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Revisiting Resentments: Jean Améry and the Dark Side of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

THOMAS BRUDHOLM

In 1966, a collection of essays on the *conditio inhumana* of the surviving victims of the Nazi genocide was published under the title *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*.¹ The author, Jean Améry, was born in Austria as Hans Maier in 1912. With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Améry's more or less unrecognized Jewish ancestry became politically and existentially fatal. In December 1938, Améry fled to Brussels and joined the resistance. Identified as a Jew, he was sent to a number of concentration and extermination camps, including Auschwitz. After the war, he returned to Brussels and changed his name. Améry first began writing the essays on Auschwitz, torture, exile, resentment, and the "impossibility and necessity of being a Jew" after two decades of silence about "the time that was impossible to lose" (Améry 1999: xiii). Based on his own experiences, moods, and desires, Améry reflects on the atrocious past and examines the existential condition of the Nazi victim in post-war Europe. His examination is a negative investigation in the sense that it focuses on the conditions that are destroyed and the things that are lost—a certain naïve belief in the intellect, a home, trust in the world and in other human beings—in the face of atrocity.

Améry tried to provide more than a testimony. He wanted to penetrate philosophically, or more precisely phenomenologically, the condition of the Nazi-victim.² *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* is, however, far from the kind of abstraction or detachment one normally expects from philosophical investigations. This is not only because Améry's thinking proceeds from his own experiences, but also in so far as the essays constituted a passionate and urgent appeal to his German contemporaries. This is part of what makes their tenor so insistent. One feels addressed—as did the listeners of the South German radio station for which the essays were originally read aloud by Améry himself. He did not write to other victims—"They know what it is all about" (Améry 1999: xiv)—but to the Germans "who in their overwhelming majority do not, or no longer, feel affected by the darkest and at the same time most characteristic deeds of the Third Reich" (Améry 1999: xiv). Thus, in spite of repeated assertions that all he can and wanted to do was to "describe," *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* was also a moral and political reaction. The essays were an attempt to provoke a revolution in the culture of German memory, which was at that time far from its present status as a "model" of what a serious working-through of

an evil past means. After two decades marked by evasion and repression of German guilt, and at a time when it was commonly thought that the past could be put to rest, Améry turned up with his protest against “hollow, thoughtless, utterly false conciliatoriness” (Améry 1999: ix): “For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory” (Améry 1999: xi). Améry increasingly felt as if he were speaking in the wind. He was not unsure about the moral legitimacy of his rebellion against appeals to forgive or forget, but he did become resigned with regard to the hope that his protest and call for accountability would be heard. In 1978, at age sixty-six, Améry took his own life in a hotel room in Salzburg.³

The writings of Améry have long been appreciated among survivors and scholars of the Holocaust. The defiant positions which he adopted have been recognized for their extraordinary and thought-provoking qualities by authors such as Theodor W. Adorno, Primo Levi, W.G. Sebald, Imre Kertész, Lawrence Langer and Jan Phillip Reemtsma.⁴ Today a publication of Améry’s collected works in nine volumes (published by Klett-Cotta) is approaching completion, and in 2004 the first comprehensive biography was published (both in German).⁵ Nonetheless, Améry has not yet been discovered by scholars of transitional justice at large. I have elsewhere carried through a close and elaborate reading of one of the most important essays in *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, entitled “Resentments.” In this article, I present some of the results of the examination.⁶ Améry’s essay contains a powerful and original meditation in which the seemingly shameful and semi-conscious resentments harbored by Améry come to be posited as a positive, affective, unyielding allegiance to a set of genuinely moral demands. Améry’s situation was, and is, not unique, but his essay represents a nearly unmatched moral defense of the victim’s harboring of resentment and resistance to social pressures to forgive or forget.⁷ Yet, before we turn to Améry’s reflections on the victim’s resentments, I would like to bring out the reasons why it is necessary to revisit this essay and its topic today. Or more precisely, I want to outline why I think it is important to introduce Améry’s thoughts on resentment as a central component of thinking and action in relation to forgiveness and reconciliation after mass atrocity.

THE DARK SIDE OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Revisiting Améry today is, I think, significant because of certain problematic trends in current discourses on forgiveness or reconciliation after mass atrocity. Popular as well as scholarly discourses about the question of how individuals and societies can “move on” in the wake of genocide are permeated with references to “negative” emotions and attitudes like anger, hatred, and resentment. Nonetheless, most of this discourse proceeds without much reflection as to the nature and value of the emotions and attitudes at stake and, indeed, with a distinct discreditation of these emotions. The assumption that people who are seriously wronged will be fuming with a lust for revenge is repeated in most discussions of the question of how societies can deal with past mass atrocities. It is one reason why the transformation of victims’ emotional responses to injustice and injury are considered to

be a central concern in efforts to promote reconciliation after mass atrocity. The assumption is, however, also grossly reductive in relation to the variety of emotional reactions and wishes found among victims.⁸ On a more general level, notions of the overcoming or taming of emotion inform many conceptions of the process of reconciliation. For example, both trials and truth commissions may be pictured as vehicles of emotional expression and cathartic transformation. The Victims' Trust Fund of the International Criminal Court has stated that trials are beneficial because (among other things) they can express the community's abhorrence of the atrocities committed and because they "can placate a victim's desire for vengeance."⁹ Or, as Antonio Cassese, former President of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, once claimed (lobbying for the tribunal before the General Assembly of United Nations): "Only international justice can dissolve the poisonous fumes of resentment and suspicion, and put to rest the lust for revenge."¹⁰

The praise of forgiveness and reconciliation that surrounded the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission exemplifies what can be seen as an even more extravagant and even redemptive project of emotional transformation. The ideal articulated during the proceedings and in related writings was that of victims *overcoming* anger and desires for revenge or retribution, not the pacification of such emotions and desires by way of justice in the form of prosecution and punishment. In spite of the commonness of references to emotions, the understanding of resentment and other "negative" reactive attitudes is often tied to unquestioned notions that do not give the reactive emotions and attitudes their due as existential realities for persons. There is today a lot of attention to forgiveness, conciliatoriness, and other responses that are commonly considered appropriate or admirable.¹¹ Yet, little interest is left for considerations of the possible value and legitimacy of victims' "negative" emotions. They are typically only considered in their function as a negative force to be overcome, labeled as hindrances to reconciliation, morally inferior, irrational, immoral, or pathological.

