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Received: 5 March 2025 | Accepted: 13 March 2025

DOI: 10.1111/ejop.13072

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

European Journal of Philosophy WILEY

Guises of Despair

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For Bob Stern
In Memoriam

In a recent paper (2024), Bob Stern and I presented a defence of hope as a secular virtue. Part of this defence consisted in claiming that hope sits between two vices, unwarranted optimism and despair. As our focus was on hope, we did not subject our conception of despair to detailed scrutiny. In this paper, I seek to remedy this and to examine whether our previous defence of hope can hold up to this widening of the scope of the inquiry.

In hindsight, a distinctive aspect of our approach is that we were less interested in the ontology of despair than in its psychology.[1] We did not say much on the 'what' of despair: we remained agnostic on whether its essence is appropriately captured by such notions as loss of hope(s), loss of the ground of hope (Steinbock 2007; Ratcliffe 2013), or hopelessness (Kwong 2020, 2023). By contrast, we focused on the 'why' of despair and sought to identify a structure common to the reasons why a person may despair. We argued that despair arises when a person is unable to stop desiring something they deem of great value, while being convinced that this thing cannot obtain.[2] Everyday examples of this include unrequited love, or the desire to achieve something which we also believe we cannot do (such as breaking free from an addiction). From a philosophical perspective, this stance seems to underwrite Nietzsche's characterisation of nihilistic despair as 'the belief that what matters most cannot be achieved' (Reginster (2008): 28). I shall call this guise of despair the 'Despair from Desire' and characterise it as follows:

> (DFD): involves being unable to stop desiring something we deem of great value while believing that this good can neither be obtained, nor obtain on its own.

My thanks to Edward Pile, Dan Watts and an anonymous referee for their very helpful suggestions. Most of all, my thanks to Bob Stern. When I started researching this paper, Bob was still alive and able to discuss parts of the argument. Now that he is gone, I remain immensely grateful to him for years of friendship and both philosophical and personal discussions. Bob was one of these rare people who make the world better.

[1]This is why I shall leave aside in this paper Kierkegaardian approaches to despair, since for Kierkegaard despair is not primarily, nor even necessarily, a psychological phenomenon. It is an ethical failure of the self as an agent to be in an appropriate relation, both to itself and to what grounds it.

[2]'When in despair, the agent believes that their desire cannot be satisfied but retains the desire (otherwise they would be resigned, not despairing); but they are unable to act on it, or even to believe in the possibility of the desired good obtaining on its own, which generates frustration and inner conflict' (Han-Pile & Stern (2024): 89). Note that this relies on an inverted version of the so-called 'standard' definition of hope, according to which to hope involves desiring something we deem good while assessing the probability of this thing obtaining as being between (and excluding) 0 and 1.

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Bob and I argued that DFD is bad for the agent for three reasons: first, the practical contradiction between desiring a good and believing that this good is unobtainable generates frustration and inner conflict, making flourishing impossible for the despairing person. Second, the agent's belief that this good cannot be obtained through their agency generates agential paralysis: torn between their desire and the belief that nothing will make this desire obtain, the agent cannot do anything. Third, this agential paralysis also arises because 'despair involves a desire which leads the agent to overlook or unfavourably distort the epistemic reasons for thinking the desired end will or will not obtain, leading the agent to miss opportunities to act' (92). Accordingly, on our reading despair is not just an ethical vice but also an epistemic one, leading the despairing agent to misjudge probabilities.[3]

This set of claims raises several issues. First, and in relation to the last point, one may worry that our opposition between unwarranted optimism and despair led us to ignore the possibility of *warranted* despair, namely despair which would arise from an appropriate use of our epistemic abilities. We examined this possibility in relation to the mother's situation in Cormac McCarthy's book, *The Road*, and concluded that the question of whether the mother is correct in her epistemic assessment is moot because in fact she does not despair: she hopes for death, not as an intrinsic good, but as a contextually preferable option. Grim as it is, this hope sustains her as an agent and she finds the strength to leave to die during the night. Still, it would be hazardous to infer from this particular case that a person can *never* be right to despair. And if despair was, in some instances, an appropriate response to a situation well judged, then it could not be one of the two vices hope sits between as a virtue.

Second, our paper implicitly considered despair from desire as the genus of all despair. But is this right? And should one renounce monism about despair, what other guises of despair are there? What is the best method to approach them? For reasons I will explain below, I believe that the most fertile ground for such approach consists in turning to literary or real life portrayals of despair (as opposed to making up examples, as is common in the philosophical secondary literature on despair). This paper will focus on three case studies: a letter (Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*), a novel (*Martin Eden*, by Jack London) and an essay (*At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by A Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, by Jean Améry). All three works are either first hand testimonies (Wilde, Améry) or very strongly autobiographical (London). My guiding hypothesis is that each of these works can be seen to illustrate a guise of despair which Bob and I previously overlooked. I shall call this the 'Despair from Loss' (DFL) and offer the following preliminary characterisation:

> (DFL): involves believing that something we deem of great value has been lost, and that this good can neither be retrieved, nor return on its own.

I argue below that each of the portrayals of despair I have selected presents us with specific kinds of loss: the loss of a key instance of the good (Wilde), the loss of the evaluative framework from which the possibility of the good makes sense (London), and what I will call 'ontological' loss (Améry). I further argue that Améry's case is *also* an instance of DFD, which brings an additional challenge to Bob's and my views on hope as a virtue: the possibility that despair may *both* be ethically bad for the individual and justified morally.

Throughout the paper, I will investigate the consequences of having overlooked the despair from loss: can Bob and I still argue that hope is a secular virtue, and for the same reasons? Does hope relate to DFL in the same way as it relates to DFD? To answer these questions, I have drawn out from our previous paper three key questions: (1) is

[3]Note that this further claim is ambiguous: 'the despairing agent misjudges probabilities' looks like a generic claim, of the type 'ravens are black' or 'dinosaurs are extinct'. Yet the scope of generic claims is notoriously ambiguous because they resist quantification. While most ravens are black, there can be the odd grey or white one. By contrast, all dinosaurs are extinct. Yet both claims are usually accepted as correct. So, depending on whether the generic involved is indefinite or definite our claim admits of two versions: (a) despair *most often* involves the improper use of our epistemic abilities, in that we distort negatively the implicit probability assignment pertaining to the likelihood of the desired outcome obtaining; or (b) despair *always* involves the improper use of our epistemic abilities, in which case Bob and I would be committed to an error theory about despair. (a) seems uncontroversial to me. I will argue in favour of (b), even though it remains possible (through epistemic luck) that despairing persons may occasionally end up being correct in their assessments, but without having arrived at these through appropriate procedures.

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DFL bad for the agent? (2) does it deprive the agent of their agency? (3) does it involve an inappropriate use of our epistemic abilities? I shall call this set the 'litmus test' and return to it after each case study.

Allow me three methodological provisos. First, I am very aware that turning to literary works or real life testimonies risks being reductive and/or instrumentalising. I turn to these works because the alternative, making up philosophical examples of despair, presents a worse risk: that of simplifying a very rich phenomenon. On balance, I would rather trust literary works to show (but not articulate, let alone theorise) despair in its poignant complexity, and hope that my awareness of the dangers of instrumentalisation will help me avoid these. Second, I am aware of the risks of undue generalisation. I have chosen my three case studies because each seemed to reveal different strands of despair from loss, and this powerfully and beautifully. However, I make no claim to exhaustivity: in musical terms, my case studies are variations on a theme – other variations are, undoubtedly, possible. In the same vein, I do not assume either than the conclusions resulting from the application of the litmus test to these case studies will be valid in all other instances of despair from loss, although I believe that these conclusions will plausibly apply to at least some further cases. I shall return to this issue at the end of the paper. Third, all three works are often harrowing in their expressions of despair. Finding an appropriate stance to analyse them is difficult in that it requires balancing critical distance with compassion. I have tried to find the right balance best as I could.

1 | DESPAIR FROM THE LOSS OF ONE'S MOST VALUED GOOD: OSCAR WILDE'S *DE PROFUNDIS*

The *De Profundis* was written by Wilde between January and March 1897, at the end of a two-year imprisonment on a charge of 'gross indecency' (homosexuality). The letter, addressed, but never sent, to Lord Alfred Douglas ('Bosie'), is thirty-two pages long. Much of it can be read as the narrative of a journey into, and perhaps out of, despair from loss. Wilde lost many things: his reputation, his standards of living, the custody of his son, and his freedom. Yet the loss that stands out is that of his lover, his 'graceful boy with a Christ-like heart' (29 April 1895). The *De Profundis* itself draws its title from the last letter sent to Bosie, in May 1895: 'even covered with mud I shall praise you, from the deepest abysses I shall cry to you[4] (…). Remember, it is that hope that makes me live, and that hope alone. (…) What God is to his saint, you are to me'. I shall retrace here Wilde's spiritual journey from love into despair and towards what he calls 'humility', with a view to gaining a better understanding of DFL, and perhaps of how one may recover from it.

