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"Wer der Folter erlag, kann nicht heimisch werden in
der Welt"

The Depiction of torture in Jean Améry's Essay 'Die Tortur'

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1. Introduction

The following scientific paper is written within the framework of the *Vienna Human Rights Master Program* in the Winter semester 2014. The paper is structured in two major parts: In the first part I will analyse the depiction of torture in Jean Améry's Essay *Die Tortur* from a hermeneutic and meta-linguistically point of view. Consequently I will outline distinct elements , which define the notion of torture in Améry's Oeuvre and critically discuss them. In the second part of my paper I will analyse textual characteristics of Améry's Essay by looking at the narrative structure, the semantic specifics and grammatical peculiarities.

Améry's Essay *Die Tortur*, first published in 1966 as part of the book "Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Überwältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten"¹ [Beyond guilt and atonement: attempts to overcome by one who is overwhelmed], describes his direful experiences at the SS-Camp *Fort Breendonk* and the resulting everlasting trauma. Améry's Essay, which can be attributed to the autobiographical genre of *survivor memoirs*, adds to the understanding and definition of torture as it leaves behind clichéd discussions about strategy, efficiency and the ticking bomb scenarios that currently dominate the discourse about torture.² The difficulties to translate Améry's work to English and the resulting loss in precision and understanding have further stipulated me to write on this topic to contribute to the reception of his works. German translations are indicated within the running text in brackets in order to support the readability of the paper.

2. Bibliographical Notes

Jean Améry, who was originally named Hans Maier, was born on 31 October 1912 in Vienna. He was raised by his catholic mother in Vorarlberg. His Jewish father, who served in the Austrian-Hungarian army, fell in World War I in 1917. Despite the fact that his family was "estranged from its jewish origins,

¹ Améry, 1977.

² cf. Hirsch, 2006, p. 370.

assimilated and intermarried"³ In 1938 due to the 'Anschluß' of Austria to Germany and the resulting increase of anti-Semitism Améry had to flee to Belgium, where he joined a small German speaking resistance movement. On 23 July Améry was arrested by the Gestapo for distributing anti-Nazi propaganda and deported to *Fort Breendonk*, where he was subjected to brutal interrogations and torture for several days. After the Nazis found out that he is not only a political prisoner but also a Jew he was deported to Auschwitz. After his liberation in 1945 Améry started writing for several Swiss newspapers, went to Brussels and changed his name from Hans Maier to Jean Améry. Améry started writing Essays, which dealt with torture, exile and concentration camps in 1964. Jean Améry committed suicide in a hotel room in Salzburg on the 17 October 1978.⁴

3. The Depiction of Torture in Améry's Essay 'Die Tortur'

3.1 Expressing the Inexpressible

In his Essay *Die Tortur* Améry stresses the insufficiency of language to transfer the extra-linguistic experience of torture into written speech, arguing that qualities of feeling ["Gefühlsqualitäten"⁵] especially the shattering exposure to torture, remain indescribable and incommensurable.⁶ Who attempts to describe the experience of torture operates at the borders of linguistic communicability and runs the risk to get lost in a "hopeless carousel of metaphorical speech" ["hoffnungslosen Karussell der Gleichnisrede"⁷]. The language employed by the author to recapitulate his own searing interrogation, is reflected-descriptive, analytical and impersonal in outlining the undergone atrocities. Améry, whose Oeuvre often has been defined by the struggle to translate his traumatic experiences into language, "resists the impulse to employ metaphor"⁸ as "it

³ Myers, 2002.

⁴ idem.

⁵ Améry, 1977, p. 70.

⁶ cf. idem, p. 70.

⁷ idem, p. 70.

⁸ Horowitz, 2005, p. 79.

would be senseless to try and describe [...] the pain that was inflicted [...]" ["Es wäre ohne jede Vernunft, [...] die mir zugefügten Schmerzen beschreiben zu wollen"⁹] and as there is no abstraction or converging imagination adequate to depict the cruelty of the reality.¹⁰ In this contiguity Elaine Scarry refers to the "incommunicability of pain"¹¹, that is radically expressed in Améry's Essay, when he states that "if someone wants to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself." ["Wer seinen Körperschmerz mit-teilen wollte, wäre darauf gestellt, ihn zuzufügen zu müssen und damit selbst zum Folterknecht zu werden"¹²].

Despite the deficiencies of metaphorical and literal speech in describing qualities of feeling and the hence resulting reluctance of Améry to describe his convulsive pain-experiences, the trauma of torture also remains irresolvable interweaved with the act of linguistic expression itself. By utilizing the language of the victim against itself,¹³ forced production of language is at the core of the experience of the tortured, leaving the victims of torture behind with the disability to express what happened to them.

