

Literary and
Cultural Theory



Piotr Śniedziewski

The Melancholic Gaze



PETER LANG

This book consists of nine chapters devoted to representations of melancholia in 19th-century art and literature. A noteworthy feature of the book is its use of concepts from later works by Sigmund Freud, Jean Clair, Jean Starobinski, Julia Kristeva and others. Those concepts elucidate further contexts of the notion of melancholia, which are presented not in isolation but juxtaposed with the philosophical background of the concept (starting from Hippocrates and Aristotle). Thus, the book not only provides a survey of images and modes of behaviour of 19th-century individuals, but also discusses the meanings of melancholia as they appeared in European culture over time.

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This book is for Magda

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Introduction

There is no Passion which is not manifested by some particular action of the eyes. This is so obvious in the case of some of them, that even the stupidest servants can tell from their master's eyes whether or not he is upset with them. But although these actions of the eyes are easily perceived, and what they mean is known, that does not make it easy to describe them, because each of them is composed of many changes taking place in the movement and shape of the eye, so singular and slight that there is no perceiving each of them separately, even though what results from their conjunction may be quite easy to recognize.¹

There are two gazes of Orpheus.

The first is well-known, almost to the point of being hackneyed. It is the gaze, full of impatience and therefore untimely, of the lover who managed to descend into the underworld, charm Charon, Cerberus and Hades himself with song, and deliver his beloved wife from eternal darkness and silence. The one condition the singer had to fulfill in order for this miracle, a miracle rivaled only by the story of Persephone, to take place may seem banal, disproportionate to the promise of future happiness. Eurydice would leave the depths of Hades with him and return to life, but during the journey home Orpheus, who had to lead the way, was forbidden to look behind him; forbidden to gaze upon his beloved. Hermes would walk behind her in order to keep an eye on the singer; to follow his movements and check his impulses, and, should Orpheus once turn around, to pull Eurydice back into the underworld. *Remember, you cannot look at her!* That was the condition set by Hades. It seems little enough to ask in exchange for a new life; for love regained. It seems even less when we consider the imbalance between what must have been a short journey home and the promise of a long and happy life on earth.

Indeed, it was not much to ask, except of someone who loved. Anyone who has ever loved knows that the gaze of the beloved can eclipse the whole world. What, then, could Orpheus do? He was no longer saddened by the death of Eurydice; no longer paralyzed by the fear of life, life which for him would once again soon know the delights of the past. Just then, in the moment that divides vanished pain from future joy, Orpheus was seized with the desire to see his beloved. Virgil recalls the event in the following passage from the *Georgics*:

1 René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), p. 79.

And now with homeward footstep he had passed [...],
Eurydice to realms of upper air
Had well-nigh won, behind him following –
So Proserpine had ruled it – when his heart
A sudden mad desire surprised and seized [...]
For at the very threshold of the day,
Heedless, alas! and vanquished of resolve,
He stopped, turned, looked upon Eurydice
His own once more. But even with the look,
Poured out was all his labor.²

Orpheus forgot about the command not to look, and his desire got the better of him. He gazed at his beloved, wanting to enjoy the sight of her and to reassure himself that she was there, walking behind him. The moment is preserved in the work of a nameless sculptor from the fifth century B.C.E., a relief depicting Hermes, Eurydice, and Orpheus. The winged god and the woman walk behind the poet, who, overwhelmed by his passions, has already stopped and turned to look at his beloved. This relief is strange indeed. We cannot tell whether the tragedy has already happened or is just about to happen. Eurydice's left arm rests on Orpheus's shoulder, as if she never wanted to leave her lover again. Yet her right arm is nervously reaching out for Hermes, which may indicate that Eurydice has had a premonition that she will never get out of the hellish underworld. Eurydice and Orpheus keep their gazes low, crossing at the level of their lips. Perhaps this is a reflection of the legend according to which Orpheus wished not only to look at his beloved, but also to kiss her. Virgil alludes to precisely that story in the *Culex*: "But cruel, more than cruel, Orpheus, thou, / Desiring kisses dear, didst break the gods' / Commands."³ In the relief, they appear still not to have looked into each other's face, since they are standing opposite each other. Will these faces catch the glimpse they seek? Will they gaze into each other's eyes? When will Hermes intervene and interrupt this foretaste of happiness, transforming it into the pain of everlasting loss? Will Orpheus's gaze touch, even fleetingly, on Eurydice's face? Will it meet her gaze? No one can answer these questions; Eurydice wonders aloud in the *Georgics*, with a note of indifference that presages the

2 Vergil, *Georgics*, IV, trans. James Rhoades, in: *Georgics and Eclogues*, trans. Rhoades and John William MacKail (North Charleston: Mockingbird Classics Publishing, 2014), p. 78.

3 *The Minor Poems of Vergil: Comprising the Culex, Dirae, Lydia, Moretum, Copa, Priapeia, and Catalepton*, trans. Joseph Mooney (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1916).

melancholy to come: “once again / The unpitied fates recall me [...] / Girt with enormous night I am borne away [...]”⁴

Orpheus’s beloved thus had an acute presentiment of what he would only come to realize in that later instant. His first loss, the death of Eurydice, was a painful experience, after which he “wrung by his minstrelsy”⁵ tears from hell itself its chance nature brought him a grief that was almost unimaginable,⁶ but that he was able to master through the process of mourning. The second loss, however, eludes the scope of any kind of funereal practices, since no one could have envisioned the correct response for a man who loses the same beloved person a second time.⁷ The second death is an epistemological scandal; no one is capable, perhaps, of imagining it; no, no one could live through it. Eurydice in this scene is filled with resignation, sadness, and apathy, while Orpheus, in the world of the living, faces the challenge put to him by an unacceptable death. No less striking is the question that stubbornly returns in this context: who did Orpheus really lose the second time? Eurydice? Might it only have been her phantom, used by the gods of the underworld to deceive him? Robert Graves recalls the singer’s doubts, mingled with despair: “at the last minute Orpheus feared that Hades might be tricking him, forgot the condition, looked anxiously behind him, and lost [Eurydice] forever.”⁸ That second loss is illogical, because it is impossible. Orpheus was supposed to recover his beloved in defiance of life and in defiance of the implacable law of death. There is therefore no way to

4 Virgil, *Georgics*, p. 78.

5 Virgil, *Georgics*, p. 77.

6 We should recall that Eurydice died as a result of being bitten by a snake, which happened when she was fleeing Aristaeus, son of Apollo and Cyrene, who was in amorous pursuit of her.

7 Similar doubts are voiced by Eurydice in a slightly different situation in Herbert’s *King of the Ants* as she asks: “How does one die a second time?” Zbigniew Herbert, *King of the Ants: Mythological Essays*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1999), p. 70. In Rilke’s version, the woman, reconciled to her second death, comes “walking back by that same path, / her steps confined by the long grave-cloths, / uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.” Rainer Maria Rilke, “Orpheus. Eurydice, Hermes,” trans. Anthony S. Kline, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/MoreRilke.htm>.

8 Robert Graves, *Myths of Ancient Greece* (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 46. Leszek Kolakowski treats the same subject in a half-humorous, half-tragic fashion in his retelling of the myth of Orpheus, “Apologia of Orpheus. Native of Thrace, a King’s Son, a Singer and Jester,” in the book *Talk of the Devil*, published in *The Devil and Scripture*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (Bristol: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 102–115.

master or rethink that loss or drown it in tears of forgetfulness. Ovid even wrote that “the double death of his dear wife” deafened Orpheus: “Seven days he sat upon Death’s river bank, / in squalid misery and without all food – / nourished by grief, anxiety, and tears.”⁹ According to Virgil, “Alone he wandered, [...] / Lamenting.”¹⁰

Astonishingly, however, none of the above-quoted authors even tries to describe the gaze of Orpheus after the loss of Eurydice. What happened to that gaze full of longing, a gaze seeking not only the eye of his beloved, but also her lips? What became of the gaze that sought to regain presence and turn hesitation into certainty? How did the gaze of Orpheus appear when all hope had departed, and not even he himself knew whom he should be weeping for: the real Eurydice, following in his footsteps, or the phantom who had held him up to ridicule before the gods? Virgil and Ovid remain silent on this point. Yet that gaze, lost to literature, must have been equally dramatic, full of pain and horror; it must have been a melancholy reversal of the hopeful gaze that sought to confirm the presence of Eurydice. Jan Parandowski only mentions the way the lonely, despairing Orpheus “looked all around him in vain: [Eurydice] was nowhere to be found.”¹¹ Wanda Markowska adds: “From then on, with wild eyes, with yearning and sorrow in his heart, Orpheus wandered about the mountains and forests of his chilly homeland.”¹²

The second gaze of Orpheus, then, has been forgotten, in spite of being doubly unhappy. The first gaze was driven by the certainty of seeing his beloved, the belief in her presence behind him and the promise of possessing her. In this second gaze there is also certainty, albeit the certainty of loss. In this case, however, that sense of loss is unconnected with mourning in the sense which Freud gave the term in his famous work on the subject.¹³ What we see here is rather melancholia, since Orpheus rather than lamenting the dead Eurydice (that act of mourning having already been performed, as seen in the above-quoted words of Virgil from the *Georgics*) he laments the memory of her ghost, the promise of

9 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922).

10 Virgil, *Georgics*.

11 Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian* (London: Puls, 1992), p. 152.

12 Wanda Markowska, *Mity Greków i Rzymian* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1987), p. 261.

13 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), vol. XIV, 1914–1916: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 237–258.

happiness forever squandered. Echoing Freud, it was not that the world became empty, since it had already been so after Eurydice's death, but that this time emptiness and loneliness prevailed within Orpheus. As Maurice Blanchot writes, Orpheus is absent in his gaze; he is "no less dead than [Eurydice] was, not dead with the tranquil death of the world, the kind of death which is repose, silence, and ending, but with that other death which is endless death, proof of the absence of ending."¹⁴ Mourning is of no use to one who has twice touched death, when it is not that "tranquil" kind, "of the world," but rather absurd, incomprehensible, beyond the human imagination, and all of this due to the impatience imposed by love. The event is accompanied by pangs of conscience and a sense of guilt at the loss, impossible to overcome in any way, and whose object is not even clear, since in fact Orpheus cannot be sure whether he has really lost Eurydice a second time, or has merely been the plaything in a game of the gods. These interpretative intuitions harmonize perfectly with the artistic betrayal¹⁵ that Feliks Frankowski permitted himself in translating the *Georgics*. In Frankowski's translation Orpheus weeps, but he is not lamenting the second loss of Eurydice; his are tears of melancholia and despair, which he cannot hold back and which wring remembrance from him: "Each day his memory of those misfortunes was renewed by his tears."¹⁶ Thus it is not mourning for his beloved that causes his tears, but rather the torment of loneliness and tears that seek out an object and find the memory of Eurydice, the memory of a memory (the double loss of which Ovid wrote, above), though they find no memory of the person of Eurydice. Thus is melancholia born, and it resists any attempts at consolation. Thus, too, the "wild eyes" referred to by Markowska become the melancholic gaze, a gaze directed at places that have ceased to be and people who no longer exist. Orpheus strains his eyes toward something that cannot be seen.

The phenomenon of the melancholic gaze has been present in art and literature since the time of Orpheus. An impressive case in point is the sentences with which Raymond Chandler closes *Farewell, My Lovely*: "It was a cool day and very

14 Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, edited with an afterword P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis, preface by Geoffrey Hartman (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 100.

15 Frankowski's departures from the original become apparent when we compare his version to Kubiak's translation of the same lines; see Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1997), p. 358).

16 Wergiliusz (Virgil), *Georgiki*, trans. Feliks Frankowski, ed. Henryk Krzyżanowski (Lwów-Złoczów: Biblioteka Powszechna, [1819?]), p. 96.

clear. You could see a long way – but not as far as Velma had gone.”¹⁷ In his book *Oczy Dürera* (Dürer’s Eyes), Marek Bieńczyk interprets that sentence as follows: “These eyes want to look far, but they only see here. They only see here, but they see that there is something on the horizon. They have the force of longing in them and the burden of encumbrance. They do not cross over to the other side as they have no access to transcendence, but out of immanence they make a feast of loss and, simultaneously, waiting.”¹⁸ Those who pass over the melancholic gaze in silence, Virgil and Ovid, and those who succumb to its charms, Chandler and Bieńczyk, incite us in equal measure to consider the three basic modalities of that gaze. Firstly, the melancholic looks at the world in a particular way. He looks at it passionlessly. He does so not in order to see the true nature of reality, its deep implications or hidden meaning. His gaze cannot pierce through to any kind of transcendence. It moves among objects and people, and sometimes feels that some kind of pose is possible, but is unable to catch hold of anything. Bieńczyk, in his essay on Antoni Malmczewski’s *Maria*, rightly observed that the melancholic’s gaze differs fundamentally from contemplation.¹⁹ Contemplation is looking at people and things in a way that leads to the discovery of their unchanging essence; it is thus transcendental in nature. The melancholic’s gaze, on the other hand, does not penetrate to the essence of people or things, but only slides across their surfaces, passing through. The gaze with which Chateaubriand’s René tries to grasp the world from the summit of Mount Etna is likewise slippery. In it, rivers were suddenly transformed into blue lines on maps, and Sicily shrank to “a small point at [his] feet [...]”²⁰ The world thus became a geometric puzzle, an unfinished algorithm where disjunction, with its goal of reaching a desired result, is replaced by the principle of free choice.

This gaze drifting aimlessly can, however, be converted into an inward gaze, introspective wonder in the face of the void or its opposite, the excess of something. That is also what happens in Chateaubriand’s novel, cited above. Its hero confesses that, looking down from Etna, he had “before [his] eyes a creation at once immense and imperceptible, and an abyss yawning nearby.”²¹ That abyss is not only the crevasse he sees from the mountain, but it quickly becomes the

17 Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 292.

18 Marek Bieńczyk, *Oczy Dürera. O melancholii romantycznej* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2002), p. 382.

19 Bieńczyk, *Oczy Dürera*, p. 46.

20 François-René de Chateaubriand, *Atala. René*, trans. Rayner Heppenstall (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2010), p. 92.

21 Chateaubriand, *Atala. René*, p. 92.

abyss of knowledge. In this sense René is a lost being, with his gaze fixed on himself; a lost being who even questions the existence of the external world. The inward look, which transforms into the gaze of a madman, furrowing the viewer's brow and instilling despondency in him, is particularly visible in a series of self-portraits by Charles Baudelaire, drawn by the poet in the years between 1860 and 1864, and in the self-portrait of Johann Heinrich Füssli (his chalk drawing on paper, made in the 1780s). That is the gaze that has elicited profound interest in the spheres of psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Dr. Jean-Marie Charcot undertook to photograph his patients, in order to establish a fixed record of the physical signs of melancholia. The portraits he made of these women are powerful and frightening.²²

The third modality of the melancholy gaze fluctuates between the indifferent gaze that fleetingly glimpses people and objects and the absent gaze that is a consequence of gazing into the vacant depths of one's own soul. I refer, naturally, to gazing through a window, which denotes looking at the world to the same degree as it does looking at oneself (given the narcissistic effect of seeing one's reflection in the window). George Steiner has previously observed the potential of both window and mirror and connected both with melancholia, writing of two "philosophical-epistemological systems."²³ Discovering the world through the window, as is clearly the case in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is an idealistic affair and postulates the existence of a place out there towards which we are heading and which we discover through intellect or intuition. Yet – and this is the sad part – we can never reach that destination. The epistemology of the mirror, on the other hand, proposes we acknowledge the world to be a form of hypostasis, since the human being, in familiarizing himself with reality, can truly only get to know himself: his reflection in the world; hence the solitude of the human being and the void that surrounds him, about which Baudelaire complains in *Flowers of Evil* and elsewhere. Thus, what lies inside may encounter what lies outside through a window, a pane of glass, or in the most extreme case, a reflection in a mirror, whose place is nowhere; neither inside, nor outside.

These three modalities of Orpheus's second gaze, so markedly present in the literature and art of the nineteenth century, will form the subject of this book.

22 See *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 427.

23 George Steiner, "Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought," *Salmagundi*, No. 146/147 (2005), p. 20.

Part I
The Outward Gaze

1. To Wander and Look (Rousseau, Chateaubriand)

But how to express the crowd of fugitive sensations, which I experienced on my walks? In the emptiness of a lonely heart, the passions resound like a murmuring of wind and waters, heard in the silence of the wilderness: they may be enjoyed, but cannot be depicted.¹

Vagabonds staring at the world or into the depths or shallows of their own souls have, without a doubt, been plentiful. However, in two famous cases, meandering combined with exile proved to be not only an important existential experience, but also a herald of aesthetic transformations. In both cases, strolling with no definite objective was also seasoned with a large measure of melancholy.

1.1 Rousseau's herbarium

At first glance, to impute melancholy tendencies to Jean-Jacques Rousseau appears an absurdity. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau himself declares that he is endowed with a “lively nature that keeps [him] from languid and melancholy apathy.”² It even seems that Rousseau, defender of morals in the *New Heloise*, critic of political systems in the *Social Contract*, and a seasoned warrior struggling in the face of the vicissitudes of fate in the *Confessions*, is a true son of his epoch, which, in the *Encyclopédie*, expressed above all its skepticism toward melancholic phantasms. Perhaps that description goes too far, however, since the *Encyclopédie* is actually far from consistent on that point. From a medical perspective, melancholy is undesirable; it is a form of possession, linked with “invincible sorrow, dark humor, misanthropy, with a tendency toward loneliness.”³ What may be called religious melancholia, i.e., a form of acedia, is likewise subjected to harsh criticism, since, as Louis de Jaucourt observed, it is born of phantasms and is merely an effective tool in the hands of

1 François-René Chateaubriand, *Atala. René*, trans. Reyner Hepperstall (Surrey: Alma Classics, 2010), p. 97. This edition will heretofore be referred to as *René*.

2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1979), p. 112. This edition will heretofore be referred to as *Reveries*.

3 Patrick Dandrey, “Encyclopédisme mélancolique, ou d’un «miroir terni»,” in: *Anthologie de l’humeur noire. Écrits sur la mélancolie d’Hippocrate à l’«Encyclopédie»*, ed. Patrick Dandrey (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 752.

the double-dealing clergy. Amid these complaints, however, there is also a place for creative melancholia, full of dignity, which Diderot mentions in a letter to Sophie Volland of 30 September 1760. The *Encyclopédie* and the Encyclopedists, including Rousseau, hesitate and are finally unable to wipe out many centuries of tradition, during the course of which melancholia managed to make itself at home.⁴ For that reason too, Rousseau's critique of "languid and melancholy apathy" by no means represents an extirpation of melancholy.

This is all the more true given that the protagonist of the *Reveries* was sick. We could rightly say that Rousseau was too, since, like the *Confessions*, the *Reveries* is autobiographical.⁵ In reality, as Jean Grenier has underscored, the narrator displays readily perceptible symptoms of cyclothymia, a disturbance of mental equilibrium in which periods of heightened excitability are followed by periods of depression.⁶ The period during which Rousseau worked on the *Reveries* (from the autumn or winter of 1776 to the end of 1777) was a depressive phase whose onset followed the excitement that accompanied the *Dialogues* (in early 1776). Moments of excessive nervous stimulation are interwoven with collapses and intervals filled with black bile in the *Confessions*, on which Rousseau also worked from 1764 to 1770. The *Confessions* and the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* provide the most expressive, moving, but also discreet record of Rousseau's melancholy. In contrast to his Romantic heirs, including Chateaubriand, whose *René* is a description of wanderings similar to those presented in the *Reveries*, Rousseau does not parade his sorrow.

Rousseau feels himself to be at turns hounded or abandoned by everyone. It is hardly surprising, then, that the first walk in the *Reveries* begins with the famous and largely representative words: "So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbor or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest" (*Reveries*, p. 27). It is worth noting that Rousseau's solitude is not the result of a choice, though he constantly reminds us that he was created for life in seclusion. In the *Confessions*

4 On these hesitations in the *Enlightenment*, see Michel Delon, "Les ombres du siècle des lumières," *Magazine Littéraire*, octobre-novembre, hors-série (2005), p. 55.

5 At the very beginning of Book One of *Confessions* Rousseau declares: "My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. John Michael Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 17. This edition will heretofore be referred to as *Confessions*.

6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du Promeneur solitaire*, introduction by Jean Grenier (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 9.

he even admits that “[t]he idleness of society is deadly because it is obligatory; the idleness of solitude is delightful because it is free and voluntary” (*Confessions*, p. 591). Nonetheless, as he himself declares, he did not choose solitude, but was driven to it by envious people, former friends and false protectors. The theme of conspiracy recurs throughout both the *Confessions* and the *Reveries*. In the latter Rousseau goes so far as to proclaim that he is the victim of a “universal conspiracy” (*Reveries*, pp. 7, 44). In the end, he does not shed many tears because solitude is to his liking, and because he has an “inclination” toward “nonchalant tranquility” (*Reveries*, p. 51) and is truly “master of [him]self” only when alone (*Confessions*, p. 148).⁷ His acceptance of solitude is nevertheless not disinterested or due merely to his natural preferences. A man who is “alone in the world,” condemned exclusively to his own company, may dedicate himself to only two things: the observation of his own soul and the observation of his natural surroundings. Rousseau thus begins to gaze in both directions: into the depths of his own soul and toward the horizon. He also tries to reconcile the two gazes, as a result of which he becomes entangled, probably not entirely consciously, in reflections on the essence of metaphor: the gaze of a solitary man with a tendency to melancholy is inescapably a gaze in search of a metaphor.

Before arriving at metaphor, however, Rousseau takes great pains to persuade his readers that he is opening up the depths of his soul to us:

Alone for the rest of my life, since it is only in myself that I find consolation, hope and peace of mind, my only remaining duty is towards myself and this is all I desire. This is my state of mind as I return to the rigorous and sincere self-examination that I formerly called my *Confessions*. I am devoting my last days to studying myself and preparing the account which I shall shortly have to render. Let me give myself over entirely to the pleasure of conversing with my soul, since this is the only pleasure that men cannot take away from me. (*Reveries*, p. 32)

As he writes, Rousseau seeks “to take the barometer readings of [his] own soul” (*Reveries*, p. 33), in order to know it better, to reach its secrets. Likewise, the chief and, in principle, only subject of the *Confessions* is the writing self: “I never promised to present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am. [...] I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye [...]” (*Confessions*, p. 169).⁸ This is the story of a human heart, whose

7 That Rousseau’s solitude is often marked by misanthropy is a separate question (see the seventh and eighth walks in particular).

8 Later in the *Confessions*, Rousseau claims: “It is the history of my soul that I have promised to recount, and to write it faithfully I have need of no other memories; it is enough if I enter again into my inner self” (*Confessions*, p. 262). The idea of keeping a

blessing and curse is shown to be sensitivity. In that sense, the *Confessions* and the *Reveries* are a vivisection of the soul that anticipates the agonies of Emma Bovary. Like Flaubert's heroine, Rousseau lives more in dreams than in reality. He feeds on illusion and forgets himself and the world in order to live somewhere else, to be someone else. This phenomenon, which almost a century after the publication of the *Reveries* would become widely known as "le Bovarysme," appears explicitly in Rousseau's text: "I was deafened by the world and bored by solitude, I was always wanting to move and never happy anywhere" (*Reveries*, p. 124). A sense of homelessness and constant apprehension clearly cannot find succor in reality, since there is no place where the subject beset by anxiety may take shelter or feel at home. In this feeling, there is considerable nostalgia for a country that never existed, very similarly, in fact, to the suicidal nostalgia of Swiss mercenaries tormented by an inconsolable longing for their *Heimat*.⁹ The only solution for Rousseau, gazing dimly into the corners of his own soul, is therefore to appeal to the imagination, which his diseased "habit of retiring into [him]self" (*Reveries*, p. 35) is capable of turning into soothing oblivion. It was precisely this dominant role of the imagination that Mme. de Staël caught superbly in the *Reveries*, describing Rousseau's book in her work *De l'Allemagne* as an "eloquent picture of a being preyed upon by an imagination stronger than himself."¹⁰ What is inside the soul cannot be seen with the human eye, even with the help of glasses, magnifying lenses or telescopes. Likewise the barometer that Rousseau mentioned is of little use, since fleeting things cannot be measured by previously existing measurements or systems. When looking into the depths of one's soul, what is needed are "wings of imagination" (*Reveries*, p. 91). That is the way reveries, a phenomenon Rousseau is constantly attempting to grasp, take shape:

Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more often my meditations end in reverie, and during these wanderings my soul roams and soars through the universe on the wings of imagination, in ecstasies which surpass all other pleasures. (*Reveries*, p. 107)

A number of elements in this passage are worthy of closer scrutiny. Above all, in a time of triumphant rationalism Rousseau appears to loftily assert that it is not the mind that enables us to know the world and ourselves, but rather reverie. It

diary is accompanied by the ruthless principle of veracity "so that for once at least the world might behold a man as he was within" (*Confessions*, p. 478).

9 See Dandrey, "Encyclopédisme mélancolique, ou d'un «miroir terni»,» p. 752.

10 Madame the Baroness de Staël-Holstein, *Germany*, trans. Orlando Williams Wright (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), vol. 2, p. 333.

is not the *Bel Esprit* of the French classicists, polished and subject to the rules of art, but something that eludes systematic thought and can bring us closer to the truth about ourselves.¹¹ Subtle differences in the meaning of the words used by Rousseau in the passage cited are also important here: *rêverie* (“reverie” in John Michael Cohen’s translation, and others) and *méditation* (“meditation”) denote what seem to be similar ideas, but are dissimilar in crucial ways.¹² The first refers to conscious mental processes guided not by a definite aim, but rather by subjective and emotional stimuli. Meditation, on the other hand, usually denotes attentive, time-intensive consideration of one thing, and therefore has a clear aim, and can be described as layered.¹³ Meditations are thus consistent explorations of relationships, as the meditating subject ruminates on one thing, the better to perceive the way it is conditioned; the way it connects to other things; and the way it is logically structured. Reveries make no such claim. Meditations may be characterized as gazing in order to see something. Reveries, on the other hand, may be said to be gazing in order to look; in order to observe; in order to admire; but not to see anything in particular. Meditations contain a completed action or at least the intention of such; in reveries, however, there is nonchalance and freedom.¹⁴ Rousseau tells us so in a much plainer fashion in the *Confessions*:

[...] not only do I find ideas difficult to express, I find them equally difficult to take in. I have studied men, and I think I am a fairly good observer. But all the same I do not know how to see what is before my eyes; I can only see clearly in retrospect, it is only in my memories that my mind can work. (*Confessions*, p. 114)

Thus, when Rousseau writes about seeing something, he is really writing about the way he remembers it; we are never, therefore, reading a faithful description, but rather a reminiscence and the interpretation that goes with it (with possible

11 On the subject of categories of imagination in classical discussions, see Stefan Morawski, *Studia z historii myśli estetycznej XVIII i XIX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1961), pp. 61–71.

12 See Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du Promeneur solitaire*, p. 121.

13 Translator’s note: the Polish original here provides an analysis of the French words with reference to *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, eds. Josette Rey-Debove and Alain Rey (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1993). Since the English equivalents are cognates of the French, I do not focus on the distinction between original and translation – T.D.W.

14 On a similar theme (the difference between the melancholic gaze and contemplation) see V. Carraud, “Les Modes du regard,” in: *Esthétique et mélancolie* (Orléans: Institut des Arts Visuels, 1992), pp. 13–20, M. Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (Warszawa: Sic!, 1998), pp. 79–84.

distortions and deviations, of which Rousseau clearly informs us).¹⁵ It is unsurprising, then, that the soul of the writer “wanders” and flies away on “wings of imagination.” Melancholically staring inward does not make for precision or consistency.

Gazing at one’s surroundings would appear to be a completely different matter, and despite Rousseau’s earlier declarations and postulations,¹⁶ such gazing seems much more important in the *Reveries* than looking inward. Rousseau liked to have his eyes and legs kept busy, we read in the *Confessions*: “my mind only works with my legs” (*Confessions*, p. 382),¹⁷ hence his gallivanting, roaming, drifting, in a word, the “passion for wandering” which Rousseau admits to in the *Confessions* (*Confessions*, p. 60).¹⁸ In the *Reveries* Rousseau also expresses his fondness for “roaming the countryside, with no guide” (*Reveries*, p. 106) and refers to “the pleasure I take in roaming the woodlands” (*Reveries*, p. 110) and the way he likes “to roam nonchalantly from plant to plant and flower to flower” (*Reveries*, p. 115). This craze for wandering endlessly is thus closely linked to botany or, as Rousseau writes, to the passion for herborizing. That “ideal study for the idle” (*Reveries*, p. 115) brings him a great deal of pleasure. He encountered it in the company of Claude Anet in Annecy, but did not feel “the first flush of enthusiasm for botany” (*Reveries*, p. 84) until he arrived on the Island of St. Pierre.¹⁹

St. Pierre, the island that Rousseau chose for his voluntary exile, enchanted him in two ways: firstly, the beauty of the landscape assuaged his pain; secondly, it enabled him to cultivate his passion for collecting plants. Rousseau makes no secret of the fact that looking at the beauty of nature is a pleasure to him. Not only is he able to describe the island, together with its buildings and flora, charmingly and in detail (*Reveries*, p. 81–82), but he also takes delight in the view: “I could let my eyes wander over the beautiful and entrancing spectacle of the lake and its shores, crowned on one side by the nearby mountains and on

15 See *Confessions*, p. 382.

16 In the *Reveries*, the author’s “true aim [...] is to give an account of [...] [his] soul” (*Reveries*, p. 33).

17 Eugène Delacroix observes in a May 1853 entry in his *Journal* (trans. Lucy Norton, ed. Hubert Wellington [London: Phaidon Press, 1995]) that “some positions may be more favorable to thought than others” and that ideas came “to Rousseau, I think, while he was walking in the country” (p. 194.).

18 In fact this is a leitmotif in both the *Reveries*, in which each chapter is called a “walk,” and the *Confessions*, in which Rousseau repeatedly praises the charms of pedestrian wanderings.

19 See *Confessions*, p. 176.

the other extending in rich and fertile plains where the view was limited only by a more distant range of blue mountains” (*Reveries*, p. 86). Rousseau’s wild gaze, according to his own observations in the *Confessions*, was not particularly alluring, though it was expressive and penetrating: “small, rather sunken eyes which sparkled with the fire that burnt in my veins” (*Confessions*, p. 55).²⁰ More important in the passage above, however, is the tendency toward pensiveness, solitude and spontaneous staring in front of himself, around himself, beyond himself. It is not the expression of his gaze that counts, but rather the way it becomes lost and wanders, and the calm that it brings. In the entry for “melancholia” in the *Encyclopedie*, we find a passage where the authors write that melancholy “took a liking for reflection, using the capacities of the soul to present her a sweet impression of existence, and frees her from the confusion of passion, living impressions which would lead to her weakening.”²¹ By a strange coincidence, Patrick Dandrey’s commentary on the passage opens with the words: “The reverie of a solitary wanderer on the shore of a lake...”²² I do not know whether Dandrey had Rousseau in mind, as he does not refer directly to Rousseau, but his wording leaves little room for doubt. Rousseau, after all, had a particular liking for reveries, solitude, wandering, and the calm waters of the lake surrounding the Island of St. Pierre.²³ Allowing his gaze to wander during what were always solitary walks was inextricably linked with the experience of isolation and abandonment by people who, in Rousseau’s opinion, callously took advantage of his naïveté and gullibility; with the recollection of loss, irretrievable and final, to such a degree that the Rousseau does not always remember what was lost; ultimately forgetting

20 Others judged Rousseau’s gaze to show intelligence – see *Confessions*, p. 94.

21 Quoted in Dandrey, “Encyclopédisme mélancolique, ou d’un «miroir terni»,” p. 750.

22 Dandrey, p. 750.

23 In point of fact, not only there, since in the *Confessions* Rousseau frequently draws attention to these same elements, which determine his melancholy disposition, though they do so discreetly: “The view of the Lake of Geneva and its lovely shores had always a particular attraction in my eyes, which I cannot explain and which does not depend only on the beauty of the sight, but on something more compelling which moves and stimulates me” (*Confessions*, p. 148); in connection with one of his journeys, the philosopher notes: “On this trip to Vevey, walking along that lovely shore, I gave myself up to the sweetest of melancholy. My heart darted eagerly after a thousand innocent delights. I indulged my feelings. I sighed and cried like a child. How often I would stop to weep at my leisure and, sitting on a large stone, would be amused to see my tears fall into the water!” (*Confessions*, p. 149).

about himself and losing himself in the fiction of reveries.²⁴ This effacement of boundaries and forgetfulness of the cause of his own pain is particularly evident in the description of one excursion to the lake:

I would make my escape and install myself all alone in a boat, which I would row out into the middle of the lake when it was calm; and there, stretching out full-length in the boat and turning my eyes skyward, I let myself float and drift wherever the water took me, often for several hours on end, plunged in a host of vague yet delightful reveries, which though they had no distinct or permanent subject, were still in my eyes infinitely to be preferred to all that I had found most sweet in the so-called pleasures of life. (*Reveries*, p. 85)

Rousseau thus dreams while awake, and his gaze moves lazily from the clouds to the water, from the water to the mountains, wandering aimlessly. Such a gaze, acquisitive, shifting from one plant to another, appears when Rousseau begins to herborize. We can only conjecture that that pursuit was so attractive to him because it necessarily involved wandering on foot. It is walks, after all, that give rise to those fleeting ineffable impressions, about which Chateaubriand would write in *René* several decades after the *Reveries*. Rousseau devotes a few sentences to the phenomenon when he attempts to formulate the essence of botany, which is more an invention of melancholy than it is a scientific pursuit²⁵:

Botany is the ideal study for the idle, unoccupied solitary; a blade and a magnifying glass are all the equipment he needs for his observations. He wanders about, passing freely from one object to another, he considers each plant in turn with interest and curiosity. (*Reveries*, pp. 115–116)

24 Rousseau returns almost obsessively to descriptions of a wandering and somehow absent gaze and to the faint border dividing concrete reality from the fiction of reveries. Here is how he writes about it in the *Reveries*: “Emerging from a long and happy reverie, seeing myself surrounded by greenery, flowers and birds, and letting my eyes wander over the picturesque far-off shores which enclosed a vast stretch of clear and crystalline water, I fused my imaginings with these charming sights, and finding myself in the end gradually brought back to myself and my surroundings, I could not draw a line between fiction and reality; so much did everything conspire equally to make me love the contemplative and solitary life I led in that beautiful place” (*Reveries*, pp. 90–91).

25 When the epithet “scientific” is used, it is in a very particular context, which suppresses the scientific as it is commonly understood: “Attracted by the charming objects that surround me, I look at them, observe them carefully, compare them, and eventually learn to classify them, and lo and behold, I am as much of a botanist as anyone needs to be who only wants to study nature in order to discover ever new reasons for loving her” (*Reveries*, p. 115).

Three things attract our attention here: the botanist's emotional nature, his method of work and a certain nonchalance in his casual movement from one plant to another.

As for Rousseau's overall mental mood (*état d'âme*), it essentially confirms his predisposition toward solitude and his fondness for states of inertia. His walk, the purpose of which is supposed to be looking for plants, is marked by the desire to flee from human society, to go into hiding. Rousseau devotes more time to wandering without purpose and putting together his herbarium than to conversations with other people. He is little interested in the customs of the local population, or its peculiarities, or furthering his knowledge of the area, since an expedition among the herbs offers instead a kind of escapism or waking dream. His only contact with other people is limited to leafing through books, which, written by another, provide information on the subject of plants and their systematization. Rousseau himself took a particular liking to the work of Linnaeus (*Reveries*, p. 84). Herborizing or describing plants is thus a kind of wandering among nature and words, a continuous losing and finding of oneself. That modicum of activity, vital in a sense, may yet still be reconciled with a certain laziness which Rousseau describes, a torpor or inertia. For in any case, he is not seeking to create another system. He describes the plants not in order to classify them, but rather because once noted down, his discoveries and the impressions that accompany them become a kind of wanderer's diary. That is precisely the way the herbarium functions in Rousseau's eyes: "This collection is like a diary of my expeditions, which makes me set out again with renewed joy, or like an optical device which places them once again before my eyes. It is the chain of accessory ideas that makes me love botany" (*Reveries*, p. 120). Thus the sight of the plants transforms itself effortlessly into a reminiscence of the wanderings during which they were collected, to finally become a waking dream.

It is precisely the unstable nature of this boundary that allowed me to write earlier that looking around oneself seems more important in the *Reveries* than looking inside oneself. For Rousseau's definition of the herbarium argues that there is no difference between the two types of gaze, that looking around oneself is simply a modality of looking into oneself. The philosopher, after all, is not sensitive to the external world in its entirety, but only to certain elements of it that chime in unison with his soul. The search for a relationship between the self that looks and the world is in fact one of the most important tropes of melancholy in the *Reveries*. Applying a barometer to his own soul and a reverie to the world that surrounds him, and thus deliberately hybridizing the internal with the external, Rousseau endeavors to

discover an analogy, or rather, to build a metaphor.²⁶ Rousseau himself mentions several times in the *Reveries* that he finds it hard not to “make the comparison” between the visible world and himself (*Reveries*, p. 37) and that he “identif[ies] [him]self” with the whole of nature (*Reveries*, p. 111). The substitutional nature of the relationship that connects the self with nature is best conveyed in the following description of the Lake of Bienné’s waters:

The ebb and flow of the water, its continuous yet undulating noise, kept lapping against my ears and my eyes, taking the place of all the inward movements which my reverie had calmed within me, and it was enough to make me pleurably aware of my existence, without troubling myself with thought. From time to time some brief and insubstantial reflection arose concerning the instability of the things of this world, whose image I saw in the surface of the water, but soon these fragile impressions gave way before the unchanging and ceaseless movement which lulled me and without any active effort on my part occupied me so completely that even when time and the habitual signal called me home I could hardly bring myself to go. (*Reveries*, pp. 86–87)

It is important above all to note that Rousseau writes of the monotonous movement of the lake’s waves with a certain relish. Neither still water, as in a pond, for example, nor the rushing water of a river or stream stirs his imagination. Rousseau also mentions this weakness for the soothing waters of the lake in the *Confessions*: “I have always been passionately fond of the water. The sight of it throws me into a delicious dream, although often about no definite subject. On getting up I never failed, if it was fine, to run out to the terrace and breathe in the fresh and healthy morning air, and to let my eyes skim along the horizon of that beautiful lake whose shores and whose skirt of mountains delighted my gaze” (*Confessions*, pp. 592–593). Let us underscore that Rousseau’s gaze, wandering along the horizon, and the reveries that accompany it, bear the distinct mark of melancholy. They have no definite object, and are characterized by a longing which defies apprehension: the author is thereby plunged into “a delicious dream, although often about no definite subject” (*Confessions*, p. 592). In order for such reveries to come into being, the soporific yet paradoxically change-bearing inevitability of little ebbs and flows seems indispensable. The boat, carried along by their rhythm, his gaze alighting on them, and his solitude combine to make Rousseau perform, with little effort, a substitution proper to metaphor.

26 For the idea that the theory of metaphor is closely linked to the theory of melancholy I am indebted to some remarks that Jackie Pigeaud made during his conference on the theme of melancholy in the Grand Palais in Paris on November 2, 2005. See also his book *De la Mélancolie. Fragments de poétique et d’histoire* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta, 2005).

The landscape available to his gaze becomes a landscape of the soul, seen no longer by the eye of the seasoned observer, but by the inner eye of the dreamer. In the passage just cited, an identification of this kind would seem ideal. However, in many other passages in the *Reveries* (see, for example, *Reveries*, II; *Reveries*, VII), similar cases lead to presumably unintended confusion. The reader ceases to be sure whether Rousseau is, in a kind of extraspection, personifying nature, attributing to it his own emotional states, or rather, immersed in the depths of introspection, absorbing what he has perceived around him into his own person.

This state of ideal balance between looking around and within, which clearly translates into a balance between the watching subject and nature, may be and often is shaken in the *Reveries*. Rousseau considers two logical consequences of this kind of disturbance. Firstly, a tendency to escapism and a fondness for walks, during which Rousseau admires the wonder of creation, frequently lead to the evaporation of the self: “My meditations and reveries are never more delightful than when I can forget myself. I feel transports of joy and inexpressible raptures in becoming fused, as it were, with the great system of beings and identifying myself with the whole of nature” (*Reveries*, p. 111). It is at just such moments in Rousseau’s experience that nature, i.e., what his eyes perceive, dominates completely. Secondly, however, his unceasing and frequently declared need to occupy himself with himself alone leads, quite often, to a completely different outcome: hypertrophy of the self. Rousseau even writes bluntly: “I would prefer to expand it [my existence] to include the whole universe” (*Reveries*, p. 100). In this instance, nature can exist only as an outgrowth of the soul’s impressions. There is no place for penetrating observation of it. It is thus transformed into an image, but an artificial, fabricated image. The point is no longer what actually appears to the gaze of the cognitive subject, but rather what that subject has remembered, processed, and extracted from his own interior. That function may be performed by writing, the problem to which I shall once more return. For it would seem that Rousseau is incapable of writing while looking out at the world; that he is then completely submerged in what he sees, and his self does not exist then. In the *Confessions* we read on this subject, among other things:

My blotted, scratched, confused, illegible manuscripts attest to the pain they have cost me. There is not one that I have not had to rewrite four or five times before sending it to the printer. I have never been able to do anything with my pen in my hand, and my desk and paper before me; it is on my walks, among the rocks and trees, it is at night in my bed when I lie awake, that I compose in my head [...]. (*Confessions*, pp. 113–114)

When he does, however, sit down at his desk and begin to write, which does not come easily to him,²⁷ nature must yield. Then the self grows out in all directions, and the “natural” image of reality is replaced by a created image, transformed by memory and time, as if imagined. When can the writer succeed, then, in seizing on the perfect metaphor? It seems that he can never do so; that he is always just a step away, and it eludes his grasp. In those rare moments when it is neither too soon nor too late, when Rousseau experiences identity between the self and nature, he is able to erase the boundary between reality and fiction as well.

All the same, executing that intention demands a certain patience and persistence, at least when one is collecting plants or putting them in a herbarium. Unlike the gaze within the depths of the self, or the gaze that wanders over the waves of the lake, as mentioned earlier, the gaze of Rousseau the botanist must be armed. For this reason, Rousseau notes that for observation, he needs “a blade and a magnifying glass” (*Reveries*, p. 115). When he begins creating a herbarium on the Island of St. Pierre, he mentions that “every morning after breakfast [...] I would set out with a magnifying glass in my hand [...] to study one particular section of the island” (*Reveries*, p. 84). On a different occasion, he writes about instruments that allow him to observe the smallest parts of plants (*Reveries*, p. 115). Only ostensibly does Rousseau run away from the world of melancholic imagination by virtue of such rigors. Only ostensibly, because none of the melancholic personalities was free from an obsession of this kind. Much has been written to explain the feeling of melancholic boredom or the inexplicability of the melancholic gaze, but relatively little space has been devoted to the melancholic need to collect, to accumulate objects, to study, measure, and describe them, only for the sake of eventually arriving at the dispiriting conclusion that what has been measured and described has not opened any hidden depths to our gaze. The world exhausts itself in its physicality, though the melancholic goes on weeping for the loss of what it was supposed to hide. That loss is mourned by the figure in Albrecht Dürer’s copperplate engraving *Melancholia I*. It is significant that he is surrounded by objects that allegorically represent the sciences, such as compasses, scales, a globe, a rhombohedron, an hourglass, as well as carpentry tools and alchemical contraptions, such as the magic square. They were all no doubt used by this mysterious character for describing the world around him. That desire has nonetheless led him nowhere. Neither theoretical knowledge, such as mathematics, nor practical, such as craftsmanship, nor magical, such as alchemy, has enabled him to look beneath the façade of reality. Dürer’s melancholy figure

27 See *Confessions*, p. 113.

dwells, however, in what Heinrich Wölfflin called his “chaos of objects,”²⁸ though he is looking somewhere else, at the indescribable world somewhere beyond the borders of the engraving. Rousseau behaves similarly in the *Reveries* insofar as he reaches for his magnifying glass, his blade, and his copy of Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*, all so that he might encompass all nature, describe the world, capture it entirely in formulae. Rousseau, as he himself admits, desires to “learn [...] all of [Johan Andreas] Murray’s *Regnum Vegetabile* [the introduction to Linnaeus’s book] and acquaint [...] myself with every known plant” (*Reveries*, p. 106). In order to fulfill this unreasonable, and clearly unfeasible, desire, it is necessary to have a method and consistently employ it.

Doing that, however, is beyond Rousseau’s powers. He is more comfortable, as he himself stresses in the above passage from the *Reveries* “to roam nonchalantly from plant to plant” (*Reveries*, p. 115). In this sense, loitering and roaming balance out the scientific side of herborization. To Rousseau, as noted earlier, what matters is not creating a compendium of the world, but rather making a monograph of his own soul. For that reason, he cannot decide on any method to govern his gaze or his wandering. He prefers for the former to rove and the latter to be without purpose. In fact, Rousseau, the philosopher-botanist, writes frankly about this in the *Reveries*: “My eyes strayed unceasingly from one thing to another [...]. I came to enjoy this recreation of the eyes, which relaxes and amuses the mind, taking it off our misfortunes and making us forget our sufferings” (*Reveries*, pp. 108–109). In this declared absence of method he is even similar to Robert Burton, probably the best-known melancholic of all time. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Burton confessed: “This roving humor [...] I have ever had, and like a ranging spaniel, that barks at every bird he sees, leaving his game, I have followed all, saving that which I should.”²⁹ Burton, of course, is not writing here about dolorous walks in the open, but rather wandering in the library, among books, quotations, and interrupted sentences. It is notable that this book, Burton’s life’s work, contains 13,333 quotations, as carefully counted by Michel Delon.³⁰ Burton’s admission is thus self-referential in nature, and refers not so much to his predilection for walks as his method, or lack of such, for working on his texts. Burton hoards quotations just the way Dürer’s melancholy

28 Heinrich Wölfflin, *The Art of Albrecht Dürer*, trans. Alistair & Heide Grieve (New York: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1971), p. 200, quoted in Wojciech Bałus, *Mundus melancholicus. Melancholiczny świat w zwierciadle sztuki* (Kraków: Universitas, 1996), p. 65.

29 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Philadelphia: E. Claxton, 1883), p. 16.

30 See Michel Delon, “Un Encyclopédie de la mélancolie,” *Magazine Littéraire*, octobre-novembre, hors-série (2005), p. 54.

figure collected all manner of odds and ends, or the way Rousseau accumulated weeds in his herbarium. In Rousseau's case, this relates not only to his intentional lack of method in filling the herbarium, but also his approach to writing. For as it transpires, the act of writing is itself deeply melancholic for both Burton and Rousseau.