Just before going to prison, Wilde was confident that his love for Bosie would ward off despair: 'this is to assure you of my immortal, my eternal love for you. (…) Think that my love for you and this idea, (…) that you love me in return, will sustain me in my unhappiness' (29 April 1895). Yet one year later, the word 'despair' and its cognates feature in most of Wilde's letters, which are not addressed to Lord Douglas anymore but to friends: 'I seem dead to all emotions except those of anguish and despair' (Letter to Robbie, 10 March 1896); 'I am dazed with a dull sense of pain. I had fed on hope, and now anguish, grown hungry, feeds her fill on me' (to Robbie, Nov. 1896)). In the *De Profundis*, Wilde links this despair to having been abandoned by Lord Douglas: 'the sorrow you should have shared you have doubled, the pain you should have sought to lighten you have quickened to anguish' (132). The loss of Douglas' love taints even Wilde's memories of their affair: 'the memory of our friendship is the shadow that walks with me here: (…) there is nothing that happened in those ill-starred years that I cannot recreate in that chamber of the brain which is set apart for grief or for despair' (104).

This despair has three main features. The first is the violent swell of negative emotions: 'out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud' (135). The second feature is the deprivation of agency. The word 'impotence' and its cognates recur several times in the *De Profundis*, as in this passage: 'for the first year of my imprisonment I

[4]Compare with the first words of Psalm 130: 'de profundis clamavi ad te, Domine' (from the depths I cried to you, Lord).

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did nothing else, and remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in impotent despair' (166). This deprivation of agency extends to the felt impossibility for Wilde, this former 'lord of language' (122), to even articulate his experience of despair: 'misery that could find no voice: sorrow that was dumb' (135). Such deprivation is also linked to the impossibility of projecting oneself in the future: rather than providing a horizon for action, Wilde's experience of time in prison is mired in meaningless repetition, 'days that are endless in their dull monotony of apathy or despair' (to More Adey, 25 September 1896). As a result, time comes to a standstill and agential paralysis sets in: 'we think in eternity but we move slowly through Time. And how slowly time goes with us in prison I need not speak again' (146).

The third feature of DFL consists in Wilde being subjected to what he calls 'one of the greatest temptations of his life' (142), namely accidia. In the Christian tradition accidia is one of the vices closely linked with despair: a tendency to carelessness, indifference, listlessness.[5] Wilde was well aware of this: 'I knew the Church condemned accidia, but the whole idea seemed to me quite fantastic, just the sort of sin, I fancied, that a priest who knew nothing about real life would invent. Nor could I understand how Dante, who says that 'sorrow remarries us to God', could have been so harsh to those who were enamoured of melancholy' (142). Now first-personally acquainted with the dangers of accidia, Wilde sees the latter as an ethical failure, a certain complacency to despair: 'one keeps an adder in one's breast to feed on one, or rises up every night to sow thorns in the garden of one's soul' (133). What makes accidia a vice is that it focuses the despairing person ever more closely on their own suffering and so fosters ethical egocentrism. Its richest evocation is perhaps this: 'the weariness and despair that creep back into one's cell, and into the cell of one's heart, with such strange insistence that one has, as it were, to garnish and sweep one's house for their coming, as for an unwelcome guest, or a bitter master' (146). Accidia elicits a profoundly ambiguous response from the agent: reticence and reluctance to accommodate the demands of despair, this 'unwelcome guest', but also an obscure willingness to participate in this relationship by 'garnishing one's house'. Accidia subjugates the self (it is a 'bitter master'). Yet such subjugation is also, at least up to a point, voluntary, for accidia presents a paradoxical opportunity (a 'chance') for relief from despair, a way to momentarily transcend one's pain through dramatization and self-pity: 'there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless' (135).

Turning to question (2) of my litmus test, it seems clear that DFL deprived Wilde of his physical agency (he was apathetic) and resulted in a radical impairment of his ethical agency: on his own retrospective assessment, when in despair he retained just enough agency to be accountable for succumbing to the temptation of accidia. This leaves us with questions (1) (is DFL bad for the agent?) and (3) (does it involve an inappropriate use of our epistemic abilities?). I'll start with the latter.

Wilde's earlier letters present a very exalted image of Lord Douglas. Wilde idealised his lover in all respects: physical traits ('from your silken hair to your delicate feet you are perfection to me', May 1895), character (a 'Christ like heart'), artistic talent ('strange' but beautiful poems). By contrast, Wilde's later letters offer a brutal reconfiguration of his earlier appreciations: 'I cannot of course get rid of the revolting memories of the two years I was unlucky enough to have [Bosie] with me (…). But I will not have him in possession of my letters or gifts. (…) He ruined my life – that should content him' (44). The *De Profundis* describes Lord Douglas as an ethically worthless character, driven by hatred (for his father) rather than by love (for Wilde). It emphasises Douglas' perceived lack of talent, egocentrism, attraction to Wilde's own wealth and success, and disregard for the needs of Wilde's own artistry (such as a quiet life when writing). One way to interpret this stark contrast consists in saying that, initially blinded by his love for Bosie, Wilde has come to his senses through despair. If so, DFL would in his case result in an appropriate use of his epistemic abilities, exhibiting greater lucidity, the ability to examine all facts, and greater detachment. However, the *De Profundis*' reassessment can also be seen as a character assassination, possibly motivated at the time by Wilde's desire to exonerate himself by appearing as a victim of Bosie's alleged ethical flaws (in particular hatred and selfishness). Biographical studies strongly suggest that this second reading is correct and

[5]See for example De Young (2015).

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that Douglas, while no saint, was not the ethical monster the *De Profundis* paints him to be.[6] If so, then it would seem that Wilde was no more lucid in despair than in love.

Remains question (1). Prima facie, the answer is obvious: as attested by his descriptions of his own suffering, DFL was woefully bad for Wilde. It was bad from the general perspective of eudaimonia (because it prevented him from flourishing) and because it radically diminished his agency. But things are not so simple, for such answer neglects a key theme of the *De Profundis*, namely Wilde's discovery of, and apology for, what he calls 'humility'. Indeed, the second half of the letter marks a strong change of tone. Having hit what addicts might call 'rock bottom', Wilde shifts his attention from despair to healing. This healing process is accompanied by a self-reconfiguration, away from both the loved object and its loss, and more generally away from the focus on the self characteristic of accidia. At the heart of this reconfiguration lie a newly discovered virtue, humility, and a new project: the spiritualisation of suffering through art. Yet Wilde was not a religious person: 'when I think about Religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe' (137). So, what could humility mean for him? He sees it as 'the frank acceptance of all experiences' (153).[7] Wilde sees humility as a spiritual task: 'there is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul' (138). Such spiritualisation relies on the restoration of meaning to his life[8]: 'now I find hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all' (135). Inwardly, humility allows the sufferer to give each negative experience meaning so that, rather than destroying the narrative of one's own life, the negative can be integrated to the development of one's ethical character. Outwardly, meaning must be generated through artistic practice, which is why sorrow is 'at once the type and test of all great Art' (144): in this respect, the *De Profundis* itself is a 'forme-sens', an aesthetic embodiment of its content imbued with transformative power (over the writer, and the reader).

Humility is thus revealed as a way out of despair; more, as the path towards appropriate character development and better art. This, however, raises a challenge regarding question (1): could it be that, while deeply unpleasant at the time, DFL turned out to be an ethically good thing in the end? Wilde himself emphasises how the discovery of humility allowed him to let go of his self-centredness and to fight off the temptation of accidia: 'I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a King wears purple (…); to make my friends walk slowly in sadness with me; (…) to mar them with my own pain. Now I feel quite differently: I see it would be both ungrateful and unkind of me to pull so long a face' (142). So, shouldn't we conclude that DFL was good for Wilde in that it brought about the spiritualisation of his character and new ways of flourishing, both as a person and as an artist?

Yet consider this: on Wilde's own account it is not *despair* which brought about these positive changes, but humility. At best DFL would have been good, then, not by itself but instrumentally, because it prompted him to discover humility. But crucially, Wilde does not believe that this discovery can be credited to his agency: '[humility] could not have come before, nor later. Had anyone told me of it, I would have rejected it. Had it been brought to me, I would have refused it. (…) Of all things, it is the strangest. One cannot give it away, and another may not give it to one' (135). One thing is clear: humility did not come to Wilde in a controlled manner, because he sought it, nor as something he could control. He did not choose *when* to become humble. He did not choose *to* be humble: had he been told of humility, or given it, he would have 'rejected' or 'refused' it. Had he wanted to give humility away, or to

[6]See for example Ellmann (1988), Sturgis (2021). The fact that Wilde, after his release, sought his former lover again and lived with him for a time in Italy suggests that Wilde may have changed his assessment again and still saw some merits to Bosie's company.