One may distinguish at least three different ways in which the "negative" reactive emotions and attitudes are not given their due. First, victims' resentment and other reactive attitudes are sometimes seen in the image of blind forces or energies. This is where the talk of the need to "tame," "channel," or "placate" the compulsive desires in question enter. Indeed, the philosophical perspective on emotions as sources of understanding and as partly cognitive in nature has not yet found any strong spokespersons in the context of transitional justice thinking.¹² Second, there is, as noted by Martha Minow, a "striking prevalence of therapeutic language in contemporary discussions of mass atrocities" (Minow 1998: 22). This means that the moral emotions or emotions responding to perceived moral wrongs are sometimes seen only as evidence of trauma or as "health effects." When victims voicing their anger (for example with a certain amnesty policy or as a result of societal expectations that they will forgive or forget) are treated as victims of an illness, a new offense may be added on top of the original injury. The pathologization of anger facilitates "blindness" to the moral demands and critiques that may be inherent to victims' anger after mass atrocity. It allows the party to whom the angry

protest is directed to reduce the resentment of “objective” injury and injustice to trauma or a subjective disturbance and is seen as something that the victim/patient should “get over” for his or her own sake and something in need of counseling and treatment rather than a moral-political response.¹³ Third, when forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation are promoted as overriding values, their advocates may assume that the overcoming of anger and resentment leaves nothing to regret or consider. Indeed, in the writings of Desmond Tutu, resentment and desires for retribution appear only as destructive and dehumanizing forces that should be “avoided like the plague” because they are corrosive of “ubuntu” and social harmony (Tutu 1999). During the hearing of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu and other commissioners repeatedly lauded those victims and relatives who were willing to forgive and reconcile. They were held forth as models of the kind of personal magnanimity and nobility needed to secure the transition to a new and better South Africa. Yet, what about those who did not want to forgive? At least in the writings of Tutu, it is hard to find testimony of a concern about the possible moral value of anger or the possible legitimacy of some victims’ resistance to the call for forgiveness. “Of course,” as Tutu writes, “there were those who said they would not forgive” (Tutu 1999: 271). But, as he continues: “That demonstrated for me the important point that forgiveness could not be taken for granted; it was neither cheap nor easy. As it happens, these were the exceptions. Far more frequently what we encountered was deeply moving and humbling” (1999: 271). Thus, Tutu does not dwell on the cases of dissent, but hastily returns to the appraisal of the forgiving and more exhilarating kind of victim response. Such lack of attention to the possible legitimacy of anger or the retributive emotions more generally, indeed the vilification of such emotions as destructive of our shared humanity and harmony, is troubling. It is troubling not only because of the way in which it licenses disregard of the possibly valid reasons of those who did not want to forgive, and not only because of the troubles arising from an elevation of social harmony to the status of supreme good. The disqualification of anger and resentment also insinuates and promulgates an uncritical conception of forgiving as always noble and praiseworthy.¹⁴

If forgiving is so attractive and admirable, as many advocates of its significance to post-conflict reconciliation allege, then why do some victims resist? As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has written, explanations of dissent often recur to “the comforting and sometimes automatic conclusion that the other fellow (skeptic, atheist, heretic, pagan, and so forth) is either a devil or a fool—or, in more (officially) enlightened terms, that he or she suffers from defects or deficiencies of character and/or intellect: ignorance, innate capacity, delusion, poor training, captivity to false doctrine, and so on” (Smith 1997: xvi). In relation to the domain under consideration here, perceptions of the unforgiving and unreconciled victim sometimes seem to exemplify a comparable pattern. If the unforgiving and unreconciled survivors understood more about the background of the perpetrators, or about what ideals and values really count; if they were more capable of managing their anger; if they thought more rationally about their own good or the good of the nation, then they would try to forgive or let go of their resentment and engage more constructively

in the process of reconciliation. Relentless, backward-looking resentment must be the sign of some kind of moral failure or irrationality on behalf of its holder.

I think it is necessary to examine more closely the moral nature and value of victims' refusal to forgive, resistance to reconciliation, and preservation of resentment after genocide and other massive crimes against humanity. In my opinion, scholars of transitional justice need to examine the "negative" attitudes and emotions as human responses that might be backed by genuinely moral reasons. That is, not only as pathological disorders and not only as the indirect path to a deeper understanding of what forgiveness is and why it is desirable. Against the assumption that nothing of value is left behind when resentment is abandoned, or that forgiving is always morally and therapeutically superior to resentment and retribution, I consider it important to explore what values and virtues might be at stake when anger and resentment are morally disqualified and when advocates of forgiveness and reconciliation become impervious to the attempts of unforgiving victims to argue their case. In short, it is, in my opinion, time to dwell on "the negative" in order to explore whether there is not more to the harboring of resentment and resistance to closure than advocates of the values of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation commonly acknowledge. And, as I shall try to show, Améry's reflections and defense of resentment is an interesting place to begin this kind of exploration.

