

October 20, 2004

Introduction to Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*

Violence - what are the causes and the roots?

Interpersonal violence can be inflicted in a calculated, systematic, bureaucratic way.

Améry asks what is the nature of evil & poses that humans are fundamentally evil but in a peculiar sense.

Arendt proposes that the type of mentality/rationale was on some level bureaucratized. The racist ideology spread throughout the Reich.

Améry disagrees - what are the tools of violence? (He uses an intellectual tone)

- important to note that he comes after Fanon and is a contemporary of Arendt

- he questions his experience: what happens to their [the victims' ] view of the world?
- he identifies more as a Jew now, after his torture in the concentration camps
- but is it fair to carry all this resentment? Should he absolve the perpetrators?
- is there any way to rebuild society after all is shattered?

*Rise of Nazi State (National Socialist State)*

- January 30, 1933 – President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor - laws put into action on basis of racist ideology
  - goal was to have the Aryan race all of Europe
- February 28, 1933 – Hindenburg & Hitler declare a state of emergency without Parliament's sanction
  - their Reichstag Fire Decree caused the suspension of constitutional rights in Germany
  - this was outside the law but legitimate because of a deemed security issue

It all starts with a sovereign with absolute power, and then the State develops. Discipline [read: torture] is kept secret. Biopolitics are at play here - they govern our rationality. In Germany, the attributes of a category of people were involved, and procedures dictating who was a citizen were implemented. All these aspects can exist simultaneously and thus create a state of exception in the name of security so characteristic of a state/sovereign abusing its power.

The specificity of actions (the sense of what is right or the law) nurtures a professional focus on the discipline. There is the appropriation of the act by the army and there is formal school of what to do.

1939 – Hindenburg dies and Hitler becomes Germany's sovereign

The biopolitics [of Foucault] in the German example are the racialist politics that categorize others and disable and homogenize them. The categorization is based on a ranking of who is biologically inferior.

1935 – Nuremberg Laws

Security Groups (SS) were the paramilitary organizations under the Nazis

- Gestapo – secret state police

- Sicherheitsdienst – elite intelligence arm of the secret police (SD) themselves biologically pure " Einsatzgruppen – the death squad

### *Biography of Améry*

Born in Vienna in 1912 to a Jewish father (who eventually died in 1916 in WWI) and a Catholic mother (who ran an inn) and was raised Christian. He studied philosophy and literature at the University of Vienna off and on, and he supported himself. While he was studying in the early 1930s, anti-Semitism was on the rise (Austria was annexed in 1938).

When the Nuremberg Laws were adopted, Améry had to re-assess who he was by blood and by politics. He was no longer considered a citizen because of his Jewish heritage, but it was a political affiliation more than a religion for him.

He committed suicide in 1978. Was the torture and dehumanization too much for the human spirit? How does the extent of pain impair language?

In 1938, Améry married an Eastern European Jewish woman and shortly thereafter fled to Belgium. He was arrested in 1940 as a German alien and sent to a prison camp in France (from which he escaped and returned to Belgium). In Belgium there was a growing resistance movement. But in 1943, Améry was arrested by the Gestapo.

### *In the book...*

In the concentration camps, lack of communication fostered social isolation. There was a need to conform and adapt to the situation. They were de-intellectualized and dehumanized (intellectuals lost more than the common man, and they had fewer resources to survive). There was an eruption of the norm and an assimilation of ideology. The entire institution was built on torture. Religion helped to transcend camp life, but an agnostic such as he had nothing to fall back on.

There was no agency, no autonomy in prison.  
The routinization of death made dying more feared than death itself.

During torture, history becomes useless because the victim's world is stripped and unmade. Torture is shame so deep it can't be penetrated and it was the essence of the Third Reich, of National Socialism. The first blow would cause the victim to lose trust in the world. The body is synonymous with control, and as the boundaries of the body are synonymous with the Self, the victim felt his Self being violated. Conventional morality was inverted during the Third Reich. Hitler's fascism was based on depravity and sadism and torture was used to elicit information, control social space, and perpetuate moral depravity.

To what extent is pain able to be described?  
How can one eventually repair both the emotional and physical ruptures?  
National socialism was a product of sadism, which lay at the heart of totalitarianism.

Existential psychology: radical negation of the other whose world the torturer aims to nullify since that is the only means by which he can realize his total sovereignty over that other.

Nazis were the bureaucrats of torture and should not be looked at benignly. They were active participants and it shouldn't be forgotten. But where is accountability? The issue is reconciliation vs.

justice.