In the *Reveries*, taking notes on successive walks and ponderings is devoid of system or method, in the same way that gathering plants is – Rousseau himself draws such comparisons (see *Reveries*, VII). At the beginning of the *Reveries* he openly admits as much:

These pages will be no more than a formless record of my reveries. I myself will figure largely in them, because a solitary person inevitably thinks a lot about himself. (*Reveries*, p. 32)

In the *Confessions*, too, Rousseau declares with disarming frankness: “[...] Now my story can only proceed at haphazard, according as the ideas come back into my mind” (*Confessions*, p. 572); “The further I go in my story, the less order and sequence I can put into it” (*Confessions*, p. 572). Further confusion is caused by the fact that in Rousseau's two last texts, the *Confessions* and the *Reveries*, confession mixes with convention; with the need to treat narrative, and its concomitant tropes, as an essential element in self-presentation. The telling of a story is never identical with either the storyteller or the story itself; for that reason, the act of writing is shown to be highly ambiguous. On the one hand, for example, in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau the philosopher speaks very skeptically and with a certain reluctance on the subject of writing; on the other hand, writing is extremely important to Rousseau the author of the *Reveries*, and is there furthermore utterly suffused with melancholy. Writing is what allows him to return to the past, to relive the life that has slipped out of his grasp. Writing is thus an exercise in remembering, a fact noted by Rousseau in the *Confessions*: “How I love, from time to time, to come upon the pleasant moments of my youth! They were so sweet! They have been so brief, so rare, and I have enjoyed them at so slight cost! Ah, their mere memory still gives my heart a pure delight, which I need in order to restore my courage and to sustain the tedium of my remaining years!” (*Confessions*, p. 132). In Rousseau's autobiographical texts we discover what Jean Starobinski calls “derivative dreaming,”³¹ the consciousness of the painful difference between the time when we dream our dreams and the time when we write them down. This also testifies to the

31 Jean Starobinski, “Marzenia i przemiana,” in: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Przejrzystość i przeszkoda*, trans. Janusz Wojcieszak (Warszawa: KR, 2000), pp. 413–426.

melancholy nature of writing itself, which represents an attempt to master reality in the wake of loss. Such mastery, however, is neither simple nor obvious. Rousseau emphatically reminds us of the fact in the *Confessions*, where we read:

Precious and ever-regretted moments, begin to run your course again for me! Flow one after another through my memory, more slowly, if you can, than you did in your fugitive reality! What shall I do to prolong this touching and simple tale, as I should like to; endlessly to repeat the same words, and no more to weary my readers by their repetition than I wearied myself by beginning them for ever afresh? Indeed if it all consisted of facts, deeds, and words, I could describe it and in a sense convey its meaning. But how can I tell what was neither said, nor done, nor even thought, but only relished and felt, when I cannot adduce any other cause for my happiness but just this feeling? (*Confessions*, p. 215)

The melancholy nature of writing thus relates primarily to the awareness that reminiscence can only partly compensate for the loss of the past. Rousseau admits that it is sometimes difficult to express what has been experienced. It seems in fact to be impossible to express it after a certain amount of time, when not only has the feeling passed, but its context has also vanished. The act of recording the past is imbued with the despair elicited by the impossibility of recovering the old self or the feelings of bygone years. The moment of writing, the undertaking of that effort, means a painful acquisition of the consciousness of loss. A loss for which nothing can compensate, and which the nonsensical act of writing only deepens. It seems that for precisely that reason Rousseau's last work, the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, bears all the hallmarks of a melancholic autobiography written by Rousseau about himself for himself. Jean Starobinski has previously drawn attention to this very strange authorial strategy, in which Rousseau is simultaneously creator (sender), content (he is speaking about himself), and addressee.³²

For these same reasons, the discreetly melancholy Rousseau of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, is a hitherto overlooked precursor of nineteenth-century melancholy. Two things require disambiguation here. I write "discreetly melancholy" because in neither the *Confessions* nor the *Reveries* does Rousseau put his melancholy on display. The word itself occurs only once in the *Reveries*, and that in a decidedly negative context (see *Reveries*, p. 112). Similarly in the *Confessions*, written somewhat earlier, there is only a single mention of "the sweetest of melancholy" (*Confessions*, p. 149) as an emotional state. More often, in keeping with Enlightenment tradition, melancholy is defined as a disease, the symptoms

32 Starobinski, p. 413.

of which are often physical. Only in one case do they fit the intuitive sense of melancholia as a state of imbalance in the psyche:

Being more sedentary, I was attacked not by boredom but by melancholy; [my fits now were of the vapors;] my languor turned to sadness. I wept and sighed for no reason; I felt life escaping me untasted. (*Confessions*, pp. 211–212; translation modified to adhere to the original – T.D.W.)

Rousseau is thus not overly effusive. We would indeed generally be inclined to talk in terms of his lively temperament and search for happiness, though that is only one of his guises, one more familiar than the others.

The connection between Rousseau and the melancholy of the Romantics also requires further explanation. As a rule, the beginnings of Romantic melancholy have been sought in the works of Chateaubriand, but it is hard to resist the impression that Chateaubriand's René, as he floats around the world, is the long-lost brother of the doleful wanderer of the *Reveries*. It should also be noted that the “wave of passions”³³ that Chateaubriand writes about in *Memoirs From Beyond the Tomb* in connection with René's almost ineffable emotional state and with the currency that expression enjoyed among nineteen year-old melancholics have much in common with the term Rousseau uses in *Confessions*. For it is Rousseau who devised the suggestive metaphor that probably best describes the melancholic figure. An unhappy soul, feeling the need for calm, preyed upon constantly by anxiety and sadness, often without any particular object, is, in Rousseau's words, a soul which “no longer kept its center of gravity [...]”³⁴

1.2 Chateaubriand's stone

It is not Rousseau, however, but Chateaubriand who is known for his decisive influence on the shape of nineteenth-century melancholia. The connection between René's attitude and that of Jean-Jacques is aptly noted by Albert Thibaudet, though he mainly compares René and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Thibaudet also asserts that Chateaubriand “is only innovative in his style, the style of thought and the formal style.”³⁵ These rather disputable observations may be read as referring not only to the connection between René and *The Sorrows*

33 Chateaubriand, *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Books, 2014). Kindle edition.

34 Rousseau, *Confessions*, translator anonymous (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 406.

35 Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Stock, 1936), p. 32.

of *Young Werther*, but also to perhaps less obvious affinities with the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. If we understand content (*la matière*) to mean the subject matter, the main themes, then it is true that *René* appears to be almost a school-boy's attempt to copy out the works of Rousseau from memory. Like Rousseau, René "cost [his] mother's life when [he] came into the world [...]" (*René*, p. 85). Chateaubriand's hero returns once more to this traumatic event in the course of the narrative when he recalls returning to his motherland. While visiting the abandoned castle where he spent his childhood under the watchful eye of his father, he visits "the bedroom in which [his] mother had lost her life in bringing [him] into the world [...]" (*René*, p. 107). That painful first loss is a stigma as far as René is concerned: his life was, from its beginnings, bought at too dear a price. From a psychological point of view, the death of the mother in childbearing can transform itself into a sense of guilt in the child. In order to redeem himself, René desires to do something that could, if only to a small extent, compensate for the loss of the mother: preserve her memory.

The natural remedy for René's deeply felt mourning for his mother, until the point when he perceives that in truth he is a young man "the source of whose torment lies in himself, and whose wounds are all self-inflicted," (*René*, p. 85) is to escape into religion. For Chateaubriand's protagonist, that appears to be the natural solution, inherited as it is from his mother:

It is true that Amélie and I found more satisfaction than anyone else in these solemn and tender ideas, for both our hearts were already tinged with sadness; either we had it from God, or we took after our mother. (*René*, p. 86)

As if that were not enough, René seriously considers entering a monastery.³⁶ We may assume that he was prompted in this case by two longings: the first his hankering for solitude, for life away from the madding throng; the second originating in the peculiar predilection for melancholia which may be called religious. That is in fact what Gustave Flaubert called it. His *Madame Bovary* was seized more than once by what he called "the finest Catholic melancholy."³⁷ In her classroom in the

36 He admits it frankly: Amélie "frequently spoke to me of the blessings of the religious life. She said that I was the only bond that tied her to the world, and her eyes fastened sadly upon me. My heart much affected by such pious conversations, I often directed my steps toward a monastery, near my new home; I was indeed once tempted to conceal my life there" (*René*, pp. 87–88).

37 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 199.

convent, too, Emma Bovary experiences “mystic languor.”³⁸ This is the very same aspect of their sensibility that allows us to link René to Rousseau, when he declares in the *Reveries*: “Lonely meditation, the study of nature and the contemplation of the universe lead the solitary to aspire continually to the maker of all things and to seek with a pleasing disquiet for the purpose of all he sees and the cause of all he feels” (*Reveries*, p. 50). In the three texts cited here, we are dealing with various faces of acedia, which transforms into a caprice in Emma Bovary, into dumbstruck wonderment before nature in Rousseau, and into a nervous desire for peace in René.³⁹ In each of these cases, however, this Catholic, or more broadly, religious melancholia, this “malady of Monks,”⁴⁰ as Baudelaire calls it in *Squibs*, requires virtues unknown to René: in particular zeal, resolve, and endurance. René, however, searches for succor nervously, demanding that it come now, immediately. In this sense religion and monastic life are not necessarily connected, in his mind, with a need for knowledge of God or exploration of the relationship binding Him to Creation. That is not what attracts René; his aim has no religious dimension.⁴¹ He has no scruples about praying while at the same time sincerely contemplating suicide, attempting, in his own words, to “rid [him]self of the burden of life” (*René*, p. 99). What fascinates him in religion is thus rather its mystery and ethereality. He frowns when Father Souël reproaches him for his desperation and his lack of respect for others. His exercise in Catholic melancholy is therefore just an episode, an airy dream, which he cannot continue because he is unable to muster the determination needed for such things.

René, in fact, frankly confesses to the changeability and capriciousness of his character:

38 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 33.

39 On the theme of Romantic acedia and its medieval sources, see Y. Hersant, “L’acédie et ses enfants,” in: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 54–59.

40 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Mineola: Dover, 2006), p. 42.

41 Despite the fact that René forces himself to pray and to be honest (as his tears bear witness) with God: “Sitting in some empty church, I frequently passed whole hours in meditation. I saw poor women come in to prostrate themselves before the Most High, or sinners to kneel at the tribunal of penance. None ever went out but his countenance was more serene, and the dull clamour to be heard outside was like the waves of passion and the storms of the world finding rest before the temple of the Lord. Dear God, Who sawest my tears flowing secretly in those sacred havens, Thou knowest how many times I cast myself at Thy feet, begging Thee either to free me from the burden of existence, or to transform the old Adam within me!” (*René*, p. 95).

I was moody and unsteady of character. In turn happy and turbulent, thoughtful and silent, I gathered my young companions about me; then suddenly leaving them, I would sit apart, to watch the scudding clouds or listen to the rain on the leaves [...]. (*René*, p. 85)⁴²

It is not difficult here to see the same disease that tormented Rousseau: cyclothymia. René cannot devote himself to the monastic life because he could never endure its rules. His natural element is that of compulsive, continuous change, sometimes forced through artificial means. In search of something that might soothe his inner pain, René roams around the world: “I resolved to travel [...] full of ardour, I cast myself without companion upon the world’s stormy ocean [...]” (*René*, p. 89). He flees people because he does not trust them. He likewise flees the social ostracism to which his incestuous feelings for Amélie have exposed him. Nothing can soothe his sadness or ward off hopelessness. In this, too, he resembles Rousseau, condemned as he is to wander. This state of being on an endless journey describes the condition they both suffer from. That is also the way the sickly need for solitude ripens in both men. René’s confession: “Complete solitude, the spectacle of nature, soon plunged me into a state almost beyond description. Without kin, without friends, alone upon earth, still ignorant of love, I was yet overcome with an overabundance of life” (*René*, p. 96) is awfully similar to the words with which Rousseau began his *Reveries*: “So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbor or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest” (*Reveries*, p. 27). Being condemned to solitude; then acquiring a fondness for it, and finally, misanthropy, an element that also appears in Chateaubriand: “Alas! Society’s every hour opens a tomb, and causes tears to flow” (*René*, p. 95); both Jean-Jacques and René tumble down this hill in order to finally focus exclusively on what is happening inside them. Telling the story of the soul’s trials and tribulations is the aim of both the *Reveries* and *René*.

Thibaudet was therefore right: there is, it would seem, nothing new in the content of the text here. I am not sure, in fact, whether the formal style in this case does not also exhibit a kind of replication. René is, after all, a stylized memoir of Chateaubriand’s own soul, a kind of spiritual autobiography, just like the *Confessions* or the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. If we take the additional step

42 Later on, we further read: “I am accused of fickle appetites, of never long enjoying the same illusion, of an imagination which seeks only to penetrate to the core of pleasures whose very persistence it cannot endure; I am accused of constantly overshooting the mark: alas! It is only some unknown good I seek, and I do so by instinct. Am I to blame, if I find everything limited, and the finite valueless?” (*René*, p. 96).

of placing beside *René* the *Memoirs From Beyond the Grave*, we are struck still more by the diptych structure of these literary undertakings. Superficially alike, and yet unlike. The formal style in fact varies because Rousseau attempts to satisfy the strictures of sincerity, which, as we know, he has a difficult time doing: we have but to remember the tale of the theft and little Maria. Chateaubriand, on the other hand, as Marta Piwińska notes,⁴³ does not so much confess as he rather develops and creates. He thereby ends up exaggerating, deliberately using hyperbole, and denaturalizing, which is the clearest harbinger of the Romantic scream. Rousseau, as has already been noted, remains much more restrained in his confidences. His melancholia, discreet because it developed in accordance with classical models, is thus taken to its conclusion and then further by Chateaubriand's dramatized melancholia. The sweet character blemish that melancholia represented in the *Reveries* is replaced by an existence suffused with melancholic despair in *René*. And thus the formal style and, more importantly, what we might call the spiritual style are truly new here, though they are rooted in the type of sensitivity discovered by Rousseau.

There is nonetheless a difference which forces me to draw a boundary between the *Reveries* and *René*. That difference is in the gaze. As we have already seen, Rousseau's predilection for looking inward was explicitly linked with looking around himself. The philosopher was a careful observer of clouds, trees and plants. He was able to appreciate the sensual beauty of the landscape on the Island of St. Pierre. He often colored what he saw with his own emotions, but the landscape was never exclusively an expression of his state of mind. Likewise, his travels and adventures fit into a more or less picaresque series of events that might have been the outline of a novel. With Chateaubriand, things are distinctly otherwise. Supposedly we are reading a novel, but we are not sure what sort of novel it is. In fact, even the main character admits that "his story [...] was limited to his thoughts and feelings" (*René*, p. 83). To his readers and his friends alike, to his adoptive father, Chactas, the missionary Souël, and the old warrior Sachem, he agrees "to recount to them not the adventures of his life, since they were few, but the hidden feelings of his soul" (*René*, p. 84). Thus, what happened; what he saw; the people he met; have no role to play in this telling. The contact with nature and the dolorous gazing at it that were present in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* are replaced by a gaze directed exclusively inside oneself. If a journey or nature appears at all, it is treated merely as a pretext. In *René* staring

43 See Marta Piwińska, *Złe wychowanie. Fragmenty romantycznej biografii* (Warszawa: PIW, 1981), p. 115.

at the world is constantly tantamount to staring inward. Even the famous episode with the protagonist sitting on the edge of Mount Etna does not present reality, but rather the impressions of René's soul. The landscape seen on the other side of the world consists only of the creations of the hero's wounded feelings, and thus, long before the *Intimate Journal* of Henri-Frédéric Amiel, we may refer here to an analysis of a state of mind (*état d'âme*). In this sense *René* is really revolutionary and utterly new.

There was also an absolute revolution that determined the shape of Romantic melancholia. Chateaubriand himself saw this clearly and, from the vantage point of a later date, offered a scathing critique in *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*:

if *René* did not already exist, I would no longer choose to write it; if it were possible for me to destroy it, I would destroy it. A whole hive of René poets and René prose-writers has swarmed: one hears nothing but appalling, disjointed phrases; it has seemed nothing but winds and storms, unspecified ills delivered over to clouds and the night. There is not a single puppy leaving college who has not dreamed himself the most unfortunate of men; not a stripling of sixteen who is not tired of life, who does not think himself tormented by genius; who, in the depths of his thoughts, is not given to *waves of passion*; who has not clasped his pale, tousled forehead, who has not amazed astonished men with an illness whose name he knows no more than they.⁴⁴

Chateaubriand's sarcastic tone here in fact repeats the nervous reaction of the missionary Souël to René's confession. The pious priest perceives in the youth's words only chimeras and baseless disgust toward society. He therefore rebukes him for misanthropy and overblown ambition. He mocks his megalomania and reclusive pride. Neither can he tolerate René's unjustified claim to be the unhappiest of men, capable, for that very reason, of penetrating the mysteries of existence. In Souël's eyes, that is an irresponsible position, extremely arrogant and laughable, were its consequences not so lamentable. Chateaubriand, from the perspective of later years, looked with a similarly disapproving eye on Renéism, the literary fashion for mental languors, a sense of hopelessness, fumes and vapors. For him, the "waves of passion" he refers to in *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* were by no means as universal as the glorifiers of the *mal du siècle* would have liked. Like Alfred de Musset in the *Confessions of a Child of the Century*, Chateaubriand was trying to present in the tale of René not only the story of his own soul, but rather, perhaps primarily, the sad fate of the post-revolutionary generation, who had lost faith in both the justness of the monarchy and the

44 Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, trans. Anthony S. Kline. Poetry in Translation. <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chateaubriand/Chathome.htm>.

purity of the Revolution's intentions. We even read the following in the novel: "Never did a more sudden or astonishing change take place in a people. From the heights of genius, from respect for religion, from a settled morality, all had collapsed into intellectual subtlety, impiety, corruption" (*René*, pp. 93–94). It was thus a generation at a crossroads, particularly those strata that had occupied a high position in the social hierarchy before the Revolution, and they included Chateaubriand's family. Chateaubriand deliberately sought to present René's melancholia as a state of mind that belonged to a concrete historical moment. Robert Kopp perceptively notes that René "is a victim of History before becoming a victim of his own temperament."⁴⁵ This unambiguously sets him apart from the protagonists who, in nineteenth-century literature, are given over into the hands of imprecise, muddled feelings; who lose their way in life and will spend it reminiscing over what they have lost without ever really experiencing it. Large numbers of readers immersed in the "everlasting restlessness [...] of a young man without strength or virtue" (*René*, p. 85) did not, however, want to see that subtle difference (though it must also be admitted that Chateaubriand does not accentuate the historical aspect of *René* with much persistence), and drew different conclusions. The wave of obscure feelings became, in their opinion, synonymous with the unassuageable pain of existence, and the style and lexicon of *René* established the canons of melancholic confessional prose for years; for the entire century, in fact. The best testimony to this fascination is perhaps that of Baudelaire, who, in his *Journals*, describes Chateaubriand's style, apparently in contrast to Chateaubriand's intentions, as "The eternal touch, eternal and cosmopolite."⁴⁶ In a poetic tribute he had sent to Sainte-Beuve in his early twenties, however, Baudelaire had confessed to feeling driven towards the abyss of melancholia himself, and clearly decoded the sighs of René.⁴⁷

It is worth considering the reasons behind *René's* successful career; what features of the hero's personality captured the imagination of poets and writers for

45 R. Kopp, "«Les limbes insondés de la tristesse». Figures de la mélancolie romantique de Chateaubriand à Sartre," in: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, p. 329. This had previously been observed by Henri-Frédéric Amiel, who, in his *Intimate Journal*, wrote of René: "Its theme, which is the malady of a whole generation – distaste for life brought about by idle reverie and the ravages of a vague and unmeasured ambition – is true to reality." *Amiel's journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, trans. Humphrey Ward (New York: A.L. Burt, 1891), p. 85.

46 Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, p. 49.

47 See Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jérôme Thélot (Paris: Gallimard, 2000, p. 53). The letter dates from late 1844 or early 1845.

so many years. It was not just because René tells the tortuous, jumbled, melancholy “story of his heart” (*René*, p. 93); after all, Rousseau had already done that, although there has not been much discussion of the role played by melancholy in the *Reveries* or his other works. Firstly, René’s confession seems much less discreet, and thus represents an advance of several steps toward a frank analysis of the soul’s contortions. Chateaubriand’s novel also provides the words with which to formulate what is by definition imprecise, unclear, and transitory. *René* is above all a great dictionary of melancholia. It is there that we read for the first time in the nineteenth century of a “heart [...] moulded by misery and despair!” (*René*, p. 122), of “disgust for life” (*René*, p. 99), of the “strange wound in [his] heart” (*René*, p. 99). This bizarre state of mind is what made René “question [...] his heart as to what [he] desired. [He] received no answer” (*René*, p. 96). Thus Chateaubriand’s protagonist was one of the first in the nineteenth century to perceive that his unhappiness and sorrow had no clearly defined cause. René is unable to say what torments him; what drives him to constantly move from place to place and to live in the sphere of dreams rather than in reality.

He wrestles with a longing that has no object; wrestles because his heart is filled with blood and black bile; blood, because he is forced to wrestle with something he cannot define; his opponent has no name, domain, or country. It is an “imaginary hallucination” (*urojony majak*), as the Polish writer Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński translates it, faithfully conveying Chateaubriand’s own pleonasm: *fantôme imaginaire*.⁴⁸ The reader senses that René wrestles with a chimera raised to a higher power; with a chimeric chimera. Is it possible to imagine a hallucination or a phantom that would not be imaginary? It seems unlikely. That, however, is precisely the type of hallucination or *fantôme* that torments René and for that reason, in addition to blood, his heart is flooded with black bile, the secretion typical for melancholic outcasts. In defiance of common sense, in order to localize that “strange wound [...] that was everywhere and nowhere” (*René*, p. 99), René, similarly to Rousseau, “was tormented by a secret impulse,” and “felt [himself] a mere traveler” (*René*, p. 98). This wandering without a clear goal allows René to examine the world. It is also an attempt to probe the corners of his own soul. In this way, in keeping with the theme of wandering, the motif appears in Chateaubriand’s text regarding gazing about oneself and into the abyss, themes already familiar from the *Confessions* and the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

René is a sharp observer, and, according to Amélie, his gaze is “proud and tender” (*René*, p. 104). He gazes at the world differently, however, from Rousseau,

48 Chateaubriand, *Atala, René* (Paris: PMI, 1995), p. 163.

who was interested in detail, in an elaborate description of a given plant in the herbarium. René's desire is completely different, constantly unsated, striving for synthesis. Whereas nature and Jean-Jacques enjoyed a companionate relationship, often independent of his gaze and unruly, in René's eyes it was interesting only as an emanation of his state of mind, as Maria Janion and Maria Żmigrodzka have pointed out⁴⁹. That is exactly what we find when René sits at the edge of a crater and looks down:

One day I had climbed to the summit of Etna, that great volcano burning in the centre of an island. I saw the sun rise on the immensity of the horizon below me, Sicily closed up to a small point at my feet, and the sea unfolded to the farthest point of space. Seen thus in perpendicular, the rivers seemed no more than geographical lines traced on a map; but, while on the one side my eye perceived these, on the other it plunged into the crater of Etna, whose fiery entrails I discerned, between clouds of black vapour. A young man whose passions are lively, sitting at the edge of a volcano, and weeping over mortals whose dwellings he barely distinguishes at his feet, is doubtless [...] a creature worthy of no more than your pity; but, whatever you may think of René, this picture gives you the image of his character and his existence: all my life I have in this way had before my eyes a creation at once immense and imperceptible, and an abyss yawning nearby. (*René*, p. 91)

Here the climb itself is significant. René must ascend to the summit. The mere loitering and walking for which Rousseau had developed such a taste are no longer enough. Anyone can be a walker; elevation, on the other hand, is only achieved by a chosen few. There is unquestionably an element of diseased pride here, which keeps Chateaubriand's hero from being content with what is everyday, earthly, accessible to all. On the surface this has little to do with melancholia; only on the surface, however, because it is primarily in this very way that the elite nature of Romantic melancholia finds expression. Even if *René* had legions of disciples in life and literature, it never became a social movement, and its adherents never organized into any political parties. When they suffered, it was only in prideful solitude. Only then could they truly taste unhappiness. This is confirmed in a letter from Amélie, in which René's sister attempts to persuade her brother that "[i]t is better [...] to be a little like the rest of mankind, and to feel a bit less unhappy" (*René*, p. 103). This advice was, of course, given in vain, and not just because loneliness seemed to a proud man a necessary trait for one of the elect, but also because it shunning human society and climbing mountains opened new perspectives to his gaze. René does not look, as Jean-Jacques still

49 See M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, "René: od utraty do zatraty," *Res Publica Nowa*, No. 6 (1994), p. 16.

did, with humility and attention to detail. René does not bend, but wants only to look down from above.

In this case the gaze must encompass everything, the whole of creation. René boasts of the fact that the sun, despite the fact that it is rising, is beneath his feet. The Polish reader at this point cannot help but think of another character who climbed Mont Blanc, this time to soothe his “hirundine disquiet” (*jaskółczy niepokój*)⁵⁰ and dispel his ill-boding tedium. Słowacki’s protagonist Kordian, however, was picked up by a cloud, so that he could be conveyed to his suffering nation. René was not so fortunate. The absurd necessity of solitary gazing from the summit of Etna turned out, in his case, to carry heavier consequences, since he saw from the top not only the sun beneath his feet, but also the “immensity of the horizon,” as if sealing his doom. On Mont Blanc Kordian received his vocation: Słowacki gave him a goal for which he must strive and which would finally replace his groundless boredom and vague disquiet. Chateaubriand not only failed to offer anything of the kind to his protagonist, but added reinforcements to his unassuageable grief. Even before the climb, René had difficulties defining the object of his pain and longing, as I mentioned earlier. The climb merely inflamed that state. The “immensity of the horizon” means that the protagonist’s gaze has nothing to catch hold of, and thus wanders across space, or rather a series of spaces, bereft of hope.

It looks, in this scene, as if René had attained a divine perspective, which (paradoxically) can only deepen his suffering and solitude. It is true that he sees almost everything, but he is also infinitely far away from everything: rivers look like nothing more than lines on a map. Such a gaze can bring neither consolation nor understanding. It is rather assailed by unceasing agitation; it shifts nervously from left to right, but cannot focus on anything; cannot rest anywhere. The void appears all-consuming; this type of melancholic perspective is common to many nineteenth-century painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich and Arnold Böcklin.

The gaze lost in the void, not only the emptiness of the landscape but perhaps above all the projection outward of the void that reigns in the hero’s soul, finds its complement when looking down into the gaping throat of Etna, and thus into the abyss of existence. The crater beneath him, into which René stares so keenly, had been frightening for the men of classicism. Rousseau, too, had looked into it with apprehension, for he knew that in looking into a real chasm, he would also

50 Juliusz Słowacki, “Kordian,” in: *Dzieła wybrane*, ed. Julian Krzyżanowski, vol. III, *Dramaty*, ed. Eugeniusz Sawyrmowicz (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1987), p. 105.

be forced to look into a chasm much less perceptible and measurable: into the chasm of knowledge. In the *Reveries* we read that during one of his climbs looking for herbs Rousseau reached “fearful precipices which [he] dared only look at lying flat on [his] face” (*Reveries*, p. 117) in an attempt to ensure his safety. Jan Śniadecki, poet and scientist of the Polish Enlightenment, also feared precipices, since that is precisely where “a man is dizzied and blinded in confusion, falls into dreaming, into errors and childishness.”⁵¹ René stands in haughty opposition to these conservative philosophers. Not only does he refuse to complain or lie flat on his face, but will go so far as to sit right “at the edge of a volcano” to get a better view. The problem is that even there René fails to perceive anything: the crater is an abyss, a void which nothing can fill, since otherwise the void would cease to be void, and the abyss would cease to be abysmal. There is thus nothing comforting in René’s gaze. On the contrary, the tender, sorrow-driven contact with nature that we observe in the letters of Rousseau is here transformed into a relationship underlaid with constant anxiety. René gazes, but in fact truly sees nothing outside his own fear. His gaze is either lost in the immensity of the horizon, or in the darkness of the abyss. He is unable, or unwilling, to see anything located in the middle ground. For that reason, he has no friend; no soul mate. He himself admits as much: “Gazing at the lights which burned in men’s dwellings, I was transported in thought to the various scenes of grief and joy within, and I knew that beneath so many inhabited roofs I had not one friend” (*René*, p. 95). He has no friend because he is only able to think about humanity as a whole, rather than the individual. There is no precision in his thought; logic would be disastrous for him. René wallows in vague generalities, aimlessness, disputes over method. “[C]reation” is therefore, in his eyes, simultaneously “immense” and is therefore impossible to grasp and “imperceptible”: it is everywhere and nowhere, here and there, but its true location remains indeterminate. That is something René neither knows nor wishes to know, and his gaze only drifts, incoherently shifts and saddens with its own infirmity. The gaze of a melancholic who longs for something which he is unable to put a name to turns out to be equally inexact and imprecise. It is an empty gaze, just as René’s soul is empty, as is the horizon before his eyes and the precipice beneath him. It seems a vicious circle.

Still, we find in *René* a character who managed to escape that vicious circle, though remaining permanently stamped with melancholy – I refer to Amélie, the sister of the title character. Her personality seems similar to her brother’s,

51 Jan Śniadecki, *Filozofia umysłu ludzkiego, czyli rozważny wywód sił i działań umysłowych* (Warszawa: Drukarnia XX. Pijarów, 1834), p. 29.

as René himself admits: “A sweet consonance of mood and inclination bound me straitly to this sister. She was a little older than me” (*René*, p. 85). When Amélie was consumed by an incestuous passion for her brother, and he tried to understand her agitation, “she replied, with a smile, that she was like [him], that she did not know what was the matter” (*René*, p. 102). In fact she knew perfectly well, but that in no way alters her melancholy nature. It thus seems, to say the least, strange that René became the patron saint of a whole line of melancholics wandering through the pages of nineteenth-century texts, while Amélie was somehow overlooked, forgotten, and pushed to the margins. In fact her despair, consistently transforming into a kind of acedia, and the writings, eloquent though few in number, allocated to her by Chateaubriand, convey melancholia. Indeed, the letter Amélie leaves before entering a convent, consists of the most typical motifs of Romantic melancholia. She begins thus:

I am leaving for the convent at B***. This convent which stands beside the sea, is perfectly suited to my soul's condition. At night, in the depths of my cell, I shall hear the murmur of the waves washing against the convent walls; I shall think of the walks I took with you, through the woods, when we thought to hear the sound of the sea in the waving pine tops. (*René*, p. 104)

Amélie therefore chooses loneliness, a wilderness far from the hustle and bustle and people, far from her brother, whose presence inflames peaks of passion in her, though the feeling is concealed. The convent is her refuge, where Amélie will devote herself to contemplation and recollection of the past. It is hardly insignificant that her abbey overlooks the sea coast, which in Romantic iconography often bears a mark of melancholy. At the seaside one may fall into meditation on the finite nature of life and the infinite nature of God. At the seaside, too, our gaze wanders in open space, slips down from the horizon and drowns in the depths. These and similar reflections on the seashore become fashionable in the nineteenth century through such paintings as Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* and Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*. In just such a dolorous landscape Amélie immerses herself in the lassitude typical of monastic life which I referred to earlier, quoting Baudelaire among others. In this life there is no place for anything or anyone. All that remains is the recollection of loss and the love of God, which is constantly put to the test; tests of endurance, sincerity, and devotion. It seems, in fact, that in such an acedia, born in the silence and darkness of the convent, Amélie found calm. She declares in her letter to René that

When I hear the storms growing, and when the seabird beats its wings against my window, I, poor dove of Heaven, I meditate [on] my good fortune in finding a shelter against the tempest. [...] here religion sweetly deceives a feeling heart; for loves of a greater

violence it substitutes a kind of burning chastity in which the maiden and the woman in love are one [...]. (*René*, pp. 113–114)

Amélie dies to the world and shuts herself up, not only in her cramped cell in the abbey, but also in the cell of her own soul, which may in fact be even more oppressive. When Amélie takes her monastic vows, the truth of her state becomes every bit as clear to her brother: “Her eyes cast down on the dust of the world, the soul of the penitent was already in Heaven” (R, 109). Like René, Amélie no longer sees anything; she is no longer looking; her eyes are turned toward eternity, in exactly the same way as the eyes of the women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings and the eyes of the goddess in Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion*:

I must not think now, though I saw that face
But for her eyes I should have fled away.
They held me back, with a benignant light
Soft mitigated by divinest lids
Half closed, and visionless entire they seem’d
Of all external things; they saw me not,
But in blank splendour beam’d like the mild moon,
Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not
What eyes are upward cast.⁵²

The melancholy portrait of Amélie is further enhanced by René’s many observations, as he with a doggedness befitting a nobler cause lingers about the convent walls and watches out for his beloved sister. Here is what he manages to see:

I roamed unceasingly about the monastery built beside the sea. I frequently noticed, at a little barred window which overlooked an empty beach, a nun sitting in an attitude of thought; she was brooding upon the ocean whose aspect showed some vessel, scudding along towards the ends of the earth. Several times, in the moonlight, I again saw the nun at the bars of the same window. With the star of night shining down upon her, she was contemplating the sea, listening, it seemed, to the sound of the waves breaking sadly upon the deserted shingle. (*René*, pp. 112–113)

Amélie is thus rapt at the window. Her gaze is drowning somewhere in the depths of the sea, losing its way, like a ship, at the ends of the earth, and her face is shrouded in moonlight. If we add to that the steady, monotonous murmur of the waves, we understand that this is a burned-out existence, corroded by sorrow, longing, and grief. This mute expression of hopelessness, with a hollowness of the eyes, is the same look we shall see on the face of a sentimental

52 John Keats, *The Odes of Keats*, ed. Helen Vendler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 195.

woman looking through a window in a painting by Johann Peter Hasenclever; the same stare we see from Emma Bovary, who spends the most important moments of her life sitting by the window with her chin resting on her elbow. The only problem is that the window, the full moon, and the trinkets scattered about signal a burned-out, empty gaze. Amélie chose the convent in order to protect herself, but in fact her cloister is the ship she sees through the window, a ship heading straight to nowhere. The sea's monotonous waves, crashing against the rocky shore, only deepen her reverie, just as the monotonous waves of the lake put Jean-Jacques into transports of joy and wistfulness in the *Confessions* and the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. It is thus surprising that Amélie's melancholy and despair seem not to have been noticed, despite the fact that they are undeniably equal in intensity to René's confusion.

This neglect may be due to the fact that unlike Amélie, René refuses to accept his loss; on the other hand, however, he never becomes directly conscious of what exactly he has lost. The answers that come to mind, concepts such as love, hope, or happiness, cease to have meaning when one is not among people but looking down at tiny figures from the heights of Etna. Perhaps that is precisely what René asked himself as he wandered around the convent and, in the evening, at sunset, sat on a rock, which soon became a mute but oppressive symbol of his anguish (see *René*, p. 117). Then he no doubt heard the "roar of the waves" (*René*, p. 114), the wind no doubt tousled his hair, and his roving gaze was no doubt directed toward the barred and illumined window in the abbey. He must at that point have grasped that he had not lost love, or hope, or happiness, but life itself. While he lived, he must have wept for that lost life. It is thus not surprising that in the last sentence of *René* Chateaubriand refers to the rock that René would sit on. That rock is a counterbalance to Rousseau's light and sensuous herbarium. The rock oppresses and, even if it suffers, stifles the cry in itself. The rock is, in fact, the ideal symbol for the new styles of thought and form referred to by Thibaudet. Nothing remains of Rousseau's sweet and enchanting melancholy. A rock is large, clumsy and ungainly; it cannot be brought into the salon. There is also something sad in the immobility that is the obverse side of René's excessive mobility and many journeys; something sad because neither the rock nor René discover anything. They stay in place and journey only inside their own minds.

It is symptomatic that in reality, too, Chateaubriand in the end stayed on his rock. His remains were placed on a rocky island off the coast of Saint Malo, the city in Brittany where he was born. The beginning and end of his earthly voyage were thus both in the same place, and, in a certain sense at least, the writer never ventured very far. Today, when the low tide draws stormy waters away or the

high tide crashes against the piers, the chance passerby and the easygoing beachcomber look dolefully out at that island. It is rather odd, seemingly forgotten, though it persistently begs to be looked at. When a gaze lingers on its shores, it is condemned to pensiveness à la René. The naked rock emerges from the sea that has washed over it for so many years. It thus endures, seemingly bare, and yet inhabited; seemingly dead and yet constantly set ablaze by dreams. Close to the shore, and yet just too far away. The paradoxes could doubtless be multiplied to infinity; what matters is that together with René's and Chateaubriand's rock, we have entered the world of the august, though often exaggerated and hysterical, melancholia of the nineteenth century.

2. Gazing and Writing Instead of Living (Senancour)

At times, though rarely, I forget that I am on earth as a shadow, walking up and down,
seeing but grasping nothing.¹

Neither the publication history of Étienne de Senancour's *Obermann* nor the vicissitudes of the eponymous hero's life readily qualify as what one would call an invigorating story. It seems that neither the author nor his character were able to extricate themselves from the "abyss of longing" (p. 248) in which, truth be told, they were far from miserable. Misfortune decreed that *Obermann* was first published in 1804, a mere two years after Chateaubriand's story of René and his vicissitudes, a book which met with great success. Even if *Obermann* and *René* present two quite distinct psychological profiles and approaches to literature, the melancholy and ennui that preside over them meant that critics were eager to mention Chateaubriand's protagonist alongside Senancour's, to the latter's despair and over his rather sheepishly voiced objections. The truth is that both *Obermann* and René suffer from the same *mal du siècle* that was felt by Yves de la Quérière,² though it is hard to forget that, whereas René travels, experiences life and finally enjoys the protection of Chateaubriand's impeccable style and composition, *Obermann* focuses entirely on himself, retreats into solitude and is engulfed by toxic ennui. What is more, Senancour deliberately rejects any kind of sophistication, and in the "Observations" that form the preface to his epistolary novel, informs us that the book contains "prolixities," "repetitions," and "contradictions" (pp. XXX–XXXI), and that the letters' style will be "unequal and irregular" (p. XXXII). In effect, Chateaubriand, to his astonishment, fairly quickly became a reference point for frustrated Romantics, who timidly began signaling their existential and literary pretensions, while Senancour fell into obscurity. The first edition of *Obermann* in fact attracted no attention whatsoever save for isolated mentions of it in the press, the authors of which were dispassionately critical.

1 Étienne de Senancour, *Obermann*, trans. Arthur Edward Waite (London: W. Rider, 1909), p. 385.

2 See Yves de la Quérière, "René et Obermann: dialectique du mal du siècle," *Romance Notes*, No. 14 (1975), pp. 75–82.

Senancour's second stroke of bad luck was noted by George Sand in an article published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on 15 June 1833, and reprinted seven years later as the preface to the third edition of *Obermann*. According to Sand, the novel, whose central mood is one of "quiet and melancholy complaint,"³ was published at the least opportune time. The beginning of the nineteenth century in France was a time of constant preparation for war, heightened belief in the nation's might and civilizing mission, and the cult of the powerful individual, leaving no place for either vain contemplation or tearful grievance. The time of disappointments and abandoned hopes was yet to come, which is the reason, as Sand stresses, "Obermann, who was born thirty years too soon, is in fact the expression of the general state of mind in 1833."⁴ In truth, it was only the second edition of *Obermann*, printed in that very year, with a preface by Sainte-Beuve, that would bring fleeting fame and renown to Senancour in Romantic circles. Against his intentions and contrary to the philosophy inscribed in the text, which resulted in equal measure from melancholy and constant attempts to overcome it, Senancour's epistolary novel was seen as a manifesto in praise of ennui, spleen and indifference of every stripe.

This seems to have been the third stroke of ill luck for Senancour. He was pleased at the book's success, but at the same time disconcerted by the complete disagreement between the Romantics' proposed interpretation and his own idea. That interpretation was driven less by Sand's text than by Sainte-Beuve's essay, first published in the *Revue de Paris* on 21 January 1832, then reprinted in an expanded and supplemented form as the preface to the 1833 edition of *Obermann*. Sainte-Beuve was the first to perceive in Senancour's novel the image of "le mal du siècle,"⁵ which would not only influence a whole generation of Romantics, but also become the curse of the entire nineteenth century. The most important symptom of this disease is the awful ennui that deprives Obermann of the desire or ability to act and delivers him into the hands of "bitter thoughts" and "tormenting disappointment."⁶ Obermann thus becomes the spokesman for almost all nineteenth-century melancholics, "the type for most of the sad and suffering souls of the century," as Sainte-Beuve writes.⁷ Even if Senancour was not entirely convinced of the correctness of that interpretation, he never unambiguously discredited it or even called it into question. To do so would, in point of fact,

3 Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Fabienne Bercegol (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), p. 520.

4 Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 523.

5 Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 511.

6 Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol.

7 Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 512.

have been extremely difficult, since both *Obermann* and Senancour's other novels, *Aldomen ou le Bonheur dans l'obscurité* (1795) and *Isabelle* (1833) contain a good measure of melancholia, as well as an inordinately high number of remarks on ennui. What constitutes the originality of Senancour's formula is, as Béatrice Didier has underscored, not so much its connection with Enlightenment ideals as the profound analysis "of the metaphysical foundations of melancholia combined with a power of philosophical reflection greater than most of his contemporaries attained."⁸ Without forgetting Senancour's moral engagement and his expressed need to teach people, to correct their errors, to encourage them to correct their ways,⁹ this essay will primarily examine that side of the text which is explicitly inspired by the experience and tradition of melancholia.

The signs of melancholy in *Obermann* are so many that several other novels could be compiled from them. The wealth of such signs, contrary to the protestations offered by Senancour in, for instance, the "Observations," is not by chance. The aspect of *Obermann* that best captures his melancholy nature, moreover, is his gaze, which flashes across people and things before fixing upon the observer himself:

I am alone. The uncommunicated energies of my heart react and pause therein. Behold me in the world, solitary amid the throng which is to me as nothing, like one long afflicted by an accidental deafness, whose hungry eye is fixed on all those mute beings surging so feverishly past him! He sees all, and yet all is denied him; he divines those sounds which he loves, seeks them and hears them not; he endures the silence of all things in the midst of the rumour of the world. All unfolds before him and he can grasp nothing; in all external things there dwells the universal harmony; it is present to his imagination, but is no longer in his heart; he is cut off from the concourse of the living; there is no communication henceforth. All things for him exist in vain; in vain does all flourish before him; he lives alone; he is as one absent in the living world. (p. 81)

It must be acknowledged that this is one of the bravest and at the same time most shocking admissions in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. *Obermann* finds himself at an impasse. He lives in a world that is not his world, among people he cannot understand, finally in the sphere of his own feelings, which have no relation to the people and things they should concern. In the passage above, it is possible to see a dynamic that leads us from the view of

8 Béatrice Didier, "Obermann le mélancolique," in *Malinconia, malattia, malinconica e letteratura moderna*, ed. Anna Dolfi (Roma: Bulzoni, 1991), pp. 180–181.

9 On this subject, see Aleksander Milecki, "«Oberman» – portrait explicite ou implicite du désespéré?," in: *Le Portrait littéraire*, eds. Kazimierz Kupisz, Gabriel-André Pérouse, Jean-Yves Debreuille (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1988), pp. 159–169.

loneliness as lack, as a feeling linked to emptiness, ennui and disappointment;¹⁰ through a stage where it is subject to the world's voracious scrutiny, to a considerable degree determining the descriptive poetics of the novel; to a focus on the self, on the writing subject, who escapes from the real world into the world of writing.

2.1 Melancholic solitude

Obermann is truly alone. To a certain extent, his solitude is voluntary, because he consistently avoids people, hiding where he is sure to meet nobody, where none may disturb his contemplation. He therefore recalls moments spent at Fontainebleau with such tenderness, and so he looks in exasperation for seclusion in the Swiss Alps, where he eventually builds a house in an area whose name, Imenstròm, similarly, in fact, to the hero's name, underscores (through its suggestion of immensity and, perhaps, Germanic dreams) the desire for escape, for concealment somewhere nobody can find him. There is thus nothing strange about Obermann's cheerful declaration that "I am at last in my own domicile, and that too in the Alps" (p. 290). Senancour wrote frequently and fondly about out-of-the-way, remote places, inaccessible to the uninitiated. It is not by chance that he mentions the Island of St. Pierre, where Rousseau in his time had found a hideaway, in the *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme*, describing it as his "long-desired refuge, happy island."¹¹ In fact Obermann is not entirely alone in his alpine retreat, since he is joined by his servant Hantz, and occasionally by Fonsalbe, to whom Obermann devotes several moving paragraphs in connection with his thoughts on friendship and whom he calls his "friend in [...] loneliness" (p. 351), but all who appear there are members of a kind of select few, a handful of devoted people. Thus nothing can disturb Obermann's calm and solitude. He resolves to examine himself in obscurity, and even to cure himself of the strange indispositions that constantly ail him and which he cannot fully understand.

In fact it is not at all surprising that Obermann, educated by Enlightenment philosophers, is unable to cope with the anxiety that torments him. He had lamented that he "attempted in vain to drive away that void, that disgust with life"

10 Mieczysława Sekrecka has written of the negative and positive valuation of solitude in *Obermann* in a somewhat different context: see her essay "L'Expérience de la solitude dans 'Obermann' de Senancour," in: *Approches des Lumières. Mélanges offerts à Jean Fabre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974), pp. 447–457.

11 Senancour, *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme*, ed. Joachim Merlant (Paris: Droz, 1939), vol. 1, p. 226.

and complained that “the full custom of sadness stretched over [his] days, incurable ennui came to overwhelm [him] with its calamitous weight.”¹² It thus emerges that characters whose basic model of behavior and key paradigm was the positive ideology of the eighteenth century, which looked for support in human reason, found life to be far from easy. The reason for this lay in their realization that faith in human capabilities and the good will of society, the praise also of utility, and logic, which dictated that order and harmony be sought in human life, were all wishful thinking rather than a rational plan for living, if such a thing were at all possible to devise: “I am in silence which is in the midst of riot, and I have nothing to do in a turbulent world” (p. 46).¹³ Obermann no longer feels any certainty as to whether society may be reformed, or the human being’s “natural” goodness restored to him, a belief Rousseau expressed with disproportionate obstinacy. The historical confirmation of such doubts was the collapse of the revolutionary ideals proclaimed with such vehemence in 1789. Crucial principles of the French Revolution had been drowned in blood before the eyes of the whole society. The revolutionary guillotine decapitated the revolution’s own fathers and the ascendancy of their ideas with equal alacrity. Robert Kopp has pointed out that in the melancholia emerging at the beginning of the nineteenth century we see not only the abstract irresolution of no less abstract, indeed technically non-existent, individuals, but also what results from the inflation of philosophical ideas and historical conflicts.¹⁴ The consequences of this disappointment include both disaffection, becoming submerged in ennui, and a loosening of the ties that previously bound the individual to society. The human being at the turn of the century becomes mistrustful, and recalls the treatises of the Enlightenment without enthusiasm. In his hands, a philosophical essay is transformed into a soliloquy, a dramatic confession or an intimate journal. Neither society nor the republic of philosophers seems either safe or pleasant. For Obermann too, others represent a chaotic crowd, which has neither the time nor the capacity to look closely at the individual or listen to his grievances. Everything thus sets him apart from society: “of my fellow-men I demanded whether they felt as I

12 Senancour, *Aldomen ou le Bonheur dans l'obscurité* (Paris: Bibliothèque romantique, 1925), p. 12.

13 On the crisis of Enlightenment ideas and the ennui that accompanied it, see Norbert Jonard, “L’Ennui et la crise des Lumières,” in: *L’Ennui dans la littérature européenne. Des origines à l’aube du XXe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1998), pp. 79–103.

14 See Robert Kopp, “«Les limbes insondés de tristesse». Figures de la mélancolie romantique de Chateaubriand à Sartre,” in: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 328–340.

did, of things whether they accorded with my tastes, and I found that there was harmony neither between myself and society, nor between my wants and the conventions which it has fashioned” (p. 4). There is no linking thread of understanding; worse, the hero’s experiences and emotions remain uncommunicable, as is clearly indicated in the above passage.