As a caveat, let me just add that I have no inclination to deny the possibility that the refusal to forgive and the preservation of resentment *can* be pathological and morally unjustifiable. People sometimes are "wallowing" in a victim identity or consumed by anger, and anger sometimes leads to dehumanizing and heinous acts of excessive revenge. I hope to contribute to a more context-sensitive and nuanced understanding of the "negative" emotions and attitudes, and am not arguing for a simple reversal of the idea that forgiveness is always morally superior to resentment and retribution.¹⁵ It should also be said that the recognition that unforgiving and irreconcilable victims may be morally justified and worthy of serious consideration does not imply that one is committed to give absolute moral or political priority to a policy of "resentment satisfaction." In the transitional justice context, there are other values than those tied to resentment and indignation, and there are other things to consider than simply securing a response to the past that will provide repair and reassurance to the victims. Finally, one could argue that there is too much talk of attitudes and emotions in current thinking about reconciliation and that the critical task is not to make this talk more nuanced, but to restrict it or lead it back into the private realm. This is a separate issue (comparable in complexity to discussions about the place of passions in the context of law) and it will not be dealt with here.¹⁶

READING AMÉRY

Existing analyses of Améry's essays all accentuate their highly complex and poignant as well as thought-provoking character.¹⁷ Améry does not proceed in a systematic, balanced, and procedurally clear fashion. Arguments and explanations

are mingled with confession, polemic, and touching but also obscure passages. In the preface to *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, Améry cautions: “To the extent that the reader would venture to join me at all he will have no choice but to accompany me, in the same tempo, through the darkness that I illuminated step by step. In the process, he will come upon contradictions in which I myself got caught up” (Améry 1999: xiv). Thus, in the essay on resentment, the topic and the aim of the examination seem to change with the course of the reflections, and the key concepts are used equivocally. In the manner of narratives (rather than conventional philosophical argument), the essay embodies a story to be told and a meaning to be revealed through the time of the telling.

Given the complex and often laconic form of the essay it is not surprising that different readers have found the essay inspiring (or provoking) in different ways and usable as an illustration of different points. Yet, even if one pays proper heed to the way in which the essay invites different interpretations, the tensions between different parts of the reception are remarkable. Thus, in one place one reads that “Resistance *quand meme* . . . is the essence of Améry’s philosophy” (Sebald 2003: 155f), in another that Améry’s was “a morality . . . of despair and resignation.” (Heyd 2004: 196). And again, according to one reader, Améry argues that resentment ought to be preserved indefinitely and that reconciliation must be refused (Heyd 2004). According to another, Améry wants to be released from his emotional predicament and is driven by a profound desire for reconciliation (Chaumont 1990). This is not the place for a thorough examination of the multifarious receptions of Améry’s work.¹⁸ Suffice it here to say that the variations in its reception, in my opinion, reflect certain ambiguities and paradoxes which are present in the essay itself as much as they derive from the different perspectives of its readers. In the following I will try to reconstruct some of the basic aspects of Améry’s reflections on his resentments without losing sight of the tensions of the essay. Along the way, I shall include some attention to other perspectives on the moral nature and value of anger and resentment.

RESENTMENT AND *RESSENTIMENT*

Turning now to the essay proper, the first point to be emphasized is the often unnoticed fact (hidden in the English translation) that Améry used the French noun *ressentiment* (and in a few places the notion of a “retrospective grudge”—i.e. the German “Groll”). *Ressentiment* can of course be what we mean when we talk of resentment in English, but it is not necessarily so, and in this case I think it is significant to consider the possible difference. The concept “resentment” has a distinct history and meaning in Anglo-American philosophy of moral emotions and attitudes. In a long tradition which includes classical thinkers such as Joseph Butler and Adam Smith and contemporary philosophers such as Jeffrie Murphy and Richard Wallace, resentment proper is seen as a legitimate and valuable form of anger responding to perceived moral wrongs.¹⁹ In Butler, resentment is connected to a sense of virtue and vice or good and evil. It functions as “a weapon, put into

our hands by nature, against injury, injustice, and cruelty” (Butler 1897: 121). In Murphy, “resentment stands as emotional testimony that we care about ourselves and our rights” (Murphy 2003: 19). Not to have resentment when our rights are violated “conveys—emotionally—either that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously.” (Murphy, in Murphy and Hampton 1988: 17). This does not mean that resentment cannot be unjustified or that it should never be overcome, but it means that it should not be condemned in principle and it allows for the thought that resentment can be too hastily or even wrongly transcended.

In these and other works, resentment is also seen to play a valuable social-ethical role. As stated by Richard Wallace, in expressing emotions like resentment we are not just venting feelings of anger and vindictiveness: rather, “we are demonstrating our commitment to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life” (Wallace 1994: 69). The contrast between these perspectives and talk of anger and resentment as dehumanizing forces—corrosive of humane relationships—is marked. For example, to Peter F. Strawson, “being involved in inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them precisely is being exposed to the range of reactive attitudes and feelings [i.e. resentment, indignation, gratitude etc.]” (Strawson 1974: 11). It is possible to adopt what Strawson calls an “objective attitude” to the other human being. That is, to see the other person as an object of social policy, a subject for treatment, something to be dealt with or cured. Seeing and relating to the other in such “professional” ways precludes reactive attitudes like resentment. But extinguishing anger or resentment from the relationship to the other also means that one does not relate to the other as a fellow human being: “If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him” (Strawson 1974: 9). In other words; being susceptible to anger or resentment is intertwined with participation in “the general framework of human life.” A social life bereft of resentment is an impossible and (in so far as it is imaginable) impoverished life.

The case for resentment has in part been argued by distancing it from *ressentiment*. As Jeffrie Murphy has put it, “*ressentiment* is, by definition, an irrational and base passion. It means, roughly, ‘spiteful and malicious envy.’ It thus makes no sense to speak of rational or justified or honorable *ressentiment*” (Murphy 1999: 152). The acknowledgement that Améry wanted to argue the case for *ressentiment* seems to undermine my claim that Améry’s essay is a good place to begin thinking about the legitimacy of victims’ “negative” emotions and attitudes. Whereas there is certainly a case to be argued for resentment, it seems nearly absurd to try something similar with regard to *ressentiment* or with regard to the moral standing of its holders. Our understanding of *ressentiment* is strongly colored by Nietzsche’s picture of the loathsome and pathological “man of *ressentiment*” in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 1998). *Ressentiment* connotes self-poisoning, hypersensibility, deceitfulness, and emotions like vindictiveness, hatred, malice, spite, and envy.²⁰ Nietzsche coined the term “the man of *ressentiment*,” but the type has

also been vividly described in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864). Here we find the "mouse-man" wallowing in self-poisoning preoccupation with the past (Dostoyevsky 1993: 11f):

There, in its loathsome, stinking underground, our offended, beaten-down, and derided mouse at once immerses itself in cold, venomous, and, above all, everlasting spite. For forty years on end it will recall its offense to the last, most shameful details, each time adding even more shameful details of its own, spitefully taunting and chafing itself with its fantasies. It will be ashamed of its fantasies, but all the same it will recall everything, go over everything, heap all sorts of figments on itself, under the pretext that they, too, could have happened, and forgive nothing.