[7]While acceptance denotes assent, the latter can lean towards the passive (as in accepting a diagnosis one can't change) or the active (as in accepting a request one could deny). In my view, both senses are present here. Passive, because Wilde views humility as a radical *openness*: in particular, he now values sorrow for the increase in receptivity it brings (144). Active, because acceptance is also a *refusal* to pick and choose one's experiences in life: instead of seeking only pleasure as Wilde formerly did, *all* experiences are now to be accepted, by a self which does not view itself as a sovereign constantly seeking gratification anymore.

[8]Sometimes Wilde seems to incline towards something stronger than the restoration of meaning, namely the transfiguration of the value of all experiences: 'I have got to make everything that has happened to me good to me' (138). This theme of 'making good' echoes Nietzsche's thoughts about 'making beautiful' as required by amor fati (love of fate) in the *Gay Science*: 'I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! (GS: §276, 223). On the transfiguration of values generated by love, see Han-Pile (2011).

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someone else, he could not have done it. The coming of humility seems more a matter of moral luck than of agency, and Wilde's role is confined to recognising, post hoc, the presence of humility in himself: 'it is only when one has lost all things that one knows that one possesses it' (135). So, on balance it would be wrong to see Wilde's despair from loss as a virtue, the exercise of which would have been good for him. From his own account, the real virtue is humility, and one of the reasons why it is virtuous is precisely that it allowed him to stop despairing.

It the above is correct, then Bob's and my conclusions remain applicable to this first case study of the despair from loss. I now turn to my next case study.

2 | DESPAIR FROM THE LOSS OF THE POSSIBILITY OF THE GOOD - *MARTIN EDEN* AND NIHILISTIC DISORIENTATION

In *Martin Eden*, Jack London tells the largely autobiographical story of how a young sailor from the slums of Oakland, uneducated and poor but physically well favoured and intellectually bright, falls in love with Ruth, the daughter of a rich bourgeois family whom he meets on a chance encounter, having saved her brother from thugs on the docks. Martin turns his considerable talents towards 'being great in the world's eyes, (…) in order that the woman he loved should be proud of him and deem him worthy' (203). In the process, he finds success as a writer, only to discover that what he fought so hard for – Ruth's love, self-improvement, literary prowess and acceptance into bourgeois society - were empty ideals. Martin falls into despair and, at the end of the book, commits suicide by swimming into the depths of the ocean (a symbolic movement downwards).

While Martin's story also presents us with an instance of the despair from loss, his case differs from Wilde's because what is lost is not any particular instance of the good, but the very *possibility* of anything being deemed good. And this, in turn, rests on the loss of what might be called Martin's evaluative framework: in Martin's own disabused words, such loss is the realisation that 'perhaps Nietzsche had been right. There was no truth in anything, no truth in truth' (403). Encouraged by this reference to Nietzsche, I will argue that Martin suffers from what Bernard Reginster calls 'nihilistic disorientation': a 'practical sense of loss or disorientation (…) which follows from the realisation that values lack objective standing' (Reginster (2008): 26). More specifically, I propose to read Martin's rise and fall in dialogue with two of Nietzsche's most famous vignettes for nihilism: the Tightrope Walker and the Last Man, both in the Prologue to *Zarathustra*. I will also argue that the manner of Martin's death stages a third possible response to despair from loss, London's own contribution to Nietzsche's chartering of nihilistic despair.[9]

In the Prologue, Zarathustra is drawn to a marketplace where a tightrope walker is due to perform on a rope stretched between two towers. Zarathustra takes this opportunity to 'teach the overman' (4) to the crowd. He sees the tightrope walker as a symbolic representation of humanity attempting to overcome itself: 'mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss' (7). Like the tightrope walker, Martin lives his life as a 'crossing over' (7), developing his considerable abilities to their utmost in an attempt to overcome the limits imposed on him by his birth, upbringing and social class. Like the tightrope walker, Martin is both keenly aware of the need for self-overcoming and willing to risk doing so, making 'his vocation out of danger' (Z 12). 'It is time that mankind set themselves a goal. It is time that mankind plant the seed of their highest hope' (9), says Zarathustra to the crowd while the tightrope walker is preparing himself. Upon meeting Ruth, Martin does set himself a goal: he 'hopes to win her' (61). His longings are 'sharp as pain' because they 'feed on hope' (68). Through his exchanges with Ruth, he encounters new ideals: 'here was intellectual life, he thought, and here was beauty, warm and wonderful as he had never dreamed it could be. (…) Here was something to live for, to win, to fight for – aye, and die for' (37). Martin develops his epistemic abilities beyond what he could have imagined: '[he] had ascended from pitch to pitch of

[9]Lest this hermeneutic thread should sound outlandish, it is worth remembering that five years earlier London had published *The Sea Wolf* (1904), which he described in a letter to Mary Austin as 'an attack on Nietzsche's Overman philosophy' (Letter to Mary Austin, Nov 5 1919, cited in *No Mentor But Myself*, Jack London, Dale Walker, Jeanne Reesman, Second Edition, 1999). Given that *Zarathustra* is the book where Nietzsche develops the theme of the Overman the most (as a response to nihilism), it would be very surprising if London, who was a keen reader of Nietzsche, had not known it.

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intellectual living (…): all the hidden things were laying their secrets bare. He was drunken with comprehension' (127). In doing so, he discovers new ethical concepts: 'he had known good and bad, but purity, as an attribute of existence, had never entered his mind. And now, in her, he conceived purity to be the superlative of goodness and cleanness' (53). The perception of Ruth's purity awakens in Martin what Zarathustra calls the 'arrow of longing' (Z 8): 'ranged side by side with the bold, defiant eyes of the girls before him, he saw Ruth's clear, luminous eyes, like a saint's, gazing at him out of unplumbed depths of purity. And somehow, he felt within him a stir of power. He was better than this. (…) If life meant more to him, then it was for him to demand more of life' (76).

So, Martin strives to change everything: his grammar, his manners, his education, his conversation, his writing, all the while having to sail regularly to make enough money to stay on land and study for extended periods. His stories and poetry, however, keep being rejected. While Ruth does fall in love with him, she wants him to become a lawyer and breaks up with him when he refuses. But the wheel of fortune turns: Martin's stories start being accepted and he rises to fame very quickly (just like London himself did). Ruth herself changes her mind and begs him to take her back. But at the height of his success, Martin's achievements turn to dust for him. This applies to literary fame, social recognition and wealth, but also to Ruth herself. 'I love the one who is ashamed when the dice falls to his fortune and then asks: am I a cheater? For he wants to perish', says Zarathustra (8). Likewise, Martin wonders whether he is an imposter. He is mystified by the fact that he is now invited everywhere whereas when he was actually doing the work of writing, and starving in the process, no one wanted him or his work. As he is 'personally of the same value that he was when nobody wanted [him]' (389), Martin concludes that 'it was not for any real value, but for a purely fictitious value that Judge Blount invited him to dinner' (370): he is wanted for his fame and recognition. Yet none of these are intrinsic, personal qualities: 'that recognition is not I. It resides in the minds of others. Then again, for the money I have earned and am earning. But that money is not I' (389). Thus Martin holds that 'there was no justice in it, no merit on his part. He was no different' (375). As far as Ruth is concerned, he realises that he had not really loved her: 'it was an idealised Ruth he had loved, an ethereal creature of his own creating, the bright and luminous spirit of his love poems. The real bourgeois Ruth, with all the bourgeois failings and with the hopeless cramp of bourgeois psychology in her mind, he had never loved' (392).

Thus Martin loses by winning, so to speak: he deploys incredible willpower and talent to realise his new ideals, and succeeds only to realise that his ideals are empty and that the evaluative framework which made such ideals desirable is flawed. At the height of his success, he finds himself stuck in a world devoid of value. This dreary realisation is compounded by the impossibility of reverting to his old evaluative framework: Martin tries to return to his former life, to the docks, and discovers that this cannot be done: 'he had travelled far, too far to go back. Their [the sailors'] mode of life, which had once been his, was now distasteful to him (…). He was too far removed. Too many thousands of opened books yawned between them and him. He had exiled himself. He had travelled in the vast realm of intellect until he could no longer return home. (…) He had found no new home. (…) He was in despair' (363).[10] Like the tightrope walker, Martin has undertaken 'a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still' (Z 6). Yet at the moment of shuddering and standing still, their paths diverge: provoked by a jester who tells him that he has 'no business between the towers', the tightrope walker 'loses his head and the rope' (Z 11) and falls to his death: he fails by failing to achieve his goal (crossing over). By contrast, Martin does achieve his goals, but this is only a pyrrhic victory, for his achievements are accompanied by the realisation that these goals were not worth striving for in the first place, and he cannot see any others. Unlike the tight rope walker, he does cross over, but into the nothing of the death of his ideals.