Joseph Slaughter states that "torture destroys the linguistic system of the victim"¹⁴ to the extent, that the reciprocity between signifier and signified is completely dissolved. Clarkson supports this statement by adding that the "damaged body, without premeditation, roars its truth in a way that cannot be recapitulated with integrity in the organising patterns and structures of language."¹⁵ Similarly Spitz comes to the conclusion that to "witness the

⁹ Améry, 1977, p. 69.

¹⁰ cf. idem, p. 58.

¹¹ Scarry, 1985, p. 4.

¹² Améry, 1977, p. 70.

¹³ cf. Slaughter, 1997, p. 426.

¹⁴ idem, p. 426.

¹⁵ Clarkson, 2009, p. 120.

moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and whispers, is to witness the destruction of language."¹⁶

3.2 The Destruction of the Trust in the World

According to Améry the most devastating impact of the experience of torture is the total and irrevocable loss of "the trust in the world" ["Weltvertrauen"¹⁷]. The notion of *Weltvertrauen* sums up the assuredness, that one human being, due to written and unwritten contracts, will spare and respect the other one in his physical and metaphysical existence.¹⁸ This loss, which culminates in the annihilation of the self [cp. 3.3], is anticipated in what Améry calls "the first blow" ["den ersten Schlag"¹⁹].

3.2.1 The First Blow

When Améry describes the first hit which intrudes his bodily border, inflicted by a policeman, his consequential loss of the trust in the world is constituted by three major elements: (1) the extinction of any kind of expectation of help²⁰, (2) the total negation of the will of the tortured²¹ and (3) the existence-threatening isolation which reduces the world to torturer and tortured. In this context Horowitz suggests that the "profound and total helplessness that Améry recollects erases his sense of physical and psychological agency in the world."²² The infiltration of Améry's bodily integrity cannot be counterbalanced by the expectation of help nor amended by any kind of resistance.²³ "They will do to me, whatever they want" ["Man wird mit mir tun, was man will"²⁴], is his disillusioning conclusion. The precondition for his "Weltvertrauen" to feel only what he *wants* to feel is shattered with the unparriable first blow, which

¹⁶ Spitz, 1989, at <http://www.csvr.org.za/index.php/component/content/article/1760-the-psychology-of-torture.html> (consulted on 25 April 2014).

¹⁷ Améry, 1977, p. 62.

¹⁸ cf. idem, p. 62.

¹⁹ idem, p. 59.

²⁰ cf. Kramer, 2004, p. 450.

²¹ cf. Horowitz, 2005, p. 80.

²² idem, p. 81.

²³ cf. Améry, 1977, p. 63.

²⁴ idem, p. 61.

demonstrates the absolute power of the torturer over the tortured.²⁵ "Outside", here merges the feeling of abandonment and isolation, "nobody knows about it, and nobody advocates for me." ["Draußen weiß niemand davon und keiner steht für mich ein"²⁶].

"And suddenly I felt—the *first blow*. [...] The first blow brings home to the prisoner that he is *helpless*, and thus it already contains in the bud everything that is to come. [...] They are permitted to punch me in the face, the victim feels in numb surprise and concludes in just as numb certainty: they will do with me what they want."

"Und plötzlich fühlte ich - *den ersten Schlag* [...] Der erste Schlag bringt dem Inhaftierten zu Bewußtsein, daß er hilflos ist - und damit enthält er alles Spätere schon im Keime. [...] Man darf mich mit der Faust ins Gesicht schlagen, fühlt in dumpfem Staunen das Opfer und schließt mit ebenso dumpfer Gewißheit: Man wird mit mir anstellen, was man will."²⁷

3.2.2 Corporeality and Torture

"Who is overcome by the pain of being tortured, experiences his body like never before. His flesh realizes itself totally in self negation. [...] only in being tortured the carnification of the human being becomes completed." ["Wer nämlich in der Folter vom Schmerz überwältigt wird, erfährt seinen Körper wie nie zuvor. Sein Fleisch realisiert sich total in der Selbstnegation. [...] in der Tortur wird die Verfleischlichung des Menschen vollständig"²⁸] To Améry, who equates the boundaries of the body to the boundaries of the self, in the act of torture the torturer imposes his corporeality on the victim.²⁹ The language Améry employs, compares the involuntarily physical intimacy, resulting from the violation of the inmate's skin surface, to the experience of sexual abuse and rape.

"At the first blow...trust in the world breaks down. This other person, opposite whom I exist physically in the world and with whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without consent [...]."

²⁵ cf. idem, p. 61.