Nonetheless, in the original German text Améry talks of his *ressentiments*—these are what he unabashedly harbors and this is what he sets out to examine and to justify. He even describes himself as a "self-professed" man of *ressentiment*. And as he puts it: "a less rewarding business of confession cannot be imagined" (Améry 1999: 64). However, Améry modifies his statement of the purpose of his essay several times, and in the end it becomes clear that the *ressentiments* to be justified are claimed to be of a "special kind" known by "neither Nietzsche nor Max Scheler" (1999: 71). Améry needs to "delimit" and "shield" this allegedly special kind of *ressentiment* "against two explications: that of Nietzsche, who morally condemned *ressentiment*, and that of modern psychology, which is able to picture it only as a disturbing conflict" (1999: 68). As in *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* more generally, Améry's reflections arise from a sense of a tension between given vocabularies and the particular experiences and situation of the Nazi victim. In his effort to address his contemporaries, he picks up received concepts, which one might think would apply to him and his kind, in order to tear and turn them around until they more adequately come to capture the particularities of the Nazi crimes or the survivor's condition during and after the atrocities. On this background, let me try to present the nature and value of what I will call "Améryean *ressentiments*."

AKIN TO RESENTMENT

In number of respects, Améryean *ressentiments* seem close to the morally legitimate and socially valuable emotion conceptualized as "resentment" (or what I will call "resentment proper") in the line of moral philosophical works mentioned above. At the same time, his reasoning also reveals certain affinities to *ressentiment*, as it has been conceived by Nietzsche and Scheler. In the following I will try to position Améryean *ressentiment* between resentment and *ressentiment* by stressing some of the traits which separate it from the two more commonly debated emotional attitudes. Let me begin with the similarities between Améry's description of his *ressentiments* and resentment as it has been characterized in the above mentioned philosophical tradition. (It is far from a monolithic tradition, but in this context the differences between the different accounts of resentment can be left unsaid.)

First, like resentment proper, Améryean *ressentiments* are constituted by a belief that a moral injury has been done or that a justified demand or expectation has been violated. Resentment is not distinguished by how it feels, but by the way in which those who account for their feeling make reference to perceived injustice, injury, or violation. Thus construed, “resentment” is not defined by a certain (low-state) kind of emotional intensity, but can range from irritation to vehemence. Améryean *ressentiments* resemble resentment proper because they are fired by a sense of the intolerable or injurious character of the way in which the post-war world, the German society in particular, allowed or facilitated an “active” forgetting of and reconciliation with the Nazi past. Améry is quite clear that his *ressentiments* were not present immediately after the war; their immediate cause was not the horrors committed and suffered during the Holocaust, but what followed in the two first decades after 1945: cheap reconciliation; claims that it was time to forgive or forget; that victims should stop pointing their fingers at ex-Nazis and allow time to heal their wounds; that the Nazi past had been sufficiently atoned for, “overcome,” or “made good again.” Améry found that nothing was resolved and that pleas upon the victims to forgive or forget were expressive of a “hollow, thoughtless, and utterly false conciliatoriness” (1999: ix): “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.” (Améry 1999: xi).²¹ Améry’s *ressentiments* do reflect his personal stake in the situation, but they constitute a moral-political protest and it would be quite misleading to apply conventional notions of *ressentiment* as being all about a personal injury or traumatic self-preoccupation.

Second, akin to the holder of resentment, Améry’s *ressentiments* are testimony of how much it matters whether the survivor of mass crimes is unable to believe that the group of the perpetrators has changed its moral *attitude* to the crimes committed in its name. Our feelings of resentment and gratitude are tied to our beliefs about the intents behind the actions (or omissions) of the relevant others. As Peter F. Strawson notices, if someone treads on my hand, the basic pain may be the same whether he does it accidentally or on purpose; e.g. in contempt or with malevolence. But in the second case, I will feel a resentment that I would have no reason to in the first. Similarly, Améry’s *ressentiment* is caused by his sense that the post-war German failure to face the past reflected a continued existence of attitudes of contempt, hatred, or indifference toward the surviving Jews. The experience of persecution was, to Améry, most profoundly an experience of abandonment and given the absence of a proper response to what happened Améry continuously feels alone and at risk (1999: 94–96):

Every day anew I lose my trust in the world. [...] My neighbor greets me in a friendly fashion, *Bonjour, Monsieur*; I doff my hat, *Bonjour, Madame*. But Madame and Monsieur are separated by interstellar distances; for yesterday a Madame looked away when they led off a Monsieur, and through the barred windows of the departing car a Monsieur viewed a Madame as if she were a stone angel from a bright and stern heaven, which is forever closed

to the Jew. [...] Those around me do not appear to me as antihumans, as did my former torturers; they are my co-humans, not affected by me and the danger prowling at my side.

Third, Richard Wallace has argued that to hold someone responsible is essentially to be subject to emotions like resentment in one's dealings with the person. According to Wallace, resentment is distinguished by a connection with expectations. It is caused by the belief that an expectation to which one holds someone has been breached (Wallace 1994). What Améry expected and what he holds his German contemporaries to will be considered in the next section. At this point, we may simply notice that akin to the holder of resentment, Améryean *ressentiments* maintain the stance of holding Germany responsible for its twelve years under Hitler: "In the midst of the world's silence our *ressentiment* holds its finger raised" (1999: 78). Améry's awareness of the nexus between responsibility and resentment is also evidenced by the way in which he devotes several pages to justifying the legitimacy and nature of the guilt and responsibility that he attributes to his German contemporaries, including those born after 1945.