At this point, the book implicitly moves to the other vignette in the Prologue: having survived a crossing which took him nowhere he now wants to be, Martin succumbs to the more passive face of nihilistic despair and adopts the comportment of the Last Men. These are last both chronologically (coming after the tightrope dancer, who was man's last attempt to overcome nihilism) and ethically: they are those who 'make everything small' (Z 10). Rather

[10]From this perspective, Martin's last name (Eden) is significant. London himself makes this explicit in the following passage: 'well, here he was, the great man on board, in the midmost center of it, sitting at the captain's right hand, and yet vainly harking back to forecastle and stoke-hole in quest of the Paradise he had lost. He had found no new one, and now he could not find the old one' (403).

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than seeking to expand the range of their life experiences and abilities, the last men shrink everything to their level, and complacently deem themselves wise for doing so. They give up on all challenges (physical, intellectual, emotional) and live hedonistically, narrowing the scope of their lives so as to secure ease and comfort: 'they abandoned the regions where it was hard to live: for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbour and rubs up against him: for one needs warmth. (…) One no longer becomes poor and rich: both are too burdensome. (…) One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one honours health. "We invented happiness", say the last men, and they blink' (Z 10). Likewise, Martin abandons the hardships of Oakland and decides to go on a cruise to the South seas. For the first time in his life he will sail in full comfort, on the deck as a first-class passenger. Yet the prospect brings him no joy: 'that in five more days he sailed for his beloved South Seas meant nothing to him. So he closed his eyes and slept normally and comfortably for eight uninterrupted hours. He was not restless. (…) Sleep had become to him oblivion, and each time that he awoke, he awoke with regret' (396).

Like the last men, Martin is apathetic: whereas he had grudged 'being robbed of four hours of life' a night by sleep when striving to achieve his ideals, he now finds everything, even resting on the deck with a magazine he cannot finish (402), too tiring. He does not blink, but he sleeps or dozes most of the time. Both mark symbolically a disconnect from life, an inability to engage with it – Martin's sleeping is blinking writ large, on the scale of days or weeks rather than milliseconds. Emotionally, he is detached: nothing seems to matter anymore: '"The Shame of the Sun" was published in October. (…) He thought of the wild delight that would have been his had this happened a few short months before, and he contrasted that delight that should have been with his present uncaring coldness. His book, his first book, and his pulse had not gone up a fraction of a beat (365). Martin has even lost his contempt for the critics and editors who initially rejected his work. Like the last men, he rubs against the neighbour for warmth: 'he forgave everybody, even the cub reporter who had painted him red and to whom he now granted a full page with specially posed photographs' (369). Yet although he now comports himself like a last Man, Martin is not one of them: he does not think that he has invented a new form of happiness. On the contrary, he realises that he is in despair[11]: '"it's too late", he said. (…) I seem to have lost all values. I care for nothing. (…) "I am sick, very sick", he said with a despairing gesture' (392). And a little further down: 'the desperateness of his situation dawned upon him. He saw, clear eyed, that he was in the Valley of the Shadow' (404).[12]

A few days later, the ship enters the doldrums (a symbolic representation of Martin's own ethical situation). Restless, Martin lies on his bed; he glances through the pages of a volume by Swinburne and has a revelation: 'that was it. The very thing. Strange that it had never come to him before. That was the meaning of it all. (…) "From too much love of living / From hope and fear set free / We thank with brief thanksgiving / Whatever gods may be / That no life lives forever / That dead men rise up never"' (405). Martin resolves to die[13]: he turns the light off in his cabin, climbs out of the porthole and dives into the sea. He first tries to drown by holding his breath but realises that this won't work. So he decides to swim downwards, until he is too deep to come back up, and the book closes with these lines: 'Somewhere at the bottom he fell into darkness. That much he knew. He had fallen into darkness. And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know' (407).

Unlike Wilde, who gained humility (and a way out of despair) by losing everything, Martin loses by gaining everything he strived for. Returning to our litmus test, in relation to question (1) it is difficult to see how DFL could be counted as good for Martin: it deprives him, not just of happiness but also of the ethical framework required for character development, and also prevents meaningful interaction with others. At the end, Martin's world is one of absolute loneliness. Arguably, DFL also deprives him of his agency (2): while extraordinarily active throughout his life, curious about all possible experiences and endowed with extraordinary willpower and energy, once in despair Martin is struck by apathy. Most importantly, he cannot write anymore, his work is all 'performed already' (the expression recurs several times). As with Wilde, his sense of time changes: he views his future passively, without interest, like a third person observer rather than as an agent: 'he was not curious about the future. He would soon enough find out

[11]Recall: 'I love the one whose soul is deep even when wounded' (*Zarathustra*, Prologue, 8).

[12](a reference to Psalm 23. Unlike David, however, Martin does not have the staff and rod of God to guide him).

[13]Note that unlike the Mother in *The Road*, Martin does not express any hope of dying: he *expects* to succeed at killing himself, through an effort of will.

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what it held in store for him. Whatever it was, it did not matter' (343). Although Martin does recover his agency at the end and devotes the same energy and willpower to dying as he previously did to living, a careful look at the last pages of the book reveals that it is not despair which prompts Martin to action but his chance reading of the Swinburne poem: 'he turned on the electric light and tried to read. One of the volumes was a Swinburne. He lay in bed, glancing through its pages, and suddenly he became aware that he was reading with interest' (405). Martin did not set out to read this particular book, had no anticipation of enjoying its content, and only realises retrospectively that his interest has been piqued. What prompts him to act is moral luck, not despair: 'he looked again at the open port. Swinburne had furnished the key' (405).

This key, however, does not lie in the discovery of a new evaluative framework or new ideals, but in the resolution to die. This is where London parts both from the tightrope walker (who dies by accident) and from the last Men (who do not die, or at least not yet) to introduce his own vignette. The manner of Martin's death, I suggest, outlines London's personal stance on the consequences of the nihilism of despair. Martin's downward swimming can be seen as a second form of crossing over, towards death this time, for which he recaptures the energy and motivation he had lost in his early crossing over to Ruth and her bourgeois world: 'he turned over and went down headfirst, swimming with all his strength and all his will' (407). Like the tightrope walker, Martin is distracted in this second crossing over: bonitas (tuna fish) come to investigate his descent, and he worries about being bitten, which might 'snap the tension of his will' (407). Yet unlike the tightrope walker, Martin does not succumb to the distraction (note the symmetry of the penalties: while the distracted tightrope walker dies, a distracted Martin would have continued to live in a meaningless world). Ultimately, he escapes the comfortable wasteland of the Last Men and does 'perish of his vocation', but on his own terms, not by accident or inattention: 'the will to live, was his thought, and the thought was accompanied by a sneer. Well, he had will – aye, will strong enough that with one last exertion it could destroy itself and cease to be' (407). By comparison with the tightrope walker's fall, Martin's death is a success, not a failure: he has exercised his own will to the utmost to thwart the 'will to live', because such life as was offered to him after the loss of his ideals was not worth living in his eyes. Yet on the larger scale of things Martin's death still represents a failure to overcome the nihilism of despair and the loss of values that characterises it. In this respect London's own vignette (the wilfully dying Martin) is profoundly pessimistic. In many ways, Martin is the incarnation of the best of the human qualities: if such a man as him cannot escape the nihilism of despair, what hope is there for us? London himself committed suicide a few years after publishing *Martin Eden*.

Remains question (3): does Martin's despair involve a bad use of his epistemic abilities? Throughout the book, London emphasises Martin's native intelligence, his will to understand himself and the world, and also his receptivity to the latter: 'he was so made that he could only work with understanding. (…) He wanted to know why and how' (207).[14] Martin describes himself as a realist: he wants to 'write life as [he] sees it' (301). So, is he lucid in assessing the ideals he strove for as empty? Does he despair, not because he is mistaken about his situation, but rather because he is clear eyed about it? As with Wilde, it seems difficult to give a definite answer. On the one hand, Martin's assessment of Ruth's character does seem correct: 'much as she had liked him she had liked the bourgeois standard of valuation more. She had opposed his writing and principally, it seemed to him, because it did not earn money' (376; see also 391). Similarly, Martin's social critique of judge Blount, for example, and more generally of the bourgeois way of life, also seems apt. On the other hand, London emphasises Martin's idealism, not just his anti-bourgeois desire for realism: 'what he sought was an impassioned realism, shot through with human aspiration and faith' (238; see also 391). One may wonder, then, whether Martin's very idealism may have led him to overemphasise the impossibility of the good. Could it be that he implicitly threw out the baby with the bath water, by inferring from the realisation that the ideals he pursued are not good that *no* good can ever be realised in this world? Seen in this light, Martin's despair from loss takes yet another dimension: it makes him blind to the possibility of other ideals, and results in the impossibility of escaping from ascetic ideals by creating (or even discovering) new values. By contrast, Humphrey ('Hump') van Weyden, who is sustained in the *Seawolf* by such ideals as community,

[14]Recall *Zarathustra*: 'I love the one who lives in order to know, and who wants to know' (8).

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empathy and mutual help, survives the wreckage of the ship with the poetess Maud Brewster, whereas Wolf Larsen dies alone.

If the above analyses are right, then this second application of the litmus test also leaves Bob's and my position unchanged. I now turn to my last case study, Jean Améry.

