Negative Possession: Two Instances of Accountability – Jean Améry and Aharon Appelfeld

Idit Alphandary

Tel Aviv University

According to Jean Améry, negative possession is a means of keeping a moral chasm open between perpetrator and victim. Negative possession posits that the “pile of corpses [that] lies between them [the perpetrators] and me [the survivor] cannot be removed in the process of internalization, so it seems to me, but, on the contrary, through actualization, or, more strongly stated, by actively settling the unresolved conflict in the field of historical practice,” referencing both the past and the future in order to foster a dialogue (Améry 1980, 69). My paper brings together philosophers and critics of the relation of time, memory, and language to examine the concept of accountability in the aftermath of WWII. I place Améry’s philosophy and Appelfeld’s literature in conversation as a means of exploring how negative possession instills a new voice in the public sphere and propels individuals and nations to encounter differences in the future, rather than simply reiterate the same cultural and political identity and interests.

Améry immigrated to Belgium, joining the Belgian resistance while fleeing Austria. Eventually, the Gestapo captured and tortured him, sending him first to Auschwitz and then to Bergen Belsen. Against the backdrop of the Auschwitz Frankfurt Trial in the 1960’s—the most prominent Nazi trial in West Germany—Améry accepted an invitation to give a series of talks on the South German Radio. These talks were later published in a volume of collected essays, *At the Mind’s Limits*. Drawing on Améry’s essays, this paper builds upon Améry’s articulation of forgiveness and resentment, examining the ways in which resentment is dialogical. I view Améry as an intellectual who cares very much about his listeners and readers: “I would be thankful to the reader if he were willing to follow me, even if in the hour before us he more than once feels the wish to put down the book” (Améry 1980, 63). In his introspections, while attempting to understand his resentment, Améry appears to ask for the impossible—that time be turned back and the catastrophe be undone so that the dead victims can take their place among the living when forgiveness is at stake. In doing so, Améry postulates a strange structure of time, memory, and speech, and challenges our understanding of these concepts. On the one hand, Améry calls on the Germans to embrace history, to give it the role of a negative possession, that is, a possession that forces one to remember the atrocities, that captures and acknowledges the fact that the existing moral language cannot articulate the evil perpetrated. On the other hand, he makes it clear that only negative possession allows the perpetrators and the nation to generate genuinely new desires, meanings, transformations, and connections to future—transformed singularities pervaded by difference. How can negative possession propel one into the future, turn one into a being constantly in the process of changing while remaining accountable vis-à-vis the past?

---

Aharon Appelfeld was seven years old when WWII began and thirteen by the end of it. He fled with his father from Czernowitz through the Ukrainian steppe, but was incarcerated in a labor camp from which he was eventually able to break out, reaching Italy and then Palestine. In Appelfeld’s memoir, traumatic memories undergo a transformation and become negative possessions that force the writer to move away from the sense of “chaos and impotence” and find the possibility for a future existence beyond the unspeakable: “There were atrocities that were beyond words, that remained dark secrets.” Ultimately, through his writing, Appelfeld creates “the language of the persecuted” (Appelfeld 2004, 69, 50, 76). He signals to the reader that his memoir begins with a lack of adequate vocabulary, by asking: “How does one give form to such a searing flame? Where does one start? How does one connect the links? What words does one use?” (ibid., 105). In prose that brings to mind Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995), Appelfeld argues that all recognizable verbal meanings are nothing but clichés designed to prevent one from coming into contact with the Beyond, the *event*, where disaster looms. Conceptually, my paper shows how negative possession plumbs the wound that resides beyond speech; it impels transformation and drives the refusal to reaffirm identity, personal and national oedipal ideology, and territory.

---

Negative possession keeps history from disappearing into oblivion, enabling a truthful confrontation across generations. The crux of negative possession is that it does not offer a satisfying explanation of the brutal facts of history. Rather, it opens up questions that reside beyond the realm of meaning. The citations above address German and Ukrainian guilt in the aftermath of World War II. I use the citations as a means to introduce my claim that in the aftermath of mass atrocity, emotions of forgiveness, remorse, reconciliation, and resentment are inseparable from one another. Addressing the opposite shores of the moral divide between victims and the offspring of perpetrators, Améry and Appelfeld respectively choose to affirm moral emotions rather than commemorate genocide or support legal punishment for criminals. They investigate the moral suffering of the victims and the shame that belongs to the perpetrators through a discussion of forgiveness and resentment. Survivors and offenders often testify that genocide is meaningless and that nothing can be learned from the inhuman experience of daily life in the camps. Yet Améry and Appelfeld prove that the opposite is true: only a moral discussion of war and annihilation can turn the victim from abandoned relic to necessary actor of desire and ethics in the community. The conversation I stage here between Améry, Appelfeld, and the Nazi régime about forgiveness and resentment in 1960’s Germany and in 21st century Israel is equivalent to a moral demand for accountability. To understand the relationship between victims and offenders is to disrupt the abandonment of the victims, the superiority of the guilty offenders, and the reticence that future generations show when they capture and represent past and current atrocities in new media but hesitate to provide a suitable moral language of accountability. I contend that it is still crucial to understand Améry’s and Appelfeld’s complex relation to the paradox of forgiveness and resentment—two behaviors that revolutionize desire and politics.