Fourth, resentment does not necessarily crave bloody revenge. According to Margaret Walker, resentment "seeks assurance from offenders or from others that they can be (or be again) trusted to reaffirm and respect the boundaries norms define, boundaries that offer protection against harm or affront, as well as the security of membership and reliable expectations in a community of shared normative judgment" (Walker 2004: 146). In a similar vein, Améry's public articulation of his *ressentiments* is tied to a wish for a constitution (or restoration) of a moral community between former enemies. Améry did not address his German contemporaries with dismissive hatred; he wanted to reach those who had never been affected or who had had enough of being reminded about the past. "My *ressentiments* are there," wrote Améry, "in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal" (1999: 70). The ultimate aim is not revenge (something Améry in this instance found nonsensical), but rather a "release from the abandonment that has persisted from that time [the time of persecution] until today" (1999: 70):

When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. 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. When they led him to the place of execution, the antiman had once again become a fellow man.

Transposing this perspective to the much wider social realm, Améry is guided by a thought that the overcoming of what he calls the moral chasm between the victim and his former perpetrators (and the wider German society) depends on the question of whether the latter will acknowledge the moral truth of what happened and assume responsibility for the Nazi past as an indissoluble part—a "negative possession"—of German historical identity. The surviving victim cannot "move on" in/with a society that has not recognized the moral horror of the crime committed in its name and which has been tolerated by the masses. It is not only a question of

the recognition and responsibility for the past, but also of the survivor's fear that it could happen again. It was the participation and passivity of an entire society and a state that made possible the Holocaust, and Améry was in no position to exclude the possibility of a "repetition" of Auschwitz. Therefore, he craves for a society-wide reformation catalyzed—fantastically—by the victims' articulation of their *ressentiment*: "Only through it would our *ressentiment* be subjectively pacified and have become objectively unnecessary" (1999: 79). As Richard Wallace has argued, "blame and moral sanction can be seen to have a positive, perhaps irreplaceable contribution to make to the constitution and maintenance of moral communities" (Wallace 1994: 69). This is indeed what informs what Améry calls his "moral daydream," that is, his unrealistic but genuinely moral desire that his *ressentiments* could be instrumental to a revolution of German attitudes to the Nazi past. In the preface to *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, Améry wrote that he sometimes hoped that the book had met its aim: "then it could concern all those who wish to live together as human beings" (1999: xiv). This not only indicates that the book as such is the vehicle of the *ressentiments* about which Améry talks in the essay under consideration (the first title envisaged for the book as a whole was *Ressentiments*). It also underwrites the way in which his upholding of *ressentiments* and resistance to forgiveness was tied to a vision of a morally justified kind of reconciliation between Jews and Germans. Améry only talks of reconciliation in its pathetic, hollow, and thoughtless instances, but this did not mean that he dismissed the prospect of a restoration of trust and community in principle. To the contrary, the preservation and expression of Améryean *ressentiments* are intimately connected to a vision of the conditions on which they would become superfluous. This is an important point, because Améry has repeatedly been presented simply as the enemy of reconciliation and as the spokesman for an indefinite preservation of *ressentiment*.

Fifth (and finally), the moral issue about resentment is often approached as a question of the moral character of its holder. *Ressentiment* is ordinarily considered to be a pathological affliction or an emotional condition that no morally sane person would deliberately retain; the reflex of a base and weak person. Philosophers arguing the case for resentment have been concerned to show that this picture should not be applied to the holder of legitimate resentment. As Murphy has argued, "a person who never resented any injuries done to him might be a saint. It is equally likely, however, that his lack of resentment reveals a servile personality—a personality lacking in respect for himself and respect for his rights and status as a free an equal moral being" (Murphy 2003: 19).²² In a comparable way, Améry's defense of a special kind of *ressentiment* is as much an attempt to rehabilitate the moral character of the holder. Améry quotes Nietzsche's famous words that "the resentful person is neither sincere, nor naïve, nor honest and forthright with himself. His soul squints" (Améry 1999: 67), but against Nietzsche, Améry invokes the authority of the eyewitness to an unprecedented catastrophe: "Thus spake the man who dreamed of the synthesis of the brute with the superman. He must be answered by those who witnessed the union of the brute with the subhuman" (1999: 68).

Améry tries to undo the common assumption that humanity and moral virtue are automatically behind displays of a willingness to forgive, reconcile, and “move on,” whereas the prolonged display of *ressentiment* and irreconcilability are the reflex of a morally flawed or deficient character. Trying to counter this picture, Améry articulates his own normative view on the proper allegiances of what he calls “the moral person” and the most central virtue invoked is the “moral power to resist” (1999: 72). According to Améry, what should, under the given historical circumstances, be met with moral resistance is the social pressure upon the victims to forgive and forget or to accept what happened because it is “already-being-long-past” (1999: 71). Such pressure is, as Améry states, in itself immoral and to give in to the social pressure and the implied attitudes to individuality, morality, and time would constitute a moral lapse. Améry even states that “loudly proclaimed readiness for reconciliation by Nazi victims can only be either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed *genuine* demand for revenge.” (1999: 71). What kind of person would be able and willing to accept the call to forgive, forget, or reconcile in the given context (that is, under the circumstances of massive impunity and escapist forgetfulness)? This is, I think, the unspoken question behind Améry’s moral critique of the belief in the moral superiority of the forgiving and conciliatory Nazi victim. It is as if he asks: is this what you want me to *be*? A person who submerges his individuality into the needs and consensus of social opinion and interest and who allows the sheer passing of time to heal his wound? Améry connects the social appreciation of the forgiving and conciliatory Nazi victim with a demeaning relinquishing of the moral experiences and demands of the individual. The ease with which the de-individualized person forgives might be celebrated from the perspective of a hasty societal interest in political stability, and nation building. Améry, however, insists upon a moral position that upholds the legitimacy of the voice of the individual in spite of its tense relationship with concerns about the social collective. The “insensitive and indifferent person” (1999: 71) is furthermore characterized by his relationship to time and the healing it may bring about. He allows what happened to remain what it was and lets time heal his wounds. According to Améry, this is again an intolerable form of human subjugation (1999: 72); a moral defeat of the social and biological or allegedly “natural” consciousness of time and the normative implications of the passing of time. Améry stipulates as unworthy the attitude that the future *per se* should be considered more important than the past, and that what is past should, simply *qua* past, be considered unimportant. Equally incompatible with his notion of human dignity is the notion that one may allow the sheer passing of time to heal the wounds of the past. From within the “natural” perspective on time, forgetting and “the natural process of healing that time brings about” (1999: 77) may be suggested as a way in which to “get over” historical wrongs. As Francis Bacon put it, “that which is past is gone and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do with things present and to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves that labour in past matters” (Bacon 1997: 13) The “future-oriented person” (1999: 76) who allows “what happened to