3 | DESPAIR FROM ONTOLOGICAL LOSS: JEAN AMÉRY[15]

As noted by many commentators, Jean Amery's writings are inhabited by a pervasive sense of despair: 'the more exactly we experience time in its irreversibility, the more in despair we fight against it, and at the same time and in the same breath the more intimately we belong to it' (OA: 19).[16] Much of Améry's work consists in analysing his losses. In this section, I argue that Améry's self-analyses bring to the fore a new form of DFL: the despair from what I call 'ontological' loss, exemplified by loss of the ability to be at home and loss of trust in the world. I examine each of these in turn.

'How Much Home Does a Person Need?' is devoted to exploring 'the scope and effects of the loss of home that befell us exiles from the Third Reich' (1980: 48). While the theme of loss of home is recurrent in the essay, this loss is set apart from other losses (such as that of 'possessions, homestead, business, fortune' (42)) by its paradoxical character. For, while Améry states several times in the essay that he has lost his home (e.g., 42, 51, 54, 57), he also claims that 'we had to realize that [our country] *had never been ours*' (50, my italics). But how is this possible?[17] How can you lose what wasn't yours in the first place? I submit that in Améry's case, the proper resolution of this paradox rests upon understanding the loss of the particular home as resulting from the loss of what having a home presupposed in the first place, namely the ability to be at home. The loss of this ability gives us our first glimpse into ontological loss.

First, consider (a contrario) what we might call the standard resolution of the paradox: suppose that I believe I lost something you lent me, and am distressed at the thought that I cannot return it to you. Suppose also that you then remind me that in fact, I hadn't borrowed the object in question from you but decided to buy my own instead (and had forgotten this). Presumably, I would not experience the realisation that I did not have the 'lost' item in the first place as distressing, but as a relief: 'phew, I didn't lose anything then!'. The paradox is resolved because the recognition that the 'lost' item was not in my possession reveals the loss as imaginary, cancelling out the pain I initially felt. But Améry's experience is different. As Hanns Mayer he had a German name, dressed in local clothes, spoke the local dialect, and felt at home in Austria until the fatal moment when, after the Nuremberg proclamation, he sees a nazi flag waved from the window of a nearby farmstead. With the realisation that 'for us, whatever was linked with this land and its people was an existential misunderstanding' (50), Mayer/Améry becomes an exile in his (formerly) home country, even though he hasn't left it yet.

On the standard resolution of the paradox, the pain of the loss of home should dissipate due to Améry realising that his home was never his to lose in the first place. Yet the realisation that he never had a home to lose *increases* his despair. So, what did he lose exactly, and how? Perhaps an analogy with the loss of innocence will help. As pointed out by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Adam can only realise that he was innocent by losing his innocence, because it is part of being innocent not to be aware *that* you are innocent: innocence is something one can only become aware of retrospectively, in the past tense. In the case of Améry's loss of home, the movement of

[15]Born Hanns Chaim Mayer, Jean Améry was an Austrian Jew. He studied philosophy and literature in Vienna. He was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo in Belgium, and then sent to Auschwitz and Buchenwald. After the war he settled in Belgium and took the name of Jean Amery (an anagram of Mayer). He died by his own hand in 1978.

[16]See also: 'nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp (…). In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and shoddy' (1980: 19).

[17]The paradox arises because Améry sees home and country as intrinsically, and inextricably, related: 'home is the land of one's childhood and youth' (48). In particular, he argues against the thought that home and the homeland (or fatherland) could be considered as conceptually separate from each other: 'home ceases to be home as soon as it is not at the same time also fatherland' (55).

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awareness is similarly retrospective: yet while Adam realises that he *was* innocent by losing his innocence, Améry realises that he did *not* have a home by losing the home he thought he had. Correlatively, the real object of the loss appears: not his home, which wasn't truly his, but that which made it possible for Améry to understand himself as having at home in the first place: his ability to be at home.

Such ability is not an empirical instance of the good, like Bosie was to Wilde. While it has an axiological dimension in that it involves an understanding of social norms, the ability to be at home also differs from the evaluative framework from which the possibility of the good makes sense (a framework which, as we shall see, Améry never lost anyway) because it bears, more broadly, on how a person orients themselves in the world. In my view, our ability to be at home is best characterised in phenomenological terms, as 'ontological', because it involves what it means to *be* for us: how we understand our relations to self, world and others. For Améry, this ability is a key structure of existence (it is 'constitutive of our nature' (50)) and has at least three characteristics. First, 'what we call home gives access to a reality that for us consists of perception through the senses' (57): to be at home is to know intuitively where you are spatially and geographically, how to make sense of the social 'signs' (48) others convey by their stance, their dress (etc.), what your place in the world is (and that you have a place in it). Second, the ability to be at home governs the possibility of being a confident agent: 'at home we are in full command of the dialectics of knowledge and recognition, of trust and confidence. (…) We trust ourselves to speak and to act' (47). This implicit familiarity with the norms and customs of one's home allows a person to navigate their physical and social environment comfortably and without hesitation: 'to live in one's homeland means that what is already knowns to us occurs before our eyes again and again' (47). Finally, the ability to be at home is transparent to those who exercise it because it is pre-reflective, in the sense that it does not require conscious articulation to be learned, or to be practiced: 'just as one learns one's mother tongue without knowing its grammar, one experiences one's native surroundings. Mother tongue and native world grow with us, grow into us' (48).

The trauma of losing the home Améry thought he had suddenly brings this pre-reflective ontological level to the fore of his consciousness. Yet like innocence, the ability to be at home only becomes reflectively available in the paradoxical mode of being lost, and desperately needed.[18] This trauma also makes visible the key role the ability to be at home plays in relation to the self: 'whoever has lost [one's home] remains lost himself' (48).[19] While it does not change the past, the new impossibility for Améry to be at home undermines both his understanding of the past and his ability to identify with his past self. He does not feel 'entitled to his past' (58) anymore. He cannot trust his memories of his homeland because he has lost the narrative which allowed him to think of himself as at home in Austria, and with it, the self-understanding his life was built upon: 'suddenly, the past was buried and one no longer knew who one was' (43). Deprived of his ability to be at home, Améry cannot even understand himself as having *had* a home, which results in a paroxysm of despair.[20]

So, the paradox of losing something one didn't have in the first place is resolved once the proper object of Améry's loss is recognised: not the particular home he did not truly have, but his ontological ability to be at home. I now turn to the second form of ontological loss Améry experienced, which he calls 'loss of trust in the world',

[18]'One must have a home in order *not* to need it' (46, my italics).

[19]See Jakobson (2009: 359): home is 'a place of and for the self'.

[20]This is marked by Améry's contrast between 'traditional' and 'genuine' homesickness. 'Traditional' homesickness is the pain a person feels when they have lost a home they genuinely had, and which remains intact in their memory: it is the pain felt by 'the German refugee from the East who knows that a foreign power [national socialism] has taken his land from him' (52). By contrast, Améry felt like a fraud for experiencing such pain: 'traditional homesickness – well, yes, we had that too, as a small extra. (…) But there was a constant undercurrent of awareness that we had appropriated it illegally' (50–51). Such appropriation felt 'illegal' to him because as we saw, the loss of a person's ability to be at home destroys their understanding of their past home and self, and so prevents this person from believing that the home they lost was ever theirs. Accordingly, while 'traditional' homesickness is passive and nostalgic, 'genuine' homesickness consists in actively embracing the loss of one's ability to be at home by destroying one's memories of the former home: 'genuine homesickness (…) consisted in dismantling our past piece by piece, which could not be done without self-contempt and hatred for the lost self' (51). The result is an intensification of despair, with the pain of each layer of loss amplifying that of the others: 'the combination of hatred for our homeland and self hatred hurt, and the pain intensified most unbearably when, during the strenuous task of self destruction, now and then traditional sickness also welled up and claimed its place' (51).

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powerfully evoked by his recounting of the torture he endured at the fort of Breendonk, in Belgium.[21] Loss of trust in the world is closely related to loss of home: as Améry puts it, part of what it is to trust in the world is to 'feel at home in the world' (40). Likewise, trust in the world is pre-reflective, and only comes to Améry's explicit awareness retrospectively, through this trust having been broken by his torturer. Yet unlike the ability to be at home, trust in the world is very strongly linked to our awareness of being fragile corporeal beings.[22] Rather than an implicit, profound familiarity with one's environment, trust in the world is the implicit confidence that the vulnerability which results from our being embodied will be respected, and even protected, by others.[23] This confidence is expressed both negatively, by the trust that others will not harm me, and positively, by the trust that should I be harmed, others will help me. Regarding the first, trust in the world involves 'the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will (…) respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being' (28). In this respect Améry likens torture to rape, the forcing of a person's corporeality on another's. Regarding the second, trust in the world involves the background belief that others will help me if I am injured: 'in almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help (…). But with the first blow from a policeman's fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived' (29).