Yet Obermann’s solitude is not merely the result of his disappointment in the ideals of the Enlightenment, nor simply an escape from the sheer tumult of Paris. It is also the bitter admission of the hollowed-out subject, the subject who finds support neither within himself nor in his environment, and for whom life is a series of inexplicable failures and frustrations. In *Obermann* this vexatious condition is related to the existential experience of emptiness or ennui. Very early on, Obermann poses a question to the addressee of his letters to which neither of them will find the answer: “Why is the earth thus stripped of illusions in my eyes? Satiety I have in nowise known; the void I find everywhere” (p. 4). He cannot escape the void the way he can escape society. The void accompanies Obermann both when he is among people and when he is entirely alone, and that is because it is an outgrowth of the lack of any kind of relation. In a passage cited above we read of Obermann’s gaze taking in both people and the world in which they live. It is a somewhat troublesome passage, however, since it presented... the gaze of a blind man. In order to describe the relation between his subject and the world, Senancour in fact used the metaphor of deafness, but only to make the lack of relation that much more acute. For the subject knows that something is happening on the outside; that something is constantly changing; he is sure of the fact, but his “hungry eye” is unsatisfied, as it allows no contact to be established. That leads in turn to the paradoxical statement that it is not the subject who is deaf, but rather the world that is mute. The subject denies the senses to whatever is located outside himself. It is therefore wholly unsurprising that with the world of human beings “there is no communication” (p. 81).¹⁵ “Nothing engrosses me, nothing takes hold of me; I seem still to be suspended in the void” (p. 392). This is the solipsistic confession of a man who finds himself amid the ruins of the values in which he once wished to believe. It is curious that Senancour is quite consistent in reducing the world to Obermann’s imaginings; in metaphorically stripping the world of its senses. In letter LXXV Obermann declares: “I dwell in an intolerable emptiness, alone, lost, uncertain, overborne with disquietude and

15 It is important to underscore that the author refers here specifically to the world of people, because, as we shall see, the gaze directed by the subject toward nature is quite distinct. That gaze is also melancholic, but for completely different reasons.

amazement, in the midst of wandering shades, in space impalpable and dumb” (p. 319). We should not be taken aback by either Obermann’s disquietude or his amazement, given that the world has just disappeared from before his eyes. He neither sees nor hears it; nor can he touch it. Obermann is thus condemned to the void, in a world which is empty because deprived of sensory experience.

Things look no better for the subject himself, who is a long way from any kind of plenitude. Obermann perceives emptiness not only externally, but also in himself: “I became a prey to sadness; the void made furrows in my heart, wants with no limit devoured me in silence, and weariness of life became my sole sentiment at an age when most people are beginning to live” (p. 319). Obermann thus gazes within himself and, no doubt to his own astonishment, perceives the same thing as he perceives on the outside: nothing. A heart hollowed out by the void, an impenetrable profundity – these are the metaphors that appear in Henri-Frédéric Amiel’s *Intimate Journal* and that recur regularly throughout nineteenth-century journals and memoirs.¹⁶ Whereas Obermann’s earlier confessions were shocking or horrifying, this one is, to say the least, paradoxical. For if the subject finds nothing within himself; if he feels hollowed or devoured by the void, who, in the end, is speaking or writing down his words? The problem is paradoxical because the words are spoken by someone who claims not to exist; who claims to be no one; one who in the end claims to be void. It is nevertheless only words that can save this subject since, if the melancholy subject consents to be deprived of any communication whatsoever, he will thereby be plunged, as Béatrice Didier has pointed out, into madness and depression, which have no words. Obermann must therefore speak; he must write; and must do so even when what he writes is repetitious; when he tests the patience of his friend, condemned to the “prolixities” of whose existence Senancour informed us in the introductory “Observations.” Unlike Fabienne Bercegol, who maintains that the subject is a guarantee of unity and coherence in the epistolary novel, I would claim that the text, regardless of its fragmentary, incomplete, or stylistically or compositionally imperfect nature, prevents the subject from disintegrating; writing protects Obermann from going mad. For only then may we declare that the hollowed-out subject is purely a metaphor, rather than the description of a pathology that devours and consumes the patient.

16 There is thus nothing surprising in the title of the book in which André Monglond posits a sign of equality between Obermann and Senancour, treating the epistolary novel entitled *Obermann* as Senancour’s intimate journal – see *Le journal intime d’Obermann* (Grenoble: B. Arthaud, 1947).

For these same reasons, the ennui that Obermann experiences as, he writes, the first feeling of his adult life, is only the obverse side of a completely unfounded optimism. Ennui allows Obermann to understand and master solitude: "There is a confusion within me, a kind of delirium, which is not that of the passions, nor yet that of madness[;] it is the disorder of weariness, the discord which that has set up between myself and outward things" (p. 81). Curiously, for Obermann ennui is no accidental feeling, resulting from fleeting discomforts; and this constitutes its force in terms of saving the subject. Neither is it contrary to the natural state of man. The question of ennui is a question concerning the very foundations of existence, and in Obermann's letters it is an ontological question. Ennui is thus a part of the fabric of human existence. If a person is bored, she exists, something not entirely understood by Descartes. I feel bored; therefore I am, Obermann seems to declare. This truth is also felt profoundly by Antoine Roquentin, the hero of Sartre's *Nausea*. The same problem appears in the Journals of Delacroix, who will go looking for boredom in order to better understand himself and his own vocation. For Obermann, however, boredom is the safeguard of identity and of the subject's continuity in time. His twisted "sensibility" is the "fruit, at once bitter and precious of [...] prolonged weariness" (p. 8). Even if Obermann complains of ennui just as often ("Weariness overwhelms me, loathing crushes me. I know that all this evil is in me," p. 152; "torpor [...] consumes my life," p. 189), he nonetheless admits that "Apathy [...] has become [his] second nature" (p. 152), and weariness, even if it is oppressive, encompasses, all the same, the whole of his existence. For this reason it is impossible to overstate the role of ennui in a game where the identity of the subject is at stake. If writing is the aesthetic guarantor of that identity (though not only that – on which more will follow below), then ennui can undoubtedly be said to be its existential guarantor.

All of Obermann's above experiences and emotional states, solitude, void, finally, ennui, definitively confirm his conviction that he is alive: "Pursued even in the mournful repose of my customary impassiveness, and compelled to be something, I became at length myself" (p. 5). This discovery on Obermann's part should not be treated lightly, since it starts the nineteenth-century tradition of intimate writing, which will be submerged in dolour and irresolution, whose main purpose will be the discovery of the writing subject's true self, whatever that might mean. For Obermann in 1804 it meant that life made him feel sad, but at least he understood, and felt that he was alive. That not very stirring conclusion was amplified by Senancourt through his description of the space for which Obermann took a particular liking: here it is not a social space, but the melancholy image of mountains and lakes.

2.2 The melancholic landscape

If once again we return to the epigraph that set the agenda for this chapter, we perceive that Obermann's "hungry eye" devours not only mute beings, but also vaguely defined external things, in which there dwells a no less vague "universal harmony." Senancour explains neither the nature of these things nor what the harmony he refers to might be. In *Obermann*, however, the melancholy-tinged landscape of Switzerland, with its alpine ranges and lakes, contains a kind of harmony. Not for nothing does Obermann, weary of idle Parisian life and unable to find his place in the world, choose that particular country for his residence. Switzerland in the nineteenth century, after all, was a place that provided inspiration, an Arcadian space where nature had not yet been tainted by the hand of man. Eugène Genoude wrote in 1821 of the "beautiful country" and its "songs so pure and melodious" that they brought the traveler's soul into a "state of ecstasy."¹⁷ Similar observations appear in writings on the subject by Germaine de Staël and Alphonse de Lamartine. It was, however, not just the topos of *hortus conclusus* in the style of Conrad Gessner that was vital for the Romanticism emerging at the time. The inaccessible Alps, the enigmatic mists and rocks, along which the last ray of sunshine fretfully glides, are also a *topos horribilis*, a dangerous place, a place that often marks the end of a person's wandering. Astolphe de Custine sees in the Alps "pyramids of snow" and an "empire of chaos," surpassing natural dimensions.¹⁸ Among others susceptible to the dark charm of these mountains, their poetic nature and their faces crammed with dangers were Charles Nodier, Gérard de Nerval, and Théophile Gautier. Both of the above aspects, with a delicate predominance of the idyllic and at times a note of sentimentality, had in fact appeared earlier, in Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* and in the letters published by William Coxe, English historian and confessor to the Duke of Pembroke, in 1779. Coxe's book is important insofar as it determined to a considerable extent the literary image of turn-of-the-century Switzerland and weighed heavily on its Romantic reception, in particular through the translation of Louis François Ramond, which first appeared in 1781, together with some "Observations by the Translator." Rousseau and Coxe were two authors whom Senancour read avidly.

The alpine landscape in *Obermann* is nonetheless quite specific. While it is true that Obermann wishes to hide away in Switzerland, he does so not for the

17 See *Le Voyage en Suisse. Anthologie des voyageurs français et européens de la Renaissance au XXe siècle*, eds. Claude Reichler and Roland Ruffieux (Paris: R. Laffont, 1998), p. 740.

18 See *Le Voyage en Suisse*, p. 710.

civic freedoms it promises (since at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Switzerland was often praised for its implementation of democratic ideas) or rural recreation. Nor does Obermann seek dangers and extreme experiences, though letter XCI describes a terrifying climb that only a happy coincidence prevented from ending Obermann's life. For Obermann, the Alps are above all the locus for a melancholia kept aloof from life and plunged into its own self. Hence in numerous descriptions we find "the glow of the setting sun and the vacant space of air" (p. 11), "black clouds" (p. 30), and the moon, which "poured upon the earth and the waters the ineffable sadness of its last glories" (p. 20). Descriptions of the landscape are here to an equal extent attempts to characterize what Obermann sees and the emotional state in which he finds himself. That is particularly evident when Obermann endeavors to present his reflections against the background of mountain lakes. The scene takes place at midnight, by the pale light of the moon. The wind brushes gently against the waves, while the text, to the reader's astonishment, completes a shift from description to soliloquy or philosophical reflections on the unhappy condition of the human being. The Alps are thus sad, unmarred and unapproachable, but they are that way because they are being gazed at by a subject filled with melancholia. A subject who desires to (and who must, if he wishes to avoid going mad) speak of himself, which is the reason he reminds the addressee of his letters that "as agreed [...] it is with me that you are familiar and not with that which environs me" (p. 248). The epithets and metaphors that Obermann uses are representations of his mental state (*état d'âme*).

To say that the protagonist is utterly oblivious to the specificity of the alpine landscape would be untrue, however. After all, in the article on style in descriptions that Senancour published in *Mercure de France* in 1811, the very demand for truthfulness is one of the most important: "The temperature, time of year, sometimes even the time of day should be shown or rather depicted from the very beginning."¹⁹ For that very reason, Senancour takes a critical stance toward the descriptions that Rousseau presented in his novels, especially *La nouvelle Héloïse*. According to Senancour, the poetics of those descriptions has nothing to do with factual experience, hence their abstract nature. The description of the valley of Valais in Letter XXIII, part 1 of *La nouvelle Héloïse* could just as well be used to describe the valleys of Savoie or Oberland.²⁰ Rousseau is therefore insensible to what constitutes the variations among diverse landscapes, and for

19 Senancour, "Du style dans les descriptions," in: *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 533.

20 Senancour, "Du style dans les descriptions," in: *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, pp. 535–536.

that reason insensible of the need to adapt his style and gaze to them. A change of landscape demands a change in point of view. That is why in *Obermann*, aside from the descriptions mentioned earlier, where the expression of the protagonist's state of mind was of key importance, there are also others in which the demand for truth dominates: hence the remarks about the atmosphere and temperature, as well as very detailed descriptions of valleys and peaks. It is nonetheless hard to escape the impression that, contrary to what Senancour writes in the article "Du Style dans les descriptions," the alpine landscape in *Obermann* is quite strange. For the same mighty Alps, whose magnitude overwhelmed other travelers, are here revealed to be a deeply claustrophobic and confined place. For example, in attempting to present Bex, Obermann writes, "[...] he rocks reach up close to the town and seem to impend over it. The dull roll of the Rhone saddens a region which appears cut off from the rest of the earth, entrenched and shut in on all sides" (p. 30). The protagonist's experience thus represents an experience of paradoxical space. Like other Romantics, he climbs up to summits where his "sight lose[s] itself in limitless immensity" (p. 41) and simultaneously is stifled because space shrinks, closes itself off. This appears to be a cheap paradox or stylistic inconsistency on the part of the author, or rather his hero. In the introductory "Observations," Senancour informed his readers that Obermann's letters would be a swarm of contradictions. Those contradictions are not, however, caused only by the paralysis of the will, the inability to make decisions, that has all the symptoms of a disease: "One observes, one seeks, but does not, however, decide" (p. XXXI). Contradiction is also, or perhaps primarily, the consequence of an authorial strategy deliberately chosen by Senancour.

The first sign of this method is the above demand for truthfulness. Since the landscape changes (as a result of the natural change of season or time of day, alterations in temperature, or variations in lighting), and since the emotional state of a human being is likewise subject to change (because it depends on circumstances, the influence of other people, or even eating a meal), it would be difficult, according to Senancour, to limit oneself to a single, universal style: "A hurricane on the measureless plains of Bangladesh cannot be described in short, disconnected sentences, using words that are murky as a windstorm in the frightening rocks of the Orkney Islands."²¹ Because it is impossible to express the richness of human experience by means of an artificially selected method. Inconsistencies are thus possible and even desirable, since they constitute a guarantee of the text's truthfulness. Secondly, it is important that for all of its variety, the style not be

21 Senancour, "Du style dans les descriptions," in: *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 534.

pretentious, not use trivial turns of phrase, and avoid worn metaphors. The main figure should be the comparison, which offers the opportunity to show connections, indirect, but “true and numberless,” between the human being and the laws and phenomena of nature.²² Senancour thus seeks the secret connections that govern nature’s mystery, its ever-elusive face, anticipating Charles Baudelaire by several decades in this quest. Description, in fact, is for him the only possible way of apprehending, even for a moment, what is evanescent, transient, or hidden from the human gaze. That is the third element of the authorial strategy, as well as the one that determines its “Romantic” character. The “Romantic effect” which Senancour writes about is linked with the experience of the strangeness of existence, its non-uniformity and astonishing quality. The experience, finally, of plenitude, bringing together and at the same time removing all contradictions.

Obermann writes about this same experience in Letter XXXVIII, when he praises “sublime sadness” (p. 127) and considers the essence of Romantic expression, which speaks only “to profound souls and veritable sensibility” (p. 125). Whatever is Romantic is simultaneously in constant movement. It intoxicates a man, opening his gaze up to a world without boundaries, but at the same time, and this is no contradiction, reconciles that same man with himself and with the world he is unable to comprehend. In life, the sublime is therefore interwoven with a feeling of calm. The universal harmony of oppositions, the discovery of the connection between self and nature, the affirmation of the self in its existence, despite the variability and impermanence of its impressions; these are nothing other than markers of the Romantic sublime (and not for nothing does the word so frequently appear in Obermann’s writings) both in its poetic and its philosophical dimension. A perfect example of this is the view of the mountain peaks that Obermann describes in letter VII:

But up there, on those desert peaks, where the sky is more vast and the air more stable, where time flies slower and life has more of permanence: there does all Nature proclaim with eloquence a lordier order, a more visible harmony, an eternal unison. There is the form of man adaptable and yet indestructible; he breathes the wild air far away from social emanations; he belongs to himself and to the universe, and lives with a true life in the glorious unity. (p. 39)

The entire effort concentrated on the description of the landscape thus leads us from a display of nature as merely the expression of the subject’s emotional state through an attempt to endow that nature with more verisimilitude (making it possible to endow it with a separate and independent life) to the almost mystical

22 See Senancour, “Du style dans les descriptions,” in: *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 538.

vision of “glorious unity” in which Obermann perceives the mysterious harmony between himself and the world. One may, nevertheless, rightly ask what has become of the mists and black clouds; where the sadness is that tormented Obermann; where, finally, in this quite simply Utopian vision from Letter VII, in which we see an overall ecstasy and paean to existence, the melancholia is.

To consider some anecdotal evidence, melancholia is an essential element of Romantic expression because in the search for perfection, there is, according to Obermann, always a little, almost undefinable, sadness. This often appears where Romantic expression crosses into song or, still better, music. A good example of this is the Swiss cowherds’ melody beloved by Obermann, *Ranz des vaches*, which stirs nostalgia, tender emotion, and ultimately contemplation in the listener. Rousseau had already written about it in his *Dictionnaire de musique*, underscoring that it elicits tears, and those who listen to it “recall [...] their country, their former pleasures, their youth and all their joys of life, excite in them a bitter sorrow for the loss of them.”²³ Obermann takes a critical view of Rousseau’s remark, however, because “*Ranz des vaches* does not simply excite memories; it may rather be said to paint” (p. 128), after which Obermann, who attaches such great weight to the gaze, tries in the most concrete way possible to depict the landscape in which the melody should be heard. It is, of course, a mountain landscape in the Swiss Alps, where the snow-covered peaks of steep mountains overlook green pastures, where a herd of cows lazily walk across the road and disappear in a leisurely way together with the cowherds, all of which takes place among larch trees, to the sound of fading bells in the distance, under the silent gaze of the glaciers and in the embrace of night. Obermann gives still more details, in order to suggest the melancholy nature of the landscape, since it is no more. His nostalgia, as Béatrice Didier has noted, does not spring from homesickness for Switzerland as his homeland, for Obermann is not Swiss. The

23 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), vol. V, *Écrits sur la musique, la langue et le théâtre*, p. 924. English edition: Rousseau, *A Complete Dictionary of Music*, trans. William Waring (London: J. Murray, 1779). Mme De Staël also mentions Swiss songs in her book *De l’Allemagne*, ed. Simone Balayé (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), vol. I, p. 153: “Much has been said of an air played on the alpenhorn, which made so lively an impression on the Swiss, that when they heard it they quitted their regiments to return to their country. We may imagine what effect this air may produce when repeated by the echoes of the mountains; but it should be heard resounding from a distance; when near, the sensation which it produces is not agreeable.” Baroness de Staël-Holstein, *Germany*, ed. Orlando Williams Wight, trans. Friedrich Max Müller (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1864), p. 139.

melody of the *Ranz des vaches* rather awakens in him “a sorrow for an imagined fatherland” and a “metaphysical pain which is the source of [his] melancholia.”²⁴ There is thus, in both the harmony of nature and Romantic expression, a sadness difficult to grasp, resulting from the fear that everything may be lost; that nothing lasts forever; that all things come to an end.

That is the source of the despair about his own existence that was in no way eliminated by the Utopian vision of “glorious unity.” Obermann’s ecstasy was temporary and ephemeral, and therein lies its tragic nature, as Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne has emphasized.²⁵ “[T]he sublime overwhelms or exalts [the soul]” (p. 76), but only for the purpose of receiving its promise of a better world. The experience of the sublime quickly transforms into something subtle and indefinable. It is entirely unsurprising that Obermann, sensitive to the secret connections that exist in nature and conscious of the human being’s infirm condition, complains: “I seemed to have nothing but undefined ideas. I passed in my mind through earth and its ages, and trembled at the work of man. Then I revert to myself, to find that I am in this chaos; I see my life lost therein [...]” (p. 63). Still more dramatic in tone is the confession in Letter XXX, in which the beautiful description of a jonquil, conveying the charm of nature and the connections existing within it, must inevitably be followed by a description of an abyss in which nothing may be perceived; where darkness reigns and one may be sure of nothing (pp. 91–92). Obermann is thus borne into the clutches of contradictory feelings, and his attitude toward nature is deeply cyclothymic: it begins from a projection of his own emotional states, mostly the pessimistic ones, leads through the highly esteemed experience of sublimity, in which the landscape becomes independent from the cognitive subject and begins to influence the subject, in order to end in melancholic loss. In the process Obermann loses not only the vaguely felt idea of universal harmony, but also himself, the self that was deprived of connections with nature is merely the “fortuitous expression of a transient combination” (p. 255). Thus nothing truly exists. In effect, life appears to Obermann a series of failures. It is the void in which he solemnly celebrates that which he has lost and is unable to name. It should also be underscored that if we examine the text from the angle of poetics, the two first stages, i.e., the experience of the landscape as a mental state and as universal harmony, are markedly descriptive, though the subject’s emotions dominate in the first,

24 Béatrice Didier, “Obermann le mélancolique,” p. 180.

25 See Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne, *La Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au romantisme* (Paris: Champion, 1997), p. 218.

and the awesome power of nature in the second, while the third stage, i.e., the experience of loss, leads to metaphysical declarations. Obermann then begins to write about the absence of words, the impossibility of expressing anything; about vagueness. The subject is thus pushed by the infirmity of language into the abyss of his disease. To avoid extreme depression and mute madness, Obermann needs words. Therefore, he writes.

2.3 Melancholic writing

In the end, it seems to Obermann that writing is, in fact, his calling: “I believe definitely that my vocation is writing” (p. 392). This declaration may be understood in two different ways. Firstly, as has been noted by, among others, Fabienne Bercegol and Mięczysława Sekrecka, Obermann inherits the eighteenth-century belief according to which the writer is society’s law-giver and teacher, the defender of morality and guardian of tradition.²⁶ It is nonetheless difficult to overlook the fact that Obermann does an exceptionally poor job at that task. His praise of suicide or love that yields to no social norms bears no similarity to classical models of behavior. If we add to that the melancholy that tears the character apart, we see that he is quite unfit to be any kind of legislator. Then again, that is hardly a particularly interesting role for Obermann, who concentrates exclusively on his own feelings: “I reflected that the true life of a man is within him, while that which he derives from without is only adventitious and subservient” (p. 5). I therefore do not find that the thesis of being called to be a writer and teacher was successfully maintained. There is no doubt that Obermann desires to become a writer, but primarily in order to talk through the groaning depression inside him, to strew words over the abyss of madness opening beneath his feet.

We thus arrive at the most important characteristic of writing, the therapeutic value that Obermann ascribes to it. We already know that he praised ennui and considered it an essential element of human existence, its foundation even. This time he declares: “I am in dejection, and therefore write” (p. 224). In reaching for his pen, he is thus not driven by lofty ideas, the need to teach or to correct errors, but because he feels bad; because he is sad and needs to write about it. It is an imperative of writing that results from the melancholic experience of nothingness. Only by writing can Obermann preserve himself. In one of the letters he admits as much straightforwardly: “I who am a hermit, or at least a fantastic dreamer, have nothing in reality to say, and yet I say it at twice

26 See footnote no. 366 by Bercegol in Senancour, *Obermann*, ed. Bercegol, p. 485; Sekrecka, “L’Expérience de la Solitude dans ‘Obermann’ de Senancour,” pp. 453–454.

the length. All that runs through my head, all that I should recite in conversation, I set down if opportunity offer; but all that I think, all that I feel, I write of necessity – it is indeed a necessity for me” (pp. 117–118). If he gave up writing, if he ceased to utter words, he would perish. That is the reason that he notes everything down, with no particular order or care for composition, for it is not the structure of the text that is at stake in this game, but Obermann’s consciousness. Only writing eases and allows him to master painful emotions, such as the lack of hope, anxiety, and internal trepidation that persistently nag at him. He himself admits that without this valve “moments like these would be beyond bearing” (p. 117), and only writing provides him with the diversion he needs, which in truth is his therapy.

Once writing has allowed him to soothe his nerves, Obermann turns his attention and curiosity to another aspect of writing: its existential value. For to write means to leave a trace behind, extending our existence on the paper bearing our signs, as well as in the memories of those who will read that paper. In Obermann’s case this reader is his nameless friend-correspondent. Spoken words are transitory and fleeting, but those written down remain: “If the hours which are spent in discussion are commonly wasted, this is not the case with those which are devoted to writing” (p. 163). They are not wasted hours, since the page filled with writing is a physical sign of the subject’s mute presence. This particular subject’s and nobody else’s, since in writing we leave the imprint of our style and manner on the page. We write only in harmony with ourselves; not according to directions or models. Hence Obermann’s graphomania, in the sense not so much of incompetence as a writer, though that could also be discussed, as primarily of his anxious need to write, his mania for writing. The potential madness of the writing subject is here contrasted with the actual madness of his writing. If, however, Obermann manages to write anything, he can be almost certain that it is reading, writing’s opposite, that makes it possible for him to survive real depression. Hence Obermann admires the principle, among the ancient poets and sophists, that “the delivery had to be adapted to the style and the latter to the way in which it would be read” (p. 337). Only thus may existence be saved. It must not be distorted, changed by accidents, of grammar or fate, because at stake is the unity of identity, the protection of the subject from dispersal, from slipping away into madness. Thus nothing outside the act of writing itself is important: “Of what consequence to me is the extent of my letters? The longer they are, and the greater the time which I spend over them, the more valuable they are to me” (p. 117). The subject matter is thus, in the final analysis, of secondary importance.

The style should be an idiolect, but whether it meets a standard of grammatical correctness is immaterial. What matters is that he must write; he needs to write.

Doubts concerning the aesthetic value of Obermann's writing thus arise, though a certain aesthetic is present in them; it is just not an aesthetic that can be reconciled to the norms of classical rhetoric. There is no hint of preparing an outline of the text in advance, or of carefully arranged composition or an impeccable style, transparent and dense. Obermann declares that "it is [his] intention to claim all epistolary freedom" (p. 220), which in his case means that he has not the slightest intention of heeding the guidelines and strictures of rhetoric: "What style shall I select? None. I shall write as I speak, without thinking about it; if it were necessary to do otherwise, I should not write at all" (p. 337). Elsewhere he adds: "I write to you at great length, expressing in many words what I might convey in a few lines, but it is my characteristic" (pp. 391–392). Obermann thus takes a roundabout way from one theme to another, his epistolary freedom; writes whatever comes into his head; and has no interest in linguistic economy: he repeats himself, is verbose and, naturally, boring. He also declares that he will "write [his] travels" (p. 336), though he had earlier stated that he "dread[s] the smallest journey, and sometimes even a simple removal" (p. 298). The contradictions, however, could be multiplied. Here we deal not with Romantic sublimity, but rather the aesthetic of melancholia, which since at least the time of Robert Burton's famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* feeds us with repetitions, inconsistencies, collections of quotations, longueurs, and lists. Obermann with his collection of letters fits perfectly within that aesthetic tradition.

In this context Senancour also chooses a somewhat different authorial strategy from either Rousseau or Chateaubriand, with both of whom he is often compared.²⁷ Rousseau in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, which remains one of the most interesting examples of literary transposition of what is known as "sweet melancholia" (*la douce mélancolie*), explicitly and without further reflection questions the value of writing both as therapy and as a means of affirming one's own existence. He is interested above all in a direct, undistorted experience of nature. Writing, which demands memory and reflection, introduces something artificial between the subject and nature. Rousseau does, it is true, feel condemned to write, but it is his solitary dreams, plunged into silence, which

27 See, for example, Béatrice Didier, "La Fête chapêtre dans quelques romans de la fin du XVIIIe siècle (de Rousseau à Senancour)," in: *Les Fêtes de la Révolution*, ed. Jean Ehrard, Paul Viallaneix (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1977), pp. 311–331; Joachim Merlant, *Le Roman personnel de Rousseau à Fromentin* (Genève: Slatkin, 1970), chapter V; Yves de La Quérière, "René et Obermann: dialectique du mal du siècle."

take precedence. The problem is quite different with Chateaubriand. René is a character who behaves as if he were still unaware of the existence of writing. He thus avails himself of the spoken word, and for that reason Chateaubriand's text lends itself to analysis as a confession-novel, drawing on the oral tradition. For that reason too, René's solitude and deep melancholia are susceptible to consolation, both because nobody and nothing undermines his presence (the voice being, from antiquity, an affirmation of the subject's existence, cf. the wandering troubadour poets), and because of the community that takes shape due to those spoken words, even if René meets with rebuke, his confession is still heard, and a thread of understanding is fastened between him and others. Obermann is deprived of all of these advantages. *Obermann*, as Caroline Jacot-Grapa notes,²⁸ is marked from the very beginning by absence and is subject to a negative logic: the preliminary "Observations" inform us of its lack of composition; the friend-correspondent is entirely absent; the language seems too simple in its confrontation with sublime mystery, which remains unformulated, unspoken. For this reason, Obermann neither questions the value of writing, as Rousseau did, nor enjoys the richness inherited from the oral tradition, as René did. All that he possesses is a blank sheet of paper and a pen. He will either write or his heart will be utterly devoured by the void. For him, only writing can be both therapy and, at the same time, life.

It is thus no accident that the Romantics devoured *Obermann* with such enthusiasm in the 1830s. Obermann was precisely the psychological type that, according to Sainte-Beuve, combined in himself all the passions and curses of the nineteenth-century human being. It was he who wandered in solitude about the Alps, and the heroes of Caspar David Friedrich and Juliusz Słowacki followed his example in heading there. Doleful and bored, as well as boring, he was tormented by inexpressible emptiness: melancholia. Finally, it was Obermann who tried, with his restless gaze and no less agitated pen, to defend himself from the madness pulling him toward the abyss of silence, in which there is nothing.

28 Caroline Jacot-Grapa, "L'Épreuve du négatif: mélancolie postrévolutionnaire," in: *Figures de la négation*, eds. Jacot-Grapa and Carine Trévisan (Paris: Textuel, 1995), pp. 31–42.

3. Looking Without Seeing (Amiel, Macpherson, Turner, Mallarmé)

The grey curtain of mist has spread itself again over the town;
everything is dark and dull.¹

3.1 Sad glances

Fog did not enshroud the nineteenth-century city, suffocating both asthmatics and melancholics, all at once. First it spread over the plains of the Scottish provinces, and from there it later wound up in Romantic scrapbooks, journals, and novels. The patron saint of mists in literature at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was James Macpherson. Madame de Staël, Chateaubriand and Senancour were among the avid readers of the *Poems of Ossian* he published in 1760. That collection brought in its wake the fashion for landscapes cloaked in fog, endless heather, and open spaces suffused with sorrow. Georges Poulet, writing on French Pre-Romanticism and Madame de Staël, observes that “the great mystery of melancholia began to afflict souls beginning with Young and his *Night Thoughts*, Ossian and his mists, from the time of the minor fin-de-siècle Romantics, such as Léonard or Chênédolle.”² According to Poulet, Macpherson succeeded in forming a suggestive connection between melancholy and mist that influenced the part of the Romantic imagination given to depression and dependency.

Mist certainly plays a crucial role in the *Poems of Ossian*. The whole world of the *Poems*, in which we meet warriors heading off to their deaths and women weeping over them, is drowning in “wavy mist,” “gray mist of the ocean” or “the flying mist of heaven.”³ The reader thus finds it almost impossible to take a single step without getting lost in the fog. It is everywhere: it pours over the plains, rises over the ocean and hangs over people’s heads, blocking their view of the heavens where they hope to take refuge after they die. This is surely what gives these texts

1 *Amiel’s journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, trans. Humphrey Ward (New York: A.L. Burt, 1891), p. 146.

2 Georges Poulet, *La Pensée indéterminée* (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 245.

3 James Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1842), p. 204; “The Poems of Ossian,” in: *Ossian and Ossianism*, ed. Dafydd Moore (London: Routledge, 2004), vol. II, pp. 41, 73. The latter volume to be further cited as TPO.

their suffocating, oppressive, one might almost say asthmatic, atmosphere. Not without reason did Kazimierz Brodziński write that *Poems of Ossian* is a work of “somber poetry,” and that “Ossian’s brush seems to paint nature put to sleep in its vastness, beyond the mist, in the gentle shade of night.”⁴ It would not be possible to live in the lands described by Macpherson; this space cannot be domesticated. The main reason for this disinheritance is not, however, the staggering awareness, and perhaps necessity, of death and the acute sense of the fragility of human existence. It is rather that the mist, pushing its way into every corner, causes the heroes and readers of the *Poems* to lose sight of their reference points. They do not see the world in which they are living; they are not at home, since they do not even know what it means to be at home. There is thus nothing strange about Hidalgo’s remark, when he speaks of losing track and forgetting: “Roll, thou mist of gloomy Crona, roll on the path of the hunter! Hide his steps from mine eyes, and let me remember my friend no more” (TPO, p. 89). The mist is responsible for the fact that the world is losing its directions, and the human being who inhabits it is condemned to wander: gropingly, without any certainty that he may not at any moment return to the place he has just left.

The mist, despite its ubiquity, is not eternal; it will eventually pass. In fact, the world of the *Poems* lightens from time to time. That does not, however, elicit any change in the elegiac mood, since the disappearance of the mist, its dissipation, usually has unhappy consequences. Firstly, it engenders in the characters a sense of life’s random and transitory nature: hence the many comparisons in Macpherson’s work in which mist is a symbol for evanescence. Shilric, remembering his beloved Vinvela, who died of a broken heart, says “She fleets, she fails away; as gray mist before the wind” (TPO, p. 198). The son of Ossian, worrying about his posthumous glory, expresses his apprehension similarly: “Oscar is like the mist of Cona; I appear and vanish. The bard will not know my name. The hunter will not search in the heath for my tomb” (TPO, p. 105). Finally, Cuchullin, handing over his sword to Fingal in shame, speaks through his bard, Carril: “Take, o Fingal, the sword of the herp; for his fame is departed like mist when it flies before the rustling wind of the vale” (TPO, p. 79). In none of these examples does the disappearance of the mist represent the joyous return of the sun; nor does it allow the characters to remain in the previously shaded world. On the contrary, the heroes are unable to rejoice at the augury of a new beginning and attend only to the precarious aspect of their life. These are characters whose flame has

4 Kazimierz Brodziński, „O klasycyzmie i romantyzmie” i inne pisma krytyczne (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), p. 29.

burned out or, like Arindal, the dead son of Armin, characters whose gaze resembles mist; characters whose eyes have turned white. We may be looking here at a phenomenon that should be understood in connection with an attempt at to characterize the culture of northern countries, since Stanisław Przybyszewski also wrote in his essay on Ola Hansson that the residents of Skåne, the southernmost region of Sweden, have a “gaze [...] as if misted over; they look as if they did not see, the axis of sight is directed into a limitless remoteness.”⁵

We are, therefore, not surprised by the fact that a gaze deprived of light for a long period of time is unable to see anything in the light, a second consequence of the mist’s dissipation. The landscape revealed when the fog lifts is an empty landscape because the people can no longer look, or even if they can, they cannot find their dreams or daydreams in this world. They also begin to miss the fog; to miss the illusion that made living possible. The human being cannot get over this loss or accept a world made poorer by the loss of yesterday’s desires. This aspect is explicit in many of Cuchullin’s utterances, unable as he is to reconcile himself with the idea that he has been defeated by Swaran’s armies; that the war had to be won for him by Fingal; and that his good name has been impugned as a result. Cuchullin complains: “I am like a beam that has shone, like a mist that has fled away; when the blast of the morning came, and brightened the shaggy side of the hill” (TPO, p. 60). The old dreams no longer exist. The human being, deprived of his misty cocoon, must confront reality. The choice between sleep and the waking world is not simple. Macpherson’s heroes prefer to remain in the old world, the world that is passing into oblivion and of which Ossian’s reminiscences are the swan song. That is exactly the way they are snared by melancholy, suffering and aching in the wake of a loss that is impossible to accept. Evidence of this rupture between incongruous worlds may be found in the many ghosts who show themselves to the heroes of the *Poems*. It should surprise no one that they, too, are swathed in mists; one wears a “robe of mist” (TPO, p. 123); Agandecca’s “face was pale like the mist of Cromla,” with a “dim hand” and a “robe which was of the clouds of the desert” (TPO, p. 52); and the form of the dead Fingal is “like a watery cloud” (TPO, p. 268). The white suspended matter thus intrudes everywhere, enveloping the world of the senses and the otherworld of beliefs. The discovery of the melancholy nature of mist and an empty gaze unable to perceive

5 Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. II. Ola Hansson,” in: *Synagoga Szatana i inne eseje*, ed. Gabriela Matuszek (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1997), p. 75. Przybyszewski further adds that “the iris sphincter muscle of the Scanian matches these vast spaces, orients his eye towards them, which externally appears as this deep, seemingly misty gaze” (p. 77).

any difference between “here” and “there” seems a crucial experience for all the characters in the *Poems*.

The mist floating over the plains and mountains of ancient Scotland is also, perhaps even primarily, a floating melancholy. Not for nothing does the landscape sung of by Ossian vividly remind the Polish reader of the steppes in Antoni Malczewski’s *Maria*. Here, as there, there is void; here, as there, there is disinheritance; here, as there, there is loss that hurts, though its name remains unknown. A typically oppressive landscape emerges from Ullin’s song about Connal:

Autumn is dark on the mountains; gray mist rests on the hills. The whirlwind is heard on the heath. Dark rolls the river through the narrow plain. A tree stands alone on the hell, and marks the slumbering Connal. The leaves whirl round with the wind, and strew the grave of the dead. At times are seen here the ghosts of the deceased, when the musing hunter alone stalks slowly over the heath. (TPO, pp. 206–207)

Though the word “melancholia” may not be used even once in the *Poems*, it is not difficult to find elements traditionally associated with black bile in such descriptions as this: loneliness, death, autumn, transience. We should therefore not be surprised to see Ossian referred to by Mme de Staël in *Corinne, or Italy* as a poet of “gloomy ideas,”⁶ whose songs are dominated by “one chord” which “constantly replies to the thrill of sensibility.”⁷ The gaze cannot fix here on anything that would elicit a smile or ease tension. The permanent mist is additionally oppressive in its heaviness, pushing into the earth not only the dead but also those who remain. Przybyszewski, quoted above, depicts Skâne in just the same way: “As far as the eye can see, the contours of earth and sky merge with each other into one misty plane of gloomy melancholia, which puts the soul in a quiet mood and a state of deep pensiveness.”⁸ In such a space, the human being is no longer capable of perceiving anything. We cannot catch sight of salvation in a world external to ourselves. The subject consequently plunges inside himself, and his gaze does not wander about the world, but is directed within:

6 Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*, translator uncredited (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1870), p. 50. According to the titular heroine of the novel, all Northern poets have a “gloomy” soul (pp. 17, 27, 46).

7 Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*, p. 56. Cairbar, another character from the *Poems of Ossian*, is described in a similar fashion in *Corinne* through the image of a landscape: “The land is hoary with ice; and the trees, as the rude winds war on their lifeless and withered arms, strew their sear leaves to the gale, and herald the course of the storm.” Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*, p. 66.

8 Przybyszewski, “Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. II. Ola Hansson,” p. 74.

The accumulation of mist falling on the land envelops it in a grey, soft and moist vestment; the landscape becomes boundlessly dismal and sad and a frightful weight, an unrest full of distress hangs on the soul; sight, as if embarrassed, must turn inward, even though it may desire to break free to the outside.⁹

The world is literally falling in on man's head in the form of mist. It settles on his shoulders and constantly presses down on him. Paradoxically, however, the stifling connotations evoked by mist reveal themselves to be amicable, since mist is like a hallucination, a phantom, that in veiling reality, allows the number of life's possible scenarios to be multiplied, or the past to be forever remembered and wounds endlessly scratched. For Przybyszewski, "the stifling weight of mists spreading above the earth"¹⁰ and the gaze turned inward create the proper atmosphere for the "new man," an ideal, more sensitive, more conscious man, capable of combining in himself animal and intellectual elements. Ossian, likewise, in remembering his dead son Oscar, remarks:

I behold my son [...] near the mossy rock of Crona; but it is the mist of the desert tinged with the beam of the west: Lovely is the mist that assumes the form of Oscar! turn from it, ye winds, when ye roar on the side of Ardven. (TPO, p. 95)

Ossian does not want the mist to dissolve and reveal an empty world without his son or his home. Better to look into the fog and see nothing than to look at the world only to be convinced of the fact that there is nothing and nobody in it. *The Poems of Ossian* tell a tale of "down-cast look and tearful eye" (TPO, p. 210), losing themselves in the mist. This particular aspect of Macpherson's work showed itself crucial for the Romantic school, whose adherents' gaze fixated, due to de Staël's analyses of the dark and melancholic spirit of the countries of the north,¹¹ on the void and milky suspended matter. The nineteenth century

9 Przybyszewski, "Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. II. Ola Hansson," p. 75. Przybyszewski several times notes the material, sensuous, and oppressive aspect of mist: "Eternal mist makes breathing hard for the Scanian, his voice is as if choked, and the motor energy of impressions in this heavy, oppressive atmosphere becomes reduced to a minimum, while the area, deprived of charm, does not favor quick reactions or nimble movements; it rather brings about an economy of words, a closedness of character and a wheezy, bland tone of voice." Przybyszewski, "Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. II. Ola Hansson," p. 77.

10 Przybyszewski, "Z psychologii jednostki twórczej. II. Ola Hansson," p. 87.

11 One of many fragments linking the North with mist is found in de Staël's book *De l'Allemagne*, ed. Simone Balayé (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), vol. 1, p. 75: "[...] from Weimar to Königsberg, and from Königsberg to Copenhagen, mists and hoar-frost seem natural to people of strong and deep imagination."

retouched the melancholic landscape and made more profound changes in the sphere of subjectivity, but never abandoned mist. The best example of the theme's later continuation is undoubtedly the Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel and his *Intimate Journal*.

3.2 Sad mist

Like Macpherson, Amiel was, first and foremost, unusually sensitive to mist as an atmospheric phenomenon. We read many times in the *Intimate Journal* of "misty weather,"¹² while in autumn Amiel observes, not without a certain dreaminess, that "St. Martin's summer is still lingering, and the days all begin in mist."¹³ These observations are not necessarily transposed onto the author's emotional state; they are rather remarks made in passing, which precede the meat of the work. Amiel, not unlike Emma Bovary, bored with her provincial life, looks at the world outside his window and sees something viscous and milk-white, something that stands in the way of all gazing. What he sees binds him to the earth, has a stifling sickness in it, and is the most acute representation of melancholia that has ever been suggested. Absent from this glance is the dreaminess that we usually tend to associate with mist or fog. Gaston Bachelard is most likely mistaken when he too hastily refers to "mists of the dreaming psychism,"¹⁴ contrasting their soothing effect with the destructive dreams studied in psychoanalysis. The "foggy sky" (*zamglone niebo*) described by the lyrical persona of a poem by Adam Mickiewicz¹⁵ also manages to activate only a fairly banal cycle of associations conditioned by the situation of breaking away from the earth and traveling in a sea of clouds. In fact, fog is connected primarily with the element of earth, with its bitter literalness and coarse surface. Unlike the clouds, which are so important in Mickiewicz's lyric poems and in Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting of the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (*Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, 1818), which soar above the earth and evoke an impression of lightness, the lower layer of fog clings to the earth's surface, nuzzling against it, thereby weighing down on the dreaming subject's imagination. If, then, we deal with any kind of reverie in the case of fog and mist, it is an oppressive reverie, full

12 *Amiel's journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, p. 117.

13 *Amiel's journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, p. 42.

14 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, trans. Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 17.

15 Adam Mickiewicz, "Do *** Na Alpach w Splügen 1829," in: *Wybór poezji*, ed. Czesław Zgorzelski (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1997), vol. II, p. 199.

of melancholy and evil augurs, like the dreams carefully studied by the heirs of Sigmund Freud. That is precisely the picture presented by the notes on fog in the *Intimate Journal* look like, since Amiel very quickly shifts from uncomplicated meteorological remarks, which nevertheless affect his frame of mind, to metaphorical observations.

Mist, or fog, turns out to be quite a useful metaphor indeed, ideal for conveying the incoherent nature of human life. This is what Amiel noted on the subject on April 23, 1872: "You are like a sad mist, without form or direction."¹⁶ An apt description of an atmospheric phenomenon here translates into an attempt at describing a particular subjectivity. We may surmise that Amiel interprets the mist's greatness and its connection with the earth, this time in psychological categories, as a metaphor for the acute, oppressive sadness whose reasons may neither be grasped nor diagnosed. This sadness is like mist insofar as it may be seen and experienced; one may enter it and lose oneself therein, but no one is able either to reach its center or even catch its edge. It is the famous nothing that, as Marek Bieńczyk says, quoting Fernando Pessõa, hurts and pinches.¹⁷ Amiel likewise draws our attention to this shapelessness when he writes that mist is deprived of both form and direction. It spreads in all directions, and yet can be found nowhere. It defies the human gaze, but can neither be repelled nor seen through. The human being, surrounded by sadness and mist, is condemned to solitude and constant remembrance of something that does not exist at all. As a result, the subject itself loses its clarity, becoming blurred, out of focus. Such an interpretation of the mist metaphor corresponds exactly to the continual atrophy of the human subject in the *Intimate Journal*. Amiel as a self loses himself, dissolves and is lost amid his own idiosyncrasies and hypostases.¹⁸

The parallel between the situation in which the subject finds himself, his emotions and thoughts, on the one hand, and nature shrouded in mist, on the other, or, in other words, the principle of equivalence, appears quite frequently in the *Intimate Journal*. The reader is particularly struck by the passages in which Amiel looks at the Swiss Alps covered in white mist:

The sea of vapour has risen and attacked the mountains, which for a long time overlooked it like so many huge reefs. For a while it surged in vain over the lower slopes of

16 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. 9 (février 1872 – juin 1874), eds. Philippe M. Monnier and Anne Cottier-Duperrex (Lausanne: L'Age de l'Homme, 1989), p. 161.

17 See Marek Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (Warszawa: Sic!, 1998), p. 15.

18 See Poulet, *La Pensée indéterminée*, vol. II, *Du Romantisme au XXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1987), pp. 131–132.

the Alps. Then rolling back upon itself, it made a more successful onslaught upon the Jura, and now we are enveloped in its moving waves. The milky sea has become one vast cloud, which has swallowed up the plain and the mountains, observatory and observer. Within this cloud one may hear the sheep-bells ringing, and see the sunlight darting hither and thither. Strange and fanciful sight!¹⁹

It may well be “fanciful,” but is it definitely a sight? The mist is truly ubiquitous here and so it devours everything in its path. Amiel himself observes (though we may question the veracity of his reported observation) that within mist, plains and mountains disappear, both that which was visible moments ago and those who were looking at it. One can thus look further, but there is nothing to see. A similar sense of wonderment was felt by Antoni Malczewski, who, in one of his footnotes to *Maria*, presented his climb up Mont-Blanc: “In my journey to Mont-Blanc, where in a visit of two hours I knew feelings that I shall certainly never experience again, in that journey I lost, from my sight and thoughts, that domain where man rules.”²⁰ In Malczewski we further read of the almost mystical emotion caused no less by the mysterious power of nature than by the body’s physiological reaction to altitude and the change in atmospheric pressure (shortness of breath and accelerated pulse). In Malczewski’s account, there is no mist, but there is a blind gaze that no longer sees anything; and there is the subject’s solitude.