---

In the context of WWII, historical and legal accountability belong in a psychological and national structure that fosters identities by establishing a strict binary opposition between subject and object. Historical and legal narratives are conforming or territorial when their explanations of identity coalesce with national, social, economic, and political stability and interests. Traumatic narratives like the testimonies of Améry and Appelfeld approach history by way of transference while relying on the inseparability of subject and object. Traumatic narratives threaten the territorial structure; they make it socially inadequate and morally untrue. The traumatic disclosure of truths dialogically constructs plots and images that lead to deterritorialization when they question dominant motivations, affective cathexis, and widespread values. History and the law do not simply disclose the truth; they introduce biased interpretations of facts, and in the process, the authoritative narratives they produce acquire power. Desire does not turn toward the Other; authority remains conservative and reliant on oedipal and national structures of organization and accountability, which the Holocaust exposed to be repetitive, obsolete, and lethal. The personal accounts of the survivors demand that historical and legal truths cease to impoverish the connections between trauma and ethics.

I turn to the work of Dominick LaCapra and Gilles Deleuze, two thinkers that are rarely brought together despite the fact both of them examine how one remembers the past through introducing difference to the present and future. Can Appelfeld and Améry remain accountable in relation to the past even as they become different, motivated by desires and connections that perpetuate resentment even while they are required to acknowledge forgiveness? How do these survivors encounter the past? Is the past nothing more than an impossibility and a closure? What does the process of working-through signify in the plots that Appelfeld and Améry construct when they encounter the past and articulate truths that must change desire and morality in the present and future? LaCapra suggests that survivors deliver history from the position of radical openness. They do not base facts and truths on causal connections but introduce “radical constructivism” using the performative traits of testimony. “Essential are performative, figurative, aesthetic, rhetorical, ideological, and political factors that ‘construct’ structures—stories, plots, arguments, interpretations, explanations—in which referential statements are embedded and take on meaning and significance” (LaCapra 2014, 1).

This suggests both that literary fiction and art can disclose the moral truth of historical catastrophe as well or even better than constative historical and legal reports. The poetic, rhetorical, and performative dimensions of plots and images generate affective dialogues and drive the dominance of difference. In “Resentments,” Améry captures the historical fact of his torture and the death sentence met by SS-man Wajs in the form of a haunting daydream:

The experience of persecution was, at the very bottom that of an extreme *loneliness*. At stake for me is the release from the abandonment that has persisted from that time until today. 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 (Améry 1980, 70).

This performative disclosure of a being possessed and haunted by the past might be perceived as the story of the victim who remains caught up in the past, loyal to the dead, refusing to rejoin society and take his place in a new life of responsibilities. In my reading, however, this performative narrative of a historical fact deals with verbal and visual transference. It turns the concept of “negative possession” into an *event* of active deterritorialization, a margin of moral truths. Améry fashions resentments to impede historical and legal narratives and social structures from reaching closure. His resentments open the way to a future that succumbs to the moral difference that negative possession imposes on society and authority. In the words of LaCapra, I see forgiveness as a voice “that may be related to an unheard-of utopia of generosity or gift-giving beyond, or in excess of calculation, positions, judgment, and victimization of the other” (LaCapra 2014, 30). Améry directly speaks against forgiveness and reconciliation because in post-war Germany these are not utopian but utilitarian. Forgiveness can never be a structure of closure that follows on the heels of indifference and forgetting. His resentments, on the other hand, are utopian rather than utilitarian, for they introduce radical openness to a nation interested in closure. His resentments seek out those listeners and readers that associate negative possession with difference. Forgiveness is as revolutionary as resentment when it introduces difference to the dialogue about the past, which ushers in a transformation of future desire and politics.

 Deleuze does not use the vocabulary of trauma even when he addresses “exhaustion,” the main trope in Beckett’s works. Beckett’s exhaustion is for Deleuze a line of flight: “One was tired of something, but one is exhausted by nothing” (Deleuze 1997, 153). Améry’s negative possession and Appelfeld’s words that “flow, but… reveal nothing. When you’ve finished, you feel confused and embarrassed” are the stuff that deterritorialization is made of. A new language issues from the plots of revolutionized victim-philosophers and novelists that use existing words to go against the grain by treating the past as “a legitimate source to be mined” (Appelfeld 2004, 180, 153). Mining the past is a political chore that restores nothing to politics. Forgiveness and resentment remind future generations that humans are not political first, nor are they racial or economic instruments. Humans are animals full of life and the relation of subject to object and image to language precede the constitution of the individual and the nation. This responsibility to revolutionize politics through becoming-nothing does not usurp historical narratives and the rule of law, but it does escape the closure that these disciplines institute. It gives the perpetrator an opportunity to turn to accountability rather than settle for institutional closure.

---

Bibliography:

Améry, Jean. “Resentments.” In *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980, 62–81.

Appelfeld, Aharon. *The Story of A Life*. Translated by Aloma Halter. New York: Schocken Books, 2004.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Deleuze, Gilles. “The Exhausted.” In *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael E. Greco. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.