On Améry's account, then, trust in the world is ontological because it shapes the most primary ways in which a person is in the world: how they relate to their own body and that of others, how confidently they occupy space (and which spaces they occupy), how they encounter others (or withdraw in fear from them), how they understand what is possible for them, and the like. While Améry does not draw explicit connections with any particular philosopher, the concept of loss of trust in the world strongly resonates with the work of 20th century phenomenologists, many of whom he had read. For Heidegger, for example, loss of trust in the world could be characterised as the loss of being-with, the ability to share a social world. Améry points out that loss of trust in the world generates an almost metaphysical sense of loneliness, like being a monad cut off from all other monads: others appear either as 'anti-humans', like Améry's torturers, or as 'co-humans', humans whom he meets every day but with whom he has no affective connection: 'I pass them with a greeting and without hostility. I cannot rely on them' (96). The only humans he mentions by name, the 'upright men he would gladly have saved', are dead (74).[24] In Løgstrup's terms, losing one's trust in the world may be tantamount to being cut off from what he calls the 'sovereign expressions of life' such as trust, mercy or compassion. Or again, a Lévinassian may interpret the loss of trust in the world as resulting from the transgression of the primary ethical imperative embodied in the face of the other: 'do not harm me'.

In relation to our paper, trust in the world is akin to what Bob and I called 'hopefulness' as the disposition to hope. Without Améry in mind, we described hopefulness as a 'background trust that at least some goods can obtain, where typically hopefulness is pre-reflective and therefore not propositional, although it can be put in propositional form' (74). Hopefulness allows us to hope because it implicitly establishes the possibility of a future in which good things can happen (and so can be hoped for). Along similar lines (and a contrario), for Améry loss of trust in the world 'blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules' (40).[25] It is a radical form of loss for two reasons: first, it does not bear solely on the actual (instances of the good or evaluative frameworks) but also on the possible: without trust in the world, one cannot project oneself into the future, in the sense, not just of making proximate

[21] 'At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down. The 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' (28).

[22] See Bernstein ••

[23] On the relations between trust and faith, see ••

[24] By contrast, even in prison Wilde had friends, in particular Robbie. His trust that others would help in case of need was not broken: 'when I was brought down from my prison to the Court of Bankruptcy between two policemen, Robbie waited in the long dreary corridor, that before the whole crowd, whom an action so sweet and simple hushed into silence, he might gravely raise his hat to me, as handcuffed and with bowed head I passed him by. (…) I have never said one single word to him about what he did. (…) It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I store it in the treasury-house of my heart' (125). As for Martin Eden, he retained his trust in his bodily integrity and his ability to physically navigate the world. If anything, Martin (like Wolf Larsen) is supremely body-confident and has no fear of being injured.

[25] On the relations between trust and hope, see McGreer (2004 & 2008). See also Ratcliffe (2023: 1): 'the most fundamental forms of hope and trust are inextricable'.

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plans but more primordially, of understanding oneself as someone who *has* a future in which they can change and adapt meaningfully. Second – at least in Améry's experience – trust in the world cannot be recovered: 'every day anew I lose my trust in the world' (94). The result is a radical alienation from the world and a sense of profound despair and abandonment: 'without trust in the world I face my surroundings as a Jew who is alien and alone, and all that I can manage to do is to get along within my foreignness'. (96).

I shall now argue that, in addition to bringing to the fore a distinctive form of the despair from loss, Améry's self-analyses are also expressive of the despair from desire, and that this presents our view with a specific challenge: the possibility that despair may *both* be ethically bad for the individual and justified morally.

4 | AMÉRY'S CHALLENGE? DESPAIR FROM DESIRE AND THE APOLOGY OF RESENTMENT

Unlike Martin Eden, Améry is not prevented by his losses from holding onto a strong evaluative framework: 'I speak as a victim and examine my resentments' (63). Such examination does not result in nihilistic disorientation but in an apology of resentment which exhibits the structure characteristic of DFD: holding on to a desire while believing that this desire cannot be satisfied. In Améry's terms, 'resentment desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened' (67). Yet Améry is well aware that his desire for redress cannot be satisfied: "all recognisable signs suggest that natural time will reject the moral demands of our resentment and finally extinguish them (…) We, the victims, will appear as (…) the antihistorical reactionaries in the exact sense of the world, and in the end it will seem like a technical mishap that some of us still survived' (79). The awareness that this demand cannot be met, combined with the constantly renewed upholding of the demand through the apology of resentment, generates an instance of DFD which I shall now examine.

Améry's apology of resentment rests on an inversion of the priority which he believes both the Nietzschean and psychological criticisms of resentment give to health over morality. Both condemn resentment because they see it as an unhealthy emotion which damages its bearer. Yet on Améry's view, this is a reductive approach. Psychologists tend to reduce the experience of the victims of the Nazi extermination project to a set of trauma, and so pathologise these victims' reactions as 'concentration camp syndrome' (69). Psychologists also minimise the moral significance of the trauma by encouraging victims to come to terms with what happened so as to recover from it – hence Améry's criticism of 'the Jews who in this hour were already trembling with the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation, whether their name was Victor Gollancz or Martin Buber' (65). As for Nietzsche's critique of resentment in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Améry believes that it does not apply to him because his own resentment is 'of a special kind (…), of which neither Nietzsche nor Max Scheler (…) was able to have any notion' (71). Améry takes offence at Nietzsche's characterisation of the resentful person as 'neither sincere, nor naïve, nor honest or forthright with himself. (…) His mind loves hiding places and back doors' (GM, quoted by Améry on p. 68).[26] Améry believes his own resentment to be different because he seeks to be sincere, honest and forthright with himself, and to bring resentment in the open: 'since I neither can nor want to get rid of [my resentments], I must live with them and am obliged to clarify them for those against whom they are directed' (67).

Améry's clarification strategy involves two main moves. First, he steals his opponents' thunder by acknowledging that resentment *is* nefarious for the individual: 'it did not escape me that resentment (…) nails everyone of us onto the cross of his ruined past (67). Améry points out that resentment is 'unnatural' and antisocial, because it gets in the way of the natural healing processes both of the individual and of society (72). Resentment prevents wounds from closing, which is why, on the view common to Nietzsche and the psychologists, it is nefarious and must be avoided. Améry's second move consists in advocating a reversal of the priority given to nature over morality. Bad as it may be for the individual, resentment is *morally* justified: 'my resentments are there in order that the crime become

[26]It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine whether Améry's views on GM are correct, and fair. See, however, footnote 27.

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a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity' (70). Holding on to resentment, far from being a debased psychological trait, is thus an attempt to fulfil the ideal of justice by demanding that the criminal 'experiences the moral truth of his crimes. (…) The moral person demands the annulment of time (…) by nailing the criminal to his deeds' (71). By contrast, forgiveness appears as a moral flaw, a form of insensitivity and cowardice: it is 'cheap and lazy' (72). Consequently, Améry weaponises his resentments into a 'moral of hitting back' (Zurückschlagen Moralität) which places his 'mean irreconcilability in the shining light of morals and morality' (71).[27] He is aware that his apology of resentment is bound to fail: 'without a doubt, I will be reproached for this. (…) I am aware from the start that the overwhelming majority of the world's nonvictims will hardly accept my justification' (71). This awareness generates further despair as the desired good (retributive or restorative justice) recedes from view ever further and the feeling of loss is increased proportionally. Yet this vicious circle of despair is not, for Améry, a morally justified reason for abandoning his apology of resentment, which he sees as a moral duty: 'I *must* encapsulate my resentments' (80, my italics).

Prima facie, Améry's apology of resentment presents a strong challenge to Bob's and my position because it opens up the possibility of a tension between what is good for us on the one hand, and what is morally right to do on the other. From this new perspective, the fact that despair is bad for us is not a sufficient reason to shun it if this despair is morally justified. Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2015) highlights the same tension with respect to Kant's views on morality: according to her, there are 'core existential commitments' which are such that we have a moral obligation not to give them up, even at our own detriment, because giving them up would pave the way to alternatives which are not morally permissible. For Améry, holding on to his resentments and fighting for justice clearly are such core existential commitments, and the alternatives (what he calls 'natural' healing, or forgiveness, or both) are not morally permissible. If Améry is correct, then Bob and I are wrong about the value of despair: in the context of Améry's apology of resentment the desired good (justice) *must* be sought, even at the cost of the agent's happiness and in the knowledge that this quest cannot succeed, because any alternative would be morally unacceptable.

A key question, however, is whether that last premise is correct. Could one not pursue the quest for justice, but without tying the means for its realisation to an apology of resentment? This would open up the (morally acceptable) possibility of keeping one's core commitment while seeking to realise it by other, non self-defeating, means. The practical contradiction central to DFD would disappear, as the agent would pursue their desire while abandoning the belief that this desire cannot be realised.