Only solitude and memories, to which the human subject is likewise condemned in the above passage, can revive an image that no longer exists. It is curious that Amiel chooses to underscore the fact that in the mist, “one may hear the sheep-bells ringing.” That is doubtless a reference to the famous Alpine herds of sheep, also mentioned by Rousseau in his *Dictionnaire de musique* and by Senancour in *Obermann*. These melancholy sounds, connected with the care-free movement of the herd and the herdsmen’s songs, elicit, in the shared view of Rousseau, Senancour and Amiel states of apathy, despondency, and melancholia. The charm of the Alpine landscapes is thus lined with worry, with some kind of anxiety and sadness. The same set of elements appears in *Obermann*: “...under the autumn sky, in these last fine days which mists suffuse with vagueness, seated by the waters which bear away the yellow leaf, let me hear the simple and profound accents of a primitive melody.”²¹ Those “romantic sounds,”²² as Senancour goes on to characterize them, comprise the nostalgic song of *Ranz*

19 *Amiel’s Journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, p. 165.

20 Antoni Malczewski, *Maria*, ed. Ryszard Przybylski (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1958), p. 77.

21 Senancour, *Obermann*, trans. Waite, p. 58.

22 Senancour, *Obermann*, trans. Waite.

les vaches, which, in combination with the psychologically toxic mist, gives rise to unwarranted sadness and melancholia. Amiel, too, from whose eyes the mist conceals all sorts of images, experiences precisely such feelings.

Mist in the *Intimate Journal* is, however, not exclusively an atmospheric phenomenon or the equivalent to the state of mind of a subject in dissolution. It is also, and perhaps primarily, the marker of a certain type of culture and way of thinking, which Amiel, in the entry of 2 April 1866, is eager to link to the northern type of sensitivity, elegiac sensibility and tendency to introversion:

This imprisonment transports me to Shetland, to Spitzbergen, to Norway, to the Ossianic countries of mist, where man, thrown back upon himself, feels his heart beat more quickly and his thought expand more freely – so long, at least, as he is not frozen and congealed by cold. Fog has certainly a poetry of its own – a grace, a dreamy charm. It does for the daylight what a lamp does for us at night; it turns the mind toward meditation; it throws the soul back on itself. The sun, as it were, sheds us abroad in nature, scatters and disperses us; mist draws us together and concentrates us—it is cordial, homely, charged with feeling. The poetry of the sun has something of the epic in it; that of fog and mist is elegiac and religious. Pantheism is the child of light; mist engenders faith in near protectors.²³ [...] The influence of mist is analogous to the consequences of blindness, and the influence of the sun to the consequences of deafness; the person of the ear is more tender and sympathetic; the person of the eye is more aloof and difficult. Why? Because the first lives primarily a human and internal life, and the second a natural and external one.²⁴

Amiel here manifestly invokes the famous nineteenth-century mythology of the northern countries, in particular with regard to Macpherson. Those legendary places are, to him, so endlessly fascinating because they are swathed in mist, an atmosphere of mystery and melancholia inexplicable to the rational mind. No less important is the fact that mist, by enshrouding the human being and condemning him to solitude, inclines him to turn inward, to peer into the corners of his own soul and to surrender to nostalgic contemplation.²⁵ It is not surprising that Amiel is quick to identify the sensitivity formed in this way with the elegy or the religious song. The person Amiel describes, scratching his own wounds and lost in memories, is taken straight from the literature of Romanticism, captivated by sorrow and a fascination with infinity. It is a blind man, for a man shrouded in

23 *Amiel's Journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, p. 148.

24 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. 6, p. 303. Trans. T.D.W.

25 On this subject, see Poulet's introduction to the *Journal intime*, "Amiel et la conscience de soi," vol. I, p. 63, as well as Poulet's *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), pp. 340–352.

mist is blind. The only thing he can see as he looks ahead is his own interior life. These optics are strange: looking around, he sees only what is inside. The mist forces the subject to pause, to think about himself as a human being and about his place in the world which has disappeared.

The human subject present in the *Intimate Journal* is, from this perspective, a fairly astonishing construction. It no longer has either the confidence of the Cartesian subject, convinced that it thinks and therefore is, or the peace of mind of the Kantian subject with its belief in abstract law. Amiel's subject may think, too, but that by no means ensures that all the doubts regarding his existential status will vanish. He, too, may be guided by law, but that is of little use, given that the law can, in truth, guarantee nothing. This is a subject who has lost everything; above all, he has lost himself. His "concentration upon what is within" (p. 105) is thus merely a pretense, since in the mist it is almost impossible to concentrate on anything else. In fact, such concentration has little to offer the subject. He neither becomes more assured of the fact that he exists, nor more convinced that abstract law will liberate him from oppression. All that remains for him is to wander, stumble, and search for a way out of the mist, from which there is no escape. For mist is not only an atmospheric phenomenon; not simply the equivalent of a state of mind or type of culture; above and beyond that, it is a metaphor for imprisonment.

The subject is indeed imprisoned in the world; imprisoned in the impenetrable mist. The mist not only deprives him of the view of what he himself has created, such as cities, ports, and gardens, but also of what traditionally symbolizes the human being's metaphysical claims and also constitutes the source of his desires and frustrations: the sky. The subject lost in the mist sees neither the things situated around him, nor those hidden above him. Both earth and sky disappear. This outflow of religious hopes is barely heard in Amiel's *Intimate Journal*; it will become much more audible towards the end of the nineteenth century. The milky white suspended matter will then be perceived as impenetrable not only to the human eye, but also to the divine eye. One traveler who will stare into the mist only to see that nothing can be seen is Stéphane Mallarmé.

3.3 Sad world

Mallarmé and mist: the combination may stir skepticism, and rightly so. Marek Bieńczyk is right to call Mallarmé a visionary of transparency and to describe his poetic subject matter as "pure, perfect, but filled not with emptiness, rather the

substance of transparency.”²⁶ It is true that Mallarmé was constant in his search for things unblemished by touch, chaste and snow-white. Herodiade, for example, the most famous of his heroines, desires that her hair “remain [...] a sterile cold metallic element.”²⁷ She also looks into a mirror, whose shining and polished surface arouses her admiration. Nevertheless, like Macpherson and Amiel, Mallarmé, too, nurtured a fascination with mist and (pace Bieńczyk) all things opaque.

As Jean-Pierre Richard underscored,²⁸ fog became a favorite theme of Mallarmé’s in late 1862 and early 1863. The poet spent that time in England, learning not only the English language, but also the idea of spleen and the overcast state of mind. In a letter to Henri Cazalis of 23 or 24 July 1863, he says he is in the grip of a disease; nothing serious, but rather something like lassitude. The English sun, not as cheerful as the Parisian sun, is pale, he writes, and he “hate[s] London when there is no mist; misty, it has no equal.”²⁹ This state of collapse, this strange, overstimulated indifference, has, in Jean-Luc Steinmetz’s view, all the markers of melancholia, resulting primarily from the peripeteia of Mallarmé’s life: the many separations from and returns of his beloved.³⁰ This is the reason for his confession in the same letter: “My suffering was a fit and since that time I am entirely yellow, like a jealous man or a lemon. Yellow blood, yellow eyes, yellow face, and yellow thoughts. Is this boredom? Or impoverishment of the blood?”³¹ These somatic signals point to a medical diagnosis, and it is not without importance, for in Mallarmé’s case states of collapse, depression and dejection are recurring phenomena. They all possess a dimension beyond the biographical, however; because it seems that Mallarmé remained under the sign of a weariness whose nature emanates from cultural experience.

In fact the London described by Mallarmé was perceived throughout the nineteenth century as the capital of mists, spleen, weariness, and, as a result, melancholia. The descriptions of England included by de Staël in *Corinne* furnish prime examples of this: “there was so tremendous a fog that I could not see the

26 Bieńczyk, *Przezroczyść* (Kraków: Znak, 2007), pp. 208–209.

27 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2006), p. 31.

28 See Jean-Pierre Richard, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1961), p. 496.

29 Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871 suivie de Lettres sur la poésie 1872–1898 avec des lettres inédites*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 146.

30 Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *Mallarmé: l’absolu au jour le jour* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), pp. 63–77.

31 Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871*, p. 146.

sun,” with a “dark and freezing” sky.³² Joseph Mallord William Turner, the artist admired by Mallarmé’s friends Claude Monet and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, was a painter renowned for his depictions of these gloomy lands and mists. Turner’s landscapes, indeed, are often swathed in mists, eliciting a reflexive response of weariness and sloth. It suffices here to recall “Moonlight, a Study at Millbank” (1797), “London from Greenwich Park” (1809), and “Mortlake Terrace” (1827), as well as the watercolors and gouaches depicting Mont Saint-Michel, the lighthouse at Shields, Venice and Konstanz. Inspired by these paintings, Monet, considering a trip to London in 1887, emphasized that he wished to “paint a few views there of mists on the Thames,”³³ the result of which intention is the series “Houses of Parliament,” which he painted between 1899 and 1901. It has not escaped the attention of critics and thinkers of various stripes that the combination of mist and London in Turner’s paintings gives rise to a sense of anxiety and melancholic apathy. Ernest Chesneau wrote in the 1860s that “Turner created the most wonderful atmospheric phenomena in lands of mist. However, those mists, in the long run, filled him with spleen and nostalgia for red-hot clarity.”³⁴ Critics at the turn of the century were no longer so understanding. The influential Hippolyte Taine wrote: “Imagine a person in the mist, in the midst of a gale, with the sun in his eyes and madness in his head, and transfer, if you can, that impression to a painting: these are disturbing visions, dazzlements, phantoms of the imagination, blurred from exertion.”³⁵ From the above, widely divergent as they are in their description of the phenomenon of melancholia, we glean a sense of the predilection of Turner’s imagination to connect mist with nervous exhaustion and melancholia.

That is precisely what Mallarmé does in his texts. In the letter to Cazalis of 28 or 30 December 1862, we read of “beautiful, grey, yellow” mist, causing the world to continue to be real while becoming somehow intangible, and the trees beyond the mist to “be outlined in a sickly way.”³⁶ Mallarmé’s mist has an additional moisture, it makes everything and everyone sticky, weighing down on them. That is exactly the way Mallarmé remembers it in the short prose work “La

32 Madame de Staël, *Corinne*, pp. 105, 106.

33 Quoted in John House, “De la Vapeur: Turner et l’impressionisme,” in the catalogue for the exhibit *Turner, Whistler, Monet*, curated by Katharine Lochnan (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2004), p. 44.

34 Ernest Chesneau, *L’Art et les artistes modernes en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: Didier, 1864), p. 92.

35 Hippolyte Taine, *Notes sur l’Angleterre* (Paris: Hachette, 1899), pp. 350–351.

36 Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871*, p. 108.

Pipe” (The Pipe), which was first published in *La Revue des Lettres et des Arts* in the issue published 12 January 1868. In it we read, among other things: “London showed itself to me the same as I experienced it a whole year ago; above all the dear mists that envelop our minds and have their own particular scent there, when they squeeze their way in under the window frame.”³⁷ Mallarmé complains to Cazalis about this same prying aspect of the mist in his letter of 13 or 14 November 1862: “The coal was suffocating me in the room, and if I opened the window, the vile November mist filled my lungs.”³⁸ These mists thus completely fill up what is draughty, press their way into the most intimate places, such as the room, or his lungs, and supersede their materiality, for it is worth noting the bizarre dissipation of the world and re-materialization, one might say, of the mist. The world, despite continuing to be real, eludes the senses; it cannot be touched or tasted. At the very moment when it loses its consistency, the mist acquires greater weight, in the literal meaning of the word. It becomes sticky, oppressive, not only filling the places in the world that were hitherto empty, such as the crevices under the window frames, but replacing that world.

For Mallarmé, mist also has its own metaphysics. Because it is a new reality, it demands the reinterpretation of connections pivotal to existence. This is exactly what Mallarmé has in mind when, in the above letter to Cazalis, he stresses: “I like this eternally gray sky, no need to think. The azure and the stars are terrifying. Here one feels at home, God does not see us. His spy, the sun, does not have the courage to come creeping in here.”³⁹ In a world empty and sad, because it is filled with mist, God is no longer keeping watch over man. There are also no other values that might give assurance of order or provide guidance on life’s path. Mallarmé’s aversion to the azure, which, as an idea external to poetry, threatens his artistic independence, here reaches its apogee. Mallarmé desires mist because he craves a world that is empty, white and sterile as a virgin sheet of paper. In contrast to Macpherson and Amiel, Mallarmé’s fascination with mist is purely pessimistic in character. In the *Poems of Ossian* the milky white suspended matter was elegiac: it furthered the cause of memory and nostalgia. Later, in the *Intimate Journal*, mist still had the power to produce illusions: “Hoar-frost and fog,

37 Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), vol. I, p. 419.

38 Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871*, p. 91.

39 Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871*, p. 93. The heroine of de Staël’s *Corinne* has a completely different assessment of the English landscape: “there was so tremendous a fog that I could not see the sun, which at least would have reminded me of my own [Italy]” (Madame de Staël, *Corinne*, p. 105).

but the general aspect is bright and fairylike, and has nothing in common with the gloom in Paris and London, of which the newspapers tell us.”⁴⁰ For Mallarmé, the gloomy mist not only elicits sorrow, but as it fills up the world, it replaces it, renders it the dominion of melancholy; of eternal loss, and of void; a void of permeable and unsecured places.

40 *Amiel's Journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, p. 338.

Part II
The Inward Gaze

4. For Only in Sadness Can Talent Be Perceived (Madame de Staël)

Sadness allows us to penetrate much deeper into the character and fate of a man than any other disposition of mind.¹

The division between South and North and the accompanying contrast between the bright, the pleasant, the congenial, on the one hand, and the dark, the solitary, and the melancholic on the other became widespread in the nineteenth century due to the popularity of Madame de Staël's *On Literature* (1800), in which we also find the following famous quotation:

It seems to me that two completely distinct literatures exist: the literature that comes from the South and that which descends from the North; the one whose first source is Homer and the one whose origin is Ossian. The Greeks, Latins, Italians, Spaniards and the French of the age of Louis XIV belong to a kind of literature which I call the literature of the South. Works of English literature, works of German literature and certain works of the Danes and Swedes should be grouped in the literature of the North, that which took its beginning from Scottish bards, Icelandic myths and Scandinavian poems. (DL, p. 252)

The distinctions proposed here are explicitly linked to Madame de Staël's preferred method in literary criticism. De Staël, the author of *Delphine* (1802), was above all convinced that literature should be read and interpreted in its various entanglements with other spheres. In *On Literature*, she underscores, among other things: "I came up with the idea of examining the influence of religion, morals and the law on literature and the influence of literature on religion, morals and law" (DL, p. 199).² The second important element of this method is linked to the conviction that one may speak of evolution with reference to art. In de Staël's view, the products of human thought compose a history which is, in essence, a progressive Utopia: works continually improve, and people, too, continue to become better over time. This belief may be compared to Montesquieu's

1 Anne-Louise Germaine de Staël Holstein, *De la littérature*, in: *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1844), vol. I, p. 253. Heretofore to be referred to as DL.

2 De Staël later presents a similar approach to literature in *On Germany*, where we read that "national character influences literature, and literature and philosophy in turn influence religion; and the whole allows us to see each of its parts in detail." De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, ed. Simone Balayé (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), vol. I, p. 47. This edition will heretofore be referred to as DA.

observations in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748). Montesquieu, in contemplating various forms of government and law, reached the conclusion that they were not arbitrary, but in each case resulted from external circumstances (such as climate, social life, religion, and so on). The division of literature into South and North is likewise based on the belief that geographical and societal differences have a significant influence on the development of literature. We thus see both cartographical data, such as the Mediterranean basin compared to the Baltic Sea, and cultural data referenced in the above passage. The Southern peoples have the sun of Greece as their patron, together with Homer and his serene and balanced epic posture; the literature of the North, however, is born amid mist and clouds, and its father is seen to be Ossian. An important difference between Homer and Ossian, or their two great epics, consists in the fact that in the Greek epic external circumstances influence the imagination and the language (see DA, p. 207). In the case of the Northern epic, however, we see an absolute domination of mental and emotional agitation. Hence the songs of the mythical bard Ossian are full of melancholy, which is in fact one of the main features of Northern literatures and societies. For these reasons, above all, the English are “quite susceptible to diseases of ennui” (DL, p. 262), while Germans are marked by a “sickness of the soul” (DL, p. 274).

Similar observations also appeared in *On Germany* (1813),³ about which de Staël wrote in *10 Years in Exile* (1821): “I attached great weight to it, thinking that it could show France the new ideas; it seemed to me that I was inspired to write it by a lofty feeling, free of hostility, and that a language can be found in that work, that is no longer used.”⁴ *On Germany* is, notwithstanding, as Jean Starobinski has pointed out, “less a document on the subject of Germany than a lengthy contemplation of what condemns literature to be at once an expression of our solitary intimacy and an act of listening keenly to a word that comes from outside us.”⁵ In this sense, too, it is not a nineteenth century academic textbook or a handy synthesis, but rather an extremely subjective survey, in categories familiar from *On Literature*: “their [the Germanic peoples’] imagination has a fondness for old

3 It should be remembered that the author’s original intention was to publish *On Germany* in 1810, but the entire print run (ten thousand copies) was confiscated and destroyed by Napoleon’s police for political reasons. Fortunately the manuscript survived and was published in England, with its far more liberal political culture, in 1813. A mere year later De Staël received permission to print it in France.

4 De Staël, *Dix années d’exil*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 365.

5 Jean Starobinski, “Madame de Staël: passion et littérature,” in: *Table d’orientation. L’auteur et son autorité* (Lausanne: Éditions l’Âge d’Homme, 1989), p. 86.

towers, battlements, among witches and phantoms; the mysteries of a dreamy and solitary nature constitute the principal charm of their poetry” (DA, vol. II, p. 3). The poetry of the North thus grows out of a fascination with the Middle Ages, a world of legends and traditions. Equally important here, however, seems the tendency toward reverie and solitude. More than once de Staël underscores that Germans are distinguished by their gift for speculative thought; that their thinking touches the deepest layers of the human psyche or gets lost in what is undefined or ungraspable. In the writings of German authors contemplation passes freely into dreaming, and logic and precision sit beside sensitivity to the smallest tremor of the soul, of which the best example, according to de Staël, is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In her view, the great virtue of German idealism and German poetry is in fact the shift from interest in the outside world to the human being’s inner perplexities.

Idealism “made the will, which is the soul, the centre of everything” (DA, vol. II, p. 199). Its aim was to pin down the nature of the individual; to conduct an analysis of the self. In this sense German metaphysics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the poetry of the North are truly innovative. For the poets of antiquity, and later the writers of the South, were accustomed to looking at the world around them. It aroused admiration or horror, but consistently remained the main point of reference. By the same token, however, these artists lacked the sensitivity to discover similar riches within the human being, hence the simple declaration: “the [ancient] poets know how to paint external objects in the most arresting way, but they never portray personalities” (DL, p. 211). De Staël finds this same defect in the writings of ancient historians, such as Livy, Sallust, Florus, Cornelius Nepos, who paint a perfect picture of the external world and the feelings that govern the crowd (see DL, p. 232), but are utterly insensible to the turbulent inner life of the individual. One consequence of such an approach is to reduce the role of the individual in shaping reality. What is located outside the individual is not only independent, but also to a considerable extent influences his actions and determines his choices. In such a world, the human being is deprived of his own free will, though not necessarily unhappy. For it turns out that the space he inhabits is ruled by laws that strip the individual of all responsibility for his own fate. It is not the human being who chooses, but mysterious forces that decide for him. All that is needed then is to endow these forces with names; to tame them so that they are no longer intimidating, and that is precisely the task of mythology, which, for the ancients, was a book that put the whole of their experience in order.

The revolution that German idealism heralded, together with the poetry of the North, has to do above all with the conviction that the world revolves around the human being. In *On Germany* we read: "The soul is a hearth which radiates out in all directions; existence consists in this hearth; all the observations and efforts of the philosophers must turn toward this self, the centre and driving force of our feelings and our ideas" (DA, vol. II, p. 169). It is not the human being who is at the mercy of the world; it is rather that reality only exists insofar as it is created by the active human subject. The ancients somehow did not want to admit that their gods and incessantly personified forces of nature were only a conceit, the result of action by a terrified subject abandoned in the world. To ward off this fear, they tamed the world and lived in a permanent relationship with it. The moderns already know that the world is empty; that there are no protective deities beyond the trees, in the waters or the air; or even if there are, they must be accepted as products of the mind, deemed part of the hearth of the soul's radiating in all directions. Greater self-consciousness, however, offers no guarantee of greater happiness. On the contrary, poets of the North paint in their work rather the pain that is solitary experience, unable to expect either help or hope.

The process of acquiring self-awareness and becoming disenchanted with the world that thus takes place is above all connected with the redefinition of nature in the poetry of the North. In the North, attitudes toward nature are most fully divested of illusions. In *On Literature*, Madame de Staël stresses: "Nature, which the ancients had peopled with protective beings who dwelled in forests and rivers, and presided over them both night and day, was returned to her solitude and man's anxiety toward her intensified" (DL, p. 255). In the poetry of the South, especially that of the Greeks and Romans, we see the strong bond between the human being and nature. This bond could be presented as a desire for mastery and domesticity. Human beings, in order to feel at home in the world, filled that world with deities, and gave names to meteorological and geographical phenomena. The spaces they lived in were swarming with Penates and other household deities, and every phenomenon had its own protector, whether good or evil. In that sense the world of the ancients was predictable, and was also an aggregate of hieroglyphs, albeit, it should be clarified, fairly easy ones to decipher. The nature they saw was completely allegorical in character. The human being's task involved perceiving phenomena and attributing a corresponding conventional meaning to them.

This kind of dependence is subject to a total revalorization in the poetry of the North, in which the image of nature loses its allegorical dimension ("the poetry of the North is rarely allegorical," de Staël asserts in *On Literature*,

in: *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 254) and ceases to be dependent on the human gaze. Meadows and forests are no longer filled with deities, their removal having been necessitated by Christianity. The world became empty, uninhabited, or inhabited only by human beings. Nature turned out to be alien, untamed.⁶ This same development was also noted by Kazimierz Brodziński in his essay “On the Classic and Romantic as well as on the Spirit of Polish Poetry” (1818). Brodziński, who knew de Staël’s work, wrote:

Christianity gave the world a different character and awakened different feelings in the human being. All the pleasant visions with which mythology had surrounded the world suddenly faded, and the human eye saw the immensity of the world and sensed the lord of infinity. Longing, this prophecy of eternity, made off with the soul and trampled everything worldly; sensation became lost in the imagination in immensity, in infinity, and the higher the human being’s thought could reach, the lower he felt on earth. But though the mind, stirred from sweet dreams, seemed to lose its inner peace, still solace and good cheer remained in the heart.⁷

The medieval human being and the human being of the North were lost in a world from which God had departed, though not quite in a sense that would foreshadow Nietzsche’s thought. What de Staël and Brodziński have in mind is rather the fact that with the ascent of Christianity, natural religion, whose purpose was to fill the world with beings similar to man, disappeared. The God of Christianity was revealed in this context to be a being foreign to everyday, common experience; it was a God of moral laws and principles, but not a guardian of the house or a hobgoblin walking through the badlands. It was also a God who did not demand to be worshiped in the form of created things; instead, he required cult and ceremonies in an artificial temple, i.e., one made by human hands. Nature thus no longer offers support to the harried human being, who must seek consolation only within himself. In *Ten Years of Exile*, de Staël describes the process of the world’s disenchantment in similar terms: “In these [Northern] countries, the two extremes are manifested, usually, rather than intermediate degrees: either people are preoccupied solely with the struggle against nature to survive, or their mental activities tend toward mysticism; because man draws everything from within, and is not inspired at all by external objects” (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 412).

6 Similar conclusions are reached in *Corinne*: “[...] there are only two ways of feeling the charms of nature. Men either animate or deify them, as did the ancients, beneath a thousand brilliant shapes, or, like the Scottish bards, yield to the melancholy fear inspired by the unknown.” De Staël, *Corinne*, p. 124.

7 Brodziński, „O klasycyzmu i romantyzmu” i inne pisma krytyczne (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), pp. 29–30.

People thus have no support in what is to be found outside themselves; they are condemned exclusively to their own devices. Marian Maciejewski, in referencing de Staël's distinction, underscores that this "severed connection between the human being and nature [...] has an ominous resonance: it evokes boundless sorrow"⁸ and leads directly to melancholia.

The disenchanting world, in which man experiences solitude, albeit at his own request, in fact elicits distress and sadness. A result of meditation is melancholia, according to de Staël, the principal trait of the poets of the North, confirmed by the nature of the landscape in which they lived: "vast heaths, sands, roads often poorly maintained, a severe climate, fill the soul first with sadness" (DA, p. 4). This landscape is certainly no friend to human beings:

We barely know the North, which touches the confines of the living earth: the long nights of those hyperborean countries, in which only the reflection of snow serves to light the earth; that darkness that borders the horizon in the distance, even when the vault of the skies is lit by the stars, everything seems to convey the idea of an unknown space, of a nocturnal universe that surrounds our world. The air so cold that it freezes our breath makes us keep our warmth inside; and nature, in such climates, appears to be made only for the purpose of enclosing man back within himself. (DA, p. 136)

Being enclosed within the self, having a tendency toward contemplation, or simply escapism all describe the Northern poet, who had to redirect his gaze from the unpleasant sight of nature, filled with sorrow and death. The Scandinavians, the Germans, and the Poles⁹ are thus condemned first and foremost to live in a world of imagination. The natural world around them is propitious neither to going for walks nor having a lively social life. This is merely reflected in their eyes and freezes all manifestations of feeling. Those flourish only in quiet and contemplation, far from other people. That, however, is only the first stage of melancholy withdrawal from life, escaping into the self. Because cutting ties with the outside world leads to cutting ties with the present. According to de Staël, the man of the North, like the heroes of Ossian's doleful songs, is plunged into the past, living only through memories, scratching his wounds and turning over scenarios that he has never carried out and, now, never will.

Here once again there appears in the writings of Madame de Staël an attempt to juxtapose the ancient and modern worlds. Our ancestors had, she claims, an

8 Marian Maciejewski, "Poezja Północy," in: *Narodziny powieści poetyckiej w Polsce* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1970), p. 311.

9 In *10 Years in Exile* Poland is described (for political and social but also geographical reasons) as "a sad and monotonous country" (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 38).

insufficiently profound sense of the past, as they lived in what appeared to be a new world, without history. It was difficult for them to recollect anything because to them it seemed everything had just happened; had just solidified. The human being at that time was focused on the present, from which he or she needed to extract the largest possible advantage. At the same time, people were focused on the future, for they expected it to provide new impressions.¹⁰ The moderns, identified in de Staël's work with Northern authors and with the Romantics, proceed in a completely different manner. They are crushed and overwhelmed by the weight of what has already passed away. They have, it is true, their own present, but derive no profit from it, since in the unfavorable Northern climate they cannot use it to enjoy everyday life. The mist and frost represent an insuperable barrier to them. They therefore endeavor to relive lost moments, and what they remember is more valuable to them than the ability to remember itself. Here we see taking place a strange process of dispersion of the self, which compensates for its deficit of activity in the present by vanishing into the past.

This kind of diseased attachment to the past is the source of Oswald's afflictions in *Corinne*. This young Englishman, one of the main characters in the book, "was already tired of life" at the age of twenty-five (*Corinne*, p. 5), oppressed by "the weight of grief" (*Corinne*, p. 7), and his existence was entirely devoted to the remembrance of loss.¹¹ When we meet him, Oswald is disconsolate after the death of his father; he is helped in mastering and working through his mourning by the eponymous heroine, whom he also loses, but this time for completely different reasons. Only love and the southern landscape, which clearly does not correspond to his northern disposition, allow Oswald to enjoy brief moments of respite and calm. This is noted in the novel by an Italian prince, a friend of

10 Poulet, in his essay "Madame de Staël," turns his attention to the importance of the paradoxical notion of "longing for the future," and concomitant "enthusiasm," in De Staël's work. See Poulet, *La Pensée indéterminée* (Paris: PUF, 1985), pp. 245–246. Poulet does not, in fact, refer the reader to the particular texts he has in mind, but his intuitions can be confirmed with regard at least to *On Germany*. There, De Staël presents a silhouette of, among others, Friedrich Leopold Stolberg, in whose work she observes the presence of "chagrin" (which leads to melancholia and the need for "looking backward," toward the past) which is balanced by a striving for perfection (leading to a "bold spirit" and compelling us to "look forward," toward the future) – see *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 233.

11 Oswald in fact possesses many qualities that identify him as a melancholic: "the melancholy look, [...] she saw him now lean upon his hand, as if bending breathless beneath his sorrows; now musing beside the sea, or raising his eyes to heaven at the sound of music" (De Staël, *Corinne*, p. 115).

Corinne: “There is something veiled and reined in about the character of [Oswald]. [...] [T]hat reserve and mystery [...]. [H]e is high-minded, intelligent, sensitive, and melancholy above all. [...] Obstacles would fatigue a mind warped by the griefs he has undergone, by discouragements which must have impaired the energy of his resolutions” (*Corinne*, pp. 63–64). Oswald cannot come to terms with his own past, which haunts him and exposes him to constant suffering. The melancholic countenance of this phenomenon is clear in the fact that Oswald only rarely and seemingly accidentally lives his own life. Bygone times oppress him and condemn him to a state of exile in the present. It is therefore unsurprising that visiting the ruins of Pompeii leads to the following assertions: “Most of the houses are built of lava, and fresh lava destroyed them. The epochs of the world are counted from fall to fall. The thought of human beings, toiling by the light that consumed them fills the breast with melancholy” (*Corinne*, p. 8). The present is unable to resist in a clash with the destructive power of the past. For the ancients, history was yet to exist, while for the moderns, nothing else exists.

All of the elements so far mentioned, i.e., the focus on the self, the disenchantment of nature, the fascination with the past, determine, Madame de Staël claims, northern poetry’s melancholic character: “The melancholy of the people of the North is one inspired by sufferings of the soul, the void that sensitivity leads one to find in existence, and the reverie that unceasingly guides thought from the weariness of life to the mystery of death” (DL, vol. I, p. 252). Innumerable such examples are also to be found in the essay *On Germany*, for example, in her analysis of the style and works of Jean Paul, de Staël points out the melancholia omnipresent in his writings, which is absolutely without object and even elicits a certain fatigue (see DA, vol. II, p. 152). It is therefore difficult to conclude that in de Staël’s work melancholia is balanced against enthusiasm, as Monika Hjortberg asserts.¹² The concept of enthusiasm does, of course, appear with great frequency in Madame de Staël’s texts, as noted earlier by Georges Poulet, but it is treated as a term of literary criticism and linked to certain concrete forms of culture, especially literature, a fact unchanged even by the last three chapters of *On Germany*, which are devoted to enthusiasm: “On Enthusiasm,” “On the Influence of Enthusiasm on the Enlightenment,” and “The Influence of Enthusiasm on Happiness”).

12 See Monica Hjortberg, “Enthousiasme et mélancolie, couple antonymique dans quelques ouvrages de Mme de Staël,” *Romansk forum*, No. 16 (2002), *XV skandinaviske romanistkongress*, pp. 425–434; <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/25197/16-02.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (21 March 2017).

In the context of the distinctions made earlier, it should come as no surprise that enthusiasm is associated primarily with antique poetry and its relative, the poetry of the South. In *On Literature* we read: “The ancients were animated by an enthusiastic imagination, whose impressions were free from analytic reflection” (DL, vol. I, p. 209) and “poetic exaltation was not self-conscious” (DL, vol. I, p. 209). Enthusiasm is thus the strength of ancient poets, who created, gorging themselves on the world, and sang life’s praises. They lacked awareness, however: “[...] everything turned them away from contemplation; nothing guided them towards it. The spirit of reflection is rarely visible in the poetry of the ancient Greeks” (DL, vol. I, p. 212). They had acquired the capacity to examine the human being, but did not know how to gaze within. We may conjecture that Madame de Staël has in mind the epic sense of enchantment with the world, which is accompanied by a lack of sensitivity in the sphere of psychology. In *On Germany*, we also learn that “enthusiasm focuses in one area all different kinds of feelings; enthusiasm is incense [rising] from earth to heaven, joining the one with the other” (DA, vol. II, p. 60). It should be added that these words refer primarily to reading the Bible and Homer. Enthusiasm is thus a form of admiration; a kind of spiritual predilection, allowing one to feel deeply and to appeal to the judgment of the emotions and the heart. It does not, however, render either critical opinion or preoccupation with unhappiness impossible. In fact, in a world where enthusiasm rules, unhappiness does not yet exist: “The poet was too satisfied, too exalted, to give unhappiness a profoundly melancholic expression” (DL, vol. I, p. 216). It was only the modern English poets, and thus artists with origins in the northern peoples, whose tragedies showed “a harrowing and melancholy depiction” (DL, vol. I, p. 216), and therefore one filled with philosophical zest.

“Melancholia, this emotion fecund with works of genius, seems to belong exclusively to the northern climate” (DL, vol. I, p. 252). It is therefore a wholly different kind of category than enthusiasm, the characteristic of a different type of culture, a different relation to the world and human beings. It is therefore hard to concur, I reiterate, with Monica Hjortberg, who treats the two categories as complementary and interchangeable. I believe the exact opposite to be true. These are concepts whose relation to each other remains in irreconcilable opposition. This may only be mitigated by the trial, dialectical nature of their relationship, as Jean Starobinski has noted. In his article on the subject of suicide in the work of Madame de Staël Starobinski shows the tortuous path from enthusiasm to melancholia. According to Starobinski, De Staël’s critical method results from centrifugal motion, allowing her to leave herself and move toward another. This ecstasy of enthusiasm leads almost to the point of

forgetting oneself in the Other; to rendering one's existence dependent on the decisions of the Other. At a critical moment, when the Other rejects our devotion, as frequently happens in De Staël's novels, that may lead to a breakdown and the decision to commit suicide. Physical suicide rarely takes place, however, which is the reason Starobinski is rather concerned with moral suicide.¹³ The human being carried away by enthusiasm, ready to make sacrifices for another, experiences such great disappointment in the moment of disillusionment that he decides utterly to forget himself and his own feelings.

The paths of forgetting vary: from religion to philosophy to poetry. This oblivion, which is only one of the masks of loss, at least allows those who seek it to attain relative peace of mind and hope for the future, while enabling them at last to dissolve in a state of sweet melancholia, or carefree sadness. "This is where the act of writing springs from," Starobinski assures us, "in melancholia, the expression of profound pain, surmounted, but endlessly renewed. Madame de Staël perceives the foundation of the literature of the northern nations."¹⁴ Writing in this case is a form of therapy, an attempt at a mastery of loss. In extreme cases it also allows the writer to forget about himself. Melancholia is thus revealed to be almost identical to literature itself. De Staël underscores that fact: "In the period in which we live, melancholy is the true inspiration of talent; he who has not felt himself seized by this sentiment cannot claim great fame as a writer; such is the price to be paid for it" (DL, vol. I, p. 313). The remedy for loss and the experience of a cheerless life is writing, understood as the expression of sadness, bitterness and disappointment. Such a cluster of destructive emotions cannot but exert an influence on language in general, and on literary style in particular.

There are, after all, languages which seem not to be naturally predisposed toward enabling the expression of overwhelming sadness. Italian may be considered a case in point:

The resonant noise of Italian disposes neither author nor reader to think; one's very sensibility is distracted from emotion by the too explosive consonants. Italian is not sufficiently concise to express ideas; it has nothing dark enough for the melancholy of sentiments. It is a language of such an extraordinary melodiousness that it can stir you like chords without your even paying attention to the meaning of the words. It acts on you like a musical instrument. (DL, vol. I, p. 250)¹⁵

13 Starobinski, "Suicide et mélancolie chez Mme de Staël," in: *Madame de Staël et l'Europe. Colloque de Coppet* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1966), p. 250.

14 Starobinski, "Suicide et mélancolie chez Mme de Staël," p. 251.

15 To grasp the phenomenon of the Italian accent and the very different English accent, it is worth consulting *Corinne*: see pp. 17, 54, 69, 162.

The situation is similar in French, but utterly different when it comes to German: “in French one only says what one means, and one does not find these clouds of manifold shapes that form around words and surround the poetry of northern languages, awakening a crowd of memories” (DA, vol. II, p. 59). Languages, similarly in this regard to people, cultures, political and social systems, are thus susceptible to external influences that form them and determine their character. Hence the languages of southern European nations, according to de Staël, are very musical, full of vowels and sounds that are pleasing to the ear, as they describe a world where the sun reigns, a world of harmony with a pleasant atmosphere. In the North, on the other hand, we hear harsh sounds full of consonants and the sadness which stretches out under a dark sky and which is breathed by all of the characters in the poems of Ossian.

These same distinctions apply to the style, a reflection of what lurks in the human soul. In *On Literature* we read:

Style should therefore undergo changes after the revolution which has taken place in minds and in institutions because style does not by any means consist merely of grammatical transformations: it reaches to the heart of ideas, the nature of minds; it is not at all just a simple form. The style of works is like the character of a man; this character can be foreign to neither his opinions or his feelings; it modifies his entire being. (DL, vol. I, p. 320)

If melancholia, which de Staël claims assures “profundity and eloquence” (DL, vol. I, p. 329), has taken root inside a man, then his style should also be suffused with it. Aristotle, in his “Problema XXX,” declared that melancholia, like wine, may cause even the taciturn to become talkative; indeed eloquent.¹⁶ More often emphasized, however, in connection with melancholy, are problems relating to aphasia, with a decline in communication or a style bereft of fluency, as Julia Kristeva explains in her book *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*.¹⁷ A similar problem also appears in *Corinne*:

On her return home, Corinne strove to reflect on what she had seen, and retrace her impressions, as she had formerly done; but her mental distraction was uncontrollable. How far was she now from the power of improvisation! In vain she sought for words, or wrote unmeaning ones, that dismayed her on perusal, as would the ravings of delirium. Incapable of turning her thoughts from her own situation, she then strove to describe

16 Aristotle, *Problems*, trans. Walter Stanley Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. II, p. 157.

17 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); in particular the chapters “Psychoanalysis – A Counterdepressant” and “Life and Death of Speech,” pp. 1–68.

it; but no longer could she command those universal sentiments that find echoes in all hearts. Hers were now but long unvaried wailings, like the cry of the night bird; her expressions were too impetuous, too unveiled, – they were those of misery, not of talent. To write well, we require to feel truly, but not heart-breakingly. The best melancholy poetry is that inspired by a kind of rapture, which still tells of mental strength and enjoyment. Real grief is a foe to intellectual fertility: it produces a gloomy agitation, that incessantly returns to the same point, like the knight who, pursued by an evil genius, sought a thousand roads for escape, yet always found himself at the spot from whence he started. (*Corinne*, p. 151)

Corinne finds herself in an extremely dramatic situation: she has lost Oswald, for whom she was ready to give up not only her fame but also her life. To rectify the situation, she leaves, driven by her lack of fulfillment, for Scotland, the country of her melancholic lover. There she receives the impression, albeit erroneous, that Oswald has forgotten about her. She also learns that he, with whom she spent so many happy moments, has decided to make her sister his wife. For Corinne, this whole story is a series of irretrievable losses. She lost her fame as a poet; lost her former comfortable life; lost her lover; lost her family; and finally lost herself because she ceased to grasp the meaning of her own life. In this state, Corinne arrives in Florence, where she visits, among other places, a beautiful gallery of sculptures and paintings. Upon her return home, she attempts to write down her impressions.

In the above passage, however, we see the complexity of the situation and the problems that arise precisely when the pen is ruled by melancholy. Above all, the loss she has experienced will not allow Corinne to write “as she had formerly done.” In the gallery she saw sculptures of Minerva, Apollo, Niobe and Alexander, each of them stirring emotions in her, each drawing out stories from her memory, but none of them able to awaken her talent. Corinne, the celebrated improviser, honored with laurels, cannot cope with the excess of emotions. She cannot express what is concealed deep within her. In writing, she is hindered by distraction because she is trying to write about something she does not want to write about. Her report on the expedition to the gallery is merely a substitute for the confession which she is clearly terrified to make. For that reason, no description or account is of any importance to her because none can be meaningful when faced with what is more important, albeit hidden. This is the reason Corinne has trouble finding words and puts them together disjointedly. Her writing is jumbled, dictated, as it is by emotions does not wish to admit to herself.

The pressure on her, however, grows increasingly strenuous. She begins to realize that she cannot escape it; that it is not possible to leave unsaid with impunity what pierces the depths of her soul like a spike. For that very reason Corinne

resolves to describe her situation, but here she continually stumbles, unable to take control of the written word. Her writing is transformed into “long unvaried wailings.” Corinne knows that she cannot tame the element inside her; that what she is writing has no connection with literature, with talent, with the refined and therefore artificial organization of words. It is rather a chaotic release of spasms that turn into halting, ungrammatical sentences, horrifying for one who for so many years believed in the harmony and dignified calm of the South. Finally, Corinne must come to the conclusion that grief does not contain “intellectual fertility” and leads rather to incessant, obsessive repetition of the same thought. Surely no text worth reading can take form thus, but such writing offers the one chance of mastering sadness; of recovery from a breakdown. Benjamin Constant, de Staël’s close friend and lover, who wrestled with similar problems, underscored this point in his *Confidential Journals*, where in an entry on 1 April 1804, he noted:

From where do the sad and sombre ideas that are assaulting me today come? Have I then lost all control over myself? Is not my destiny in my own hands? Have I not found a strength for work beyond what I had hoped? It is only will that I lack to be happy.¹⁸

Like Corinne, Madame de Staël, and so many other nineteenth-century melancholics, Constant sought his redemption in literature. Later in his journal he writes: “I must find a way to make literature the focus of my entire life. It will suffice to satisfy all my wishes.”¹⁹ The melancholic must write, then; must obsessively return to the thought that torments him; must quote and lose himself in the word; must finally cobble together some hideous sentences, so as not to fall into the abyss of silence and disease, a topic which Julia Kristeva considers in *Black Sun*. The melancholic should therefore be a graphomaniac, a person possessed by writing, endlessly transcribing his pain and disappointment, scratching his wounds. Writing is medicine, but it can also be a menace, it demands absolute devotion. As Jean Starobinski observes, “entering literature presupposes the person’s sacrifice for the work, the removal of his empirical life (in which the writer actually experiences his happiness and unhappiness) to the benefit of the secondary life, which is continued in the work.”²⁰ Corinne does not fully understand that, because, as mentioned above, she is bound to the Mediterranean cultural order. For her, what has value is empirical life, full of surprises and adventures, in

18 Benjamin Constant, *Journal intime*, ed. Dora Melegari (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1895), p. 21–22.

19 Constant, *Journal intime*, p. 22.

20 Starobinski, “Suicide et mélancolie chez Mme de Staël,” p. 251.

which there should always be a happy ending. Corinne is also hungry for laurels and fame.²¹ She desires a bright, well-ordered reality. Because it constitutes an important element in the description of both the character and her environment, we should also stress that Corinne's voice is "sweet" and carries "the softest tones of affection" (*Corinne*, pp. 56, 66), and in the country where she lives, according to Lord Nelvil, "the sky [...] appears lapped in perpetual lightning" (*Corinne*, p. 97).²² Corinne must therefore learn melancholy and the melancholy line, and she proves more than equal to the task.

The problem of expression, of self-expression and of self-forgetting in an impersonal text, is the last element in de Staël's writings that links them with melancholia. This question simultaneously leads us to the important nineteenth-century discussion about escapism, fleeing the world into the depths of one's own subjectivity. The gaze with which the poets of the North look inward, and which allows them introspection, is a gaze more suited to sounding the depths and shallows of the Romantic soul so very susceptible to flights of melancholia.

21 This is very much in evidence in the scene of the crowning at the Capitol, when Corinne is presented thus: "She gave you at the same instant the idea of a priestess of Apollo advancing towards his temple, and of a woman born to fulfil the usual duties of life with perfect simplicity; in truth, her every gesture not more elicited wondering conjecture, than it conciliated sympathy and affection" (*Corinne*, p. 13).

22 Among many passages in *Corinne* devoted to describing the South and the character of its inhabitants, the following is particularly noteworthy: "No one who has not dwelt in Southern climes can form an idea of this stirless silence, unbroken by the lightest zephyr. The tenderest blades of herbage remained perfectly motionless; even the animals partake this noontide lassitude" (*Corinne*, p. 40).

5. To See the Nothing Inside (Amiel)

And is there not another reason for all this restlessness, in a certain sense of void?¹

At first the world is a void. Amiel was convinced it was his lot to live in a world of derivative gestures and religious injunctions that, at best, could merely veil the vanity of existence. This was no doubt the cause of “the sharpest sense of the emptiness of life and the flight of things” (p. 191) that he felt, and his experience of a “dumb sense of desolation” (p. 258). There, on the outside, there was a family unable to grasp Amiel’s solitary way of life; there, too, lurked difficulties in establishing contact with others. Amiel frequently grumbles at the “[h]urtful timidity, unprofitable conscientiousness, fatal slavery to detail!” (p. 288) that allegedly deprive him of his freedom. Before he experiences anything, he seems to create an endless number of scenarios of the experience in his head, which consequently deprives him of any kind of pleasure, and renders his movements stiff: “[...] the timidity springs from the excessive development of the reflective power which has almost destroyed in me all spontaneity, impulse, and instinct, and therefore all boldness and confidence. Whenever I am forced to act, I see cause for error and repentance everywhere; everywhere hidden threats and masked vexations” (p. 62). Thus the world, before it even begins to be felt and experienced, appears to the cognitive subject as a pale reflection of itself, a chain of events formed in the head that are merely a substitute for life. This is presumably the reason Przybyszewski calls Amiel a “typical follower” and reckons him among “the herd of dilettantes who are able to do everything, and unable truly to create anything, who were born sterile and fritter away their powers needlessly in constant attempts to harness will to emotion.”² According to Przybyszewski, Amiel, like an entire generation of authors in the grip of a particular kind of “degeneration,” wallows in his own feelings; chafes his wounds, thereby weakening his reason and his will to act. His life is a mere simulation, a mental illusion created by a paralyzing, hypersensitive imagination.

It is hardly surprising to find that in a similar context, Amiel was obliged to note that “the world is but an allegory” (p. 27). He credited Berkeley, Fichte and

1 *Amiel's Journal; the Journal intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel*, trans. Humphrey Ward (New York: A.L. Burt, 1891), p. 71.

2 Stanisław Przybyszewski, “Misteria (o powieści Knuta Hamsuna),” in: *Synagoga Szatana i inne eseje*, ed. Gabriela Matuszek (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1997), p. 109.

Emerson with responsibility for this revelation, and pronounced his agreement with the belief that the only real substance is the soul, while the “world is but a firework, a sublime phantasmagoria, destined to cheer and form the soul” (p. 27). In consequence, reality is revealed to be a mere figment of the imagination and exists to the extent that the mind perceives and names it: “We are all visionaries, and what we see is our soul in things. We reward ourselves and punish ourselves without knowing it, so that all appears to change when we change” (p. 46). At the center of consciousness is the subject, and the world, even if its existence cannot be questioned after the death of the subject, is important for the subject himself only as a hypostatic object of knowledge. For that reason the world never means what it intersubjectively or objectively, if these words still have any sense, appears to mean; since it is only a projection of the self, to whose obsessive presence the *Journal intime* is dedicated. It was just this idealistic premise that allowed Amiel to speak of the world in terms of allegory, as Stanisław Brzozowski meant when he referred to the “object-centered” nature of Amiel’s thought.³ This double vision of the world and belief that it not only means something more than what it appears to mean, but also means something different, also awakened the “ironical instinct” (p. 98) in Amiel. Amiel never comes to a standstill in his scrutiny of reality because he is convinced that it is underpinned by something that contradicts what lies on the surface.