remain what it was [and] lets time Améry 1999: heal his wounds” (1999: 71) might be considered healthy from a therapeutic perspective. But Améry retorts on moral grounds: “Man has the right and the privilege to declare himself in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about. What happened, happened. This sentence is as true as it is hostile to morals and intellects.” (1999: 72).

AKIN TO RESENTMENT

So far, Améryean *ressentiments* seem to be morally and functionally equivalent to resentment proper and one might be tempted to say that had Améry known the works of Adam Smith and Joseph Butler, he would have found “conceptual support” and a reason to dismiss the concept of *ressentiment* as inapplicable to his case. Améryean *ressentiment* is—if it is to be categorized as a kind of *ressentiment* at all—certainly of a special kind. It is not fired by spiteful and malicious envy (that is, what is often taken to distinguish *ressentiment* from resentment); it does not crave revenge; its attributions of guilt and responsibility are not expressive of a blind and unjustifiable generalization of blame, and Améry does not delight in the continuation of his *ressentiments*. Also unlike the “mouse-man” or the “man of *ressentiment*,” Améry’s anger and fear were not expressive of an irrational or disturbed understanding of the social reality. Up against diagnoses of the concentration camps survivor as a “warped” or traumatized person, Améry argued that his “condition corresponds completely to reality” (1999: 99). Should we simply say that Améry presents a case where what appears like *ressentiment* actually is resentment proper? And where *relentless* resentment is morally justified by the specifics of the social circumstances? Perhaps, but first one should take into consideration some important “family resemblances” between conventional notions of *ressentiment* and Améryean *ressentiment*.

Unlike resentment proper, but very much like *ressentiment*, the essay slowly reveals that Améryean *ressentiment* also refers to an “existential determinant” (1999: 64) that has taken hold of the person. As long as Améry talks of his *ressentiments* as an attitude directed toward German society, the affinities with resentment proper are clear: His *ressentiments* are a weapon in his hand, brandished against the injustice of amnesia or cheap reconciliation. Yet, near the end of the essay Améry suddenly exclaims: “But what an extravagant moral daydream I have abandoned myself to!” (1999: 79). Awakening from this moral daydream, Améry dismisses the vision of a German revolution as completely unrealistic: “natural time will reject the demands of our *ressentiments* and finally extinguish them [. . .] Germany will not make it good, and our rancor will have been for nothing” (1999: 79). Améry gives up both the hope that the guilty ones will face the moral truth of their deeds and that Germany will pay heed to the collective responsibility emerging from the past. In the opening of the essay Améry wrote: “I travel through a thriving land . . . I feel uncomfortable in this peaceful land” (1999: 62–63). Now, at the end,

he “travels through the thriving land, and . . . feel less and less comfortable as I do” (1999: 80). The whole tone has become darker; “some stand eternally in the light and others eternally in the darkness”(1999: 80). Understanding, if that was what was recovered through the examination, has not been redemptive. The final part of the essay conveys Améry’s searing bitterness at the prospect that his moral address will not be answered and at his powerlessness to change the situation. The essay ends (1999: 80–81):

Our slave morality will not triumph. Our resentments—emotional source of every genuine morality, which was always a morality for the losers—have little or no chance at all to make the evil work of the overwhelmers bitter for them. We victims must finish with our retroactive rancor. In the sense that the KZ argot once gave to the word “finish”; it meant as much as 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.

The essay oscillates between the hope present in parts articulating his “moral daydream” that the victims’ *ressentiment* will goad a change, and parts where he nearly but not completely abandons this hope. It is probably not the least due to this wavering that the essay has left a strong impression upon many readers. Clearly, at the time when the essay was originally read it was intended to make its recipients feel summoned to respond or, more precisely, to defy by practical response the bleak tone on which the reasoning ends.

In a highly significant passage, Améry reflects in more general terms on what might be called the condition of being-in-*ressentiment*: the mode or state of being in which the survivor has to endure. An aspect, in other words, of the *conditio inhumana* that *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* as a whole is concerned to examine (1999: 68):

[*Ressentiment*] nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. *Ressentiment* blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future. I know that the time-sense of the person trapped in *ressentiment* is twisted around, disordered, if you wish, for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened. [. . .] for this reason the man of *ressentiment* cannot join in the unisonous peace chorus all around him, which cheerfully proposes: not backward let us look but forward, to a better, common future!

Here *ressentiment* is not presented as a lifted finger or attitude toward the Germans, but as a certain “unreasonable” attitude to the past. Whereas Améry has otherwise tied his reflections over his *ressentiments* to the problem of the relationship between groups, he seems here rather concerned with the relationship between the resentful victim and his past. And what past? Not, it seems, the post-war years, but the years of persecution. Moreover, *ressentiment* now appears in the image of a passion: an occupation of the will and the time-sense of the person

and certainly not something that its “holder” is the master of: *Ressentiment* nails us to the past, *blocks* the exit to the future, *twists* or *disorders* the time-sense of the person *trapped* in it. Like Nietzsche and Scheler, Améry ties the being-in-*ressentiment* to an irrational craving and an inability to let go of the past. His will is, to quote Nietzsche, “sullenly wrathful that time does not run back” (Nietzsche 1969: 161). In *ressentiment*, the victim is possessed by a demand for something that simply cannot be effected and a desire that it is impossible to satisfy. One cannot demand in relation to the past; the irreversible is what cannot be turned around; the events of the past are what cannot be undone. If a release from being-in-*ressentiment* is premised on a satisfaction of the absurd demand, then the entrapment is inescapable. Nothing nobody could do would be able to satisfy the demand or desire in question; nothing will undo or cancel out what happened: trials, schemes of compensations, apologies—nothing will satisfy the wish or the demand for an undoing of what happened. *Ressentiment* remains—again—in accordance with Nietzsche and Scheler, as a disturbing inflection of memory. As Nietzsche put it in *Ecce Homo*, the memory of the “man of *ressentiment*” is like a “festering wound” (Nietzsche 1979: 45) or, as Améry wrote: “no remembering has become mere memory” (Améry 1999: xi).²³