²⁶ idem, p. 61.

²⁷ idem, p. 70.

²⁸ idem, p. 70.

²⁹ cf. idem, p. 62.

"Mit dem ersten Schlag aber bricht dieses Weltvertrauen zusammen. Der andere, gegen den ich physisch in der Welt bin und mit dem ich nur solange sein kann, wie er meine Hautoberfläche als Grenze nicht tangiert, zwingt mir mit dem Schlag seine Körperlichkeit auf. Er ist an mir und vernichtet mich damit. Es ist wie eine Vergewaltigung, ein Sexualakt ohne Einverständnis des einen der beiden Partner."³⁰

While the "intellect" ["Geist"³¹] is entirely absorbed by the acute infliction of pain, the victim is reduced entirely to its body. The pain inflicted, states Heidelberger-Leonard, "becomes the climax of corporeality."³² The devastating experience of torture crystallizes to "embodied memory"³³, indelible inscribed into body, soul and psyche. Améry summarizes the experience of his bodily assault, which was not accompanied by any kind of expectation of relief, an "act of annihilation of the existence" ["existenzieller Vernichtungsvollzug"³⁴]. In this way Améry's notion of torture goes far beyond the mainstreamed legal definitions of torture.

3.3 Annihilation of the Self

Améry makes the inextinguishable feeling of being-overwhelmed to the Archimedean point of his Essay.³⁵ This feeling of being overwhelmed, which cumulates in the Annihilation of the self, is initiated through the first blow that has, according to Améry, the capacity to end a part of our life, that is irrevocably lost.³⁶ Not only does it alter "one's relation with one's self"³⁷ but also with the "others, with the world."³⁸ In this aspect Horowitz assumes that the distortion of relationships happens because the loved ones have proved irrelevant and unreliable in the devastating moment of torture. They have remained "outside the assault [...], outside the rape" and failed to "rush to the prisoner's aid."³⁹

³⁰ idem, p. 62.

³¹ idem, p. 74.

³² Heidelberger-Leonard, 2004, p. 210.

³³ Horowitz, 2005, p. 73.

³⁴ Améry, 1977, p. 63.

³⁵ cf. Kramer, 2004, p. 449.

³⁶ cf. Améry, 1977, p. 63.

³⁷ Horowitz, 2005, p. 81.

³⁸ idem, p. 81.

³⁹ idem, p. 81.

Through the experience of torture the identity endowing core of the victim is replaced by the experience of being overcome by the other: Everything that is called soul, consciousness or identity, is being annihilated and the victim becomes engulfed by the agonising feeling of being concaved and decoupled from the world.⁴⁰ When Améry at the narrative climax of his Essay proclaims that "who has been consumed by torture, can never be homely again in the world" ["Wer der Folter erlag, kann nicht mehr heimisch werden in der Welt."⁴¹] he refers to the tremendous disruption, which makes the victim of torture a psychological nomad in a restless and never-ending struggle for reconciliation with the world.

3.4 Lifelong Torture

"Torture", states Améry, "is the most dreadful experience, that a human can keep in himself/herself" ["Die Tortur ist das fürchterlichste Ereignis, das ein Mensch in sich bewahren kann"⁴²]. In a haunting realization the author recapitulates 22 years after the incident "I am still hanging" ["Ich baumle noch immer"⁴³]. He further emphasises on the "character indibilis"⁴⁴ of torture by stating "who was tortured, remains tortured" ["Wer gefoltert wurde, bleibt gefoltert"⁴⁵]. The traumatic stigma of torture, which has become embodied memory, has no limitations in time nor space. It is impossible to repress and enshrined in the victim, that perpetually encounters "freedom without freedom"⁴⁶, due to its coercion to live through its trauma again and again.

4. Textual Analysis of Améry's 'Die Tortur'

While the previous chapters dealt with the depiction and interpretation of the notion of torture in Améry's Essay *Die Tortur* the following chapters will provide

⁴⁰ cf. Améry, 1977, p. 81.

⁴¹ idem, p. 80.

⁴² idem, p. 53.

⁴³ idem, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Kramer, 2004, p. 451.

⁴⁵ Améry, 1977, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Faust, p. 12., at <http://www.psychosoziale-gesundheit.net/psychiatrie/folter2.html> (consulted on 2 May 2014).

a textual analysis with emphasis on the narrative structure, the grammatical peculiarities and the semantic characteristics.

Améry's Essay, which can be attributed to the genre of survivor memoirs, utilizes a set of narrative techniques to increase the tension throughout the reception. His "reluctance to describe the actual act of torture"⁴⁷ and "the digressions and hesitations"⁴⁸ he employs, put the reader into an unpleasant position increasing his pitiful expectations. Contrary to the arrestive manner in which Améry approaches the baleful dramatic core of his Essay, he interweaves a terminology that evokes hastening and inescapability.

