try to understand, is that language is an inseparable part of the reality of social practices. What language acts are, what their meaning is, is determined by the social practices to which these language acts belong. On the plane of the problems of the philosophy of time, this general, theoretical belief affects the understanding of the relationship between a particular person, the society in which that person lives, and images of that person's past.

In the final pages of the text, Améry considers this problem on the example of the German-language Jewish poet Alfred Mombert. In one of his letters, Mombert wrote that after deportation to an internment camp, all his past as a recognized poet was annulled and lost, and he asked if anything similar had ever happened to a German poet. Améry notes that Mombert failed to understand the consequences of the contradiction between the annulment of the past and the status of the German poet he believes he still is because he was a German poet.

The solution proposed by the Author of the contradiction between the socially recognized past and the subjectively maintained past is radical. For he believes that when society (that is social practice) cancels someone's past, that someone who is affected by the annulment was not the one which he remembers he was. The social negation of the past also changes the past in terms of the subjective sense and feeling of the past. When someone's past is socially annulled, he or she becomes someone without a past. In the internment camp, Alfred Mombert was not a German poet, and because German society annulled his past, he was never a German poet. This observation expresses the idea of belonging of the language to society and simultaneously, the idea of belonging of the images of the past to social practice. This practice decides on the fate of the person's past.

> In the barracks of Gurs, hungry, plagued by vermin… [Mombert] could not possibly have recognized that for which many of us needed years of concentrated thought . . . : that only someone who writes poetry not merely in German but also for Germans, upon their express wish, can be a German poet; that when everything flows off, the last traces of the past will also be swept along. The hand that was not raised in his protection cast the old man out. His readers of yesterday, who did not protest against his deportation, had undone his verses. When he wrote the tragic letter, Mombert was no longer a German poet . . . In order to be one or the other we need the consent of society. But if society repudiates that we ever were that, then we have also never been it. Mombert was not a German poet in the barracks of Gurs. That is the way the hand that did not stir when he was taken away had

> wanted it. He died without a past—and we can only hope that, since he did not know it, he died in some peace.[7]

The dissolution of the past as a result of social decisions and homesickness understood as self-destruction correspond with each other. In essence, they mean one process of destroying a sense of having a past and of losing memory. This process is reinforced by the inability to find oneself in new conditions, in a new culture, in a new homeland and its language. On the one hand, it is impossible to achieve full rootedness during exile. On the other hand, we are dealing with an active break with the old bonds with the past, which results from both social rejection and (from the refugee side) hatred of the persecuting homeland country and hostile mother tongue.

The Author's reflection on the loss of the past culminates in fragments of the text about the problem of aging and old age. Then, at the end of life, there is a significant change in the relationship between the past and future of a person. When aging does not yet concern us, or when it takes place, but our time is not yet over, we may not have a past if it is socially canceled or if we destroy it ourselves. However, we can still have a future, that is, we can still realize some of our possibilities in the future. However, the situation transforms drastically when we feel that we have become truly old.

A German-language Jewish refugee, when he is old, has no future and no past, because this second temporal dimension was taken away from him and because he destroyed his memory himself. Furthermore, he cannot take root in the new homeland, because it is not possible for the new language to become his new mother tongue. The expression which in the text of Jean Améry synthesizes the whole picture of the existence of a refugee in the flow of time is "alienation from the self." Such a person ceases to be himself from the past, and simultaneously, he or she has no future. He uses speech, his mother tongue, which is a speech expressing the threat of death. The only rescue that could come to the solitary one referred to in the text is the rescue from real history. It is a strongly spoken call for return that could be made as a result of the homeland's metamorphosis. This call, as we know, did not appear.

The significance of the work of Améry for the problems associated with the expression "wandering cultures" lies primarily in stating that the space of pluralism of cultures is not neutral, is not something like a cartesian space or like a geometrical space. I mean that between cultures, there is the culture of the birthplace, of mother tongue, which is what the author describes as a homeland. Every movement, every displacement in the space between cultures has a reference point in the form of homeland and in the

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

form of mother tongue. The author not only considers the problem of loss as belonging to the dynamism of displacement but also the problems related to the political sovereignty of the homeland. The act of depriving a person of the right to the past is a political act, as is the act of defending a person by homeland. The political dimension of these acts introduces a problem of sovereignty and of the lack of sovereignty in the reflection on the temporal dimensions of exile. The analyzed text articulates the problem of the spectral presence of the past, understood not only as an effect of exile and emigration, but also as an indelible component of the human condition stretched between the space of experiences and the horizon of expectations.[8]

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Abstract

In this article I focus on the essay *How Much Home Does a Person Need?* by Jean Améry. I analyze the difference between traditional homesickness and what the Author defines a new kind of homesickness. The contradiction between those two types of attitude lies in the tension between longing for homeland and hatred of it. Hatred is manifested in rejection of the past and in forgetting that what was and was lost. The author expresses this contradiction using the difference between self-pity and self-destruction. In my analyzes I show how self-destruction contributes to transforming the real past into something that never was. Thus, the entire past transforms into spectral space.

Keywords: escape, emigration, specters of the past, Jewish identity, testimony.

[8] Cf. M. Bugajewski, *Historyczna wspólnota słowa. Rozważanie z teorii historii*, Instytut Historii UAM, Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, Poznań 2018, s. 15-55.