One result of allegory and irony turning up in philosophical thought about the world is the inevitable treatment of reality as an empty form, whose nothingness is masked only by the desires of the subject. It is no surprise, then, that Amiel resolved to withdraw from the world and from active life within it. “At bottom there is but one subject of study: the forms and metamorphoses of mind,” he explained (p. 2). This conviction appears, contrary to the belabored interpretations that seek the reasons for his decision in his psyche or antipathy for life in society,⁴ to be primarily philosophical in nature. The famous sadness and melancholia in the *Intimate Journal* are likewise above all speculative and

3 See Stanisław Brzozowski, “Fryderyk Henryk Amiel (1821–1881). Przyczynek do psychologii współczesnej,” in: *Głosy wśród nocy. Studia nad przesileniem romantycznym kultury europejskiej*, ed. Ostap Ortwin (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), pp. 132–134.

4 See Jean Vuilleumier, *Le complexe d’Amiel* (Paris: Broché, 1985). Vuilleumier acknowledges that the “Amielism” he describes is not a strictly medical phenomenon, but the article is dominated by a pursuit of “pathology” and “shyness born of being closed within the self, hypersensitivity exacerbated by a sense of isolation and humiliation” (p. 109).

literary categories and only secondarily psychological, as Stanisław Brzozowski observed, perceiving in Amiel's work "deep sorrow, intellectual in origin."⁵ Amiel himself urges such a framing on us in his metareflection on the phenomenon of the intimate journal:

A private journal, which is but a vehicle for meditation and reverie, beats about the bush as it pleases without being bound to make for any definite end. Conversation with self is a gradual process of thought-clearing. Hence all these synonyms, these waverings, these repetitions and returns upon one's self. Affirmation may be brief; inquiry takes time; and the line which thought follows is necessarily an irregular one. I am conscious indeed that at bottom there is but one right expression; but in order to find it I wish to make my choice among all that are like it; and my mind instinctively goes through a series of verbal modulations in search of that shade which may most accurately render the idea. Or sometimes it is the idea itself which has to be turned over and over, that I may know it and apprehend it better. I think, pen in hand; it is like the disentanglement, the winding-off of a skein. Evidently the corresponding form of style cannot have the qualities which belong to thought which is already sure of itself, and only seeks to communicate itself to others. The function of the private journal is one of observation, experiment, analysis, contemplation; that of the essay or article is to provoke reflection; that of the book is to demonstrate. (pp. 312–313)

The genre concept itself, as Daniel Renaud has noted,⁶ is rather astonishing here. For what is an intimate journal? First of all, it announces that Amiel has managed to do what Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, was afraid to do. For Amiel succeeded in performing on himself the experiment of replacing experience with writing. Rousseau preferred looking at plants and wandering in the wilderness because the world around him had still lost neither its separateness nor its cognitive value: "Why did I not write [the works of my early youth]? will be asked; and why should I have written them? I may answer. Why deprive myself of the actual charm of my enjoyments to inform others what I enjoyed? What to me were readers, the public, or all the world, while I was mounting the empyrean. Besides, did I carry pens, paper and ink with me? Had I recollected all these, not a thought would have occurred worth preserving."⁷ Rousseau is fully aware of the derivative nature of narration. The world, as far as he is concerned, is the

5 Stanisław Brzozowski, "Fryderyk Henryk Amiel," p. 132.

6 See Daniel Renaud, "Un Écrivain en marche vers sa reconnaissance non plus comme malade mais comme écrivain," <http://www.amiel.org/oeuvre/etudes%20et%20travaux/amielrenaud03.pdf> (28 April 2017).

7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, translator uncredited. Gutenberg Project e-book version: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm> (28 March 2017).

true storehouse of experiences and considerations. Writing, on the other hand, is sometimes a regrettable necessity, which can only present in a crooked mirror what has taken place through a sensory or spiritual cognition of nature. According to Amiel, such a belief is based on a misunderstanding. It follows the logic of the chiasmus. There is good reason to doubt whether he found writing to be a consequence of experience. So it is worth venturing the exact opposite assertion: experience is a derivative of writing because the latter makes it possible to understand that the world is an illusion created by the subject. For precisely that reason, the regular recording of interior sensations, emotions and thoughts constitutes an obvious virtue of the journal. If the world is only a fiction of the cognitive mind, moreover, then the fact that the journal ought by definition to be “intimate” also seems completely clear. “Intimate” means devoted to the subject, his falterings, idiosyncrasies, and reflections. The self is the main hero of the *Intimate Journal*, based on the same principle by which it plays a crucial role in the notes of Maine de Biran, as Józef Czapski stresses.⁸ The point here is not narcissistic exaltation, but rather the inward gaze, into the self, which as a result allows intellectual sadness to be remedied.⁹

It is nevertheless soon revealed that Amiel’s proposed introspection contains as much precision as it does escapism, a fact expressed in the counterintuitive conjunction of “meditation and reverie.” The “gradual process of thought-clearing” is by no means as obvious as Amiel would like it to be. He is really trying to capture his own thought, to encompass in a speculative form the substance of his soul, but he is ceaselessly hindered in doing so by his incorrigible tendency to reverie, his predilection toward conditional constructions and his inclination to pondering what-ifs. It is difficult here to separate philosophical gesture from literary craft. Amiel was truly possessed by this element of reverie. He suffered, as did many other nineteenth-century characters, both fictional and real, from the same disease that afflicted Emma Bovary. Not by chance does Amiel stress that “Reverie, like the rain of night, restores color and force to thoughts which have been blanched and wearied by the heat of the day. With gentle fertilizing

8 See Józef Czapski, “Ja,” in: *Tumult i widma* (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1988), pp. 167–177. This same aspect of the journals of Amiel and Maine de Biran is touched on by Henryk Elzenberg in *Kłopot z istnieniem* (Kraków: Znak, 1994), p. 329.

9 This is part of what Elzenberg was looking for in Amiel. In *Kłopot z istnieniem* (p. 121) he interprets the self-portraits of Rembrandt and Amiel’s *Journal intime* as follows: “The subject under consideration is for me the mania for self-portraiture, attention dedicated to oneself and one’s state of being. A modern trait, the more so as in the formulation, we sense *der Grübler*, a probing, distorting self-analyst.”

power it awakens within us a thousand sleeping germs” (p. 30). He also claims, in apparent contradiction to the notion of the empty world, “What a pale counterfeit is real life of the life we see in glimpses” (p. 29). Thus, Amiel does not search in either the real world, for such a thing does not exist at all, or the world of systematic reflection, about which he seems not really to care much, but rather in a hazily defined world of reverie. This is somewhat surprising, as we might properly ask ourselves in what way an inner dream could be the same as a dream previously experienced by the subject and therefore susceptible to his assessment in the real world. However, it fairly quickly becomes clear that the inner dream is supposed to be therapeutic in character. It is an attempt to compensate for what was lacking in the external world. That, it is true, is only a hypostasis of the cognitive subject, but an imperfect one.¹⁰ It is therefore imperative to seek the promised land, defined by him as “the land where one is not” (p. 48). This is escapism combined with the unassuageable pain that results from experiencing the world’s emptiness. Michel Braud has written insightfully on the subject, stressing that “the diarist [...] treats his life as a continual process of mourning: mourning for God, but also mourning for himself, for his future death, for his hopes and his dreams.”¹¹ The world, in this formulation, is a fiction, and the subject mourns himself because, in keeping with this logic, he has been forced to replace experience with writing and to live only a vicarious life, which for Rousseau, too, was a dream, but with an important epithet: it was a derivative dream.¹² Rousseau could thus treat the dream as a way of adding variety to reality; for Amiel in the *Intimate Journal*, it became the only reality.

10 This appears to be another reason for Amiel’s avoidance of active life in favor of contemplation. Because life is tantamount to an imperfect dream directed outwards and petrified in interpersonal space; contemplation, or the inner dream, remains artistic; it does not surrender to the element of conclusion that Amiel so loathes: “...the reality, the present, the irreparable, the necessary, repel and even terrify me. I have too much imagination, conscience and penetration and not enough character. The life of thought alone seems to me to have enough elasticity and immensity, to be free enough from the irreparable; practical life makes me afraid” (p. 8).

11 Michel Braud, “Le Diariste solitaire,” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266891496_Le_diariste_solitaire (30 March 2017). On this subject, see also Braud, “L’Extase, la mélancolie et le quotidien dans le *Journal intime* d’Amiel,” *Modernités* No. 16 (2002), pp. 118–119.

12 On this subject, see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Gazing into the self, however, assures no cognitive comfort. After all, Amiel sought to discover within himself the center that radiated through and created the reality in which he lived. Moreover, if reality is found to be empty because it is only a procession of forms conjured up by the cognitive subject, then the interior of the subject must be the generator of these illusions. At the same time, there is no way to get through to that center-generator. Meditation is not “bound to make for any definite end,” and thought is circuitous and gets lost in words, “synonyms, [...] waverings, [...] repetitions and returns,” as in a labyrinth that has neither exit nor center. In this helplessness we can surely see the anti-systematizing turn of Amiel’s thought, but also, as Maria Janion has noted, Amiel’s “fascination with the void that returns to the void.”¹³ It would appear that the void of the world is by no means a result of its being merely a projection of the self and not having a face of its own. Instead, it issues primarily from the fact that the self is itself void. Here, it seems, Amiel parts ways with his philosophical forefathers. There is no substantive self; it is as fragmented as the world in which it must live; and what Amiel is attempting to effect is nothing but the substantialization of emptiness. While George Poulet does not mention melancholy, he draws attention to a similar problem in the *Intimate Journal*¹⁴ in his analysis of the centripetal motion, i.e., toward the self; toward one’s own interior, and centrifugal motion, i.e., toward intersubjective reality, present in Amiel’s text. According to Poulet, nothing can suspend this movement, and Amiel circulates incessantly between the experience of the strangeness and otherness of his own existence and the world that threatens the identity and homogeneity of the subject. Poulet tries desperately to find a way out of this essentially negative logic and concentrates as a result on the positive mechanisms that allow Amiel to gain control over himself and the world through reflection. Poulet’s profoundly humanistic position is not always justified, however, and the negative element, that connected with the melancholia he neglects to discuss, cannot so blithely be marginalized. One of the main reasons for this is the literariness of the philosopher’s notes, from which a system with coherent premises, precisely what Poulet is looking for in his essay “Amiel et la conscience de soi,” can only be drawn out at the expense

13 Maria Janion, introduction to Amiel, *Dziennik intymny*, trans. Joanna Guze (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1997), p. 17. On the same topic, see Andrzej Zawadzki, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), p. 126.

14 Poulet, “Amiel et le conscience de soi,” introduction to Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. I, 1839–1851, ed. Philippe M. Monnier and Pierre Dido (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1976), pp. 45–94.

of what is anti-systematic and extremely important to his thought. For what is crucial here is Amiel's celebration of the void in the hollowed-out subject, which Poulet does not wish to acknowledge. For Amiel, however, that is one of his pivotal experiences: "Two powers of contemplation: the first degree is the world, which evaporates and becomes a pure dream; the second degree is the self, which changes into a shadow, the dream of a dream."¹⁵ That is the very reason Amiel's journal is suffused with the deepest melancholia, tantamount to an inconsolable mourning for oneself. Here Poulet refers to the same phenomenon as a state of "ontological indefinition" as Braud.¹⁶ It is the melancholia of a philosopher who became a writer, only to finally understand that he was neither one nor the other. All that is left to him from this journey are words.

That is the reason so much attention is paid to words in the above extended quotation from the *Intimate Journal*, and that is also the reason Amiel tries to explain exactly the way he writes, as he cannot say anything about what he writes. An acute sense of the impossibility of expression appears in the most important passages in the journal: "Tears, griefs, depressions, disappointments, irritations, good and evil thoughts, decisions, uncertainties, deliberations, all these belong to our secret, and are almost all incommunicable and intransmissible, even when we try to speak of them, and even when we write them down. What is most precious in us never shows itself, never finds an issue" (p. 73). Amiel nevertheless does not surrender. Renaud even remarks that "what is most surprising in this work, which resembles no other, is undoubtedly the dazzling, amazing virtuosity of the writing."¹⁷ This writing is what makes it possible to avoid going insane, though it is equally responsible for the constant reminders of melancholia.

Amiel, like Gustave Flaubert, is obsessively attached to stylistic, syntactic and lexical precision. What he says of Ernest Renan is also true of both Flaubert and himself: "his object is style" (p. 31). This straining to find the perfect phrase, or rather this mad imagining of it, often paralyzes the writer: "I have been working for some hours at my article on Mme de Staël, but with what labor, what painful effort! When I write for publication every word is misery, and my pen stumbles at every line, so anxious am I to find the ideally best expression, and so great is

15 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. XI, *avril 1877 – juillet 1879*, eds. Monnier and Anne Cottier-Duperrex (Lausanne : L'Age d'Homme, 1993), p. 360.

16 Poulet, introduction to Amiel, *Journal intime. L'année 1857*, ed. Poulet (Paris : Bibliothèque 10/18, 1965), p. IX. In "Amiel et le conscience de soi", Poulet observes that the absence of hope, together with experiences which may be described as schizoid in nature, mean that "Amiel loses any kind of substantiality in his eyes."

17 Renaud, "Un Écrivain..."

the number of possibilities which open before me at every step” (p. 287). Amiel, this passionate lover of literature, fears the pen and the blank sheet of paper. He pays for his dream of perfection in prose with writerly sterility:

I am the heifer sacrificed to Proserpine; I idle my time away, without offspring, as a result of avoidance and silence. Everything moves, creates, radiates in its own sphere, where I diminish and dry up. The space between me and the work is an abyss; the distance becomes infinite because imagination constantly magnifies the object and mistrust constantly reduces the subject. Talent is zero, when the task becomes too huge. An article scares me as much as a book, a simple task as much as a serious undertaking, a word difficult to pronounce as much as any activity to be carried out.¹⁸

In this note of 22 December 1858, Amiel analyzes the dissonance, on the one hand, between himself and the world, and on the other, between himself and the work of which he dreams. The abyss that up until this point separated Amiel from the external is here absorbed by the subject and internalized. His own plans and dreams likewise become impracticable because they are too remote. At the same time, Amiel is afraid not only of truly ambitious designs, but he is paralyzed by the obligation even to write a short article or speak a single word. Everything appears here to be a consequence of the overuse of hyperbole. The shrinking and withering subject is unable to encompass his own hypostases and take control of them. This disinheritance, the loss of his own self, effectively wrests Amiel’s pen from his hands. He therefore admits his own sterility and the impossibility of creation, and grumbles about it despite the seventeen thousand pages he wrote in the *Intimate Journal*. This mass of paper does not, however, constitute a “work” in its author’s eyes; it is just a worthless instruction manual, a substitute for the desired text: “I am always preparing and never accomplishing” (p. 52). The works that have been published are also subject to devastating criticism: “all my published literary essays, therefore, are little else than studies, games, exercises for the purpose of testing myself. I play scales, as it were; I run up and down my instrument, I train my hand and make sure of its capacity and skill. But the work itself remains unachieved” (p. 52). This same trepidation may be observed in profusion half a century later in the thoughts of Walter Benjamin, who also wrestled with the fantasy of an impossible work. Crushed by notes and myriad jottings, Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter of 28 October 1931 to Gershom Scholem

18 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. III, mars 1856 – décembre 1860, eds. Monnier and Cottier-Duperrex (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1979), p. 608.

that he was treating work on this text as “prolegomena and paralipomena.”¹⁹ In Amiel’s case, this particular type of self-doubt leads to two kinds of consequence.

Firstly, Amiel is distinctly afraid of a finite perspective, a closed sentence, or any idea that would encompass the whole of human experience: “it is love of truth which holds me back from concluding and deciding” (p. 288). In his essay on Amiel, Stanisław Brzozowski stresses this aspect of Amiel: “Writing is an act, too, and this act, like any other, demands enclosing the self within certain definite boundaries. It is difficult to decide to look from a certain definite point of view when one knows that there may be a great many such points; when one feels capable of taking any one of them.”²⁰ In Amiel’s view, there exists no system of greater worth than the search leading thereto, and no point by which one can pass through all the paths of experience. In this sense, Amiel stands in defense of difference and diversity against repetition and identity among phenomena. This choice is far-reaching in its consequences and is stamped with melancholia because in spite of all of the above declarations, Amiel has a tendency to undermine his own subjective perspective to the point of weariness. That, however, does not mean that the rôle of the subject is reduced here. In fact quite the opposite is true. Let us remember that Amiel’s first step was to define the world as a fiction of the cognitive subject. In remaining faithful to that statement, Amiel must agree, which he does unreservedly, that there exist as many worlds as there are subjects; thus the individual’s task is not merely to understand that objective reality is an illusion, but also that a great variety of illusions compete with each other in creating the most accurate description of the world. In order not to let such a totalizing point of view become established, Amiel is forced to recognize the validity of his own doubts as well as the dissimilarity of other points of view. Acknowledging their independence demands real understanding, though, such as the empathy that we frequently find in the pages of the journal.²¹ Thus closes Amiel’s reflection, based on the syllogism: the world is the fiction of a thinking subject; thinking subjects are many; worlds are therefore many and any kind of conclusion regarding their ontology would be fundamentally flawed. For this reason, Amiel fears any kind of summing-up, closed sentence or work, despite the fact that he, to all appearances, desires to write one.

19 Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. and Evelyn M. Jacobson, eds. Gershom Scholem and Teodor W. Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 385.

20 Stanisław Brzozowski, “Fryderyk Henryk Amiel,” p. 139.

21 Stanisław Brzozowski writes about empathy as a crucial component of Amiel’s critical method – see Brzozowski, “Fryderyk Henryk Amiel,” pp. 132–133.

We can now shift to the second consequence of Amiel's hesitation and his belief that, while beginnings constantly multiply, they do not represent progress toward the desired work. For such a work, understood as a text encompassing the whole of experience, turns out to be impossible to create, and herein lies probably the greatest drama of the writing human being. Amiel has already discovered the void or absence of the world, has performed a substantialization of the void located within himself, and now must admit that the work he desires to create is only, and exclusively, a proof of the absence of such a work.²² In the entry for 4 July 1877 we find the following note: "a [journal], not itself a work, hinders all other works whose place it seems to occupy."²³ The written text is just another mask, concealing yet another absence. Hence "a private journal is like a good king, and permits repetitions, outpourings, complaint... These unseen effusions are the conversation of thought with itself, the arpeggios, involuntary but not unconscious, of that Aeolian harp we bear within us. Its vibrations compose no piece, exhaust no theme, achieve no melody, carry out no programme, but they express the innermost life of man" (p. 344). The final function of graphomania, filling pages with writing, is thus not the discovery of some abstract order, the execution of an intention, but merely the solidifying of one's own haphazard existence, a defense against the one thing which is absolute: the void. Only in this context can we understand Amiel's words expressing his belief that the true goal of writing was style. To make himself perfectly clear, he adds that "though it takes the place of everything, properly speaking it represents nothing at all" (p. 295). For there is nothing that could be represented in either sense of the French verb *représenter*: either to present, a nonsensical activity, if it is understood that the world, the subject and the work are nothing but masked emptiness; or to make newly present, an activity which hardly seems more sensible, since it is not even very clear what was previously present and what could thus be represented.

Such concerns as these probably contributed to the development of the subsequent definition of the intimate journal that Amiel proposes in his text:

A private journal is a friend to idleness. It frees us from the necessity of looking all round a subject, it puts up with every kind of repetition, it accompanies all the caprices

22 Zawadzki (*Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, p. 29) writes the following observation about this theme: "The postulated harmony of the work [...] is revealed, however, to be an unrealizable project: the text is condemned to the condition of a fragment, a sketch, an exploration [...]. As a result, the presentational power of intimate diaristic discourse itself is undermined; a journal is not capable of capturing the essence of life and is unmasked as false."

23 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. XI, avril 1877 – juillet 1879, p. 129.

and meanderings of the inner life, and proposes to itself no definite end. This journal of mine represents the material of a good many volumes: what prodigious waste of time, of thought, of strength! It will be useful to nobody, and even for myself, it has rather helped me to shirk life than to practice it. A journal takes the place of a confidant, that is, of friend or wife; it becomes a substitute for production, a substitute for country and public. It is a grief-cheating device, a mode of escape and withdrawal [...]. (p. 295)

The journal and its accompanying gaze into the depths of the self are thus melancholic in nature. It is the place of yet another unprocessed mourning, of the void once more observed. It possesses no practical goal; its essence is wandering and constant stumbling into incessantly recalled loss. Albert Béguin perceives in Amiel a faithful reader of and heir to the Romantics²⁴ because Amiel's melancholia, quite often psychologically and metaphysically tinged, results from searching vainly for absolute values and becoming lost in a sad landscape or world whose image is transferred to the journal straight from Romantic novels and painting: "Whence this solemn melancholy which oppresses and pursues me? I have just read a series of scientific books [...]. Are they the cause of this depression? or is it the majesty of this immense landscape, the splendor of this setting sun, which brings the tears to my eyes?" (pp. 222–223). This particular aspect of melancholia in the *Journal intime* is, however, decidedly derivative. Much more important is the way the reinterpretation of Romanticism allowed Amiel to anticipate Freud in connecting melancholia not so much to sadness or nostalgia, but rather to the above-mentioned concept of loss.

The logic of loss in fact defined the trajectory of Amiel's life. His biography was riddled with painful iterations of loss. Not only did he witness the premature death of his younger sister, but his mother died of consumption when he was eleven, and his father committed suicide barely two years later by jumping into the Rhône. It seems that he felt the loss of his mother particularly acutely. Marie Claire Grassi even believes that the experience represents the reason behind several entries in the journal, such as those for 16 October 1864 or 9 May 1867, which express a desire to return to the maternal bosom.²⁵ It was partly due to that unrelenting connection that the journal itself took shape. On 11 and 12 April 1850 Amiel visited his uncle in Monnaie, where he discovered some family

24 See Albert Béguin, *L'Ame romantique et le rêve* (Paris: Corti, 1946), p. 353.

25 See Marie Claire Grassi, "Amiel ou l'œuvre mélancolique," in *Malinconia, malattia malinconica e letteratura moderna*, ed. Anna Dolfi (Roma: Bulzoni, 1991), pp. 284–285. On this same topic, see Poulet's remarks in *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), pp. 347–350, and *La Pensée indéterminée*, vol. II, *Du Romantisme au XXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1987), pp. 132–133.

papers. Eight years later he took all of the papers home and found among them the journal that had belonged to his mother, which enabled Albert Py to declare that “behind the *Intimate Journal* is hidden a first journal which initiates and in a sense authorizes the second, and is the source of its voice.”²⁶ That is only part of the biographical peripeteia which may lie at the foundation of Amiel’s melancholia. He also became engaged twice, both times breaking off the engagement due to doubts or fears.

We should certainly not minimize these traumatic experiences of Amiel’s boyhood and embarrassing secrets of his early adulthood because they repeatedly return within the text of the journal: “I am always waiting for the woman and the work which shall be capable of taking entire possession of my soul, and of becoming my end and aim” (p. 71). Amiel feels the loss of illusions and the resulting defeats, at least in his perception, of adulthood profoundly: he has not achieved fame either as a professor or as a writer. With a palpable sense of envy, he writes: “The names of great men hover before my eyes like a secret reproach, and this grand impassive nature tells me that tomorrow I shall have disappeared, butterfly that I am, without having lived” (p. 223). His anxieties now concern not himself, but his name, which is condemned to be forgotten. Those fears are accompanied by an admission striking in its frankness: “It is painful to me to be misunderstood” (p. 367). In this sense, too, the *Journal intime* is an attempt to preserve himself, to make his existence last, despite its being subject to the rhythm of loss and transience. His acute awareness of that fact elicits the “melancholy of memory” (p. 225), i.e., the belief that memory is only a faint reflection of lost experience. Individual remembrance is not alone in being melancholic; melancholia inheres in the very essence of life: “This rapid and inexorable expansion of the universal life, which covers, overflows, and swallows up all individual being, which effaces our existence and annuls all memory of us, fills me with unbearable melancholy” (p. 90). Amiel has withdrawn from active life and fears that that loss will be deepened by any further loss. Here he has in mind the disappearance of his name. He is oppressed by the feeling that after his death no one will remember him; that he will disappear forever. One of Amiel’s obsessions as a writer is Saturn, the protagonist of a macabre story and patron of time understood as “the medium of constraint.”²⁷ Every melancholic suffers because of his lost past, but also feels threatened by the approaching future, which brings with it what is unavoidable. Thus, behind him and ahead of him, the melancholic is

26 Albert Py, “Amiel ou l’œuvre éconduite,” *Écriture*, No. 18 (1982), p. 72.

27 Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 115.

charged with overcoming the certainty of loss. In this unequal struggle, the journal becomes a factotum for Amiel, because the order of writing not only escapes from the vanity of passing life, painful oblivion, but also enables mastery over the obtrusive future, i.e., death. Writing is a place of refuge, of working through one's own failures and anticipated (and therefore assimilated) death.²⁸ In the entry for 21 December 1860 Amiel confesses that he places all his hopes in the journal, which protects him from the evil world. Nevertheless, the slips of paper that continue to accumulate also represent a threat. Life evaporates in words, and writing becomes a dependency to the same extent that it liberates. The *Intimate Journal* is thus undoubtedly therapeutic in nature insofar as it allows Amiel to soothe his trepidation and to put in order thoughts that would otherwise remain in chaos. Still, it seems that for the modern definition of loss, it is neither his biographical *perpeteia* nor the gloom in his psyche that are most relevant.

More importantly in his case is the philosophical disinheritance or, as Paul Gorceiz argues,²⁹ the metaphysical character of Amiel's melancholic tendencies. Because Amiel desires everything and attempts to grasp existence in all of its variety, he is delivered into the hands of an insatiable hunger for knowledge. In his fevered searching everything eludes him. He cannot linger on anything because other things constantly demand his attention; hence his hurry, and his constant impression of evanescence, transitoriness, and finally irremediable loss. Life brings with it "an inextinguishable flame of desire, and an agony of incurable disillusion" (p. 89). The unceasing procession of forms creates the impression that something has got lost in it, and that something else has escaped notice entirely. That is also the source of the obsession with the lost thing that Amiel is unable even to name:

I am indeed always the same; the being who wanders when he need not, the voluntary exile, the eternal traveller, the man incapable of repose, who, driven on by an inward voice, builds nowhere, buys and labours nowhere, but passes, looks, camps, and goes.

28 Amiel returns repeatedly to this problem. On 18 September 1864, for example, he observes: "Melancholy is at the bottom of everything, just as at the end of all rivers is the sea. Can it be otherwise in a world where nothing lasts, where all that we have loved or shall love must die? Is death, then, the secret of life? The gloom of an eternal mourning enwraps, more or less closely, every serious and thoughtful soul, as night enwraps the universe" (p. 129).

29 See Paul Gorceiz, "La Problématique de la mélancolie chez Henri-Frédéric Amiel" (Bruxelles: Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, 2007), <http://www.arlfb.be/ebibliotheque/communications/gorceix090906.pdf> (6 April 2017).

And is there not another reason for all this restlessness, in a certain sense of void? of incessant pursuit of something wanting? (p. 71)

In the passage we see a vibrant display of this disinheritance. The cognitive subject belongs nowhere, has no domesticated space where he would feel at home. His life is defined by the rhythm of transitory things, people and places. In effect, the sense of existence consists in loss and mourning for something the subject cannot even name. Amiel admits: "I feel myself then stripped and empty, like a convalescent who remembers nothing. [...] I feel myself returning into a more elementary form. I behold my own unclothing; I forget, still more than I am forgotten; I pass gently into the grave while still living" (pp. 90–91). Yet in the grave he longs for what he was unable to experience in life. "It seemed to me that I had failed in the task of life, and now life was failing me," he writes in a pensive moment where his heart is "gnawed at" (p. 191) by regret. Like Emma Bovary, Amiel never manages to find himself in the right place at the right time. He therefore constantly splits himself into the present self, who writes or remembers, and the lost self, the one that has vanished or that never took shape due to an imprudent choice or a reluctance toward active life.

We thus arrive at the third form of loss present in the *Intimate Journal*. This time what is at stake is the homogeneous self of the subject himself. In Amiel's case that self is revealed to be simply impossible. Its first split appears at those moments when Amiel observes reality and tries to understand other people or describe objects. His highly empathetic position perhaps allows him to grasp what he observes, but brings with it a threat to his identity as a subject. Stanisław Brzozowski notes: "This capacity to recreate others' thoughts and feelings within himself, which can become a source of many important historical or psychological phenomena, nonetheless represents, for the individual privileged by it, a great danger. It doubtless has a destructive influence on his own personality, on his own way of thinking and feeling."³⁰ The subject undergoes a second split when it reaches for the pen and becomes aware of the difference that exists between the writing self and the experiencing self. At last the flesh-and-blood self is opposed to the self that desires to live only in the sphere of absolute values. Those subsequent oppositions lead to the subject's disintegration; to the collapse of identity and possibly; and to the elimination of facile parallels with the Romantics. The Romantic melancholics with whom critics have usually compared Amiel had no such problems with subjectivity. While it is true that they were at the mercy of history and hostile nature, and lived in conflict with society, they did not think

30 Stanisław Brzozowski, "Fryderyk Henryk Amiel," p. 136.

about any kind of disintegration of the subject. The subject as Amiel understands it, on the other hand, collapses before our eyes, and that is connected with the modernist dominant in his work. In this sense, Amiel is not so much the heir to Romantic melancholy as he is rather, as Gorceix asserts,³¹ a precursor of modernist melancholy, particularly in its Viennese incarnation: Hugo von Hoffmannsthal made a devoted a perspicacious study of the *Intimate Journal*, while Amiel refers in his notes to the Baron Ernst von Feuchtersleben, the first teacher of psychiatry at the University of Vienna, and his *Zur Diätetik der Seele*.

Amiel's solution, however, seems much more radical than what doctors, writers and philosophers had been discussing in Vienna throughout the nineteenth century. For what Amiel is talking about represents not merely the disintegration of the subject, but its depersonalization: "I am afraid of the subjective life, and recoil from every enterprise, demand, or promise which may oblige me to realize myself; I feel a terror of action, and am only at ease in the impersonal, disinterested, and objective life of thought" (p. 62); "I have lived the impersonal life – in the world, yet not in it thinking much, desiring nothing" (p. 342). This "train to namelessness,"³² as Stanisław Brzozowski calls it, is the proof of final loss and a void that nothing can fill. Amiel ceases to write about himself as a particular person and loses himself in order to devote his reflection to humankind in general, as Renaud puts it.³³ This last loss is utterly irreparable. There is no world because it was only a fiction of the mind; there is no work because it breaks down unceasingly into textual fragments; and in the end, there is no subject because it is lost both in a philosophical and in a psychological sense. The melancholic experience of loss and void is, for Amiel, paralyzing. It encompasses everything and takes away the will to fight. It is unclear, after all, in the name of what or whom one might struggle. The price of endlessly looking into the abyss of the self is revealed to be ruinous because the subject has become lost in the chasm:

What is our life in the infinite abyss? [...] I can scarcely breathe. It seems to me that I am hanging by a thread above the fathomless abyss of destiny. Is this the Infinite face to face, an intuition of the last great death? [...] When depths of ineffable desire are opening in the heart, as vast, as yawning as the immensity which surrounds us? (p. 223)

The void of the world, the work and the subject thus incessantly devours everything that appears on its surface. It is a nameless void that dominates both the external world and the depths of the subject, who becomes a hypostasis of

31 See Gorceix, "La Problématique de la mélancolie."

32 Stanisław Brzozowski, "Fryderyk Henryk Amiel," p. 138.

33 See Renaud, "Un Écrivain..."

himself. As Amiel puts it, “Life is but the dream of a shadow” (p. 146). Elsewhere, he compares himself to a balloon which, exactly like a soap bubble, is “the plaything of all gusts, surrounded by the void of the atmosphere and even more void within itself.”³⁴ To leave this void is impossible, and the subject is condemned to incessantly mourn its own death because, in resigning from life and from society, it has not succeeded in creating another myth for itself that would impose order on its inner disarray and prevent trepidation.

34 Amiel, *Journal intime*, vol. III, mars 1856 – décembre 1860, pp. 787–788. On the metaphor of the “soap bubble” in Amiel, see Poulet, *Les Métamorphoses du cercle*, pp. 335–337.

6. Gazing Helplessly Through Life as It Recedes (Delacroix)

The essential thing in this world is to fight boredom and sadness.¹

We do not know what led to Delacroix's decision to write and record passing moments in his journal. In 1822, he made his artistic debut as a painter: his painting *Dante and Virgil* was displayed at the Salon that year. The critics were in fact lukewarm in their reception of the work and only Adolphe Thiers spoke up for the still unknown artist, in an article published in *Constitutionnel*. To the critics' surprise, however, the government bought the canvas and housed it in the museum of the Luxembourg Gardens. It was extremely rare for an artist just making his debut to be honored in this manner. The same story repeated itself two years later: at the 1824 Salon Delacroix presented *The Massacre at Chios*, and shortly thereafter was delighted to see the painting on one of the walls of the same gallery. Spectacular successes, combined with scathing criticism, assured Delacroix sufficient renown to ensure concrete commissions and allowed him to live a peaceful and relatively prosperous life.² In this context, it is difficult to ascertain the reason Delacroix began to write. Contrary to what Delacroix's biographer Philippe Julian has written, only with some unease can Delacroix's *Journal* be juxtaposed with Amiel's *Intimate Journal*³ or other undertakings deemed crucial to the development of nineteenth-century intimate letters, such as Benjamin Constant's *Intimate Journal* or the notebooks of Maine de Biran. Delacroix's journal features neither deeply personal confessions, nor the fascination of delving deep into one's own soul. In this sense, too, as Anne Larue notes, we might say that Delacroix is the anti-Amiel.⁴ As Larue herself admits, however, it is precisely the melancholia that figures so frequently in the journals, memoirs, and collected letters of the nineteenth century that ensures the unity and internal cohesion of

1 Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, 28 mars 1853. Kindle edition. Trans. T.D.W. I will use the entry dates for reference – T.D.W.

2 Maurice Rheims studies the history of the sales of Delacroix paintings in detail in "La Cote de Delacroix" in: *Delacroix* (Paris: Hachette, 1986), pp. 244–253.

3 See Philippe Jullian, *Delacroix*, trans. Zofia Cierniakówna (Warszawa: PIW, 1967), pp. 48, 51.

4 See Anne Larue, *Romantisme et mélancolie. Le «Journal» de Delacroix* (Paris: Champion, 1998), p. 126.

Delacroix's text. It is also melancholia that forces Delacroix to take up his pen and dip its nib in an ink-well filled with black bile.

For Delacroix the journal is a form of therapy. Firstly, it allows this nervous young man to cope with the death of his mother, who died in 1814. It was probably no coincidence that he began to write on the day when, just a few years earlier, he lost her: "The day before yesterday was the anniversary of the death of my beloved mother. That was the day I started my journal" (5 September 1822). Perhaps taking up the journal is indeed supposed to be a kind of therapy that allows him to forget about death in general because, while the death of his mother was probably the most painful event in young Delacroix's life, other experiences were also extremely hard for him to accept, such as his father's death in 1805, and his older brother Henri being killed at the Battle of Friedland in 1807. The unsteady and initially irregular entries in the journal are also intended to remedy something difficult to put into words, however: "I'm taking up this enterprise again after a long break. I think it's a good way of soothing the anxieties that have gnawed at me for a long time" (15 April 1823). In Delacroix's Journal the memory of real pain at the loss of near ones, identified by Freud several decades later as the work of mourning,⁵ is thus mixed with the memory of an inconsolable pain due to the loss of something Delacroix cannot even name, which Freud defined as melancholia.

It seems that Delacroix's disposition predestined him to feel such emotions to a heightened degree. Delacroix himself openly admits to experiencing states of anxiety: "The smallest thing can make me afraid and I always believe any inconvenience will last eternally" (20 April 1864); "What is this anxiety that is sometimes justified; sometimes not; and just appears out of nowhere?" (30 April 1853). Other such admissions are reminiscent of cyclothymia, the disease from which Jean-Jacques Rousseau also suffered: "What mental ups and downs I have! One moment or one idea disturbs everything and reverses the most advanced decisions..." (12 October 1822), "[...] I felt very tired and disheartened. I have a singular nature: these morning changes of place always cause me extreme mental fatigue, [but] then I only need a trifle to put me back in good spirits" (7 June 1855).⁶ There are many similar asides in the Journal, allowing us to see in Delacroix a "clinical case of melancholia."⁷ That is not, however, the aspect of the

5 See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."

6 Jullian notes (*Delacroix*, p. 13) that Delacroix had, as a child, been "subject to mood swings, shifting from daydreaming and reticence toward games and friends to sudden bursts of energy in which he was much more lively and mischievous than them."

7 Larue, *Romantisme et mélancolie*, p. 13.

Journal that is of primary interest here; what seems much more important for understanding the diary is to perceive those traces of melancholia that issue not so much from Delacroix's own psychic make-up as from his cultural predilections.

The first to address the latter was Charles Baudelaire. Here are his observations, from his essays on art: "To complete this analysis, it remains for me to stress a final quality of Delacroix, the most remarkable of all, the one that makes of him the true nineteenth-century painter; I refer to that strange and persistent melancholy which pervades all his work, and which his choice of subject, the expressions on his faces, the gestures and the colour key all alike reveal."⁸ Baudelaire therefore perceives the melancholia present not so much in the man as in his work, in the way Delacroix moves his brush, the way he applies colors, the way he sees his characters. Baudelaire connects melancholia with art and in this union wishes to see the modern and thus Romantic nature of Delacroix's painting. For Baudelaire, melancholia in the work of Delacroix results primarily from an incessant remembrance of the past, from a continual return to what has already passed, and finally, from a completely desperate attempt to remember everything because what is not captured in some form or other will undoubtedly perish. Delacroix himself expresses this thought in his journal:

It seems to me that I am the master of the days I have written down, though they have passed; but those that this paper leaves unmentioned are as if they had never been. In what darkness am I plunged? Must a miserable and fragile piece of paper be the only monument that remains to my existence, due to my human weakness? The future is entirely in darkness. The past which is utterly gone is too. I complained of having been obliged to resort to this; but why should I always be outraged at my own weakness? Am I capable of passing a day without food and drink? That is the body. But my mind and the history of my soul, all of that will be destroyed because I do not want to owe whatever I may keep of it to the obligation to write. (7 April 1824)

It is a strange admission. Delacroix, who has achieved fame as a painter, fears artistic fruitlessness, and seeks fame and salvation from oblivion not in painting, but in this very journal. For it is in the latter that the human self is preserved; its thoughts and impressions; only writing and the intimate journal, as Jean-Pierre Guillermin has noted,⁹ protect the self from others. They represent a hard shell that keeps closed within it something belonging only to the subject; something that lies beyond all bargaining. According to Delacroix, painting lacks that virtue. The

8 Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 74.

9 See Jean-Pierre Guillermin, *Couleurs du noir. Le «Journal» de Delacroix* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1990), p. 19.

image, in spite of bearing its creator's signature, is set free, condemned to meet the gaze of the Other and distorted by it. Painting is responsible for the dispersal of the self, for the loss of oneself. The journal, on the other hand, remains something intimate, allowing not only fleeting, stray moments to be preserved, as a canvas may also remind us of them, but above all ensuring the preservation of continuity, which is the basis for recognizing the self as an individual. The continuity of identity, i.e., the answer to the question of who the self is, and the continuity of existence, confirming the invariability of the self in time, are essential for Delacroix. What has not been written down, recorded, has gone forever, and nothing and no one can save it.

This explains the constant tension in the *Journal* between past and present, and the frequently recurring motif of memory.¹⁰ Delacroix is afraid of transitoriness and continual irremediable loss:

I often tell myself, thinking of the bitterness that always accompanies all pleasures: can one be truly happy in a situation which must end? This apprehension of rapidity and, finally, nothingness, spoils every joy. (7 June 1853)

Thus the subject loses what gives him satisfaction, and the moment in which he begins to realize that is, to all intents and purposes, the last moment of happiness. Delacroix knows very well that there are only two possible ways to master loss: either living life to the fullest in an Epicurean fashion, replacing each loss with a new pleasure, or in constant search of what has been lost, constant remembrance of loss. In the *Journal*, the latter approach predominates. This results in an incessant conflict between the idealized past and the present, which lives only in the rhythm of memories. The melancholic subject thus never really exists, since his present is only important to the extent that it enables constant duplication of the past or is reminiscent of that past: “[...] I believe I have now persuaded myself that I am only happy when remembering past happiness spent in similar circumstances” (30 August 1854). Delacroix perceives this bizarre status of the present, which ceases to mean anything as the present, with characteristic sagacity: “For a joy to be complete, it must be complemented by memory; but unfortunately, one cannot simultaneously enjoy oneself while remembering joy. It is the ideal added to the real. Memory reveals a delightful moment or makes illusion necessary” (12 October 1856). One is either living or remembering. Either one is given over

10 On this theme, see Hubert Damisch, “La Peinture en écharpe,” introduction to Delacroix, *Journal 1822–1863*, ed. André Joubin (Paris: Plon, 1980), pp. IX–XXXVI. Guillerme also considered this problem to be crucial to understanding the melancholy nature of the *Journal*: see Guillerme, *Couleurs du noir*, pp. 137–151.

to changing and unstable emotions or one is thinking about an ideal buried in the past. There is no other option. Delacroix, painter of *Dante and Virgil*, persistently chooses the latter, thereby locating the ideal in bygone times and pondering its loss with anguish. The anguish becomes more severe in proportion to the weakness of the memory of the person remembering. Delacroix repeatedly accuses himself of being defective in his memory (“you don’t have the memory of a simple merchant,” 1 June 1824), though finally his Journal is, as Baudelaire observed, a continual return to what has passed in order to overcome the vanity of existence in the present. Delacroix fears this void more than anything:

The result of my days is always the same: an infinite desire for what can never be obtained, an emptiness that cannot be filled, an extreme itch to produce all manner of things, to struggle as much as possible against time that carries us along and the distractions that throw a veil over our soul; almost always, a sort of philosophical calm as well, that prepares for suffering and lifts above trifles. But it’s imagination that may be playing a trick on us here too – at the slightest accident, it’s almost always farewell to philosophy!
(26 April 1824)

According to Delacroix, the human being is thus given over to contradictory desires. We idealize both what the past has engulfed and what has not yet arrived. Yet the moment in which we experience this eminently strange feeling is drained of all meaning; it is a moment without qualities. The void of the moment of memories or dreams is, in the final analysis, the answer to the loss of what is remembered or dreamed about. Delacroix thus raises to an exponential power the mechanism, familiar from Freud’s work, of the melancholic chafing of wounds. Delacroix is not only unable to name memories or dreams, but, while experiencing them, he is also unable to grasp the present, which, according to logic, he will very soon be mourning. The void is thus all-encompassing and it is that void that is responsible for the feeling of boredom that for Delacroix represents true damnation.

Delacroix’s boredom, however, may also take on a different hue. Often his remarks on the subject are merely ornamentation, the word “ennui” appearing in chains of synonyms with words signifying sadness, melancholy, unhappiness, and suffering. No less often, though, “ennui” represents its own specific state of body and mind. Firstly, it may result from gastric trouble: “I think the pastries I ate yesterday at dinner to cheer me up in my solitude contributed to making me feel the most awful and unabating moroseness this morning. Feeling ill-disposed toward anything whatever, I was in the forest at 9:00 and went straight to the Prior oak. Though the morning was magnificent, nothing could distract me from my black mood” (9 May 1850); “[...] it is not enough to be free of true subjects

of sadness; the state of one's health can suffice to change everything... The infamous digestion is the great arbiter of our emotions" (31 May 1853); "Seized by ennui after dinner" (27 August 1854). To these digestive troubles we must add his sensitivity to meteorological changes; to even the slightest barometric oscillations: "I roamed about the beach uselessly, through the rather unhealthy foggy weather, and in a demi-ennui that is even more unhealthy for me" (29 August 1854); "I suffer horribly from the heat and from this ennui" (26 July 1855). Only superficially do all of these remarks appear amusing or exaggerated. If we remind ourselves of the admonitions that Hippocrates and Aristotle made to melancholics, we will understand that ennui is not merely a state of mind that achieved great fame in the nineteenth century through the texts of Baudelaire, but also includes the physical maladies that Flaubert mentions in his letters to Maxime du Camp and Louise Colet and in his celebrated *Voyage en Égypte* in the entry dated 14–16 April 1850.¹¹ Delacroix, likewise, suffers from indigestion and is tormented by heartburn, irritated by the sun, and nauseated by fog.

That is not the end of it, however, since Delacroix also experiences an ennui that is metaphysical; that torments not his body but his soul: "All day out of sorts and an insipid melancholy: it would be quite helpful to go to bed early now when the evenings are dull. It would be so nice to get to the studio when it is still daylight!" (27 April 1824) "Profound sadness and discouragement all evening" (15 May 1824); "But there are also moments of sadness and ennui, which are well made for experiencing in the extreme; this morning I experienced it in my studio. [...] whenever there ceases to be inspiration, I feel ennui" (13 June 1824). The earlier part of the Journal in particular, covering the years from 1822 to 1824, abounds in such statements. Delacroix was racking up his first successes as a painter in those years, and yet in the journal he gripes and laments, bemoaning his lack of inspiration and his creative impotence. From what we read, nothing appears to be happening in his life at that time to bring about such anguish. We know that he suffered greatly due to the death of his mother and lost both his father and brother, but there is not a word about these tragedies in his notebooks. He is afflicted, on the other hand, by an unspeakable ennui, and even "extreme melancholy" (21 April 1824). The sources of this feeling should, however, be looked for not so much in Delacroix's own psyche, as in the nineteenth-century fashion for weariness, for spleen and melancholia. One scholar to have drawn

11 On this topic, see Pierre-Marc Biasi, "Baudelaire/Flaubert. La chute d'Adam et celle du baromètre," *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 400 (2001), pp. 34–37. On possible connections between "state of mind" and the level of the barometer, see Pierre Pachet, *Les Baromètres de l'âme: naissance du journal intime* (Paris: Hachette, 2001).

attention to the importance of ennui for Romanticism was Pierre Glaudes,¹² who notes that ennui in the nineteenth century was not a matter of momentary despondency or faint disappointment. For the Romantics, confessing to world-weariness amounted to posing the question of the strangeness or emptiness of existence; of what represents the very core of Delacroix's musings. In Glaudes's view, the world-weary Romantic had the impression, exactly like Senancour's Obermann, that his time was void, stripped of ideals, and that he himself was delivered into the hands of the *mal du siècle* that Sainte-Beuve wrote about in his foreword to *Obermann* of 1833.¹³ The reasons for this widespread disappointment were both political, due to the collapse of the ideals of the 1789 revolution and the fall of Napoleonic France, and philosophical, due to the undermining of the shibboleths praised by the heralds of reason and enlightenment. There thus arose a void, which the then-nascent Romanticism did not fill with anything. Hence the pain felt by René; hence the grouching of Octave in Musset's *Confession of a Child of the Century*, hence, finally, the "despondency, more apathetic than painful," with which Benjamin Constant's *Intimate Journal* begins.¹⁴ It seems that Delacroix belongs among these characters, some fictional and some real, from the first half of the nineteenth century, characters who did not know what to do with themselves and were unable to master existence.