As it happens, this is more than a theoretical possibility: it is exactly what Primo Lévi, another well-known survivor from Auschwitz, did. In 'An Intellectual at Auschwitz', which was written explicitly as a meditation on, and critique of, Améry's 'bitter and chilling' views, Lévi makes the following comment: 'I heard a few years go that Améry, in a letter to a common friend, defined me as 'he who forgives'. I do not regard this either as insult or as praise, but as incorrect. I am not prone to forgiveness, I have not forgiven any of our then enemies. (…) I demand justice, but (…) I prefer, in the limits of what is possible, to delegate punishment, revenge and retribution to the laws of my country' (134, my translation). Lévi adopts a middle position: not to forgive, and so to keep his desire for justice alive, but to seek a different way of realising this desire by relying on institutional processes (such as the Nuremberg trials) to obtain justice. In his view, Améry's moral of 'hitting back' and apology of resentment, while admirable for their courage, are not the best agential options precisely because they are self-defeating and can only foster despair: '[this choice] led him to positions of such severity and intransigeance that they made him incapable of finding joy in living, and more, of living: whoever fight the whole world with his fists pays a very high price, for he is certain of defeat' (133). Lévi never gave up his desire for justice but found other ways of upholding it than nursing resentment: in

[27]Note that this last characterisation of resentment suggests that Améry's reading of Nietzsche rests on a category mistake. For, a key characteristic of ressentiment in the *Genealogy of Morals* is precisely that it *cannot* hit back: its inability to externalise itself in the real world is the reason why it must turn inward and limit itself to what Nietzsche calls an 'imaginary revenge'. By contrast, Améry weaponises his resentment by openly emphasising what he sees as its moral value and historical validity. He keeps reminding Germany, and the world, of the duty to remember, and to make amends. By Nietzschean lights, such actions are not expressive of ressentiment. In fact it is *forgiveness* (as Améry describes it), not his own resentment, which would appear to be a true case of Nietzschean ressentiment: '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*' (71, my italics).

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doing so, he arguably was more effective, for the profound humanity of *If This is a Man* did much to sensitise the public to the systematic dehumanisation operative in the camps. By contrast, Améry's apology of resentment often had the opposite effect to that which was sought: it hardened people against the very cause he wanted to defend, a fact he was well aware of.

Lévi's case shows a contrario that Améry's apology of resentment rests on a false alternative: either upholding the desire for justice, and so being morally right at the cost of despairing, or giving up the desire for justice and avoiding despair, but at the cost of being morally wrong. While the fact that there were other, morally permissible options in this case does not rule out the abstract possibility of situations where there genuinely would *not* be any other option but to uphold despair, Améry's challenge itself is thus not sufficient to call for a revision of the claim that despair is a vice because it is bad for the agent. In addition, one may note that Améry did not advocate for the upholding of *despair* as a moral duty, but for the nurturing of *resentments*. There is a difference between advocating for despair for its own sake on the one hand, and for a psychological structure which both is expressive of, and reinforces, despair on the other. Accordingly, Améry's challenge needs reformulating: what is really at stake here is not a putative duty to despair, but the duty to *endure* despair in the course of seeking a morally justified outcome by a means which is bound to generate despair (the apology of resentment). If this is correct, then it removes the possibility of despair being morally good in itself, which was at the core of Améry's challenge.

Could despair be good instrumentally then, for example by helping Améry achieve his goals? This takes us to the second question of the litmus test: did despair deprive Améry of his agency (2)? At first sight this does not seem to be the case, given how active he was in articulating his resentments throughout the years. But things are more complicated: while Améry was able to act, arguably despair had a strong negative impact on the possibility of his exercises of agency being *successful* because it generated a series of double binds. These have the following structure: as an agent, Améry sets himself goals. Yet he does not believe that he can achieve these goals. He still pursues the relevant goals but fails, which confirms his belief that he cannot succeed, and deepens his despair.

This double bind structure is shared by the three following examples. First, the desire for, and impossibility of, a new home. As we saw, Améry's loss of his previous home (Austria) is deepened, and made more complex, by the realisation that this home was never his. After the war, he seeks to 'find a new home' (47) in Belgium. Yet he soon comes to believe that this is an impossible task, for one will never have the immediate, native familiarity with the new home that one had with the lost home: 'penetrating the signs will not be spontaneous but rather an intellectual act, one combined with a certain expenditure of moral effort' (48). Native immediacy to one's home can never be reproduced: there is no acquired immediacy, only a reflective relationship to the new environment.

Second, the desire, and impossibility of, a new mother tongue. Améry's mother tongue was German: he applied himself to learn French and Dutch, but soon realised that neither would become natural to him. He recounts a moving episode which illustrates this: 'I heard a milk boy say "ja" at a house door while delivering his ware. He said it in Dutch with a Flemish accent and with exactly that dark A resembling an O that is usual in the same word in my native dialect. The "ja" was familiar and strange at the same time, and I understood that in the other language I would always be entitled only to temporary hospitality' (54).

Third, the desire, and impossibility of, being a Jew. With the Nuremberg laws Améry is 'made' a Jew. After the war, he sees as part of his task to positively own his Jewishness: he 'must' be a Jew (82). Yet unlike people raised within the Jewish tradition, Améry finds it impossible to identify as a Jew because no positive determinants are available to him: 'if being a Jew means sharing a religious creed with other Jews, participating in Jewish cultural and family tradition, cultivating a Jewish national ideal, then I find myself in a hopeless situation' (82). Paradoxically, the only thing Améry can identify with is the very impossibility of identifying as a Jew: 'it is not because I don't want to be a Jew, but only because I cannot be one. And yet must be one. (…) The necessity and impossibility of being a Jew, that is what causes me indistinct pain' (82). The main reason for the impossibility of any positive self-identification is this: 'one can reestablish the link with a tradition that one has lost, but one cannot freely invent it for oneself, that is the problem. Since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won't be able to become one' (84). This passage seems an implicit criticism of Sartre's radical choice: one cannot 'freely invent' a new self, because either there

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are no criteria for the choice and so it is arbitrary, or there are existing criteria but then the self is not 'freely invented' (because this would require inventing the criteria too). Similarly, Améry can neither invent a tradition (as this would be arbitrary) nor appropriate a tradition he does not own.

These examples suggest that Bob and I were not quite right in arguing that despair deprives us of our agency. We implicitly had in mind situations of crisis, where the agent is paralysed by despair. Yet Améry's case shows that it is possible, in the long term, both to despair and to act – but not successfully. Thus in relation to question (2) of the litmus test, we should revise our initial claim and say that at the minimum despair severely impairs our agency.

I now turn to the last question of the litmus test (3). Given the radical extent of his losses, could not Améry's despair result from a correct epistemic assessment of truly awful circumstances? Or did his loss of trust in the world distort his ability to see any good in the world, and so bias him against the positive aspects of any situation? The question of whether he was lucid was particularly important to Améry himself. He raised it several times and believed that his experience of torture and imprisonment had 'equipped him better to recognise reality' (110). Lévi, however, points out that '[Améry's] gaze is turned towards the heights and rarely stops on the people of the Lager' (139). He emphasises Améry's 'intransigeance', a certain one-sidedness in honing on the negative, his focus on death as well as the absence of 'vital goals' more generally in his life: 'vital goals are the best defence against death – not only in the Lager' (144). So, did the despairing Améry use his epistemic abilities appropriately?

While I am in no position to give a definite answer, I was struck by the fact that each time Améry asks the question of whether he is lucid, he does so by framing, apparently without realising it, a false alternative. If this is true then one may wonder, in the spirit of an internal critique, whether the fact that Améry does not see this may be taken as indicative that the way in which he construes his situation and circumstances is not as lucid as he believes it is.

I shall examine briefly three such false alternatives. The first is introduced in this long passage: 'but am I attempting this rejoinder in full command of my mental powers? Mistrustingly, I examine myself. It could be that I am sick, for after observing us victims, objective scientific method, in its lovely detachment, has already come up with the concept of the "concentration camp syndrome'. (…) Nervous restlessness, hostile withdrawal into one's own self are the typical signs of our sickness. (…) Vigilance is imperative. Seductive, consoling self-pity could entice. But one can believe me when I say that for me this is no problem. In the jails and camps of the Third Reich all of us scorned rather than pitied ourselves because of our helplessness and all-encompassing weakness' (67). Améry sets up an implicit alternative: either being 'sick', and so to exhibit a tendency to self-pity instead of vigilance, or being vigilant and free from self-pity, in which case one is not sick. But one could be *both* vigilant and sick. In fact, the sickness could reside in part in the very manner in which vigilance is sought, without any compassion for oneself or for others (all of us 'scorned ourselves'). Hyper-vigilance is also known to be one of the most common effects of post-traumatic stress.[28] From this perspective, the above passage could be taken to exhibit the very signs which comprise 'concentration camp syndrome', in particular hostile withdrawal into the self.