The self-alienating and dehumanizing aspects of torture manifest linguistically, when Améry describes himself as "shrill mewling pig" ["schrill quäkendes Schlachtferkel"⁴⁹] or mentions that his own unheard "howl" ["Geheul"⁵⁰] became foreign to him. The "Pizzle" ["Ochsenziemer"⁵¹], an instrument normally used on oxen, that had been used to inflict lacerations on his skin after his shoulders get dislocated by the hanging, further strengthens the feeling of his dehumanization.

Contrary to that Améry describes the Reification of Torture and evokes the feeling that *Die Tortur* becomes an monstrously thing, which is capable of developing its own existence and will: "There it happened to me: The Torture" ["Dort geschah es mir: Die Tortur"⁵²]. What gets partly lost in translation, as several aspects of the Essay, is the fact that *Die Tortur* in this phrase seems to be decoupled from the perpetrator. "It" or more precisely "she" ["die Tortur"] overwhelmed him. From this linguistic aspect the haunting undefeatable nature of his trauma becomes even more explicit.⁵³ The torture is capable of following him outside the torture chambers, outside Fort Breendoonk, wherever he goes.

⁴⁷ Hirsch, 2006, p. 364.

⁴⁸ idem, p. 364.

⁴⁹ Améry, 1977, p. 74.

⁵⁰ idem, p. 55.

⁵¹ idem, p. 68.

⁵² idem, p. 52.

⁵³ cf. Heidelberger-Leonhard, 2004, p. 209.

An interesting aspect, that demands further investigation, is the fact that Améry switches from the first person ["Ich"] to the impersonal ["man"] in the crucial moment, when his body gets lifted up by a chain.

"Just at the moment when he describes dangling from the hook on the ceiling, Améry shifts from the first person to the impersonal German pronoun *man*, often translated into English as the second-person pronoun *you* (or the more impersonal and less commonly used *one*)."⁵⁴

The impersonal but inclusive pronoun *man* has consciously or unconsciously a tremendous impact: Firstly the shift correlates with what torture victims have described as the feeling to leave their own body. Similarly Améry linguistically leaves the sphere of the first person "ich" to the impersonal "man". Contrary to this the generality of the term "man" supports the reader in empathizing with the narrator as the pronoun suggests an exchangeability of the tortured subject and thirdly the experience of "man" claims universality - everybody, who is overcome by torture, would feel similar. Furthermore the switch to the impersonal could indicate that the narrator, when living through his experience by recapitulating it, has a strong impulse to 'escape' even verbally, or to at least gain distance from his own narration.

"In such a position, or rather, when hanging this way, with your hands behind your back, for a short time you can hold at a half-oblique through muscular force. During these few minutes, when you are already expending your utmost strength, when sweat has already appeared on your forehead and lips, and you are breathing in gasps, you will not answer any questions. [...] You hardly hear it."

"man wird, während dieser wenigen Minuten, wenn man bereits die äußerste Kraft verausgibt, wenn schon der Schweiß auf Stirn und Lippen steht und der Atem keucht, keine Fragen beantworten. Die vernimmt man kaum."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hirsch, 2006, p. 366.

⁵⁵ Améry, 1977, p. 69.

Hirsch adds that through "this *man* and the present tense" the reader is "appealed [...] directly to imagine, to feel what the tortured person feels, to experience the sweat on the forehead, the gasps of breath."⁵⁶

5. Conclusion

In his Essay Améry "takes the discussion of torture out of the terms of 'efficiency' or 'strategy' and out of the 'ticking bomb' scenarios"⁵⁷ where the contemporary discourse of torture lays. With his stirring description and philosophical analyses of torture Jean Améry has anticipated what psychologists, legal experts, linguists and criminologists have taken up only recently. What was at the core of Améry's devastating experience cannot be found in legal texts nor in human rights declarations. It does not easily fit into legal terms and definitions. It was not only blatant humiliation, the extraction of information or the will to inflict severe physical and psychological pain that drove the torturer, merely it was the will to totally and irrevocably annihilate the self of the other, to destroy his trust in the world and make him carry around this stigma for his entire life. The tortured self signifies its trauma through its being. It restlessly meanders through the labyrinth of pain constituted by the embodied memory. With regards to Améry this status of being seemed to be worse than death. Who got tortured, says Améry, cannot be home any more in this world.

⁵⁶ Hirsch, 2006, p. 366.

⁵⁷ idem, p. 370.

6. References

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