Delacroix is overwhelmed by his sense of an excess of time, impossible to fill, and the absence of an idea around which his life experience might be organized. Delacroix therefore begins keeping a diary, and herein lies the answer to the riddle posed above, serving as a kind of mirror in which he might recognize himself and understand his calling. Writing offers him the only chance of gazing at himself from a distance without erasing his own subjectivity. It is a screen that divides the man, despairing and plunged in ennui, from the artist, whose purpose is work. Delacroix thus resolves to overcome his own impotence; to make it the touchstone of his genius. This mad gesture should come as no surprise because Delacroix thereby inscribes himself in the ancient tradition, associated with Aristotle, of melancholy understood not merely as a state of apathy and discouragement, but also as a disease of those gifted with genius. As Larue writes,

12 See Pierre Glaudes, "Romantisme: le mal du siècle," *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 400 (2001), pp. 30–33.

13 It is perhaps worth reminding the reader here that *Obermann* was one of Delacroix's favorite books, a fact noted by Juliusz Starzyński in his book *O romantycznej syntezie sztuk. Delacroix, Chopin, Baudelaire* (Warszawa: PIW, 1965), p. 22.

14 Benjamin Constant, *Dzienniki poufne*, trans. Joanna Guze (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1980), p. 11.

“in contrast to oppressive and destructive ennui, the genius of melancholia [...] allows one to subdue the evil stream of bile, to turn it into a paradoxical source of creativity.”¹⁵ It is precisely the “genius of melancholia” that makes the second part of Delacroix’s *Journal*, covering the period from 1854 to 1863, despite what certain critics have written,¹⁶ a logical consequence of the first part, if only we bear in mind the aesthetic of melancholy that reigns in both, and the Aristotelian theory of genius.

We learn fairly early on from Delacroix’s journal of his obsession with work, something closely connected with the theory of genius, the bizarre imperative that dictates he sacrifice everything and devote himself exclusively to his painting: “Produce, produce!” (27 March 1824); “Must keep firmly at work” (8 April 1824); “Worked frenetically all day, until three and beyond” (11 October 1854). There are two reasons for this frenetic drive. Firstly, unceasing work allows Delacroix to avoid ennui; to tear himself from the grasp of spleen: “This beautiful leisure time would end up bringing back the terrible ennui and, with it, the desire to renew myself by going to get the brush and canvas about which I often think. I wish I had them here” (10 October 1855); “I have a great desire to work. This movement, this variety of situation and emotion imbues all feelings with more vivacity: in varying one’s existence, one becomes more resistant to the fatal numbness of ennui” (14 October 1855). We might go so far as to risk the assertion that Delacroix only paints because he was first afflicted by ennui. Work is both a form of therapy and a reaction to ennui. According to Aristotle’s theory of melancholia, fatigue and states of apathy are directly related to periods of creative excitement. Melancholia is not a fault, a vice or a curse; on the contrary, it constitutes a basic condition of all creativity. For that reason, the descriptions of moments devoted to work sit next to accounts of bouts of weariness and despair. The other reason for his feverish involvement in the search for activity is his belief that doing so represents the only way to fill the void of the present. In the *Journal*, the present is an interval of wasted time, because it is filled entirely by mourning past loss or dreaming of events that have not yet occurred. In order to avoid the remembrances or daydreams that snatch a man away from his present, Delacroix tries to fill it with work, something which forces him to focus on the moment at hand: “Working is not only for

15 Larue, *Romantisme et mélancolie*, p. 228.

16 I find it hard to agree with the thesis advanced by Jean Cau (“Un Génie consacré plus à peindre qu’à vivre,” in: *Delacroix*, p. 17), who claims that the second part of the journal shows us Delacroix as a “rationalist,” “a pure product, intellectually, of the eighteenth century and its critical and analytical predilections.”

producing art, it is also to give time a price; one is more satisfied with oneself and one's day after having put some ideas forward, begun something well or finished something" (19 August 1858). Delacroix thus changes the optics of the gaze from internal, i.e., focused on himself and the void and the ennui of the current moment, to external, i.e., encompassing the work being composed, relating to its composition and the process of retrieving a lost ideal. The mingling of these two perspectives, the existential and the creative, is clearly evident in the following passage:

One must ward off as best one can the phantoms of this devil of a life we've been given, I don't know why, and which becomes bitter so easily, when one does not present a steel front against ennui and various forms of ennui. One must, in short, shake this body and this mind, which gnaw at each other in stagnation, in an indolence which is nothing more than torpor. It is absolutely necessary to move from rest to work and vice versa; they then appear equally agreeable and salutary. The poor man overwhelmed by rigorous work and who works without any break is no doubt horribly unhappy, but he who is obliged always to enjoy himself finds neither happiness nor tranquillity in his distractions; he feels he is fighting this ennui that grabs him by the hair; the phantom is always right there beside the distraction and shows itself looking over his shoulder. Do not believe, my dear friend, that because I choose my hours of work, I am exempt from the attacks of this terrible enemy; it is my conviction that with a certain frame of mind, one would need an inconceivable amount of energy not to feel ennui, and to know how to extract oneself, by force of will, from this languor into which we fall at every instant. The pleasure that I find in this very moment in elaborating on this subject with you is a proof that I avidly seize, when I have the strength, upon opportunities to mentally occupy myself, even by speaking of this ennui which I seek to ward off. (25 August 1854)

Let us note that this state of ennui and apathy involves both mind and body; all of human existence bears its stamp. There is no way to opt out of it; the only solution is to tame it by screening it off with other activities, either rest or work. Those other activities are merely outgrowths, however, of the deep ennui that consumes the human being from the inside, corroding his viscera and thoughts (elsewhere Delacroix notes: "Suffering all day: in poor disposition of body and mind" [7 November 1854]). Though ennui forces the raising of the most fundamental questions about the nature of the world and the human being, though it is a mirror in which every person should examine himself, it is nevertheless impossible to devote oneself entirely to pondering the problem; it is too easy, in doing so, to slide into madness or self-destruction. To find a way out of these existential vacillations, Delacroix proposes blocking out states of ennui with rest

or work, which to a certain degree is reminiscent of Pascal's view.¹⁷ Like the author of the *Pensées*, Delacroix believes ennui to be the core of existence. He believes notwithstanding that surrendering completely to ennui can have harmful consequences. A man should therefore rest and work without overindulging in either. Despite the paucity of direct references to the theme of rest in Delacroix's Journal, we are able to surmise that he enjoyed having leisure time and eating well, and his meetings with the models who posed for his pictures sometimes included physical contact that went beyond shaking hands. Yet he was, above all, absorbed in his work, a fact he mentions in the recorded conversation published as *Mémoires d'un bourgeois de Paris* by Louis Véron.¹⁸ Delacroix did not abstain from the pleasures attendant upon salon life, but nor did he allow them to interfere with his work on new paintings.

Steady work habits in fact keep Delacroix away from the demon of ennui, but do not tear him from the clutches of melancholia. He observes the change taking place in him: "I'm surrounded by my little notebooks from previous years: the closer they come to the present moment, the more I see this eternal complaint against the ennui and the void I felt in the past becoming a rarity" (15 November 1853). He remains firm in his conviction, however, that melancholia is a unique condition. In contrast to ennui, it contains something worthy, something that has a direct connection to personal genius and the genius of art. Delacroix was particularly sensitive to this aspect of melancholia; he perceived it, for example, in the life and work of Michelangelo, whom he regarded, together with Peter Paul Rubens, as his masters. It is not difficult to find passages in the Journal that present Michelangelo as a painter "tormented by melancholia" (19 January 1860). This same image of Michelangelo appears in an article published by Delacroix in two parts in the *Revue de Paris* in 1830. In this text it is arresting what enormous importance Delacroix attributes to his hero's crises and states of apathy. He notes, not without a certain satisfaction: "Having already achieved an imposing reputation and being at the height of his powers, [Michelangelo's] genius suddenly pauses. [...] Here it is only possible to perceive a malady of the

17 On the topic of ennui in Pascal's oeuvre, see Laurent Thirouin, "Pascal: une misère et une aubain," *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 400 (2001), pp. 24–26.

18 See Louis Véron, *Mémoires d'un bourgeois de Paris* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1856), p. 274. Delacroix's assessment of the book was harsh; among his remarks in the Journal we find the following: "in short, these are not [Véron's] memoirs, not his true and sincere judgments on the men of his time. Add to that the absence of any composition and the banality of the style [...]" (25 October 1853).

soul, a particular crisis of his talent.”¹⁹ This surprising episode in Michelangelo’s life is explained by his admirer as relating to his tendency toward melancholia and hypersensitivity, and, finally, by a theory that recalls Aristotle’s *Problemata* XXX: “In the most formidable minds we find the greatest laziness.”²⁰ Michelangelo thus appears to divide his life between frenetic work, causing him to forget himself and the world in which he is forced to live, and moments of total stupefaction, sorrow, or loss of vitality. At the same time, Delacroix is convinced that Michelangelo’s genius could not have existed without those moments of collapse and hopelessness.

We see Michelangelo in precisely such a moment of melancholy reverie in the painting *Michelangelo in his Studio* (1849–1852). In this canvas, Michelangelo sits in his studio, resting his head on his right hand, while his gaze wanders somewhere far away. He has turned away from his sculptures and near his feet there is an abandoned chisel, with which he was no doubt moments ago attempting to bestow upon statues the shapes of human perfection. The outlines of those statues, their materials assuming human forms, are evidence of the Michelangelo’s greatness, though he is now plunged into pensiveness and silence. It was very quickly observed that in this tribute to his master, Delacroix was in fact painting himself in the clutches of melancholia and fame. Théophile Silvestre in *Les Artistes français* stressed this idea: “In this Michelangelo at rest you can also recognize the weary Delacroix, downcast and sorrowful [...]”²¹ It is perhaps also worth noting that in many portraits Delacroix is presented in a pose that seems an exact replica of the pose in which he depicts Michelangelo, as in, for example, the *Self Portrait as a Young Man*, which is believed to have been painted by Delacroix in 1823, the *Self Portrait as Ravenswood* (1821), and the *Self Portrait in a Green Vest* (1837), but also in the portraits by Théodore Géricault (*Eugène Delacroix*, 1818–1819) and Frédéric Villot (*Delacroix, from His 1818 Self Portrait*, painted in 1847). In all of these canvases Delacroix is presented facing the viewer, a man lost in contemplation. Part of his face is illuminated, signalling his creative power, his pursuit of glory and focus on the work, which represents an attempt to attain his ideal. The other half of his face, however, is hidden in darkness, the eye seemingly slightly deformed, and the gaze fearful. Here we see the elements of

19 Delacroix, *Michel-Ange* (Paris: Éditions Novette, 1995), p. 18.

20 Delacroix, *Michel-Ange*, p. 19.

21 Théophile Silvestre, *Les Artistes français* (Paris: Éditions G. Crès, 1926), vol. II, p. 161; Quoted in Starzyński, *O romantycznej syntezie sztuk*, p. 128. See also Larue, *Romantisme et mélancolie*, pp. 158–161.

ennui and introspection devouring the painter from within, elements he is both unable and unwilling to resist.²²

The same attitude to genius and melancholy, and their interweaving, is also evident in two paintings that depict Tasso in prison: the first from 1824; the second from 1839. While working on these canvases, Delacroix was still under the powerful influence of the new French translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and the poem dedicated to Tasso by Lord Byron. Like Michelangelo, Tasso in these portraits is pensive and somehow absent. Confined in a hospital for the insane, he is also condemned to solitude. The poet is thus shown to be doubly disinherited: firstly, the society in which he lived has rejected him; secondly, he finds himself among lunatics who jeer at him. This feature is particularly prominent in the 1824 version.²³ This version of the painting, or a lithograph based on it, inspired Baudelaire to write his sonnet "On Eugène Delacroix's *Tasso in Prison*,"²⁴ in which the poet is presented as a lonely artist, forsaken by all, looking into the abyss of his own soul. In both Delacroix and Baudelaire there

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- 22 Peter Rautmann (*Delacroix*, French translation from the German by Denis-Armand Canal and Lydie Échasseriaud [Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 1997], p. 28) stresses, in this context, that "a permanent feature can be perceived in portraits of Delacroix, regardless of the date of creation, technique, or artist. The facial expression remains essentially the same marked especially by the tightly shut mouth, turned down at the corners, and the seriousness of the gaze. This is the very type of the melancholy artist." A similar artistic manner appears in the portraits of other people by Delacroix, such as Chopin (1838) or George Sand (1838).
- 23 These same aspects of Tasso, seen as a melancholy genius, are underscored by Madame de Staël in *Corinne* (p. 102): "long grief had almost quenched / Reason's clear light, but genius still was left. / Yet kept he knowledge of the things divine, / When earthly images were all obscured. / Thus shrieking from the desert spread around, / Doth Genius wander through the world, and finds / No likeness to itself; no echo given / By Nature; and the common crowd but hold / As madness that desire of the rapt soul. / Which finds not in this world enough of air - / Of high enthusiasm, or of hope." Similar observations appear in *On Germany*, where de Staël comments on the image of Tasso presented by Goethe (*On Germany*, pp. 115–116): "Tasso, too, is a German poet. The inability, attributed to Tasso by Goethe, to cope with all the ordinary circumstances of communal life, is a feature of the meditative and retiring life of Northern authors. Poets of the South do not usually have such an inability; they are more used to living out of doors, in public areas; things, and especially people, are more familiar to them." As a poet of the North, Tasso is clearly a nearly perfect exemplar of the melancholic.
- 24 On this subject, see Armand Moss, *Baudelaire et Delacroix* (Paris: Nizet, 1973), pp. 41–47 and 223–227. The importance of the connection between Baudelaire's poetry and Delacroix's painting has also been underscored by Claude Roy, who writes of the

is a dominant belief in the ceaseless conflict between art and life, between the artist and the bourgeois. The bourgeois seeks only pleasure and cheap amusement, is intoxicated by the hubbub, while the artist shuns the crowd and tries to understand himself, but, since that impossible, he succumbs to dejection. Sadness is the only necessary complement to greatness that Delacroix mentions in his *Journal*:

How do you suppose life has been for those men who rose above the crowd? A continuous battle. A struggle with the laziness they share with the vulgar man, when there is a need to write, if the man is a writer; because his genius demands to be manifested, it is not due solely to the vain pride of becoming famous that he obeys, it is by conscience. Let those who work in cold blood keep quiet... But do they know what it means to work under the dictates of inspiration? What fears! What terrors of awakening this sleeping lion, whose rumblings shake your very being!... But to repeat, one must be firm, simple and true. (6 June 1824)

Thus there recurs in Delacroix's writing this thoroughly Romantic belief in the role of inspiration in the creative process and the ideal that art ought to incarnate. Genius, in Delacroix's view, is something that surpasses the human dimension, the babble and bustle of everyday life. It is genius that allows the poet, painter or sculptor to grapple with the ideal which he might, amid the influx of apathy and lassitude, only have had a memory or dream of. After hours spent in reminiscing, in looking into the distance, as Michelangelo was doing in the above-mentioned painting, and in total resignation as a result of overpowering ennui, Delacroix somehow returns to himself, recognizing what constitutes his distinct status. The point toward which Delacroix gradually tends is the recognition that his one calling is painting.²⁵ In this sense his melancholia has much in common with the condition of the narrator in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, whose aim is to

phenomenon he calls "Baudelacroix" ("Delacroix écrivain," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 9 mai [1963], p. 4).

- 25 This comes across movingly in a passage by the artist when he was already advanced in years: "Painting harries and torments me in a million ways, it is true, like the most demanding mistress; for four months, I steal out early in the morning and come running to my enchanting work as if to the feet of the most beloved mistress; what from a distance seemed easy to overcome presents me with horrible and incessant difficulties; but why is it that this eternal struggle, instead of knocking me down, lifts me up; instead of discouraging me, it consoles me and fills up my moments after I have left it? Happy compensation for what these beautiful years have brought with them; a noble use of the moments of old age that are besieging me from every side, but which still leave me the strength to overcome the pains of the body and the cares of the soul!" (1 January 1861).

discover the artist in himself. The task of that narrator's memory is not the banal recollection of past events, but rather the perception in them of what was to lead to the awakening of the writer in him. Delacroix behaves similarly in his *Journal*, where he writes in order to understand that he must devote himself utterly to painting; and so we find another answer to the enigma posed at the beginning of this chapter. We thus, on the surface at least, come to the end: it is through expressing his ennui, allowing it to take over his body and soul, that Delacroix overcomes it, takes up his brush, and works to achieve renown as a painter. If that were the way the *Journal* ended, we would have before us one of the most touching intellectual stories; one inscribed in the Aristotelian tradition of understanding melancholia. Delacroix does not, however, cease at that point, so neither may we pause there. The real problem only appears after the invigorating summons to work. That is also when melancholia makes itself heard, as the sign not so much of genius as of complete paralysis.

In writing about the imperative of creation, Delacroix expresses only a wish he cannot realize. In his younger years, he had already noted: "Dufresne says he would be capable of devoting himself to any great cause, but he sees only emptiness and nothingness. I feel the opposite way" (28 May 1824). The disillusioned and hopeless character of his generation seems to him rather exaggerated. He himself does not, by all accounts, experience the disquiet of inner emptiness and disappointment. Quite the reverse, one idea after another appears in his head, and orders for paintings, from both collectors and the French government, continue to multiply. There is thus no reason to grumble at the coarseness of reality or complain about attacks of spleen that may result from a lowering of the mercury in the barometer or an indigestible supper eaten too late at night. Delacroix has an idea. But the idea's worth becomes questionable if he finds himself incapable of living up to it. Here in fact begins his real drama: he has understood his vocation, but is unable to follow it; hence the incessantly repeated admissions of helplessness and subsequent despair in the *Journal*: "My resolutions always disappear in the face of action. [...] And then when there is a chance, I am almost angry, I would prefer not to have to act; that is my cancer" (13 June 1824); "Finally got back to painting after over four and a half months" (18 May 1857). Thus the collision with an ideal that does not correspond to reality often manifests as an inability to act and a total paralysis of vital forces. Delacroix's discouragement seems to result from the incongruity between the two spheres: the ideal from which inspiration flows, and even the need to work, and real life, where the artist is besieged by dark thoughts, oppressed by ennui and dejection. Real life is a series of disappointments, and he is unable to withstand it. He does, it is true, try to possess the ideal; to capture it and transfer it to his canvas, but, in his

own conviction, each successive painting is but a pale reflection of the idea that fostered it, but finally eluded its grasp.

As an artist Delacroix is thus plunged into mourning, longing for something that has been vaguely adumbrated in his head, but which he no longer has the strength to express. It is not, however, mourning for the idea which has slipped away and will no longer return. This mourning is rather an unconquerable sense of the loss of oneself and a concomitant conviction that art is nothing but a pale substitute for what it is supposed to express. Delacroix understood, as we have seen, that his vocation was to be an artist, a painter. He grasped, however, that he was incapable of measuring up to that vocation. This paradoxical lamentation of the loss of oneself is not where the story ends, however. After all, Delacroix continues to work; to carry out new commissions; to prepare new paintings and frescoes. There is no rift or inconsistency here between what is written and what is lived. Delacroix creates, but remains dissatisfied with his work, under the impression that it does not fulfill all the hopes he invested in it. The moments of creative collapse, moreover, are a kind of reprise of what he knows of the lives of Michelangelo and Tasso. Let us remember that the former, in Delacroix's painting, abandoned the chisel, a work tool that temporarily seemed deficient, infirm, inadequate. The latter, in the canvas from 1839, is looking somewhere in the distance, while the lunatics separated from him by the bars of his cell reach in vain for the scattered pages of his manuscript. Michelangelo and Tasso gave up and rejected that which constituted their power, thereby repeating the gesture of the hopelessness of the figure in Albrecht Dürer's drawing "Melancholia." One may draw; one may write; but these activities are, at a certain point, bereft of sense, the paintings seem to declare.

Delacroix also seems to have been asking himself where the sense was in these activities. As a painter, he was earning both renown and money, though he remained fairly scrupulous in his bookkeeping to the end of his life not so much from parsimony as from his fear of losing his independence, but as a writer his doubts were multiplying. The journal was perhaps intended as an attempt to save himself, an attempt at salvation from his own weakness, breakdowns, a fear identical to the metaphysical irresolution of all Romantic heroes. To deal with that, Delacroix resolved, as did Flaubert and Mallarmé, to take refuge in language; in its presumed precision and directness, for which reason he found it easy to set writing apart from painting and music. Whereas literature speaks to the reader directly, painting and music, according to Delacroix, work rather by means of what is left unsaid; what is imprecise, as Delacroix at times put it, perhaps overly reliant on the nominalized adjective *le vague* (the vague), and fleeting. His journal

is thus intended as a refuge from what eludes knowledge and representation. He therefore returns frequently to the problem of style: "Nothing more should be said than what there is to say: this is the quality that needs to be bound to elegance" (5 October 1856). Delacroix seeks ideal proportions, transparency, and eloquence. He quickly comes to the conclusion, however, that writing only superficially allows the whole of human experience to be grasped in a logical and natural way. Literature turns out to be a difficult art form:

If it entailed only connecting thoughts to other thoughts, I would find myself more quickly armed and in agreeable territory; but to observe the sequence, to respect the plan, and not to get lost in the middle of phrases, this is what poses the greatest difficulty and hinders the flow of thought. You see your painting in one glance; in your manuscript, you don't even see the whole page, that is to say, you cannot grasp it all at once in your mind; it takes a singular strength to be able to keep in mind at once the whole of the work and take it forward with the necessary effusiveness or sobriety through developments which can only arrive successively. (21 July 1850)

Delacroix clearly finds the classical principles of compositional rhetoric unsuitable. It is not enough to have something to say; one must also know how to put it in words. Delacroix's problem seems identical to the irresolution of Edgar Degas, who found himself unable to write a sonnet, despite the ideas buzzing in his head. Degas confided his troubles, which apparently caused him to experience states of dejection and despair, to Mallarmé, who replied that for writing poems, what is needed are words, not ideas. The same doubts tormented Delacroix. What seemed natural to him reveals itself to be artificial and concocted. Additional difficulties issue from the fact that in composing a text, a writer must think simultaneously about the complete work and the part on which he is working at any given time. It is never possible to encompass the whole in a single gaze. The writer and his reader are doomed to a linear logic of utterance which is a reflection of the iron rules of rhetoric, but in the painter's view it has little to do with what is going on in his head. Writing is not a pure reflection of emotion and thought; its order does not issue from inspiration, bouts of creativity, or epiphanies.

For that reason, Delacroix begins looking for a new order and desires to break free from the grip of classical rhetoric, to abandon the system still highly esteemed in the eighteenth century and based on three pillars: invention, disposition, and elocution. It was disposition that most troubled Delacroix. For these reasons, the part of the journal written in Delacroix's maturity becomes a draft for a dictionary of the fine arts, which is to allow free expression of that which the artist has already thought through. The dictionary is also, as we shall soon see, a proposal for a new theory of writing, which will no longer limit the painter's

creative aspirations in any way, allowing him to freely connect themes, shift from one entry to another without need to explain the connections between them and, finally, ensure that the entirety of the artistic experience is covered.²⁶ By the same token, Delacroix, the painter-melancholic, by dint of his choice of themes and attitude towards ideas and his craft, blooms as a writer-melancholic hoarding definitions, coasting from one problem to another without fear of expressing some absurdity:

A dictionary is not a book; it is an instrument, a tool for making books or all kinds of other things. The material, in the articles thus divided, expands or shrinks according to the author's disposition, sometimes according to his laziness. It thus suppresses transitions, necessary connections between the parts, the order in which they should be arranged. (13 January 1857)

A book has a thousand advantages no doubt [...] but there must be a plan, transitions; the author of a book imposes on himself the task of not leaving out anything that pertains to his subject. The dictionary, on the contrary, suppresses much... If it does not have the seriousness of a book, it also does not offer the fatigue; it does not oblige the breathless reader to follow its course and its developments; though the dictionary is ordinarily a work of what are properly called compilers, it does not exclude the originality of ideas and *aperçus*. He would be lacking in inspiration, for example, who found in Bayle's dictionary nothing but compilations. It soothes the mind, which finds it tedious to enter into long disquisitions, to follow with appropriate attention or to classify and divide subjects. One takes it and one leaves it; one opens at random, and it is not impossible to find, in reading a few fragments, an occasion for long and fruitful meditation. (18 January 1860)

Both the above quotations are rich in observations. Above all, Delacroix is becoming aware of the fact that the dictionary frees him from the duty to reflect on composition. If he wanted to write a book, he would have to respect the rules of classical rhetoric, develop what he was saying based on points worked out in advance, in addition ensuring clear and logical transitions between them. Such linear logic of discourse neither seems attractive to him nor exerts any hold over him. Delacroix is searching for a kind of freedom that would allow him to write and also make allowances for the laziness that enters the writer's room through the side door. That laziness is his ennui, creative paralysis, already familiar to

26 On this subject, see Larue, *Romantisme et mélancolie*, pp. 131–144. See also Larue's "Introduction" to Delacroix's *Dictionnaire des beaux-arts* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs des Sciences et des Arts, 1995), particularly pages XII–XXI, where she conducts an analysis of Delacroix's questioning of classical rhetoric and, paradoxically connected with that, the painter's attachment to the Enlightenment spirit of the *Encyclopédie*.

us from Delacroix's reports from work on his paintings and the essay on Michelangelo. It is also, however, the laziness of composition. The dictionary is a collection, more or less unrestricted, never fully complete, possessing the character of a herbarium, as in Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. It may always be supplemented by adding something, annotating, losing oneself amid the many quotations; the element of compilation thus creeps in. He does not assess it as a bad quality. In fact, the aesthetic of melancholia finds nothing undesirable in compilation. Robert Burton created his work from quotations, and Marek Bieńczyk is not the first to go so far as using a quotation for the title of his book. Delacroix thus inscribes himself in a century-old series of borrowing, quoting, collecting, and deforming authors. This authorial freedom, however, is complemented by the freedom that Delacroix demands for the reader. He may also proceed with the text in a manner that depends primarily on his own needs and desires; not on the idea or conception that with the book in hand needs to be faithfully reconstructed. The dictionary putatively has an author, but in truth its author is the reader. He, too, surrenders to chance, wandering from definition to definition, reading or, when he feels lazy, putting the book back on the shelf. It seems that work on the dictionary, whose life began on the pages of the *Journal*, is further evidence of the extent to which the aesthetic of melancholia was present in Delacroix's thought. The project of compiling a dictionary is another of the clever Frenchman's examples of a work within a work. The journal is a mirror into which Delacroix the painter gazes, but also the birthplace of a new text, whose author was supposed to be Delacroix the academic. It is in fact a rather amusing episode in his life, during which he began pondering the idea of the dictionary, which notwithstanding did not fulfill academic requirements, at the moment when he was accepted into the ranks of the immortals, i.e., members of the Académie Française.

Neither painting, the *Journals*, nor the planned dictionary, however, could protect the artist from the calamitous sense of ennui and the desire for genius that mingled with it. Shortly before dying, this man of "a nervous disposition," as Théophile Gautier described him,²⁷ managed to note down the following dispiriting reflection:

What will we find in the beyond? Night, terrible night. Nothing better awaits us; that at least is my sad premonition: these sad limbs in which Achilles, who was nothing more than a shade, walked about regretting, not that he was no longer a hero, but even the

27 Théophile Gautier, *Histoire du romantisme* (Paris: Charpentier, 1874), p. 211.

slave of a peasant, to endure cold and heat under the sun which, thanks to heaven, we can still enjoy (when he does not cry). (26 November 1860)

It turns out that at the last moment, Delacroix is inclined to give up the genius and fame in order to re-discover the real world and the present moment that he had never really possessed. In this he differs from Achilles, for the Greek warrior remembered both his glory and his everyday life. Delacroix remembers only the constant battle with ennui in the name of some idea that always eludes him. These journals do not contain much everyday life. Stricken by melancholia Delacroix always avoided it, escaping and frequently praising the comfort of solitude: "must get back to solitude [...] the things one experiences when alone are much stronger and purer" (31 March 1824). The memories that will remain to him in the afterlife will be those moments when he grappled with ennui in the name of something that he was unable to attain; those moments that were already in the past when they appeared; those moments by dint of which he became famous, as he had desired, though that did nothing to change his behavior. The melancholia that many Romantics saw as a stigma distinguishing exceptional souls (a trope inherited from Aristotle) completely devoured Delacroix's life, leaving no trace, no memories but itself. Distinction turns out to come at a high price, a fact that resounds dramatically in the above quotation from Delacroix. It was hoped that the struggle with ennui would bring results in the form of breathtaking paintings, but the dedication that required cost Delacroix his life. There is thus a little pride in Delacroix's melancholia: by means of ennui and work he joined the ranks of Michelangelo and Tasso; but there is also a paralyzing awareness of loss; this time not the loss of an abstract idea, but of his own life. In this context, too, Delacroix imparts to us probably the most painful explanation of his reasons for keeping a journal. It was not only in order to leave some trace of himself behind, since Delacroix had already done that by creating his paintings. Neither was it in order to acquire fame in life because he wrote the Journals for himself, and they were not published until after his death. He must write the journal because it alone may stand as his testament and his final word, in which there resounds the despair he feels at the loss of his own life; not in a metaphysical sense but in the most human sense, due to the accidental character of existence, a problem which Delacroix supplanted with his bouts of ennui and quest for fame. He was one of the few Romantics who profoundly understood the meaning of Aristotle's maxims and brought them to life only to arrive too late at the conclusion that he had been misguided. Delacroix's Journals are a celebration of the void that remained after a lost, and perhaps even a squandered life.

Part III
The Gaze Out of the Window
or Into the Mirror

7. On the Harmful Effects of Looking Through the Window (Flaubert)

Madame Bovary had opened her window on to the garden, and she was watching the clouds.¹

Emma Bovary was sick. That, at least, was Charles Bovary's reasoning when he resolved to take his wife to Rouen and seek the advice of one of his old professors. Doctor Larivière, the professor in question, had no doubts; the diagnosis was quite simple: "a nervous ailment" (p. 63). The symptoms were in fact typical: a "febrile torrent" succeeded by "states of torpor in which she lay there without speech or motion" (p. 62). Here the only possible remedy was a change of climate, which was the reason Charles began seriously to consider moving from Tostes to Yonville-l'Abbaye. Emma, for her part, had no intention of standing in his way. A journey into the unknown, with the possibility of forever leaving behind Tostes, where continuing to live, particularly after the ball at Vaubyessard, seemed to her intolerable. All of that led her to play the rôle of a woman having a nervous breakdown with great skill. She developed a dry cough, drank vinegar in order to lose weight, and soon lost her appetite completely. This raises the question whether she was really ill or just acting.

Neither Charles nor his more capable colleagues had any doubts: Emma was ill. That diagnosis of Emma's condition is repeated regularly throughout the novel. Disappointed by the failure of the operation by which Charles was supposed to cure Hippolyte's deformity and become famous, Emma makes no secret of her contempt for him. Charles, however, perceives instead symptoms of a "nervous ailment" in her conduct (p. 173). Her spasms and fainting after her break with Rodolphe are likewise, to the pharmacist Homais, nothing but a sudden intensification of her symptoms, allowing him the opportunity to expound on the subject of "irregularities of the nervous system" (p. 194). The symptoms in reality seem purely physiological: malignant fever, loss of consciousness, inflammation of the brain (see p. 194). That explains Charles's decision to apply mustard plasters, as well as his impatient anticipation of the arrival of Doctors Canivet and Larivière. Soon the illness passes, but the convalescence seems burdensome and ends with a wave of new attacks: "her illness set in again a rather less distinct

1 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 112.

pattern this time, and with more complex symptoms. Sometimes she had pains in her heart, in her chest, her head, her limbs; there was vomiting” (p. 195). Soon Emma is acting out nervous fits planned in advance. When Charles, under his mother’s influence, is seized by a desire to withdraw the plenipotentiary powers he has given his wife, she begins “to laugh a loud strident continuous laugh: she was having a nervous attack” (p. 256). Similarly, at the point when the first serious problems with Lheureux begin, and their daughter, little Berthe, is wearing torn stockings, Charles explains his own foolhardy behavior in terms of Emma’s “old nervous ailment” (p. 268).

In one sense there is nothing surprising in these diagnoses. Charles, doctors Canivet and Larivière, and even the presumptuous pharmacist Homais all represent the world of science and medicine. They are thus convinced that Emma’s capricious behavior can be subjected to rational analysis and appropriate treatment. It is no accident that a dictionary of medical sciences is within easy reach in Charles’s house in Tostes, or that there is a clock with a bust of Hippocrates there (see p. 30). The image of the father of medicine is important here in that he was one of the first to submit the nature of man, and the four humors that defined it, to study and reflection. In this context, the search for a rational explanation and the accompanying belief in a purely medical remedy for Emma’s languors is perfectly understandable. Let us also remember that Flaubert published the novel in 1857, and thus before the investigations of Charcot and Freud, though after the death of Etienne Jean Dominique Esquirol, who had drawn attention to the fact that treating nervous disorders purely somatically was a mistake. In *Madame Bovary* we see this intuition articulated by the servant Felicité, who comments on Emma’s afflictions in Yonville, and the explanation that they concern the nerves alone, as follows:

– Oh yes, Felicité went on, you’re just like La Guérine, Père Guérin’s daughter [...]. She was so sad, so sad, just to see her standing on her front-step, she looked for all the world like a white shroud spread out by the door. Her trouble, from what they say, was a kind of fog she had in her head, and the doctors couldn’t do a thing, nor the cure. Whenever it took her really bad she’d go off on her own along the beach, and the customs officer, on his rounds, often found her lying there flat on her face [...]. (pp. 101–102)

Thus Felicité perceives and accepts as natural what no doctor or clergyman can cure. Emma’s illness is, according to her servant, some kind of strange indisposition, a “fog she had in her head” difficult to define, accompanied by a feeling of isolation and alienation; that is surely the reason old Guérin’s daughter was “lying there flat on her face”; she could not look at the world, because she was not at home in it; in the end it was more comfortable for her to look into the depths

of her own soul. If we further add to that the seaside landscape, we understand that Felicité, in her own way, is talking about a melancholic girl and comparing Emma's indisposition to La Guérine's problems. The main characteristics of the condition in which Madame Bovary found herself are not, in Felicité's opinion, related to pathological disturbances of the nervous system, but result rather from her particular disposition; from her atypical tendencies. The latter do not lend themselves to easy definitions, as Emma was perfectly well aware. While she still lived in Tostes, we are told, "It may well have been that she wanted somehow to confide these secrets of hers. But how could she give voice to an elusive malaise, that melts like a cloud, that swirls like the wind?" (p. 38). What Emma Bovary experiences cannot easily be named, though it is an indisposition that afflicts many nineteenth-century protagonists, from Chateaubriand's René, to Huysmans's Folantin, the hero of the 1882 novel *À vau-l'eau* (Downstream);² an indisposition most commonly associated with melancholia.

It is curious that in *Madame Bovary* the word *melancholia*, seemingly so apposite, appears only rarely. After the first mention, when Emma, then still a novice in a cloister, has a chance to become acquainted with such works as *Le Génie du christianisme*: "How she listened, the first time, to the sonorous lamentations of romantic melancholia echoing out across heaven and earth!" (p. 34). Later, as a wife, she sings "many a melancholy adagio" to Charles (p. 41); the expression in the eyes of a greyhound bitch also strikes her as melancholy (see p. 42). In time, however, her own feelings take on a tinge of melancholia. The passion she feels for Léon is one such case, and she is possessed by "a dull melancholy" after his departure (p. 114). Emma describes Rodolphe's voice (see p. 144) and attitude (see p. 148) as melancholy. In his presence, she makes free with her "melancholy sighing" (p. 161).³ The memories of those meetings likewise quickly become full of melancholy (see p. 184) as are some of Emma's letters to her lover (see p. 187). On the other hand, after a breakdown caused by Rodolphe's sudden departure, she is "seized with the finest Catholic melancholy" (p. 199). That aspect of Emma's personality is observed by Léon during their reunion in Rouen (see p. 216). In fact

2 On the gallery of fictional nineteenth-century melancholics, see Robert Kopp, "«Les limbes insondés de la tristesse». Figures de la mélancolie romantique de Chateaubriand à Sartre," in: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 328–340.

3 In the examples that follow, "mélancolie" is used in the original; Geoffrey Wall's translation mostly uses "melancholy" but substitutes "pleasures and pains" on p. 219 for "les plaisirs et les mélancolies"; see Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche Classique, 1999), p. 360.

they will both soon be reminiscing over the times gone by full of joy and melancholy (see p. 219) and admiring the melancholy of the moon (see p. 239). Finally, Emma often experiences a “boundless melancholy” (p. 249), and her voice also has a melancholy timbre (see p. 250).

The point of this list is not only to show that Flaubert was markedly determined to tint his story with melancholy colors, but also to turn attention to the considerable freedom that governed the literature of the nineteenth century with regard to designating depressive states. Probably the most popular word, *spleen*, was popularized by Baudelaire in both his 1857 *Les Fleurs du mal* and his cycle of prose poems *Le Spleen de Paris*, published in periodicals in 1864. It was not Baudelaire who introduced this borrowing from English into French literature, however; he was beaten to it by Pierre Besenval, with a text entitled *Spleen* (1757), and Aimé-Ambroise-Joseph Feutry with the poem *Les Ruines* (1767).⁴ In the latter we read that “The English took the word from the Greeks [...]. They use it to describe a suffocating feeling, a sorrow of the soul, pronounced wasting [by

4 See Michel Delon, “Les Ombres du Siècle de Lumières,” *Magazine Littéraire*, October-November (2005), p. 57. In passing, it should be noted that Delon correctly cites Besenval’s text, but erroneously refers to Feutry’s *Le Temple de la Mort* instead of *Les Ruines*. It is notable that Zygmunt Krasiński acknowledged the English context important in his attempt to define the word “spleen” (“Irydion,” in Krasiński, *Wiersze. Poematy. Dramaty*, ed. Marian Bizan [Warszawa: PIW, 1980], p. 498). “The first Stoics brought into the world a disease called spleen, inherited from the English, whose final solution is suicide.” It is sometimes forgotten in the European (non-Anglophone) context that spleen is not only a state of mental collapse, sadness, and even depression, but also literally refers to the organ so named, responsible, according to tradition, for the production of black bile (the body fluid that causes a melancholic disposition). All of these relationships, apparent from an analysis of the word “spleen,” were perceived by Descartes, who wrote (in *Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen Voss, p. 78): “Sometimes, on the other hand, the body happened to lack sustenance, and that must have been what made the soul feel its first Sadness, at least [the first] that was not joined with Hatred. The same thing also made the heart’s orifices contract, because they were only receiving a little blood, and made a very considerable portion of this blood come from the spleen, because it is, as it were, the last reservoir that serves to supply it to the heart when enough does not come from elsewhere. This is why the movements of the spirits and nerves that serve to contract the orifices of the heart in this way and to guide blood to it from the spleen always accompany Sadness.” On the topic of the history of the noun “spleen” and its reception in French and Polish literature, see Piotr Śniedziewski, “«Spleen» – dialog anatomii z psychologią. Problemy recepcji i przekładu,” *Rocznik Komparatystyczny*, No. 1 (2010), pp. 105–124.

tuberculosis] or any other kind of infirmity as the result of an illness of spleen. The French adopted the word some time ago to express the same things.”⁵ In addition to “spleen,” all other words or formulations which sought to suggest mental and nervous disorders, albeit without great precision, grew in popularity. Chateaubriand thus wrote in *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb* of the indefinability of René’s feelings,⁶ Alfred de Musset in his *Confession of a Child of the Century* described an entire generation as “ardent, pale, nervous,”⁷ and Sainte-Beuve in his preface to *Volupté* presented the purpose of his novel as follows: “The true object of this book is to analyze a penchant, a passion, a vice even, and all of that side of the soul which this vice dominates, and for which it sets the tone, of this [side which is] languorous, idle, endearing, secret and private, mysterious and furtive, fanciful to the point of subtlety, tender to the point of feebleness, in a word, voluptuous.”⁸

There is also a place in this pantheon of inexpressible distress for Emma Bovary, who describes herself and the world using terms that include, but are by no means limited to, the magical word “melancholia.” The novel’s narrator often refers to her “agitation” and “marvelous passion” (p. 38), her “boredom” (p. 42), “sorrow” (p. 61), and “torpor” (p. 62). A term that takes the reader aback, however, is the “fear” that “seize[s]” Emma during a solitary walk:

In the avenue a green light dimmed by the leaves lit up the smooth moss that crackled softly beneath her feet. The sun was setting; the sky showed red between the branches, and the trunks of the trees, uniform, and planted in a straight line, seemed a brown colonnade standing out against a background of gold. A fear took hold of her; she called Djali, and hurriedly returned to Tostes by the high road, threw herself into an armchair, and for the rest of the evening did not speak.⁹

5 Aimé-Ambroise-Joseph Feutry, *Opuscules poétiques et philologiques* (La Haye: Delalain, 1771), p. 72.

6 See Chateaubriand, *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

7 Alfred de Musset, *Confession of a Child of the Century*, trans. T.F. Rogerson (Philadelphia: G. Barrie, 1899), p. 8.

8 Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (Paris: Charpentier, 1869), p. 1.

9 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, in: *The Complete Works of Gustave Flaubert: Novels, Short Stories, Plays, Memoirs and Letters: Original Versions of the Novels and Stories in French, An Interactive Bilingual Edition*, trans. Eleanor Marx-Aveling, online edition, e-artnow, 2015.

In the French, the sentence in question begins with the words “Une peur la prenait.”¹⁰ The Polish translation by Aniela Micińska, which refers to “Some kind of fear” (*Jakiś strach*),¹¹ is thus faithful, but cannot in any way convey the uncertainty, hesitation and real fear that appear in the French and result from Flaubert’s use of the indefinite article “une” with the noun “peur.”¹² The fact that this article disturbs the reader’s sense of safety was noted by Jean-Paul Sartre.¹³ In such a context, it almost seems more natural to expect the definite article, since that would theoretically confirm that Emma’s fear had an identifiable source, i.e., the fear of something, and that it was therefore temporary, explicable and manageable. It is none of those things. Flaubert chose the indefinite article because it is cognitively unsettling to both character and reader. This article also signals the weakness of the narrator’s position. Though he is able, on certain occasions, to look into Emma’s heart, he in fact knows only as much as the character he is describing. Madame Bovary’s indefinite fear is also another sign that she suffers from melancholia in the Freudian sense.

Emma’s melancholia is the result of her longing for something that seems to her lost, but which she herself is unable to describe. In this way, the “metonymy of pleasure” that Kristeva described is broken.¹⁴ Emma is unable to say anything about what she desires or longs for. In her case it is most often “the kind of reverie that comes when something vanishes forever, the lassitude we feel when some habitual movement is interrupted” (p. 114), giving rise to melancholy and despair (see p. 114). When one day she receives a letter from her father, Emma suddenly becomes immersed in memories of her childhood and observes:

What happiness in the old days! What freedom! What hope! What an abundance of illusions! Nothing left of them now! She had dissipated them in the exploits of her soul, in each successive phase: in virginity, in marriage, and in love; just like a traveler who leaves

10 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Wall, p. 112.

11 Flaubert, *Pani Bovary*, trans. Aniela Micińska (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1996), p. 46.

12 The same is true of Ryszard Engelking’s Polish translation – see Flaubert, *Pani Bovary. Z obyczajów prowincji*, trans. Ryszard Engelking (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2005), p. 47. Translator’s note: this applies in equal measure to the English translation by Geoffrey Wall from which I have been quoting – T.D.W.

13 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Notes sur *Madame Bovary*,” in: *L’Idiot dans la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), vol. III, p. 668. I have been unable to find this passage in the Polish translation: *Idiota w rodzinie*, trans. Józef Waczków (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2000).

14 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 14.

some portion of her wealth at every inn along the road. But who was it that made her so unhappy? Where was the extraordinary catastrophe which had overwhelmed her? And she raised her head, looking around, as if to find the cause of what was making her suffer. (p. 160)

The reason for her pain is thus unknown, and her suffering without an object. This state of nervous excitement has two consequences. Firstly, it brings about a life in constant trepidation and removes the possibility of enjoying the present. Instead of taking advantage of life as it is happening, Emma becomes preoccupied with its fleetingness. In both of her romances, despite their great sensuality, there is a note of sadness, a kind of apprehension at the possibility of total fulfillment, which could then only culminate in loss. This is probably what causes a kind of renunciation, a defense mechanism that keeps Emma from knowing true happiness. When she thinks of her feelings for Léon, she almost immediately observes the following: "But the more Emma became aware of her love, the more she repressed it, to keep it from showing and to diminish it" (p. 100). The case is similar with Rodolphe: "Love had intoxicated her at first, she had had no thought of anything beyond it. But, now that her life depended on him, she dreaded losing the least part of his love, or even merely upsetting him" (p. 153). Emma is thus unable to accept change. She is also unable to say "I am happy," because that would mean that her next sentence would have to describe a state of decreased happiness, marked by a loss which in fact cannot be grasped within any kind of rational explanation.

The second consequence of this nervousness is her need to constantly imagine other circumstances and places where she might have lived. These cannot be lost since they cannot by any means be attained. In that sense, their contemplation is also a contemplation of loss, a loss which is in essence damnation because it causes pain accompanied by the awareness that the pain can never be assuaged or the loss repaired. This, in fact, is the daydream of pure loss. One of its forms is losing herself between the covers of a book. Emma has been a passionate reader since her youth: "at the age of fifteen, Emma dabbled in the remains of old lending libraries" (p. 35). She drafts her correspondence with Léon based on what she grew up reading in romances, and finds her emotions aroused by the evening at the theatre where Charles takes her in Rouen. It reminds her of the books she used to read, particularly Walter Scott (see p. 206). Fiction is thus revealed as something that allows Emma to breathe, and to feel hope, though this is the most illusory hope of all. This kind of feeling leads to further disappointments and eventually, in moments of discouragement or exhaustion, to the declaration of "I've read everything" (p. 59). This famous statement, repeated by Mallarmé

in his poem “Brise marine” and paraphrased by Verlaine in “Langueur,” marks a turning point in Emma Bovary’s life, since from that point on she can only lose her illusions.