At this point we can answer the question of what norm or expectation Améry held his contemporaries to. On what basis did he judge the post-war German response to the Nazi past? Améry held the Germans to the demand of *ressentiment* to turn back time and undo what happened. Is this a legitimate demand to pose? He did not demand satisfaction of the absurd demand, but he wanted his contemporaries—German society in particular—to join the victim in being affected or bound by the wish to undo what happened. Why did Améry accord such weight to the absurd demand for an undoing of the past? Probably because he thought it was tied to an understanding of the moral nature or implications of the horrifying past. Perhaps, one might say that *ressentiment* testifies to the “moral truth” of what happened by maintaining disquiet or the scandalous dimension of the Holocaust; that is, as a transgression in relation to which we face the limits of what can be repaired or managed? In this way, *ressentiment* contains an insight into the moral truth of what happened; i.e. it prevents reconciliation with what happened and defies the “anti-moral natural process of healing that time brings about” (1999: 77). But this does not mean that Améry refused reconciliation between peoples. Instead, it seems that his notion of reconciliation between peoples was premised on everybody’s coming to share the resentful victim’s unreconcilable attitude to the inexpiable evils of the past. Thus, *qua* the impossible wish that what happened could be undone, *ressentiment* should remain indefinitely. That is, in the form of an unreconciled memory or—as Améry also puts it—a German people that “would remain sensitive to the fact that they cannot allow a piece of their national history to be neutralized by time” (Améry 1999: 78). But *qua* the “lifted finger” pointed toward the Germans, *ressentiments* could and should be pacified if German society came to join the resentful victim’s wish for an undoing of the past.

CONCLUSION

Améry's essays repeatedly questioned abstract and generalizing approaches to the ordeal he personally suffered. His aim was to illuminate concrete events and experiences and to face up to particular socio-political realities. Moreover, his moral articulation and justification of a special kind of *ressentiment* is nearly unmatched in post-Holocaust moral philosophy and current thinking about forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus, one should take care trying to "apply" Améry's thinking more generally or to stipulate an identity between Améry and the morality of resentful victims more broadly considered. At the same time, it would be wrong to insulate his reflections in utter singularity. Salient features of his social predicament, and of the attitudes or perspectives against which he voiced his protest and moral vision, are comparable to the situation facing other survivors in the aftermath of state-sponsored mass atrocities. What Richard Hovanissian has written about survivors of the Armenian genocide seems close to the yearning of Améry: i.e. "that not only they but also the perpetrators and bystanders confront the face of evil and know the truth of their suffering" (Hovanissian 2003: 124). More generally, societies tire of the angry and accusing voices of survivors who cannot or will not forget and reconcile with the past. Their rage, some may say, *was* legitimate, but it has had its time; now it is time to let go, true grief and anger have an end. The past cannot be changed anyway, and it is more reasonable, it is to their good, to accept loss or forgive and begin to look ahead. When "reconciliation" has become the order of the day, victims who persist in their demands are seen as "imprisoned in the past, as hostages to their own memory and therefore obstructions to the process of selective forgetting advocated by reconciling national political leaders." (Hamber and Wilson 2002: 45).²⁴ Referring to the Argentinean Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (mothers whose children "disappeared"), Brandon Hamber writes that they dismiss any form of compensation and insist: "You took them away alive, we want them back alive" (Hamber 1997: 3). This is not far from Améry's "impossible" desire for an undoing of the past. Hamber's essay was written for the South African *Mail and Guardian* and the attention to the South American victim groups naturally leads to an appeal to South African society (1997: 37):

Perhaps they only want others to experience the frustration they have felt and are determined to offer constant reminders that, in reality, there is nothing that can ever be done to replace their 'missing' loved ones. As bizarre as this extreme position sounds, if we are truly to sympathize with victims we are required to understand it. [...] The challenge to all South Africans is to learn to cope with, and accept as legitimate, the ongoing anger and even impossible demands of victims who will continue their struggle for an ever-elusive truth.

What Améry adds is the attempt to bring to our attention the moral reasoning that may inform and justify such "bizarre" positions. After atrocity, forgiveness can be refused and resentment can be retained on genuinely moral ground. There are those, as Tutu mentioned, who do not want to forgive, and sometimes they may

have the reasons and character of Améry and others like him on today in Bosnia, Algeria, Armenia, Cambodia, or Rwanda.

What I have tried to prompt here is an acknowledgment—especially among those who work to promote forgiveness and reconciliation—that it is inadequate and wrong to look at the unforgiving ones as examples which only testify to the nobility of those willing to forgive. The former group may be annoying and tiring and their demands may be “unreasonable,” but they may also at the same time hold to forms of moral protest and ambition that should be recognized as legitimate and worthy of respect. In my opinion, Améry’s example should inspire a more nuanced understanding of victims’ “negative” emotions and attitudes after mass atrocity. Hopefully, his example can help undo the assumption that resistance to forgiveness and reconciliation automatically is all about a lust for revenge or some kind of psychological deficiency or moral atavism. In the face of evil and indifference, anger can be testimony of moral commitment to norms that have been breached. In the aftermath of mass atrocity, the refusal to forgive and reconcile can be the reflex of a moral protest and ambition that might be as permissible or perhaps admirable as the values and desires behind the willingness to forgive or reconcile. In societal contexts where an atrocious past is denied or where victims are expected to move on, the preservation and articulation of outrage and the bitter continuation of a struggle for accountability may be a moral accomplishment. When this possibility is neglected—when advocates of forgiveness and reconciliation act as if resistance is basically immoral or irrational—it can be costly to the victims who may feel, or be, pressured to a kind of forgiving that is not worth its name.²⁵ This is not fair—in fact it can be deeply offensive. As one young South African woman said: “What really makes me angry about the TRC and Tutu is that they are putting pressure on me to forgive [. . .] The oppression was bad, but what is much worse, what makes me even angrier, is that they are trying to dictate my forgiveness” (Villa-Vicencio 2000: 201).