A little further, Améry returns to the issue of lucidity: 'it is entirely impossible for me to refute the suspicion that I am drowning the ugly reality of a malicious instinct in the verbal torrent of an unverifiable thesis. I will have to take the risk. (…) It seems logically senseless to me to demand objectivity in the controversy with my torturers, with those who helped them, and with the others, who merely stood by silently. The atrocity as atrocity has no objective character. Mass murder, torture, injury of every kind are objectively nothing but chains of physical events, describable in the formalized language of the natural sciences. They are facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system' (69). The alternative here is this: either one is objective, in which case one loses the 'moral truth of the conflict', or one keeps this moral truth but then one must give up on objectivity. Améry's implicit reasoning seems to be the following: 'objectivity' denotes the scientifically recordable and analysable character of facts. Given that his own approach is not scientific, and that the proper objects of his account are not facts, but moral values, the demand for objectivity is meaningless: it is a category mistake. Yet Améry's understanding of 'objectivity' seems both reductive

[28]See for example Bryant et al. (1997), Chemtob et al. (1988), Ehlers (2000), Conoscenti et al. (2009).

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and counter-intuitive. Reductive, because it rests on a stark opposition between facts and values and presupposes a radical anti-realism about morality ('the atrocity as atrocity has no objective character'), both of which are hard to accept without justification. Counter-intuitive, because in the hermeneutic context of a narrative such as Améry's, objectivity tends to be understood, not as a property of facts, but as an epistemic virtue which applies to the manner in which the relevant narrative is constructed. To be 'objective', in this context, does not mean to abandon any evaluative perspective, but to temper one's evaluative perspective best as one can, for example by avoiding interpretive biases (such as confirmation bias), seeking exhaustivity (by looking at all the relevant evidence) and impartiality (e.g., treating evidence and arguments fairly), exhibiting critical reflective self-awareness (e.g., seeking to avoid the undue influence of one's beliefs or emotions) and intellectual humility (recognising the limits of one's own approach). If objectivity is understood in this contextually appropriate sense, then Améry's alternative between either being objective or losing the moral truth of the conflict evaporates: in fact, a degree of objectivity may be required to properly understand the moral truth of the conflict.

At the very end of the book, Améry raises again the issue of the lucidity of his assessments[29]: 'once again I must ask myself the question that I already raised fleetingly in my essay "Resentments": am I perhaps mentally ill and am I not suffering from an incurable ailment, from hysteria? The question is merely rhetorical. (…) I know that what oppresses me is no neurosis, but rather precisely reflected reality. Those were no hysteric hallucinations when I heard the Germans call for the Jews to "die like a dog!" and, in passing, heard how people said that there really must be something suspicious about the Jews, because otherwise they would hardly be treated so severely. (…) I am thus forced to conclude that I am not deranged and was not deranged, but rather that the neurosis is on the part of the historical occurrence. The others are the madmen, and I am left standing around helplessly among them, a fully sane person' (99). The alternative is this: either Améry is suffering from a mental ailment, namely hysteria, or he is 'oppressed by precisely reflected reality'. Yet here too both could be the case. Further, hysteria is not the only mental disorder that could possibly be considered: the block claim that 'the others are the madmen' could be taken as indicative of paranoia, as well as the implicit assumption that *someone* has to be mad (as opposed to no one being mad, a possibility which Améry, perhaps significantly, does not consider).

While none of the above examples is conclusive, on balance my view on (3) is that the very form of Améry's claims to lucidity (namely the false alternatives he recurrently sets up in his attempts at self-examination) undermines the validity of his conclusion (namely, that he is lucid in his assessments).

5 | CONCLUSION: FURTHER GUISES OF DESPAIR?

I originally set out to explore a guise of despair which Bob and I had not considered, namely despair from loss (in contradistinction to despair from desire). I undertook such exploration both for its own sake, and to test our claim that despair is one of the two vices hope as a virtue sits between (the other being unwarranted optimism). I turned to literary works, in the hope of finding richer sources for the phenomenon, and uncovered several forms of the despair from loss. It is now time to gather the threads. Perhaps the first conclusion is that our view has, on the whole, withstood the litmus test: in view of the case studies, we can still hold that despair is a vice because it is bad for us ethically (1) and that it distorts the use of our epistemic abilities (3). Regarding agency (2), Améry's case has shown that we should amend our original claim and say that at the minimum despair constitutively impairs (rather than paralyses) our agency, because it makes us unable to act successfully in relation to the relevant outcome.

I now return to the issue of scope I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: can the conclusions linked to these case studies be generalised, and if so, how far? I have two thoughts to offer in this respect. The first concerns the possibility of epistemically justified despair (3). While this possibility has not, in my view, been instantiated in any of

[29]One may wonder whether the very number of times Améry raises this question in a relatively short book is also indicative of a pre-reflective awareness that his views may be biased. Having said that, the recurrence of the question could also be seen as a pre-emptive, defensive move against his critics (by stealing their thunder, a strategy Améry was familiar with).

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the case studies, we might derive from the latter the beginning of a more general argument. In all three cases, a key effect of despair is the shrinking of existential possibilities, that is, of possibilities which are not merely logical but which the agent could make their own first-personally, and act upon. For example, escaping apathy and accidia is not an existential possibility for Oscar Wilde until humility pulls him out of despair. The invention (or discovery) of new ideals is not an existential possibility for Martin Eden on the *Mariposa*, even though this was possible for Hump on the *Seawolf* (and saved him). Moving on is not an existential possibility for Jean Améry, even though Primo Lévi seems to have found a way forward. One reason for this tapering off of existential possibilities is that despair profoundly affects a person's perception of time. Despair closes off the possibility of a meaningful future, in which agents could project themselves in the first person: the despairing person is trapped in the present (like Wilde or Martin Eden) or in the past (like Améry). Despair, then, has a constitutive tendency to restrict what we might call a person's agential horizon: the possibility of seeing possibilities for action as open to being pursued first-personally, and worthy of being pursued. If so, it would follow that a despairing person is bound *not* to see existential possibilities which could be available to someone who does not despair. Améry could not see any other existential possibility to seek justice than encapsulating his resentments, even though he recognised that this was a self-defeating strategy (and so despaired even more). By contrast Lévi, who from his own avowal believed in hope even in dire situations,[30] was able to find a course of action which allowed him to pursue justice while avoiding despair. More work would need to be done, but if the above is true, then despair would constitutively affect the use of a person's epistemic abilities in a negative manner, by preventing this person from seeing, let alone acting upon, the existential possibilities which might offer a way out of their situation.

My second scope-related thought is that there may be further guises of despair. In the course of researching this (already very long) paper, I came across sources (amongst which Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Malcom Lowry's *Under the Volcano* and Silvia Plath *The Bell Jar*) which may illustrate another such guise: the despair that comes from acting under the guise of the bad (or, to a lesser degree, from failing to act under the guise of the good) and blaming oneself for it.[31] Prima facie such despair, which we might call for now 'Despair from Ethical Failures of Agency' (DEFA), differs from the despair from desire because the desired object (e.g., the bad) is not perceived as being constitutively unattainable, and from the despair from loss because it does not bear on the loss of a valued object or ethical framework (on the contrary, the agent would not despair in this way if they could not tell good from bad). DEFA has a specific object, namely the wrongness of one's actions, thoughts, or (by extension) ethical character.[32] As DEFA can only be experienced by the self as an agent, the very reason which led me to leave Kierkegaard's analyses of despair out of this paper (namely, that for him despair is always agential) would make him an excellent interlocutor to help illuminate literary instantiations of the despair from ethical failures of agency (just as Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism offered profoundly useful resources in the case of the despair from loss). However, I must perforce leave such investigations to another paper.

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[30]By Lévi's lights, the morally justified thing to do to defend justice is to uphold *hope*, not resentment: 'you may be certain that the world is heading for destruction but it is a good thing, a moral thing, to behave as though there is still hope' (1985 interview).

[31]A key issue here would be whether it is genuinely possible to act under the guise of the bad in the first place. Bob Stern himself was very strongly opposed to this claim and argued that it should be reduced to a defective variant of acting under the guise of the good, where the agent misidentifies the bad for the good (on Bob's own example, Hitler did not act under the guise of the bad in ordering the Holocaust but misidentified eugenics for a good). Others, like Velleman (2015), hold that genuine Luciferian comportment is possible and so that one can desire, and seek, the bad for its own sake (see p. 95: 'the ruler of Hell doesn't desire what he wrongly thinks is worthy of approval; he desires what he rightly thinks isn't'). Depending on how one adjudicates on this issue, despair about ethical failures of agency would take different guises (e.g., from resulting from an epistemic failure to being expressive of a profound ethical failure, with various shades in between, for example if the epistemic failure itself is due to an earlier ethical failure in educating oneself appropriately).

[32]One might suggest that this is a form of ontological loss (loss of one's proper self). While this cannot be ruled out a priori, note that if to lose something one must have had this thing in the first place, then it is not clear that any of the characters in the books I just mentioned ever were in an appropriate relationship to themselves to start with.

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How to cite this article: Han-Pile, B. (2025). Guises of Despair. *European Journal of Philosophy*, e13072. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.13072

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