A slightly different variation on the same desire is the constant talk of journeys to places which remain so distant that the planning of such trips is inherently doomed to frustration. Sometimes these are simply inaccessible places. Emma has a great fondness for thoughts of a “different life” (p. 42), of different events and different people from those she knows. This is surely what guaranteed a long career to “Bovaryism,” the concept introduced into literary studies by Jules de Gaultier, who defined it as “the ability, particular to human beings, to perceive oneself differently from the way one is.”¹⁵ Emma Bovary is, in fact, constantly day-dreaming. After the ball at Vaubyessard she tries at all costs to “prolong the illusion of this world of luxury” (p. 50), to which effect she eventually employs even the cigar-case forgotten by the Viscount (see p. 53) with whom she danced at the ball. Her desire therefore needs more objects in order to feed on them and thereby endure. Thus Emma buys a map of Paris, orders periodicals and reads books that include events from the capital in the background of their plots. Before long, “Paris, rippling like the ocean, gleam[s] in Emma’s mind under a warm golden haze” (p. 54). These are the same emotions that love awakens in her. With Léon, Emma would like to run away “somewhere, far away, to build a new destiny” (p. 101), and, exhausted by passion, “she wanted to fly away like a bird and become young again, somewhere, far away, under a wide immaculate sky” (p. 272). To Rodolphe, on the other hand, she sighs: “We could go away and live somewhere... together...” (p. 173) and asks him, “Take me away!” (p. 180). We quickly learn, however, that the journey, somehow regardless of its promise of happiness, will also bear the stamp of sadness: “Yes, it will be good to travel. Why is my heart so sad, though? Is it fear of the unknown [...]?” (p. 184). All of these elements are present in Emma’s reverie, which we encounter already in Tostes:

Down in her soul, the while, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a shipwrecked sailor, she perused her solitary world with hopeless eyes, searching for some white sail far away where the horizon turns to mist. . She didn’t know what her luck might bring, what wind would blow it her way, what shore it would take her to, whether it was a sloop or a three-mastered schooner, laden with anguish or crammed to the portholes with happiness. But, every morning, when she awoke, she hoped it would happen

15 Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme, la psychologie dans l’œuvre de Flaubert* (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1892); some of his remarks were reprinted in 1902 in the form of the article “Le Bovarysme” in *Mercure de France*; quoted in the Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche Classique, 1999), p. 49.

that day, and she listened to every sound, jumping to her feet, surprised when nothing came; then, as the day came to its end, with an ever greater sadness, she was longing for the morrow. (p. 58)

This remark by the narrator contains all the elements that bear witness to Emma's melancholy disposition. Above all, her dreams always take shape in a closed, confined, somewhat claustrophobic space. In this case we read about "[d]own in her soul," but that is not the only dimension at play. Let us note that Emma's bouts of unhappiness, which in some sense force her to dream of a better life, always begin in small rooms bathed in twilight. The farm at Les Bertaux, though well-kept, is unimpressive in size, and the hut where Emma sleeps is not "large" as the Micińska translation describes it (Micińska, p. 17); the original in no way suggests that.¹⁶ If anything, the description of the room, that catch-all tightly packed with all kinds of objects, from a four-poster bed with patterned canopy to sacks of grain, suggests that it has very little free space. The house in Tostes likewise does not overwhelm with its size, while the one in Yonville is pronounced by Emma herself to be "too cramped" (p. 101). The hotel rooms, too, where her trysts with Léon take place, are not overly spacious. The room in the Croix Rouge inn is simply "small" (p. 204), as is the room where Emma spends the evening at mid-Lent with Léon's friends (see p. 271). Only such a closed space can awaken the desire for travel, open spaces, and change. It is perhaps worth noting that these two poles have considerable influence on Flaubert's descriptive technique. In the first case we see very precise and detailed description, as in relation to the farm and Emma's room at Les Bertaux or the house in Tostes. There can also be no serious doubts as to the objectivizing nature of these descriptions and the presence, behind them, of a narrator familiar to readers from the novels of Balzac. They give a strong signal of someone who looks on from a third-person perspective; who stands outside the action and does not participate in the situation he describes. The picture changes when the hitherto closed space is expanded or broken apart. At that point, Emma's desires come to prominence and the narrative becomes personal, acquiring subjective traits. At the same time, the description seems less precise because it is no longer focused on presenting objects, but rather dreams and imaginings that are difficult to capture, a fact confirmed by the analysis of the state in which Emma finds herself after Léon's departure from Yonville, when she is seized by sadness and "the kind of reverie that comes when something vanishes forever," while the objects, so meticulously described

16 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche Classique, 1999), p. 72.

by Flaubert in other situations,¹⁷ “seemed to be wrapped in a confusion of shadows drifting over their surfaces” (p. 114). We can therefore state that Emma’s melancholy disposition, as well as her desire for travel and sense of mourning something she is unable to name are what led Jean Rousset to call Flaubert “the great novelist of stasis, melancholia, motionlessness.”¹⁸

There is yet another element to be perceived in the above report on Emma’s emotional state, as she encounters merciless boredom in Tostes. This element seems essential not only to a psychological analysis of the character, but also, like the closely related balancing between open and closed spaces, to the modern form of novelistic narration whose patron Flaubert is considered to be. I have in mind the gaze of her “hopeless eyes” (p. 58), particularly in those iterations where it is directed through a window. For the melancholy imagination, the window is, as Marek Bieńczyk remarks, the “place of transition,”¹⁹ holding in continual tension with each other that which is outside and that which is inside. Eyes, the gaze and the window are also the elements in Flaubert’s novel that in a sense regulate its development and simultaneously constitute a type of structural fastener. To begin with, Emma’s eyes and her gaze are what seduce Charles: “If she were beautiful, it was in her eyes; though they were brown, they seemed to be black because of the lashes, and they met your gaze openly, with an artless candor” (p. 15). Thus the novel in fact begins, if we discount the first chapter in which we get to know Charles’s schoolboy past and in which the narration is objectivized in the Balzac style. In the final description of Emma as she lies dying, on the other hand, we find disconnected gazes, shadows and one more effort at breaking away from the confined space:

And in fact she looked all around her, slowly, like someone awakening from a dream, and then, in a clear voice, she asked for her mirror, and she remained bent over it for some time; until the moment when big tears began to fall from her eyes. Then she turned her head away with a sigh, and fell back on the pillow. Her chest soon began to heave rapidly; her entire tongue protruded from her mouth; her eyes were rolling as they grew dimmer, like two lamp globes, so that one might have thought she was already dead, except for the

17 For more on this subject, see Claude Duchet, “Roman et objets: l’exemple de *Madame Bovary*,” *Europe*, September–November (1969), pp. 172–201 (reprinted in the anthology *Travail de Flaubert*, ed. Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov [Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1983], pp. 11–43).

18 Jean Rousset, “*Madame Bovary* ou le livre sur rien,” in: *Forme et signification* (Paris: Corti, 1962).

19 Bieńczyk, *Oczy Dürera*, p. 362.

frightening heaving of her sides, shaking with violent breaths, as if the soul were leaping inside, trying to get itself free.²⁰

In the last three chapters of the novel, the Balzac type of narration returns and, instead of hazy premonitions, we meet with precise description of the grief and then death of Charles, and with a presentation of the untiringly overconfident, if occasionally kindhearted, pharmacist Homais. Between these two borderlines, Emma's first and last gazes in the book and the objectivizing narration that presents the period of Charles's primary education and his death, we encounter widely varied modalities in Emma's looks, as well as the personalized model of narration that arises out of them. Jean Rousset perceived this with flawless discernment: "Windows and perspectives that look down, faraway views and reveries in closed spaces are always points where the plot slackens, nodal moments where the narrative slows down; they correspond to a particular way of shaping the image, as the novelist loses his traditional divine authorization and subjective vision begins to dominate; he identifies maximally with his heroine, stands behind her and looks through her eyes."²¹ Let us attempt, then, to describe Emma's eyes a little more precisely, her eyesight and the consequences and changes that it brings about in the narration. The fact that the gaze of Flaubert's eponymous heroine is almost always a melancholy gaze, full of reverie and undefined sorrow, has considerable importance here.

The presentation of the purely physical aspect of eyes is in itself arresting. Sometimes they are described, in a quite banal way, as "beautiful" (p. 217) or "large" (p. 99). Their mysteriousness is linked primarily to their color, which is difficult to define, and which changes depending on the situation in which Emma finds herself, and on the behavior of the person looking at her. Thus, according to Charles they are, in Wall's translation, "dark" (p. 46; *noir* in the original), an assertion later backed up, in fact, by the narrator (see p. 77) and Rodolphe (see p. 120). Emma, too, when she falls in love with Rodolphe, perceives her eyes in the mirror the same way: "Never had she had eyes so large, so black, so mysterious" (p. 150). When, however, she hears a confession of love pass from Léon's lips, those same eyes become blue (see p. 218). Later, disappointed in her expectations of her lover, she will take his measure with "burning eyes" (p. 278) filled with hatred and frustration at his behavior. Finally, after her death, "a sort of white powder besprinkled her eyelashes, and her eyes began to blur under a

20 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), p. 281.

21 Rousset, "*Madame Bovary* ou le livre sur rien."

pale film” (p. 308). We also learn of the strange opalization²² peculiar to Emma’s eyes directly from the observations of Charles, who likes to peek in at the face of his sleeping wife: “So very close, her eyes seemed even bigger, especially when she first awoke and her eyelids fluttered into life. Black in the shadows, and deep blue in full daylight, as if the colors were floating layer upon layer, thickest in the depths, coming clear and bright towards the surface” (p. 31). There we could in fact have done with the matter, since after all every human being’s eyes can change to a variety of colors depending on the light that falls on them, as well as the situation in which the person finds himself. Emotional tension and tears may also make it impossible to accurately distinguish the color of someone’s eyes. Yet in the case of Emma Bovary something else seems to be going on other than the mere confirmation of this physical regularity. Firstly, the other characters never experience this phenomenon. The colors of their eyes are not described with any such nuance. Secondly, the colors of Emma’s eyes are relevant. Blackness fits perfectly with inconsolable sorrow, with mourning for a lost object, impossible for the heroine to name as she experiences it. Pale blue, the color of the sky, relates to reverie, into which Emma is incessantly falling. Paleness also signals sterility and disaccord with the world. The changing colors of the protagonist’s eyes are thus a sign of the instability of her situation, her constant oscillation between dream and waking, and her lack of resolve. In other words, the eyes, in the case of Madame Bovary, mirror the soul. I have in mind not the mystical connotations associated with that notion, but its more or less literal meaning.

In the novel, essentially only the eponymous heroine is endowed with a soul, in the sense that the reader gets to know only her emotions, afterthoughts, and weaknesses. It seems that we know Emma fairly well. That, at least, is what nearly all readers of the book would think; whereas the other characters resemble extras and belong rather to the background. To put it another way, in the case of Emma, we may indulge in psychological speculation. The novel is in fact a kind of dissection of her soul. In relation to the other characters, we can at best employ a behaviorist interpretation. They are people whose psychological profile is very limited, whom we are able to describe and evaluate only through an analysis of their relations with others and their more or less extended utterances. For this reason, Antoni Sygietyński could write of Emma that she is by nature nervous and sensitive, while Rodolphe was merely able to use “a store of stilted

22 On the subject of how Emma’s eyes change their color, see Claudine Gothot-Merch, “La Description des visages dans *Madame Bovary*,” *Littérature*, No. 15 (1974), pp. 17–26.

platitudes.”²³ These remarks apply in equal measure to the model of narration, of course. As was mentioned above, the parts dealing with Emma have a distinct, subjective stamp. The narrator withdraws into the character’s shadow, looking at the world through her eyes. With the other characters in the novel, Flaubert avoids such close contact. This is distinctly visible in one of the passages at the beginning, when Charles is contemplating the possibility of marrying Emma: “That night, he didn’t sleep. His throat was dry, he was thirsty, he got up to take a drink from his water-jug and he opened the window; the sky was full of stars, there was a warm breeze, dogs were barking in the distance” (p. 22). In this passage, Charles looks out of the window, probably the most intimate situation in which one of Flaubert’s characters may be seen. In *Madame Bovary* in general, only Emma in fact looks through windows, a fact to which we shall return. We find Charles looking out of a window too, which immediately introduces a kind of rapprochement with him, a focus of attention on his inner life. Flaubert quickly withdraws, however, from such familiarity: he ends the paragraph and begins a new one, which consists of only one sentence and forms a kind of liaison. The next paragraph brings a complete change of perspective and informs the reader of the reaction of Emma’s father to Charles’s proposal. Flaubert thus allows neither himself nor his reader to get too close to the characters, with the exception, of course, of Emma. Only in her case are we given the opportunity to look at the nervous filaments of her soul, if they exist. One of the paths that lead to that soul is through her eyes.

Considered the window of the soul, the eyes, due to the changing models of narration, thus provide information about the character’s psychology. The color of her eyes and the character of her gaze represent equivalents of her emotions. On the very first pages of the novel we learn that Emma was “animated one moment, her eyes wide and innocent, then half closed, her gaze clouding with boredom, her thoughts drifting” (p. 22). When Léon has left Yonville, and a series of colorless days have begun to remind Emma of the tedium of her existence in Tostes, we are told that she had “a vague look in her eye” (p. 116). Even Rodolphe, who is not given to easy elation and is, generally speaking, a calculating cad, recognizes that Emma has eyes that “go right into your heart” (p. 121). The narrator also informs us that Emma was capable of “long ardent looks that drown the eye” (p. 180), but also a gaze of madness at the moment when despair prompted her suicide: “She cast her eyes around, waiting for the earth to open” (p. 190). Each of

23 Antoni Sygietyński, “Gustaw Flaubert,” in: *Pisma krytyczne wybrane*, ed. Zygmunt Szweykowski (Warszawa: Instytut Literacki, 1932), p. 83.

these descriptions is an attempt to follow Emma's gaze to the depths of her soul or, if we prefer, her psyche. Journeys of this type, however, never end with the acquisition of some measurable, concrete knowledge because in fact with regard to Emma's psyche such knowledge does not exist. We wander constantly around the crannies of her desires, but it would be difficult to say what Emma truly longs for. As we have seen, she is suffering from the loss of something she is unable to name. Now we must add that her suffering is severely aggravated through waiting for something which she equally cannot define.

Though Emma's eyes are, in a sense, the mirror of her soul, she is incapable of grasping what it is that appears in that mirror. She does not know the way to recognize herself in it, and incessantly feels herself a stranger: to others, in the world in which she is forced to live, and even to herself. It could be said that Emma fails to move beyond the first phase of the Lacanian "mirror stage."²⁴ Even at the point when she looks at herself in a mirror, she is unable to see reality in it and sees only her fantasies. Thus after going riding with Rodolphe, "when she looked in the mirror, she was startled by her own face. [...] Something subtle, transfiguring, was surging through her" (p. 150). In this way, the reality that surrounds her is quickly forgotten, including her home and family: "blue immensity was all about her; the great summits of sentiment glittered in her mind's eye, ordinary existence appeared far below in the distance, in shadow, in the gaps between these peaks" (p. 151). Soon Emma will have to pay dearly for this absence of cares and error in judging her reflection: the reflection of the soul in the eyes and the face in the mirror. In Emma's case, mirrors distort.

This aspect is captured on film by Vincente Minnelli in his adaptation of *Madame Bovary*. Although the film as a whole cannot be pronounced a success, primarily because of the clumsy narration and departures from Flaubert's plot, the mirror as a prop and the reflection as an element used to build tension are employed in it with great intuitive power. A mirror first appears in the scene of the ball at Vaubyessard. Emma is invited to dance the waltz, but turns down the dance, though with a certain lack of assertiveness, as she does not know the steps. Surrounded by a cluster of admirers, she suddenly sees a mirror hanging on one of the walls and herself in it in her exquisite dress and the men unremittingly thronging about her. Emma's filmed gaze speaks volumes: this is the life she desires; this is the ball that, as the narrator stresses, "made a hole in her

24 See Jacques Lacan, "Le Stade du miroir comme fondateur de la fonction du Je," in: *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), pp. 93–100, On this topic, see also Frédéric Pellion, "Mélancolie d'amour," in: *Mélancolie et vérité* (Paris: PUF, 2000), pp. 307–318.

life” (p. 52). Some time later Emma is shown in her room in the inn called La Croix Rouge. There she looks in the mirror and thus the escapist mechanism is activated. She no longer perceives herself in a small, shabby hotel room, but is immersed in memories. Suddenly in the mirror in the inn there appears Emma at the ball in Vaubyessard: elegant, amid the local aristocracy, constantly at the center of attention. This reminiscence shows us once more that Emma does not want to scrutinize her situation; does not wish to recognize reality. In fact, as soon as the film’s Léon appears in the room, Emma begins to look through the window, as if seeking to forget that she is meeting her lover not in a gilt palace, but in a shabby room in an inn.

That last gaze, not into the mirror, but through the window, is in fact crucial for understanding the situation in which Emma finds herself.²⁵ Her eyes, moreover, are in fact a transposition of the window. We might define them with referencing to a saying akin to the earlier saying, in which the eyes are said to be the window on (rather than the mirror of) the soul. From a logical point of view that makes more sense. For if the eyes were the mirror of the soul, then we could never perceive it in them, since the image transmitted from a person’s interior would reflect off the mirror and return inside. In fact, it is by all accounts supposed to be accessible to the gazes of other people, so it must evade closed space, exactly as does Emma’s gaze, which emerges from shabby little rooms through the windows. There is an additional justification for allowing this other application of metaphors of eyes, mirrors and windows. Like the soul and the emotions reflected in the eyes, which do not allow themselves, in Emma’s case, to be reconciled with reality, the disaccord of which represents a variation on the incongruity between the world and its reflection in the mirror, Emma’s gaze through the window refuses to be reconciled with the world. It is precisely a gaze of this type that represents the melancholy stigma of Emma and is her true curse. As the narrator observes, she looks out of the window incessantly: “Emma was stationed at her window (she was often there: the window, in the provinces, replaces theatres and promenading)” (p. 118). In order to correctly understand the nature of this gaze, it is necessary to turn our attention to a few of its constitutive elements.

Above all, the pose that Emma strikes as she looks through the window is important. In the above passage, we read in the original French that she was “accoudée à sa fenêtre,” in other words resting her elbow on the windowsill.²⁶ In

25 Léon Bopp, in his *Commentaire sur Madame Bovary* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1951), devotes a great deal of attention to this gaze.

26 *Complete Works of Gustave Flaubert* (Hastings: Delphi Classic, 2013), online edition.

another situation, too, when Charles leaves their house in Tostes, Emma goes “to the window to watch him leaving, and she would lean on the sill” (p. 31; again, in the French, more precisely “accoudée sur le bord”). There is also an intriguing description of Emma bidding farewell to Léon as he leaves Yonville and still hoping that he will work up the courage to profess his love for her: she “had her face pressed to the window-pane” and “turned towards him, her chin lowered and her forehead prominent” (p. 111). Geoffrey Wall’s English translation is here markedly superior to Micińska’s canonical Polish version, whose rendering of this passage is somewhat marred by an imprecise choice: Madame Bovary is described as turning towards him with not her chin but “her head lowered and her forehead prominent” (Micińska, p. 111). In the Polish translation, the reader thus encounters a redundancy which fulfills no rhetorically important function, but is rather simply a misstep. If we try leaning forward, we find that the forehead does jut forward slightly in a natural movement based on the structure of human anatomy. Flaubert, who devoted so much time to the most minute stylistic corrections of his work, would surely not have allowed himself such a clumsy description. In fact, if we consult the French, we find that it is not the head but the chin that is inclined: “Elle se détourna, le menton baissé et le front en avant.” The difference might appear insignificant, but in fact, a lowered chin, especially supported by the left hand, is a recognizable iconographic sign of the melancholic.

If readers have doubts regarding the need to split hairs with the translator over this passage, a different example should suffice to convince them; one in which the Polish translation acquits itself flawlessly. When Emma is impatiently waiting for Léon, who is supposed to come for supper, we read (now in Francis Steegmuller’s English translation, close to Micińska’s on all relevant points): “At twilight, when she had put down her embroidery and was sitting there with her chin in her left hand, she often started at the sudden appearance of this gliding shadow.”²⁷ I probably do not need to mention that in the French version here as in the previous quotation, the word *menton*, meaning “chin,” not “head,” as implied by Aniela Micińska in her translation of the previous passage, is used.²⁸ The indication of the chin is not accidental, just as there is nothing accidental about the fact that when she was still being taught by nuns in the cloister, Emma dreamed of living the life of a sentimental heroine: “She would have liked to live in some old manor house, *like those long-waisted chatelaines* who spent their

27 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2013), e-book.

28 Engelking’s Polish translation commits the same error: see pp. 118 and 97.

days spent their days leaning out of fretted Gothic casements, elbow on parapet and chin in hand, watching a white-plumed knight come galloping out of the distance on a black horse.²⁹ Here again, Micińska's translation, by substituting a more general word, i.e., "face," for the chin of the original, implicitly conflicts with readers' everyday life experience. Supporting one's face with one's hand is not a natural pose when looking into the distance. It is difficult to recreate the pose thus described in life, and not only because of the paucity of knights in shining armor to gaze upon. It is difficult primarily because holding the face with the hand makes looking straight ahead harder; it prompts us to look down. The above fragment is, in its classic Polish translation, thus bereft of sense. The reader realizes from the context, of course, that the French version refers not to the *châtelaine* sitting with face in hand but with chin in hand ("le menton dans le main"). Such minor corrections are unusually important here because Flaubert chooses words with astonishing precision in order to express what the medical profession of his time and the nascent science of psychiatry were unable to name, or to refer the reader to a time-honored traditional code for describing the melancholic. This obsession of Flaubert's is noted in an article by Yvan Leclerc, who writes: "Where the scientist is unable to provide a name, the novelist weaves a web of images to portray that void, that absent object of desire, that waiting for something that will not come."³⁰ Hence the chin and not the head or face; hence the chin in the left hand, because that is, as Flaubert knew perfectly well, the most recognizable symbol of the melancholic.

There are many examples of this phenomenon. One of the oldest is of course the small bronze sculpture made in the first half of the first century B.C.E., depicting Ajax in despair after a rash act committed in a fit of madness. Even if we confine ourselves to nineteenth-century art, we shall find many similar representations, albeit, as is in fact true in the case of the statue of Ajax, sometimes the chin rests in the right rather than the left hand. Suffice it to mention Caspar David Friedrich's woodcut *Woman with Spider's Web Between Bare Trees* (1801–1803), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot's painting *Melancholia* (1860), and Johann Peter Hasenlever's canvas *Sentimental Woman* (1846). Emma Bovary's pose as she looks out of the window thus fits well within this particular iconographic tradition. There can be no doubt that Flaubert was trying in this way to further suggest to us the melancholic nature of his heroine. The pose, however is not

29 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Steegmuller.

30 Yvan Leclerc, "La Dépression en héritage," *Magazine Littéraire*, October-November (2005), p. 69.

all; it seems essential to consider the phenomenon itself of looking through the window, which, like a door, belongs neither to what is inside, nor to what is outside. It is rather a connector of the two spaces. The window, however, unlike the door, is associated, as Georg Simmel observes, with a “teleological emotion [...] directed almost exclusively from inside to outside: it is there for looking out, not for looking in.”³¹

This is also the function most often performed by the window in Flaubert's novel, though the pattern is not a binding rule; “most often” because Simmel in his reflections did not consider one possibility that exists in *Madame Bovary*: a window may be covered, the window shade drawn, and the people located in a room with such a window may have no desire whatsoever to look through it. This is what happens when Emma goes to La Huchette for the first time to see Rodolphe. In her lover's room “[t]he short muslin curtains [...] darkened the evening shadows” (p. 143). The meetings with Léon at the Hotel de Boulogne likewise take place in a room with the “shutters closed” (p. 238),³² and the ecstasies of their famous amorous journey take place in a room with “yellow curtains with wide stripes” (p. 241). According to Jean Rousset, those shuttered and curtained windows are a sign of Emma's reconciliation with life and the world; they are a promise of equilibrium.³³ It seems to me that a corrective to this interpretative intuition is necessary. The covered window, which somehow reduces the space, limiting it, after all fits nicely into the logic described above of small, claustrophobic rooms. Of course the fact that in the above passages, Emma does not attempt to leave the room. The reason for that is not, however, that she has found happiness in the world in which she lives. Her behavior is rather dictated by an irrational reversal of perspective, since for Emma, the real world is the world of her dreams. Contrary to what Simmel wrote about our teleological sense relating to the function of the window, we find that something may in fact enter the room through it. In Rodolphe's dwelling or at the Hotel de Boulogne, only Emma's indistinct dreams and fantasies, i.e., an illusion of the world, its desired image, find their way in from outside. The situation in the room is thus meant to be an attempt to render real that which is unreal. The covered window is therefore not a reconciliation with reality, as Rousset would have it, but rather a deeply bitter withdrawal from it, a replacement of it with appearances, chimerae, and phantoms. Those are precisely

31 Georg Simmel, “Bridge and Door,” trans. Mark Ritter, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. XI (1994), p. 8.

32 The Micińska translation substitutes “curtains” (story) for “shutters” in this passage, also implausible given the modest port status of the Hotel de Boulogne.

33 See Rousset, “*Madame Bovary* ou le livre sur rien.”

the kind of experiences that Emma's misguided gaze is seeking when it is able to find its way out of the room through the window. A gaze of this type is nevertheless not homogeneous. It changes depending on what window pane Madame Bovary is looking through, transparent or colored. Of no less crucial import is whom she sees through the window at any given moment.

Frequently the object of Emma's gaze is the theater of everyday life; the narrator informs us that sitting by the window took the place of theater for her. The window pane thus transforms into an invisible curtain, and her gaze follows the people and things she perceives. That is what happens in Yonville, where Emma is devoured by ennui: "Sitting in her armchair, near the window, she watched the village people going past along the pavement" (p. 90). We can only surmise that her gaze at such moments is indifferent and passionless. What she sees through the window is of no concern to her. She sees nothing but a world full of banality, inertia, and cruel repetitiveness. Here she finds Binet entering punctually at six to dine at the Golden Lion (see p. 70); there she sees the irritating comings and goings of the cart called "*Hirondelle*" (The Swallow); the unchanging Phrygian cap of the pharmacist Homais; and even Léon's tiresome twice-daily walk from his office to the Golden Lion (see p. 90). This regularity, amounting to flatness, wears Emma out in Tostes, where she suffers from her vision of how "the days began their same old procession again. One after another along they came, always the same, never-ending, bringing nothing. The future was a dark corridor, and at the far end the door was bolted" (pp. 58–59). Life in Yonville is in fact no different. Léon informs Emma during their first meeting that the town has "so very little to offer!" (p. 78), to which she immediately reacts by saying: "Like Tostes, I expect [...] so I always had a subscription to a library" (p. 78). So indeed, looking at the show playing out on the other side of the window is senseless in such a situation. That spectacle does not permit the viewer to dream because in fact nothing happens in it. It is better to open a book, for only there can we see the kind of existence we desire. Nonetheless, Emma should not be trusted overly much here. If any of her book dreams were to be fulfilled in reality, its attractiveness would surely be gone in no time. That is because no dream is capable of satisfying the anticipation of constant change. That is also the reason Emma's gaze through the clear glass at life's theater is a disappointed gaze, full of weariness. That is precisely how it was when "One evening [...] she was sitting by the open window, watching Lestiboudois [...] trimming the box-hedge" (p. 102), or the time when she gazed together with Rodolphe through the windows of the town hall at the agricultural fair in Yonville (see p. 131). Since that sort of life is

incapable of seducing Emma, her gaze is empty, though it comes to rest on particular things and people.

It only begins to come alive when Emma sees somebody important to her through the window. When she sees Léon's shadow, she "shudder[s]" (p. 90) because in that case what is outside is not a banal spectacle, completely unrelated to her desires, but, quite the contrary, it is the embers of those desires. A landscape may also be burdened with the same function: Léon visits Emma at La Croix Rouge where "[t]hrough the sash-window they could see a scrap of dark sky between pointed roofs" (p. 220), representing a kind of omen of the sad ending not only of their liaison but of Emma's life. Sometimes the mention of the thing that we would like to see is superimposed on what we see and then looking through the window is particularly sad and dangerous, since the boundary between dream and reality is effaced. Emma had her purest experience of that during the agricultural fair in Yonville. Shut up with Rodolphe in one of the rooms of the town hall, she listened to her seducer's avowals and was not even aware of when remembrance and dreams displaced the reality before her eyes:

In his eyes she noticed little threads of gold, and she could even catch the scent of the pomade in his glossy hair. And then the swooning was upon her, she remembered the Viscount who had waltzed with her at La Vaubyessard, whose beard, like this man's hair, gave off that scent of vanilla and lemon; and, mechanically, she half shut her eyes to breathe it deeper. But, as she did so, bracing herself upon her chair, she noticed in the distance, right on the far horizon, the old Hironnelle [...]. It was in this yellow coach that Léon had, so many times, come back to her; and along that very road that he had gone away for ever. She thought she saw him over the way, at his window, then it was all a blur, clouds went past; it felt as if she was still turning in the waltz, under the bright chandeliers, on the Viscount's arm, as if Léon were not far away, was going to come... and yet all this time she could smell Rodolphe's hair beside her. (p. 136)³⁴

The reader thus does not know exactly what is seen by Emma and what only seems to be. A yellow coach surely might have appeared on the horizon, but its metonymical binding with the image of Léon is only her hallucination, her

34 A parenthetical clarification is perhaps warranted regarding this strange "over the way" window in which Emma appears to perceive Léon. Obviously it does not refer to a real window, located somewhere "over the way" from the window through which Emma gazes in the town hall. It refers to another window, in which she was able, at an earlier point in the novel, to freely admire her future lover: "She had fixed up, at her window-sill, a little shelf with a rail for her flowerpots. The clerk also had his own little hanging-garden; they would observe each other at the window, tending their flowers" (p. 92).

unfulfilled daydream. In this instance, the gaze through the window therefore leads to confusion. From here it is only one step further to that feeling of instability that often appears in Emma's eyes and determines their melancholy character. Often Emma's gaze does not so much deliberately ignore people and things beyond the window as simply fail to perceive them. We recall the moment of separation from Léon in Yonville, when Emma's posture (head down, chin supported on her hand) is an obvious repetition of the iconography of melancholia. I have in mind the passage with Emma's "chin lowered and her forehead prominent," whose resonance with that afore-mentioned tradition was somewhat lost in the Polish translation. If we continue a little further, we read: "The light flowed over her brow as over polished marble, down to the curve of her eyebrows, disclosing neither what she saw in the distance nor what she was thinking deep down inside" (p. 111). Emma's gaze here in some sense anticipates the gaze of various figures in paintings by Edward Hopper, described by Marek Bieńczyk as "people utterly immersed in the transparent; though they look through the window, they see nothing other than its transparency."³⁵ Emma likewise seems to see nothing else. Her gaze pours through the pane's transparency and drifts aimlessly, far away, to nowhere. In precisely the same way, during her convalescence after the attack caused by reading Rodolphe's farewell letter: "lifting her hand to shade her eyes [...] she gazed into the distance, far away" (p. 195). The same dreamy state is manifested in Emma's eyes when her financial troubles worsen, with Lheureux coming to see her increasingly frequently, while "[t]o make some money she began selling off her old gloves, her old hats, any old junk" (p. 268), and the affair with Léon becomes full of "[a]n intolerable fatigue" that "overwhelmed her" (p. 280). At this exact point she goes to "open her window, breathe down the cold air, spread upon the wind the abundance of her hair, and, gazing up at the stars, dream of princely lovers" (p. 169). The transparent window-pane is once again revealed to be a pane that leads not to the open space of the world outside, but rather to a space of desire that exists in the imagination; of desires that cannot be fulfilled; hence the unceasing pain; hence the constant mourning for something that never existed; hence melancholia.

In order to maintain the illusion, in order to look at the world not as it is, but as we wish to perceive it, however, colored panes that tint reality with dreams prove indispensable. A character in Baudelaire's prose poem "Le Mauvais vitrier" (The Bad Glazier) desires such glass panes, and throws the eponymous glazier out on his ear because the latter does not possess "*Rose glasses, red glasses,*

35 Bieńczyk, *Oczy Dürera*, p. 362.

*blue glasses, magic glasses, glasses of Paradise! [...] glasses which make life look beautiful!*³⁶ Emma looks through such a colored pane in the morning after the ball at Vaubyessard in a passage unfortunately cut by Flaubert from the final version of the novel. It is worth quoting here because it clearly shows the obsession with windows on which Emma Bovary feeds. Thus, she comes out of the castle early in the morning for a walk in the garden. She quickly reaches the mysterious bower of a summer house exotically decorated with colored windows:

She looked out at the countryside through the colored glass. Through the blue pane everything seemed sad. A motionless azure haze diffused through the air, lengthened the meadows and pushed back the hills. The tips of the trees were velvety with a pale brown dust, dotted irregularly here and there as though there had been a snowfall, and far off in a distant field, a fire of dry leaves someone was burning seemed to have flames of wine alcohol. Seen through the yellow glass, the leaves on the trees became smaller, the grass lighter, and the whole landscape as though it had been cut out of metal. The detached clouds looked like eiderdown quilts of golden dust ready to fall apart; the atmosphere seemed on fire. It was joyous and warm in this immense topaz color mixed with azure. She put her eye to the green pane. Everything was green, the sand, the water, the flowers, the earth itself became indistinguishable from the lawns. The shadows were all black, the leaden water seemed frozen to its banks. But she remained longest in front of the red glass. In a reflection of purple that overspread the landscape in all directions, robbing everything of its own color, the trees and grass became almost gray, and even red itself disappeared. The enlarged stream flowed like a rose-colored river, the peat-covered flower beds seemed to be seas of coagulated blood, the immense sky blazed with innumerable fires. She became frightened. She turned away her eyes, and through the window with transparent panes, suddenly, ordinary daylight reappeared, all pale with little patches of sky-colored mist.³⁷

The quotation is long, but I have decided to include it for two reasons. Firstly, it is not familiar to Polish readers of *Madame Bovary*, as we do not possess a Polish-language critical edition of the novel. Secondly, we see here with bold clarity the meaning of the colored windows through which Emma desires to look at the world. Curiously, this act of gazing through tinted glass not only colors reality, but also influences the shapes and proportions of things. Everything located on the other side of the window becomes warped. The world ceases to be the world and becomes the play of lights, existing only subjectively. It is merely a function of the subject who sees it. A transparent windowpane, on the other hand, loses

36 Baudelaire, "The Bad Glazier," trans. Aleister Crowley, in: Crowley, *Early Writings of Aleister Crowley*, Enhanced Media 2016, p. 27 (first published in *Vanity Fair*, 1915).

37 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling and Paul de Man, ed. Margaret Cohen (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), pp. 289–290.

all of its charms in this context because it is by nature banal, ordinary; it changes nothing; it transfigures nothing. This is in fact the critical point of Emma Bovary's melancholic obsession with windows: looking at the world without seeing it; seeing only her own fantasy of it. The calamitous results of such gazing are the stockings of little Berthe, to M. Homais's horror stretched and full of holes (see p. 268), and finally the arsenic applied as a cure for *mal de vivre*, the disease of life (see p. 297).

We see nothing through that window then. There is nothing there, and nothing can be seen there. Emma's last gaze before her death is such a gaze full of emptiness. She is having convulsions, but Charles does not yet know that his wife has taken poison. He tries to help her. Emma, as her voice grows quieter, makes only one request of him: "Open the window... I'm stifling!" (p. 295).

8. To Look in a Tarnished Mirror (Baudelaire)

Mirrors [...] play a mute mysterious symphony for the eye.¹

“Les miroirs ternis” (tarnished mirrors) writes Baudelaire in his poem “*La Mort des amants*” (The Death of Lovers). A troubled mirror, as Bronisława Ostrowska had it in her interpretation (*zamaczone zwierciadło*), though we might also say a hazy, dim, or, in the words of translator Cyril Scott, a tarnished mirror² had previously appeared in the entry on melancholia in the tenth volume of the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* published in 1765. There we read that the soul of persons afflicted with melancholia “see objects only indistinctly, as if in a tarnished mirror or through cloudy water.”³ In Baudelaire’s “Les Phares” (The Beacons) Leonardo da Vinci is presented as a “dusky mirror” (trans. Roy Campbell⁴), while the lyrical persona of “Le Jeu” (Gambling) perceives, in a courtesan’s room, a row of mirror-like chandeliers “under dirty ceilings” (trans. William Aggeler⁵). All of these chandeliers and mirrors naturally fulfill their basic function: they reflect. The reflections, however, do little to please those gazing into the mirrors. In these dim mirrors there appear the reflections of what the authors of the entry from the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* would call melancholics, who perceive themselves and the world hazily, in a continual state of distortion. The melancholic adventure of reflections in *Les Fleurs du mal* nevertheless begins

1 “L’Invitation au voyage,” in: Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 33.

2 Baudelaire, “Śmierć kochanków,” trans. Bronisława Ostrowska, in *Kwiaty zła*, eds. Maria Leśniewska, Jerzy Brzozowski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), p. 325; Baudelaire, “The Death of the Lovers,” in: *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Cyril Scott (London: Elkin Mathews, 1909), p. 62.

3 Quoted in Patrick Dandrey, “Encyclopédisme mélancolique, ou d’un «miroir terni,»” in *Anthologie de l’humeur noir. Écrits sur la mélancolie d’Hippocrate à l’Encyclopédie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 754.

4 *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/105>.

5 *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1954), <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/165>. The Polish translation by Wiktor Gomulicki in fact changes the chandeliers to mirrors, while many English versions (including William Aggeler’s quoted here, but he at least correctly translates “quinquets” as oil-lamps) use the evasive non-translation “lustre.”

with a seemingly clean mirror. With a reflection in water, commanding us first and foremost to ponder the vanishing of time and the transience of things, and then allowing us to see the important connection between reflection, melancholia, and allegory.⁶ I am referring here, of course, to Andromache's "mirror, poor and sad" in "*Le Cygne*" (The Swan).⁷

In this "great Baudelaire poem"⁸ (in Marek Bieńczyk's assessment) various gazes and various reflections meet. Two among them are reconstructed by Baudelaire in detail at the very beginning of the poem:

Andromache, I think of you! – That little stream,
That mirror, poor and sad, which glittered long ago
With the vast majesty of your widow's grieving,
That false Simois swollen by your tears,
Suddenly made fruitful my teeming memory,
As I walked across the new Carrousel.
– Old Paris is no more (the form of a city
Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart).⁹

Everything thus begins with the story of Andromache and her disinheritance. After the death of her husband Hector and the fall of Troy, Andromache was taken captive by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who took her to Epir. In a foreign land, deprived of family and friends, Andromache is immersed in painful remembrance of the past. She attempts to recreate the Trojan landscape around her and continues to build Hector's tomb. Her tears flow straight into a stream which reminds her of the Simoeis river that flows past Troy. In Epir, however, there is only the false Simoeis, as the poet writes, an illusion of Simoeis, and Andromache's whole project is a mere pitiful simulacrum of a once-great city. Baudelaire is clearly making a reference here to the third canto of the *Aeneid*, as he underscores the wife's despair over her husband's empty tomb. The situation itself seems to be stamped with melancholia, in Andromache's case consisting in a failure to do the work of mourning, a refusal to return to reality. For that reason, she directs her gaze toward the past; toward what is gone and lost forever.

6 It should be added here that the emphasis on the connection between "the specific rhetoric of melancholy" and the allegory that is the main figure of that rhetoric was used by Patrick Labarthe to introduce his book *Baudelaire et la tradition de l'allégorie* (Genève: Droz, 1999), p. 11. Labarthe perceives a mixture of allegorical and melancholic elements beginning with the title of Baudelaire's book; see pp. 41–42.

7 Baudelaire, "The Swan," trans. William Aggeler, <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/220>.

8 Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (Warszawa: Sic!, 1998), p. 10.

9 Aggeler's translation.

There is, however, no hope that this imaginative withdrawal from the present will lead her back to what she has lost. Andromache probably realizes that looking backward can only lead to disappointment; that “gray lump of nausea at the heart of being” about which George Steiner wrote.¹⁰ For what is being thought about, what is being remembered, is no longer there, and will never be again. In this sense thought and remembrance are but futile activities, attempts to certify the agency of a subject deprived of the object of its pain. All of this therefore takes place only in the sphere of reflection, because Andromache’s thought does not pierce through to anything that exists in reality (neither her husband nor her city remaining in existence), but rather, reflecting from the mirror of the past, returns to the source of her suffering.

Thus in Andromache’s case, and in accordance with what Steiner says, being in the world is connected with the epistemology of the mirror:

It postulates a totality of experience whose only verifiable source is that of thinking itself. It is our minds, our neuro-physiology which project what we take to be the forms and substance of ‘reality.’ [...] All thought about the world, all observation and understanding would be reflection, mappings in a mirror.¹¹

That is precisely what Andromache does. Neither her gaze nor her thought wander toward something *there*; toward some place; because there is nothing left. All that exists is a pale reflection of the past, a pathetic simulacrum, in which the grandeur of Old Troy is reflected. For the same reason, the “little stream” changes in the poem into a “mirror, poor and sad,” and the woman inclined over it evokes the most typical images of shrinking and inward-looking melancholy figures. Thought that is a reflection of bygone times is like the image reflected in a mirror: in both cases at the center of cognition there is only the subject, alone and abandoned. This narrow link between reflection and thought escapes notice in the Polish language and becomes rather abstract. In the language of Baudelaire, as in English, matters are altogether different. The nouns “réflexion” and “reflection” both refer to the physical phenomenon and to the intellectual process of turning thought back toward one idea in order to grasp it more profoundly.¹² In the first verse of “Le Cygne” we thus find a whole series of reflections: 1) the past

10 George Steiner, “Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought,” *Salmagundi*, No. 146/147 (2005), p. 21.

11 Steiner, p. 22.

12 See *Le Nouveau Petit Robert. Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, eds. Josette Rey-Debove and Alain Rey (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 1993), entry for “réflexion.”

is reflected in the present via Andromache's thought and her painful remembrance of loss; 2) the present is a reflection of the past in its material dimension through a reconstruction of space, a simulacrum created by this loving woman; 3) finally, harried Andromache's face is reflected in the waters of the Simoeis.

The reflections, however, do not end there, since the beginning of the second stanza informs us of yet another: "[That false Simoeis] / Suddenly made fruitful my teeming memory [...]" The lyrical persona who appeared at the very beginning of the poem ("Andromache, I think of you!") thus reminds the reader of his presence. Once again, we see a knot that ties thinking to reflection. The lyrical persona remembers Andromache and recognizes himself in her situation. In this sense the woman is a reflection of him; one returning from the past. The vectors of repetition, however, cannot be fully reconciled with each other. After all, Andromache lost Troy, and with it her family, which she in a sense managed to reconstruct, and to which she raised a monument. The lyrical persona, i.e., the poet, while he has lost his Paris in a sense ("Old Paris is no more"), its reconstruction will be purely intellectual in character. This persona does not rebuild anything literally. He is condemned to reminisce over his loss, finding emblems of what is gone (the remains of old Paris) and excavating their faded meaning. The symbol of this search is the eponymous swan, about which Baudelaire wrote in his letter to Victor Hugo of 7 December 1859:

I was determined to express, by means of brevity, how many resonances can be contained in one case, one image, and how the sight of a suffering animal can push the soul toward all living things, which we love and which are absent, which are suffering, toward all those who are deprived of something that cannot be recovered.¹³

This is yet another reflection. Baudelaire is not so much looking at the swan as looking at himself within it. The swan, like the poet, has been disinherited; lost the space where it felt at ease, and carries it only in its heart, "homesick for its fair native lake [...]"¹⁴ In the world wherein it finds itself, however, the swan, just like Andromache in Epir or Baudelaire walking around Paris, finds only lopsided emblems of a lost world: the city's cobblestones instead of the soft earth, gutters and dust instead of the lake. The swan, however, is not only a disinherited bird, but also, as Baudelaire suggests in the above letter to Victor Hugo, a symbol of all forms of disinheritance. It is surely not irrelevant that in French, *le cygne* (the swan) is a homonym of *le signe* (the sign). The swan is thus both simply a swan

13 Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, edited with commentary by Claude Pichoux and Jérôme Thélot (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 178.

14 Aggeler's translation.

and something more than a swan: it represents both itself and something else. This becomes very marked at the point where the lyrical persona lets the swan speak, complaining: “Rain, when will you fall? Thunder, when will you roll?”¹⁵ The prosopopeia thus employed make us aware, as Jean Starobinski has underscored, that the bird is above all “a figure of loss, separation, deprivation, futile impatience.”¹⁶ The swan (le cygne), as a sign (le signe), therefore means something different and something more than what it denotes, because in the poem, it becomes another figure of melancholia; yet another allegory of melancholia, because that is precisely the figure in use here.

Baudelaire employs this allegorical logic of reflections, which in fact orders the whole poem, most transparently in the stanza that opens the second part of the work:

Paris changes! but naught in my melancholy
Has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone,
Old quarters, all become for me an allegory,
And my dear memories are heavier than rocks.¹⁷

Here we find a comparison in which Baudelaire unhesitatingly superimposes melancholia on allegory and reflection; above all, on allegory. The connection between the two is underscored by their rhyme, a link unfortunately not conveyed as strongly in this reasonably faithful English rendering, since the stress in both words falls on the first syllable and only the final unstressed vowel in fact rhymes. We know to some extent the reason Baudelaire decided to marry melancholy with allegory from the meaning of the eponymous swan. On further examination the problem becomes somewhat more profound; at the heart of the matter, we find more than disinheritance.

Melancholia originates, in this case, from the painful experience of the lack of proportion between the objective time of industrial change (“Paris changes!”) and the subjective time of intimate experience (“but naught in my melancholy / Has stirred!”). The former is out of control, constantly eluding our grasp, and therefore impossible to catch up with. Paris in the mid-nineteenth century ceases to resemble its previous self: some buildings are collapsing, giving way to others; barracks rise up in various parts of the city and quickly disappear because construction is happening everywhere. Haste is required.

15 Aggeler’s translation.

16 Jean Starobinski, *La Mélancolie au miroir. Trois lectures de Baudelaire* (Paris: Julliard, 1997), p. 73.

17 Aggeler’s translation.

The intimate and subjective form of time is somehow muffled, rather timid, shy about demanding a place for itself. That place consists of the enclaves of what remains of the old Paris; what has not yet been razed or obscured. It is the time of an unhurried walk; a melancholy walk because after all, remembrance of the past combined with slowness is one of the most typical markers of melancholia. The melancholic does not hurry: he wanders and looks for a place for himself. More than arriving at his desired destination, he is interested in the act of searching, erring, finally, wasting time. For these very reasons, allegory appears within the circle of melancholy. The poetic persona, in his ramblings, encounters fragments of what Paris used to be (“palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone, / Old [suburbs]”) and wants to save them from the destructive operations of objective time. He contemplates them and treats these fragments as traces of an irreversibly lost world. In this way, they cease to signify what they have hitherto signified (ruins, remnants to be gotten rid of), and begin to represent something greater or something different (the old world). They become an allegorical reflection of what the poet has lost.¹⁸

We thus come to the third crucial piece in this puzzle: reflection. In a similar context, Jean Starobinski has written that “allegory in this sense represents the apex of melancholy: it is obviously a way of conjuring to a halt the passage of time and the flow of images of destruction, but that involves a simultaneous pause in our entire life and casting on ourselves and on the world the gaze of Medusa.”¹⁹ As we know, Medusa’s gaze has the power to turn people to stone. Starobinski here refers to a kind of attempt by the subject to see itself reflected in the world, which leads to the fixation of the world, its solidification in the form of a fossil that represents the hypostasis of that subject. This gives rise to Baudelaire’s forceful comparison: “my dear memories are heavier than rocks.” He chooses the rags of reality in order, via the reflection in them of his memories and desires, to endow them with meaning other than those they possess. It is no longer clear whether these shreds of reality reflect a long-lost world, in which case allegory would be a reflection of reality, or the persona, the subject who is remembering that world, in which case allegory would be a reflection of the

18 This aspect of allegory, among others, has been observed by Tzvetan Todorov, with reference to the thought of Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger; see *Théories du symbole* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), p. 258.

19 Starobinski, *La Mélancolie au miroir*, p. 75.

cognitive subject's present reality.²⁰ In any case, allegory is impossible without this bizarre and highly melancholic logic of reflections.

In the case of "Le Cygne" that logic is relatively easy to trace. Only the juxtaposition of the different kinds of time (past and present tense and objective and subjective time) slightly complicates the reflection itself. As a result, melancholia actually appears within the poet's circle of interests. Matters complicate greatly, however, when in juxtaposition with the "mirror, poor and sad" of "Le Cygne," so easily redirecting our gaze toward other figures of disinheritance, we consider the anxiety elicited by a reflection that neither redirects nor allows itself to be penetrated. It stands fixed on the path of the cognitive subject and causes confusion because the subject wants to get to the heart of the matter, the essence of existence, which nonetheless appears unattainable. He is therefore condemned to a flat, superficial image; to hovering above the surface of phenomena; and to perceiving only, as in the prose poem "Les Yeux des pauvres" (The Eyes of the Poor), the "dazzling surfaces of mirrors [...]."²¹ This epidermal interchangeability of images once more forces us to rethink the problem of allegory, which here suddenly loses its transcendental imprimatur. Let us step back for a moment, however.