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NOTES

1. The full German title is: *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Améry 2002). The title of the English translation by Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld (Améry 1999) is far from the original (*At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*) and does not try to translate this allusive play with the German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (literally meaning to overcome or manage the past).
2. Cf. Améry (2002: 623)—a reprint of Améry’s own account of the content of *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*.
3. Cf. Neiman (1997).
4. Cf. Levi (1988), Kertész (1996), Sebald (2003), Langer (1991), Reemtsma (1996). Concerning Améry’s influence on Adorno (and the German reception more generally), cf. Gerhard Scheitert’s commentary in *Werke* (Améry 2002).

5. Cf. Heidelberger-Leonard (2004).
6. Cf. Brudholm (2005).
7. To my knowledge the only comparable account was argued by Vladimir Jankélévitch (See Jankélévitch 1996).
8. Cf. Stover (2003) and Margaret Walker's contribution to this issue.
9. Cf. www.victimstrustfund.org/info/abouticc.html#4. Accessed 25 November 2004.
10. The statement comes from an address to the General Assembly, November 14, 1994. Cited in Landgren 1998.
11. Helmick and Petersen (2002) lists more than 50 "Worldwide Organizations Promoting Forgiveness and Reconciliation."
12. The perspective on emotions as partly cognitive in nature is the most influential position today and Martha Nussbaum is arguably the most prominent voice in the debate today (cf. Nussbaum 2001, 2004).
13. An example can be found in Charles Villa-Vicencio (2000), discussed in Brudholm (2005).
14. For a more elaborate and substantiated examination of Tutu's writings as well as the hearings of the commission, cf. Brudholm 2005, Wilson (2001) and the paper by Annelies Verdoolage in this issue.
15. In current literature on the ethics of emotions and transitional justice, similar attempts to give a more fair hearing to the "negative" emotions can be found in Murphy (2003), Lamb and Murphy (2002), Phelps (2004), Schimmel (2002), and Weissmark (2004).
16. Thanks to Natan Sznajder for raising this issue. An account of a strictly political concept of reconciliation (and responsibility) can be found in Schaap (2004).
17. "Resentments" has only been subjected to elaborate philosophical analysis in two papers (Heyd 2004; Chaumont 1990). Besides these, the essay has been taken into consideration in a number of works including Agamben (1999), Neiman (2002), Reemtsma (1996) and Sebald (2003). The essay by Arne Johan Vetlesen in this issue of the *Journal of Human Rights* has not been taken into consideration in this paper.
18. The reception of "*Ressentiments*" is analyzed in more detail in Brudholm (2005).
19. One might see Aristotle as the "founding father" of this tradition in so far as his *Nichomechean Ethics* includes a balanced consideration of anger as an emotion that—appropriately managed—has a role to play in the life of the virtuous agent. There is, according to Aristotle, such a thing as a slavish deficiency of anger. Seneca can be posited as the "father" of the perspectives on anger/resentment as wholly negative (cf. Seneca 1970).
20. Nietzsche describes the human beings of *ressentiment* as the "physiologically failed and worm-eaten ones, a whole trembling earth of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible, insatiable in outbursts against the happy" (Nietzsche 1998: 89). The deceitfulness of those possessed by *ressentiment* is also portrayed in Nietzsche's picture of how they "fabricate ideals on earth." Cowardice is turned into patience; misery becomes blessedness and revenge is disguised as justice: "Bad air! This workplace where they *fabricate ideals* – it seems to me to stink of sheer lies" (Nietzsche 1998: 27).
21. Today, Améry's understanding of the reality of unfinished business is an accordance with most historians' assessments of the development from 1945 until the late 1960s. Cf. for example Frei (1996) and Herf (1997). Also, today it is broadly recognized that countries *should* face up to past injustices and it is recognized that denial or disregard of an atrocious past can do real harm to surviving victims as well as the societies in which such neglect may be cultivated (Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide and its significance for the country's accession to the European Union being a case in point). Yet in 1965 this was not the case, and Améry might well be seen as one of the "pioneers" of the notion that the way in which countries deal with their past is a significant moral issue.
22. The discussion of anger or resentment as a question of the moral virtue of their holder is a steady part of ethical considerations of the emotion. Already Aristotle noticed that the absence of anger in the face of injustice can be testimony of a slavish character. Cf. Aristotle (1991).
23. Cf. Scheler: Dieses Immer-wieder-Durch- und -Nachleben der Emotion ist hierbei von einer bloss intellektuellen Erinnerung an sie und die Vorgänge, auf die sie "antwortete," sehr verschieden. Es ist ein Wiederleben der Emotion selbst—ein Nachfühlen, ein Wiederfühlen. (1955: 36).
24. Hamber and Wilson also refer to the Brazilian Commission for the Family Members of the Persons Killed or Disappeared for Political Reasons (*Comissão de Familiares de Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos*). The group's relentless demands for "the truth before compensation, and their refusal to see the new law as the final stop, has made them unpopular. The government and even some previously sympathetic members of society now refer to the group as 'dinosaurs'" (Hamber and Wilson 2002: 45).
25. The representation of the question of how victims should respond to evil as a choice between either forgiveness or vengeance runs through Desmond Tutu's book about the TRC, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Tutu 1999). For example: "to forgive rather than to demand retribution . . . to forgive rather than wreak revenge" (19pp: 31); "instead of lusting for revenge, they had this extraordinary willingness to forgive" (1999: 86).

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