The problem we have been discussing in fact appears in the poem "L'Homme et la mer" (Man and the Sea), in which we read:

Free man, you will always cherish the sea!
The sea is your mirror; you contemplate your soul

20 Pascal Maillard has written about the temporal and spatial dimension of Baudelaire's allegory ("L'Allégorie Baudelaire. Poétique d'une métaphore du discours," *Romantisme*, No. 107 [2000], p. 38): "The privilege of allegory, which does not possess the symbol, is based on the fact that it allows us to cross the mirror of the process of meaning to reach the depths of time and space." Baudelaire himself suggests this trope when, in *Les Paradis artificiels* (The Artificial Paradises), he joins the allegorical use of reflection to melancholy: "Hashish expands time and space, two ideas that are always linked, but which the mind now faces without sadness or fear. The mind gazes with a certain melancholy savor through the depth of the years gone by, audaciously plunges into infinite horizons." Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises*, trans. Stacy Diamond (Ann Arbor: Carol Publ. Group, 1996), p. 65. Solger wrote about this in 1815 in his dialogue *Erwin*: "an allegorical work always has more to say than can be found within the confines of its relation to the present, but yet nothing other than that which it carries within itself and develops in a living form." Solger, *Erwin. Vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1815).

21 Baudelaire, *Petits Poèmes en prose*, in *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1869), vol. IV, pp. 75–77.

In the infinite unrolling of its billows;
Your mind is an abyss that is no less bitter.²²

In this case, the mirror in which man examines himself is the sea. The reflection is not an exact one, however, since he contemplates his soul “[i]n the infinite unrolling...” (*le déroulement infini de sa lame* in the French). Baudelaire here attempted to ripple the surface of the water; to distort the image reflected in it. We should remember that in “Le Cygne,” there was reference to the lack of correspondence between objective and subjective time. Here that lack finds its way into the space between what is reflected and the reflection itself, which distorts it and reshapes it. In that sense, a reflection is never an ideal representation, and its allegorical character loses some of its transparency. There is no unambiguous link between the reflection or mirroring of an idea, as an abstract concept, and an idea that has passed through the process of reflection or its equivalent. Thus Baudelaire complicates a relationship that appeared clear in the theory of allegory. Baudelaire goes one step further. Not only does the metonymic relation between the reflection and the reflected cease to be clear, but the latter also loses definition. In the second and third stanzas of the poem we read:

You like to plunge into the bosom of your image;
You embrace it with eyes and arms, and your heart
Is distracted at times from its own clamoring
By the sound of this plaint, wild and untamable.
Both of you are gloomy and reticent:
Man, no one has sounded the depths of your being;
O Sea, no person knows your most hidden riches,
So zealously do you keep your secrets!²³

It is true that the sea submerges itself “into the bosom of [its] image,” but its mirrored surface makes it impossible for the human being to conduct a similar exploration. He may certainly have an inkling of the mysterious underwater space, but has no access to it, remaining at the surface and perceiving only his own, distorted reflection. The mechanism also operates in the other direction: the human being also contains enigmatic spaces, there is no way of reaching them; they cannot be fathomed. Thus the gaze merely drifts across the surface, without reaching the heart of the matter. If we transfer this to the mechanism of allegorical reading, which, thus far, was clearly linked with the reflected image, then we shall see that Baudelaire has significantly modified the function of that

22 Aggeler’s translation.

23 Aggeler’s translation.

mechanism. In the case of Andromache, the reflection referred to her lost Troy; in the swan's case, to the lost lake; but here it is unable to penetrate to anything deeper. In an allegory, we look for equivalences, generally conventional equivalences, between the material signifier and the abstract signified. In a letter to Alphonse Toussenel of 21 January 1856, Baudelaire, elaborating on his views of allegory as equivalence, mentions, among other things, "form shaped according to an idea."²⁴ The trope we are considering here is thus understood as a kind of material reinforcement of a non-material concept. What is more, where in the case of a symbol the connection between form and idea is natural in character, and its interpretation spontaneous, in an allegory the situation is decidedly more complicated. Allegory is based not on intuition, but on a conditional relation; its deciphering thus demands plumbing the depths of the problem; penetrating to what is hidden, distant, covered or simply past, i.e., antecedent. That is also, let us recall, the reason allegory is temporal in nature, since it results from the superimposition of one perspective on another, the simulacrum on reality, the present on the past.²⁵ In "Le Cygne," too, we saw the very same kind of dependence at work. In the poem "L'Homme et la mer," this ceases to be so clear, as the material signifier does not refer directly to the abstract signified. The latter is hidden in the depths, incapable of being known, while the subject is condemned to drift along the surface of things. Allegory loses its precisely designated transcendental element, but does not cease to exist. Yet it no longer offers easy access to the idea. It is, rather, a confirmation of that idea's subtlety. In "L'Homme et la mer" we find neither a gauche naïve relationship between signified and signifier, nor a belief in the presence of a meaning that welds together the scattered elements of reality. For that reason the reflection here is disturbed by the incessant flow of the waves.

A similar mechanism appears in "Portraits de maîtresses" (Portraits of Mistresses) in *Paris Spleen*. There the poet observes:

The story of my love is like an endless voyage on a surface as pure and polished as a mirror, dizzily monotonous, reflecting all my feeling and my movements with the ironic exactness of my own conscience, so that I could not allow myself an unreasonable move or emotion without immediately beholding the dumb reproach of my inseparable spectre.²⁶

24 Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, p. 121.

25 This element in the definition of allegory is crucial for Paul de Man; see "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in: *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 187–228.

26 Baudelaire, "Portraits of Mistresses," in *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, trans. Arthur Symons, ed. Thomas Robert Smith (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919), p. 79.

Here, the surface of the mirror is monotonous and the reflection induces fatigue. The lover admits to feeling a love that runs only skin deep. There can be no deep exploration here, nor may one even plunge into the bosom of an image, since there is no depth whatsoever. We should in this instance take note of the fact that the allegorical reflection, albeit deprived of depth, is here accompanied by irony, which plays an active role in deconstructing the allegory.²⁷ Tradition, poetic and other, would have us seek a hidden meaning in love; a transcendental signified; an abstract idea to which the material sign leads. In this context, love is always allegorical, and allegory always amorous. That principle may be demonstrated by this passage from “Le Jet d’eau” (The Fountain).

Moon, singing water, blessed night,
Trees that quiver round about us,
Your innocent melancholy
Is the mirror of my love.²⁸

This projection of the lover’s state of mind sees him perceive what he feels manifested in his natural surroundings. In that sense, the moon and night are not only phenomena caused by the movement of the earth; water is not only a natural resource; and trees are not of interest to the dendrologist alone: all of these objects shift to a different, poetic dimension. What moves them there is language: apostrophes, personification and epithets, but above all allegory. In fact, the objects enumerated in “Le Jet d’eau” are endowed with an attribute that only the human gaze can bestow on them; they are melancholy. In effect, the moon, water, night and trees begin to mean something more than they denote. For that reason, they are also able to become signs of love. The lover here makes use of his own transposition to express his own feelings. Nevertheless, in the “Portraits de maitresses,” the lyrical persona questions that hidden meaning, thereby stripping love of its aspirations and allegory of its balance. The sign remains, but if it is limited to encompassing only itself, deprived of its metaphysical underpinning, its power is greatly compromised.

On the other hand, we encounter here the fatigue, reluctance and apathy referred to above. For that reason, the surface of the mirror in “Portraits de maitresses” is “monotonous.” Looking into the eyes of Feline, another mistress, this from the prose poem “L’Horloge” (The Clock), is no less monotonous. Deep

27 Maillard has written on the connection of allegory with irony in the context of “Heautontimoroumenos.” See “L’Allégorie Baudelaire,” p. 43.

28 Aggeler’s translation.

within her eyes the lover finds more of the same, seeing time wandering into Eternity:

in the depths of her adorable eyes I always tell the time distinctly, always the same, a vast, a solemn hour, large as space, without division of minutes or of seconds, — an immovable hour which is not marked on the clocks, yet is slight as a sigh, is rapid as the lifting of a lash.²⁹

That only seems to be a virtue. The lover immediately defines his utterance as a “really meritorious madrigal, Madam, and just as flamboyant as yourself”³⁰; the “Eternity” in the eyes of Feline is thus studied and artificial. It is an imitation of Eternity, which only masks the fact that there is really nothing hidden behind those eyes. His praise thus turns into “a bit of garish gallantry,”³¹ for in fact nothing more banal could possibly be devised. The lover must finally admit that his mistress either conceals nothing within herself, or conceals an “Eternity” that in this reckoning is just as dull and meaningless. In either case, however, the allegorical nature of love or the amorous nature of allegory becomes somehow crooked.

A similar weariness, resulting from the continued mirroring of the same thing, appears in “Le Voyage” in *Les Fleurs du mal*:

Bitter is the knowledge one gains from voyaging!
The world, monotonous and small, today,
Yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our image:
An oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!³²

Baudelaire here removes all doubt: from the incessant play of reflections arises apathy, a melancholic state of weariness caused by the continual appearance of the same thing. It appears in this case that the reflection no longer conveys new knowledge of what it reflects. It is merely a simple repetition, bereft of cognitive consequences. Thus reality appears barren, always the same; and we may therefore ask to what purpose anything should be reflected. The world is a “desert of ennui” because nothing new happens in it, but there is still an “oasis of horror” in that desert, namely reflection. If life is an assortment of useless junk, as in the poem “Spleen” (“I have more memories than if I’d lived a thousand years...”), stirring disgust and eliciting a frown, there is little point in reflecting and multiplying that. Zero multiplied is still zero. This is life as a desert.

29 Baudelaire, trans. Symons, p. 69.

30 Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Varèse, p. 30.

31 Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Varèse, p. 30.

32 Aggeler’s translation.

In all the above examples (“L’Homme et la mer,” “Portraits des maîtresses,” “L’Horloge,” “Voyage”), melancholia results not so much from the allegorical representation of lost space or time as from a lack of faith in the complete success of such representation or, indeed, from a reluctance to repeat anything. In “Le Cygne” it was still possible to master loss. Baudelaire, however, does not address the question as to what should be done this time because the answer would force him to bring his accusation to bear on writing. In fact, for Baudelaire allegory is identical to poetic genius, indeed to literature itself. In *Les Paradis artificiels* Baudelaire writes that “allegory, this most spiritual genre which clumsy painters have made us habitually disdain, [...] is truly one of poetry’s primitive and most natural forms [...]”³³ From this perspective the act of writing is nonsensical, deeply aporetic. It ceases to guarantee anything, but its interruption is tantamount to being plunged into an uncomfortable silence. To abjure writing is to consent to melancholia, threatening the subject’s health and identity.

Reluctance to speak and the negation of speech may drive the subject to madness, or into a dark depression from which it is then impossible to extract himself. For that reason, it is above all necessary to speak and write, in order to obtain liberation. Kristeva adds this, citing the categories of Aristotle, in an interview entitled “Les Abîmes de l’âme” (Abysses of the Soul): “In the final analysis, depression is located at the threshold of creativity.”³⁴ That is also why Baudelaire writes, though he has already lost the hope that writing will lead to something else, enabling him to discover some truth or allowing him to feel at home in the world. Nothing of the kind will happen. Writing is a search for further reflections, which are like glimmering precious stones or a mirror standing against the wall. If we break open one such stone, it ceases to shimmer, but we also find nothing inside it. If we stand behind the mirror, then we will not see the reflection, but neither shall we penetrate to any depth. Neither can a man looking at a reflection in water penetrate to any depth. For all we know, there may be something there in the depths, but the human gaze will never reach it. Allegorical reflection here becomes allegorical wandering amongst forms, eliciting boredom, just as in the poem “L’Amour du mensonge” (The Love of Lies):

I know that there are eyes, most melancholy ones,
In which no precious secrets lie hidden;

33 Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels* (Paris: Éditions Baudinière, 1900), pp. 43–44.

34 Dominique-Antoine Grisoni, “Les Abîmes de l’âme,” interview with Julia Kristeva, *Magazine Littéraire*, October–November (2005), p. 27.

Lovely cases without jewels, locket without relics,
Empty and deeper than you are, O Heavens!³⁵

“Most melancholy ones” is an expression of awareness that what needs to be mourned is not loss but rather the cruel fact that there is nothing but loss. Thus we read in the same poem of the “boredom of your gaze”; while elsewhere, in “Une Martyre” (A Martyr), Baudelaire stresses:

[...] empty of thoughts,
A stare, blank and pallid as the dawn,
Escapes from the upturned eyeballs.³⁶

In these poems the meaning of allegory shifts from a form entangled in a system of thorny and self-contained reflections to a form whose one remaining perceptible feature is its flitting across the surface, a state of doubtful equilibrium between fatigue and the need for one more reflection.

It soon becomes clear, however, that nothing more can be reflected, since everything has been devoured by the melancholy void, which, like a black hole, has absorbed every kind of matter. This allegorical annihilation is revealed in “Un Voyage à Cythère” (A Voyage to Cythera), a poem that inscribes itself in the tradition of nineteenth-century re-interpretation of the meaning of the island of love. For many Romantic (and other) texts in French literature, Jean-Antoine Watteau’s painting entitled *Pèlerinage à l’île de Cythère* (Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera) represents an important point of reference. There is nothing astonishing in the picture, which is maintained entirely in the *fête galante* style, dazzling with its lighthearted atmosphere of romance, pleasure, and a certain ambiguity. On the left side of the canvas we see a crowd of lovers arriving on Cythera, longing to experience the delights of love under the watchful and understanding eye of Venus, whose statue is to be seen slightly higher and to the right of them. Chubby angels soar above their heads. On the right side of the canvas we see three couples, usually interpreted as constituting an allegory for the three stages of aristocratic seduction. There are clouds on the horizon, clouds which will soon disperse; the capering of the angels in the sky gives the impression of a game with the wind. In short, at first glance there is neither a hint of melancholy nor any complicated reflections here, unless perhaps, using our imaginations, we count the reflections, filled with desire, of alluring shapes in eyes that seek them out. It is also hard to speak of any deliberate allegorical layer in the image, in

35 Aggeler’s translation.

36 Aggeler’s translation.

which we find rather a somewhat stereotypically presented scene of eighteenth-century courtliness. It is in reference to that context that Gérard de Nerval mentions the painting in his novella *Sylvie* (1853),³⁷ and Paul Verlaine invokes it in his poetry collection *Fêtes galantes* (1869). Those are not, however, the works that set the tone for the nineteenth-century re-interpretation of Watteau's painting. That honor goes to the poem "Watteau," published by Théophile Gautier in his book *La Comédie de la Mort* (The Comedy of Death, 1838), and above all to an article by the Goncourt brothers.

Edmond and Jules Goncourt published an essay entitled "La Philosophie de Watteau" (The Philosophy of Watteau) in the issue of *L'Artiste* dated 7 September 1856, which had the effect of leading to Watteau's being defined in the nineteenth century as a melancholic painter. What had previously been viewed as an ambiguous joke, a form of frivolous amusement, the brothers Goncourt defined as "poetic love, love that dreams and reflects, modern love, with its aspirations and its crown of melancholy."³⁸ They also perceived in the painting "a kind of infectious, charming and sweet sadness [which] permeates frivolous amusements" and described the work "as a game and diversion for suffering thought, as the toys of a sick child who must die."³⁹ In their view, *Gilles*, another Watteau painting, from the period 1718–1719, is also marked by melancholy, pulsating from the dark eyes of the eponymous figure.⁴⁰ The Goncourt brothers thus endowed particular elements of the painting with new meaning, subjecting them to Romantic re-interpretation. The sensuous wind thus became the herald of encroaching catastrophe, and the clouds that had previously nonchalantly drifted along the horizon began to brood ominously over the pilgrims, who hide in loving embraces from death, which plagues them at every step. Every joy is thus underpinned by sorrow, and the worm eats unrelentingly away at even the healthiest body. The procession of love is transformed, in the nineteenth century, into a crowd of men and women condemned to death.

37 Gérard de Nerval, *Les filles du feu: Angélique, Sylvie, Chansons et légendes du Valois, Jemmy, Octavie, Isis, Corilla, Émilie: Les chimères* (Paris: Slatkine, 1965), p. 47.

38 Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, "La Philosophie de Watteau," *L'Artiste*, 7 September (1856), p. 129.

39 Goncourt, "La Philosophie de Watteau."

40 This current was in fact detected by Joris-Karl Huysmans, who christened Watteau "the melancholy inventor of dark eyes that burn though there is no flame in them, and lips simultaneously vexatious and cold" ("Le Geindre," in: *Croques parisiens* [Paris: Henri Vatou, 1880], p. 46).

It appears that with “Un Voyage à Cythère,” Baudelaire inscribes himself precisely in that tradition, or rather extracts from it its most radical consequences. In the poem, a ship arrives at the island, but the subject, a sailor, finds on land only the remains of bygone splendor and the hanging corpse of a former servant, or so we may surmise, of the queen of love. Unlike the Goncourt brothers, who held Watteau’s colorful painting before their eyes and made an effort to fully interpret it, perceiving the concealed layers of sadness and melancholy in it, however, Baudelaire sees nothing, as he has nothing even to look at. He sees the hanged man, whose “eyes were two holes,”⁴¹ perhaps the most eloquent possible expression of the fact that his gaze no longer conceals anything. An equally radical, empty allegory is presented in the prose poem “Le Fou et la Vénus” (Venus and the Fool) in *Le Spleen de Paris*. The text presents a man, a king’s professional fool, charged with keeping him amused, who desires to be loved. In the park, “beneath the burning eye of the sun,”⁴² a detail of some relevance in a work seemingly tinged with neo-Platonism, he looks at a statue of the goddess of love and laments his lot. Both Venus and the sun are thus, for this fool, signs of a different reality, one that contradicts his “sadness and [...] frenzy.”⁴³ It is quickly revealed, however, that the solar metaphor and the familiar, centuries-old allegory of love are mere illusions, costumes displaced from their metaphysical context and sewn together by the man only in order to delude and deceive other people. For that reason, the poem ends in such a way as to remove all possible doubt: “The implacable Venus gazed into I know not what distances with her marble eyes.”⁴⁴ Those eyes, then, are like the empty eye-sockets of the hanged man in “Un Voyage à Cythère,” for nothing may be seen with “marble eyes.” The same thing is true of “Les Aveugles” (The Blind):

Their eyes, from which the divine spark has departed,
Remain raised to the sky, as if they were looking
Into space: one never sees them toward the pavement
Dreamily bend their heavy heads.⁴⁵

Like the empty sockets of the hanged man or Venus’s marble eyes, however, the eyes of the blind cannot see anything through their filmy coating, or, if we allow ourselves a harmless play on words, they can only see nothing.

41 Aggeler’s translation.

42 Baudelaire, trans. Frank Pearce Sturm, in: *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, ed. Thomas Robert Smith (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919), p. 114.

43 Baudelaire, trans. Frank Pearce Sturm, in: *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*.

44 Baudelaire, trans. Frank Pearce Sturm, in: *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*.

45 Aggeler’s translation.

Likewise, on Cythera there remains nothing that can be harnessed within the above logic of reflection. In this case, the void has materialized. For that reason, allegory here is not based on the reflection of another's situation, as in "Le Cygne," or on maintaining faith in some deep substratum though it remains unreachable, as in "L'Homme et la mer", but on the painful experience of nothingness, no longer conditioned by anything:

– The sky was charming and the sea was smooth;
For me thenceforth all was black and bloody,
Alas! and I had in that allegory
Wrapped up my heart as in a heavy shroud.⁴⁶

The shroud in the French original is "thick" (*épais*) rather than "heavy," but the effect is at least equally lugubrious. Everything here becomes shadow, blackness, and the subject is, as a result, unable to distinguish shapes clearly. He thus finds his way gropingly, circuitously, around the remains of a long-vanished world, knowing that everything he finds there once had meaning, but today bears the memory only of death. Nothing can be learned even from the eyes of the hanged man, since only his eye-sockets remain. It is as though all memory had taken flight, and the whole world perished. That is why looking for a meaning for the allegory seems pointless, since it is fulfilled in the emptiness of the present moment. There is nothing more. As a consequence, form itself is subject to devastation and devaluation. The world swarms with signs, oddments and scraps that have lost their metaphysical investiture; nobody even remembers what they were supposed to refer to, a fact forcibly expressed by the lyrical persona of "Spleen (J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans)":

A heavy chest of drawers cluttered with balance-sheets,
Processes, love-letters, verses, ballads,
And heavy locks of hair enveloped in receipts,
Hides fewer secrets than my gloomy brain.
It is a pyramid, a vast burial vault
Which contains more corpses than potter's field.⁴⁷

These trinkets should elicit memories. They should bring the past to life and fill up the void of the present, just as in "Le Cygne." Nothing of the kind, however, takes place here. They are only the "corpses" of former things; memory burned to ashes. Such "corpses" no longer have any meaning whatsoever for the rememberer; they are displaced from their own past, and mean only what they appear

46 Aggeler's translation.

47 Aggeler's translation.

to mean, i.e., they refer only to themselves as objects, not to experiences or values that accompanied them in the past. Baudelaire confirms this in the poem “Ciel brouillé” (Cloudy Sky):

One would say that your gaze was veiled with mist;
Your mysterious eyes (are they blue, gray or green?)
Alternately tender, dreamy, cruel,
Reflect the indolence and pallor of the sky.⁴⁸

The epithets attached to the sky here cast a doubt over its religious meaning. The sky was the highest arbiter of human quarrels, and a fictive space into which people projected their hopes. Baudelaire’s lyrical persona, on the other hand, is like the vagrants in “Bohémiens en voyage” (Gypsies Travelling), who wander “[s]urveying the heavens with eyes rendered heavy / [b]y a mournful regret for vanished illusions.”⁴⁹ The original text refers to these illusions as “chimères,” so that the sky is associated with chimeras, unfounded desires. The disappearance of the sky as the highest authority removes the reasoned order of life on earth, transforming it into a procession of forms, variable and interchangeable, though without much significance for human existence. Similar observations led Patrick Labarthe to write that in Baudelaire’s work, “the soul is only a mirror of an empty sky,” and the world, “deprived of the guarantee of the Absolute [...] becomes a theater of multiplication of signs impossible to restrain; the onslaught of chance elicits, so to speak, a scattering of sense.”⁵⁰ In “Ciel brouillé” we thus see mingled sorrow at the loss of an important reference point, e.g. sight shrouded in fog and the indistinction of the related emotions: from tenderness to remoteness, with consideration of the optical phenomenon of reflection: the lover looks at himself in the eyes of his mistress, wherein the indifferent sky lies. In this context we must admit that Walter Benjamin is right to claim that “Baudelaire’s genius, which feeds on melancholy, is an allegorical genius.”⁵¹ Being a hostage to transience, he is preyed upon by loss and surrounded by scraps devoid of memory. Walter Benjamin continues his reflection in this vein and arrives at the following important remark:

The key to the allegorical form in Baudelaire is bound up with the specific signification which the commodity acquires by virtue of its price. The singular debasement of things

48 Aggeler’s translation.

49 Aggeler’s translation.

50 Labarthe, *Baudelaire et la tradition de l’allégorie*, p. 27.

51 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1999), p. 21.

through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities.⁵²

It is curious how the modalities of allegory change here. According to Walter Benjamin, the nineteenth-century allegory did not fully appreciate its material basis because what was primarily essential for that allegory was the sphere of ideas that it sought to command, hence the deficit, to remain within the context of economic associations, of the signifier, its depreciation. The comparison with a commodity turns out to be entirely legitimate, since the value of a commodity is determined not by its quality, the labor concealed within it, or the hopes connected with it, but the price established by speculation, which is the criterion of value. When prices undergo devaluation, however, goods lose their power, cease to be fetishes and become junk that anybody may indulge his desire for. The same holds for allegory and the mechanism of its functioning. It elicits a blush on the cheek of the cognitive subject for just as long as there exists certainty regarding its metaphorical validity. In this situation, things, i.e., signs, depreciate, it is true, but that is because they constitute merely a means of passage toward that which seems essential. If, however, the meaning ceases to be clear, the thing that suggests the clamor for it decreases, becoming a “corpse,” as in the above poem.

According to Walter Benjamin, the only salvation in such a case is a sincere search for newness: “This degradation, to which things are subject because they can be taxed as commodities, is counterbalanced in Baudelaire by the inestimable value of novelty. *La nouveauté* represents that absolute which is no longer accessible to any interpretation or comparison. It becomes the ultimate entrenchment of art.”⁵³ Newness nevertheless alters the logic of allegorical reflections. We recall that in “Le Cygne,” as well as such poems as “L’Homme et la mer” and “Un Voyage à Cythère,” allegory was inextricably linked to both the past and the present. Even the empty eye-sockets of the hanged man in “Un Voyage à Cythère” brought to mind the collapse of the previously existing myth of the isle of Venus. For Benjamin, on the other hand, newness posits a drastic rejection of the past. In that sense newness calls into question the experience and aura that Benjamin mentioned in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”⁵⁴

52 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 22.

53 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*.

54 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Marcus Paul Bullcock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), vol. IV, pp. 313–355. On this subject, see Karol Sauerland, “Przeżycie i doświadczenie, czyli jeszcze raz o Walterze Benjaminie,” in: *Od Diltheya do Adorna. Studia z estetyki niemieckiej* (Warszawa: PIW, 1986), pp. 149–166.

Communing with the past, once understood as tradition, that is, the accumulated experience of past generations, used to lead to a perception of things and people in their aura, in a symbiosis of the superficial and the deep. Newness, however, questions experience and replaces it with the isolated, immediate encounter; and aura is destroyed by shock, i.e., the sudden, unassimilable meeting with the absolute strangeness of the Other. Walter Benjamin was guided by a similar belief during the period of his work on German baroque drama. Building on his knowledge of that drama, he stresses in his fragmentary notes written in 1939, the year before “On Some Motifs”: “The Baudelairean allegory – unlike the Baroque allegory – bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay waste its harmonious structures.”⁵⁵ Perhaps this change of perspective really does constitute the antidote to the depreciation of the thing in Walter Benjamin’s conception. Baudelaire, however, in keeping with his “melancholy genius,”⁵⁶ reacts to the devaluation of meaning and the concomitant collapse of the thing with fatigue and fear of fruitlessly repeating the same thing over and over again.

Repulsion at repetition, in which the emptiness of that which is repeated is made manifest, in fact appears quite frequently in *Les Fleurs du mal* and determines the melancholy nature of the book. In the poem “Tu mettrais l’univers entire dans ta ruelle” (You Would Take the Whole World to Bed With You), we even find the following significant admonition, commanding us to question the meaning of further reflections:

Why are you not ashamed and why have you not seen
In every looking-glass how your charms are fading?⁵⁷

The melancholy nature of the reflection here no longer represents a sorrowful separation of signifier from signified; of form from idea. This time Baudelaire is not referring to an empty allegory. The subject here remains merely at the surface of phenomena, uninterested in whether the reflection possesses depth, or whether it refers to something besides itself. Here the point is rather the condition of what is reflected because if beauty, and, we may surmise, every other kind of thing, gets lost among the mirrors and the gazes that drift across the skin, its lustre is surely bound to be jeopardized. What shines in successive reflections may not be beauty anymore, or something may merely shine because the surface of the mirror is polished and shiny. The subject thus questions the unchanging nature of what is reflected. If the reflection loses its gloss and turns

55 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV, p. 174.

56 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV, pp. 95–6.

57 Aggeler’s translation.

pale, then it ceases to captivate, becomes incapable of eliciting new emotions and becomes dull. The subject eventually loses the pleasure of looking at new reflections, which, in his eyes, cease to opalesce and seize his attention.

Baudelaire remains with the one, petrified reflection that saddens him because he has already seen it; because nothing changes. In the end, he declares, as in “La Musique”: “dead calm, great mirror / Of my despair!”⁵⁸ Thus allegory, too, burns out, because the reflection ceases to refer to anything. Here we are no longer dealing with either the temporal distance that de Man mentioned in connection with allegory, or the metapoetic mechanism of meaning described by Solger and reinterpreted by Todorov. Allegory burns out, but melancholia waxes because not only does the sea become empty and thus deprived of the mysterious depths it still possessed in “L’Homme et la mer”, but the reflection also loses its power to endow things with meaning. The mirror that is the sea now reflects nothing but despair, which returns as despair to the despairing viewer; a perfect tautology, of no use to anyone.

The world is thus submerged in a night that allows no reflection; for the reflections that follow have no meaning. In “Le Possédé” (The Possessed One) we read that “[t]he sun was covered with a crape,” and the subject summons to “plunge your whole being into Ennui’s abyss[...].”⁵⁹ The black sun, associated most frequently and prominently, among nineteenth-century poems, with Nerval’s “El Desdichado,” also rose on the pages of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Baudelaire reminds us of the fact again in “Épigraphe pour un livre condamné” (Epigraph for a Condemned Book), wherein he defines his collection of poems as a “saturnine, / Orgiac and melancholy” book.⁶⁰ The reader is left to immerse his gaze in it (“But if [...] / Your eye can plunge in the abyss”), in order to become convinced of the depths of darkness and downheartedness he has in himself. This is the final reflection, with which Baudelaire condemns us to melancholia, refusing to let us free ourselves from the vicious circle of allegory.

58 Aggeler’s translation.

59 Aggeler’s translation.

60 Aggeler’s translation.

9. Through the Window and Back (Balzac, Baudelaire, Hasenclever)

I remember once in some public place, as I was pointing out to [Delacroix] a woman's face of uncommon beauty and melancholy expression, he condescended to admire its beauty, but said to me, with that characteristic laugh of his: 'How can you think that a woman could be melancholy?' thereby insinuating, no doubt, that women lack an essential something to be capable of experiencing the sentiment of melancholy.¹

In the first scene of the short story "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" (The Unknown Masterpiece), published by Honoré de Balzac in 1831, but set in the seventeenth century, we hear a conversation between two artists, François Porbus and Master Frenhofer, about a painting the former has painted. The picture depicts Mary of Egypt and is intended as a gift for Maria de Medici. The seriousness of the theme and the social position of its intended recipient do not constrain Frenhofer from speaking openly about his doubts regarding the painting. The work may be said to be successful, and yet he addresses Porbus frankly and confesses: "Your lady is assembled nicely enough, but she's not alive."² Frenhofer further observes that Porbus has sketched the profile beautifully and in accordance with the laws of anatomy, but he nevertheless asserts that "[s]he's a flat silhouette, a cutout who could never turn around or change position."³ Again, his perspective is offered without reproach, but the critic "could never [...] believe that the warm breath of life comes and goes in that beautiful body."⁴ Frenhofer eventually rolls out his heavy guns against Porbus: "The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet! [...] We must detect the spirit, the informing soul in the appearances of things and beings. [...] Neither painter nor poet nor sculptor may separate the effect from the cause, which are inevitably contained the one in the other."⁵

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- 1 Baudelaire: *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 385–386.
 - 2 Honoré de Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), p. 11.
 - 3 Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece."
 - 4 Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece (Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu) and Other Stories*, trans. Ellen Marriage (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901), p. 6.
 - 5 Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece (Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu)*, pp. 7–8.

At stake in this dispute, it would seem, are dissimilar views on beauty. Porbus, the painter of *Mary the Egyptian*, is an artist devoted to the most painstakingly detailed studies. He is thus passionately interested in anatomy, poring over textbooks and examining the pale blue blood vessels of his models. His gaze is far removed, however, from searching for what is individual and distinctive in the women who pose for him. Porbus has no feeling for minor blemishes, slight discoloration of the skin or subtle rings around the eyes. He does not perceive, because he does not wish to perceive, everyday imperfections, but attempts to create an ideal model based on what he has observed and read. He dismisses the accidental or fortuitous and focuses on the permanent. That is precisely the reason Frenhofer praises his flawless sketching and immaculate perspective, but is also concerned by the lack of life in the figures he paints. They are dolls, mannequins who fit perfectly into their moulds, but are never quickened by the breath of desire. In this sense, Porbus's workshop could be compared to a laboratory where experiments are carried out. After all, when conducting an experiment, it is vital to keep everything sterile and tidy, thus enabling the experiment's repetition. The success of an experiment consists in repetitions that elicit the same results; the exact same conclusion as before. The idea that governs his approach is the discovery of a pattern, a kind of magic formula. Porbus's practice seems to be an attack on that which is individual or different. As an artist, he seeks to put an end to the multiplicity of phenomena and variety of human types, and to bring them together to the sphere of the general. He therefore forgets about sensuality, the rise and fall of feelings, and uncertainty. In connection with this, beauty is, according to Porbus, merely the reflection of an unchanging idea, expressing itself in art by means of the symmetry and harmony of elements; their regularity and universality. He thus finds his idea, rather than life itself, to be fascinating and worthy of attention.

The way Porbus perceives the beautiful is fairly typical for the first half of the nineteenth century. It is possible to see Hegelian features in his attitude; it was Hegel who, in his writing on aesthetics, instructed readers to search for regularity and harmony in art. The task of a work of art was, in his view, to remove the accidental and to capture the object presented in its general aspect. For Hegel, beauty existed only in the idea, the embodiment of which art should be "the beautiful is characterized as the pure appearance of the Idea to sense."⁶ From there it is only one step further to the declaration that:

6 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), vol. I, p. 111.

Owing to this freedom and infinity, which are inherent in the Concept of beauty, as well as in the beautiful object and its subjective contemplation, the sphere of the beautiful is withdrawn from the relativity of finite affairs and raised into the absolute realm of the Idea and its truth.⁷

Beauty is thus something that escapes man. In order to see it, in sculpture, painting or poetry, we must renounce life, as that quality was referred to by Frenhofer in Balzac's story. Proportions turn out to be more important than desires, and the artist's subjectivism is fairly clearly limited by the imagined ideal. This does not of course mean a return of normative poetics. Neither Porbus nor Hegel suggests or imposes a particular means of expression. They do, however, fetter the artist to a chimera of an idea to which he is to subordinate his work. The purpose of art is the search for perfection. For that reason, it offers no place for either a free relationship to the object to be presented or for any kind of imperfection. The artist's eyes need to discern what is unchanging, symmetrical; that which may be measured and adjusted to a scale of perfection; a process that may in fact be repeated in more or less laboratory fashion, since the ideal does not change.

This very concept of the beautiful is subjected in Balzac to an incisive critique by Frenhofer. In his view, this type of belief leads down a blind alley because artists dismiss not only imperfect reality, but also the layers of mutable feelings inside each person. What does it matter that the Mary in Porbus's painting has perfect proportions, since they are so very unnatural that even today only plastic surgery could achieve them. Frenhofer does not glimpse life in the face of the woman on his friend's canvas, and he has the effrontery to demand it. In doing so, he manifests a rather different approach to the work of art and the beautiful. In his eyes, beauty has nothing to do with an unchanging ideal, but rather dwells in life. He therefore looks askance at the perfect face because he perceives no emotion in it, nor the color of the eyes, nor the mist of breath. This aesthetic turn that constitutes Frenhofer's contribution was much commented upon in the press in the middle of the nineteenth century and hailed by Théophile Gautier, among others.⁸ Michel Brix even declares that for Gautier "a thing is beautiful not because it possesses one of the attributes ascribed to the idea of Beauty in general, such as unity, universality, or harmony, but because it possesses the meaning that the artist is trying to illustrate."⁹ There are two issues here that demand some commentary.

7 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 115.

8 See Théophile Gautier, "Musée espagnol," *La Presse*, 27 August 1850.

9 Michel Brix, *Le Romantisme français. Esthétique platonicienne et modernité littéraire* (Louvain-Namur: Peeters, 1999), p. 202.

Firstly, this view finds that a thing becomes important by virtue of itself, rather than due to the idea of which it is supposed to be a mere representation. If the painter, often with relish, studies the anatomical details of his model; if he examines the bluish curves of her veins, he does so not in order to check whether they match the ideal drawing that can be found in a medical textbook. Instead, he heeds the delicate vibration of her pulse or smiles at the sight of her wrinkles because he perceives beauty in them. This is unquestionably a form of liberation from the shackles of the eternal idea that would not let Porbus see the woman in his model, but only the embodiment of perfect proportions. A painter who sees a woman will paint her face taut with emotion, where Porbus painted only a marble mask. Secondly, as aptly noted by Michel Brix, the role of the artist must be considered. The artist's presence is here pregnant with consequences because it is his vision that perceives emotions on the face and imperfections in the body, and his hand is tasked with presenting all of those in a sensuous form. The figure must come to life, whether in a painting or in poetry. He or she should breathe, blush and be moved. Beauty thus results not from the order of a centuries-old idea, but from the artist's sensitive gaze. At the same time, he is no longer looking toward eternity, but around himself. Beauty ceases to relate to ideal proportions or symmetry, and issues rather from the subjective feelings of the cognitive subject; a fact noted by Balzac in another work, *La Femme de trente ans* (The Thirty Year-old Woman):

There is no character in women's faces before the age of thirty. The painter discovers nothing there but pink and white, and the smile and expression that repeat the same thought in the same way – a thought of youth and love that goes no further than youth and love. But the face of an old woman has expressed all that lay in her nature; passion has carved lines on her features; love and wifeness and motherhood, and extremes of joy and anguish, have wrung them, and left their traces in a thousand wrinkles, all of which speak a language of their own; then is it that a woman's face becomes sublime in its horror, beautiful in its melancholy, grand in its calm. [...] An old face is the province of the poets among poets, of those who can recognise that something which is called Beauty, apart from all the conventions underlying so many superstitions in art and taste.¹⁰

We should take note here of the way the writer's gaze changes; the way it dispassionately glides across the pink skin of a girl and only pauses when it reaches the barely perceptible wrinkles of a mature woman. Youth in fact holds no interest for him, because it is always the same. Where the master painter Porbus would

10 Balzac, *A Woman of Thirty*, trans. Ellen Marriage (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901), pp. 202–203.

perhaps see an unvarying ideal, a beautiful shape or an affirmation of vitalism, the narrator of *La Femme de trente ans* sees only boring repetition, an absence of individuality. Even art cannot keep pace with that banality and reproduces nothing but little pictures of smiling, indistinct faces. Those faces lack character, and they lack life, because their owners are still only on life's threshold. The situation is completely different when the weary artist's gaze comes to rest on the face of a mature woman. Only then does the whole richness of life open up before his gaze with all of its delights, as well as its sorrows. Hence Balzac speaks of dread, melancholy and calm in one breath. For in fact what is less important than the wide range of these feelings is the simple fact of their variety. He no longer perceives a fixed ideal of beauty in the face of a grown woman, but rather a relative beauty, and therefore a more attractive beauty because it is unique. If he does not catch sight of it at the right moment, he will lose it forever. He will undoubtedly have many more chances to look at the faces of other women, perhaps even at that one face, but will never see the particular wry face or sad look he has missed.

In the same way, the poet strolling through the city in Baudelaire's poem "À une passante" (To a Passer-By) will never again meet the woman whom he might have loved. The moment he saw in her blue eyes "[t]he sweetness that enralls and the pleasure that kills"¹¹ was only one fleeting moment. The blue of that fleeting and changing gaze thus has nothing to do with the blue of Porbus's marble veins and unfeeling figures in "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu." Baudelaire's persona finds himself rather in a situation akin to that described by the narrator of *La Femme de trente ans*. His gaze is absorbed in something impermanent, quite different from fixed models of beauty. There is one more thing that seems worthy of emphasis here. Balzac claims that only "the poets among poets," who have freed themselves from all conventions and can speak with their own voices, are capable of perceiving this beauty which is so difficult to render. Baudelaire, on the other hand, writes about a rebirth taking place because of the woman's gaze: "Fleeting beauty / By whose glance I was suddenly reborn [...]"¹² Of crucial importance, then is the fleeting nature of the beautiful, but also the sensitivity of the artist who looks upon it, who is the only one capable of perceiving it.

In *Le Romantisme français. Esthétique platonicienne et modernité littéraire* Michel Brix presents the entire nineteenth century as caught in the clutches of the two above tendencies. We thus find, at first, a theory of immutable beauty constructed on Platonic foundations, closely linked with the harmony of elements

11 Aggeler's translation.

12 Aggeler's translation.

and appropriately selected proportions, a beauty that is completely ignorant of anything ephemeral, and that attaches no importance to the temperament of the artist. From the middle of the century onward, this theory is replaced by a modernist concept of beauty, which, for a change, places the accent on what is changeable or accidental, and which distinctly stresses the presence of the poet's or painter's gaze. A common trait of both aesthetics is the precise formulation by each of its object, the clear definition of the ideal of beauty. In both cases we know perfectly well what the artist's gaze is seeking. It nevertheless appears that these two rival aesthetics fail to exhaust the richness of the nineteenth century in this domain. We also encounter a third approach, in which neither the artist's position nor the notion of the beautiful itself is as clearly defined. In it, in fact, defining beauty is revealed to be impossible. The signal for this position is a fragment placed by Baudelaire in the "Squibs" section of his *Intimate Journals*. There, he discusses the indefinite idea of beauty that a drawing of a woman's head has elicited in his mind:

I have found a definition of the Beautiful, of my own conception of the Beautiful. It is something intense and sad, something a little vague, leaving scope for conjecture. I am ready, if you will, to apply my ideas to a sentient object, to that object, for example, which Society finds the most interesting of all, a woman's face. A beautiful and seductive head, a woman's head, I mean, makes one dream, but in a confused fashion, at once of pleasure and of sadness; conveys an idea of melancholy, of lassitude, even of satiety – a contradictory impression, of an ardour, that is to say, and a desire for life together with a bitterness which flows back upon them as if from a sense of deprivation and hopelessness. [...] But this head also will suggest arduous and passions – spiritual longings – ambitions darkly repressed – powers turned to bitterness through lack of employment – traces, sometimes, of a revengeful coldness [...] sometimes, also – and this is one of the most interesting characteristics of Beauty – of mystery, and last of all [...] of Unhappiness. I do not pretend that Joy cannot associate with Beauty, but I will maintain that Joy is one of her most vulgar adornments, while Melancholy may be called her illustrious spouse – so much so that I can scarcely conceive [...] a type of Beauty which has nothing to do with Sorrow.¹³

On the surface it seems that there is nothing new in this definition of beauty. Baudelaire appears to lay claim to the same ideas that were expressed in his poem "À une passante" and Balzac's *La Femme de trente ans*; on the surface because Baudelaire, who cited Gautier to emphasize that "the inexpressible does not

13 Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1957), pp. 11–12.

exist,”¹⁴ admits that his new ideal of beauty ought to contain some kind of “mystery.” that there is something “a little vague” something that leads to dreaming “in a confused fashion” for still more vagueness. It is thus a beauty impossible to define. The face of the woman in Baudelaire’s description should be spell-binding like the face mentioned in *La Femme de trente ans*, but Balzac, for his part, never paused in his writing to ponder the wonderful phenomenon of a face lined with wrinkles. Baudelaire, on the other hand, is quick to point out that his ideal contains something undefinable. He in fact does so at the very beginning of the passage. It is a beauty that seduces, but even Baudelaire is hard pressed to explain the reasons. One thing only is certain: this lack of resolution, this hesitation, indeterminacy and indefiniteness are closely related to sadness; to melancholy. Baudelaire is convinced that beauty cannot exist without a melancholic countenance. Only melancholy is worthy of being framed and presented as fascinating. He thus becomes one of the first who, in a manner that leaves no room for doubt, combines the feeling of melancholy with the experience of an ineffable beauty, which supplements the binary opposition of the above Platonic beauty and modernist beauty. While they may both be defined, the melancholic version of beauty eludes taxonomy.

9.1 Odds and ends, and looking into the void

In this context it is worth giving close consideration to Johann Peter Hasenclever’s 1846 painting *Sentimental Woman* (Düsseldorf, Stiftung Museum Kunst Palast). This canvas is a balance of a kitsch assortment of elements typically associated with melancholia in iconography and ineffable sad beauty. In the painting we see a woman supporting her head on her left arm, looking through her window at the moon, which is reflected in a tract of still water. In the room where the woman is sitting, we also notice wilted flowers, a letter from her beloved and two books: *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* and Claren’s *Mimili*. These slightly pretentious props are accompanied by the woman’s absent gaze and an aura of mourning for something that she never really possessed, but the signs of which surround her. The basic difficulty that the viewer of the painting encounters stems from the fact that it seems impossible precisely to define the woman’s emotional state. Her figure is somehow presented in suspension between the pole of repetition, drawn to our attention by the various odds and ends scattered about

14 Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–1976), vol. II, p. 118, quoted in Rosemary Lloyd, *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 166.

her, a remarkably typical feature of the iconographic tradition of melancholia, and the pole of difference, relating to the attempt to convey an utterly individual, unrepeatable state of melancholia; what the French call “*l'état d'âme*,” literally the state of the soul, idiomatically, state of mind.¹⁵ Both poles inscribe themselves in the typology of the concepts of beauty in the nineteenth century.

Repetition, in this case, represents a desire to capture the unchanging, the ahistorical; that which was found to be crucial both for Porbus's research in connection with his portrait of Mary the Egyptian and for Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics. Hasenclever avails himself of elements essential to the representation of melancholia with the intention of presenting an abstract idea of melancholia. It appears at first that he is not concerned with showing melancholia as a deeply felt emotional state experienced by the woman. That is why the picture includes the above clichés of melancholia, familiar in art since antiquity. First and foremost, we see the woman's characteristic pose, supporting her head with her left arm, and her tearful eyes turned toward the window, as though she sought to free herself from the closed, stifling, musty space of the room. That wistful face, resting on her arm, is a symbol of melancholia, familiar from as early as the stele on the tomb of Demokleides in the fourth century B.C.E.¹⁶ It is as frequently used in the nineteenth century as in ancient times, and descriptions of figures appearing thus submerged in melancholia turn up in numerous books from the period. We need only think here of *Madame Bovary* or Kraszewski's *Ulana*, whose eponymous heroine is described in precisely this manner after she has been abandoned by Tadeusz: “She sat by the window and looked through it, her head upheld by her arm, at the shimmering lake. Her look was one such as sees nothing, glassy, immobile, her eyes full of tears, which involuntarily, unperceived, fell from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.”¹⁷ We find in this extract almost all of the elements in the melancholy junk-shop. The woman's solitude, the gaze that looks intently out on the world, but in fact sees nothing: “[h]er look was one such as sees nothing.”¹⁸ Finally the tears, which confirm that the landscape that *Ulana* sees through the window is nothing but a reflection of her soul; her interior. The

15 Wojciech Bałus writes about these two poles and the indeterminacy that results from their collision in the aesthetic of melancholy in his book *Mundus melancholicus. Melancholiczny świat w zwierciadle sztuki* (Kraków: Universitas, 1996), p. 52.

16 See *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 49–50.

17 Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, *Ulana. Powieść poleska*, ed. Stanisław Burkot (Warszawa: LSW, 1985), p. 132.

18 Kraszewski, *Ulana*.

woman in *Sentimental Woman* is depicted in precisely the same pose, a clear signal of her melancholic disposition. Obsessively looking through the window thus reveals itself to be a silent scream, a cry for help that no one can hear.

That scream expresses a refusal to be imprisoned in a closed room teeming with all sorts of junk that brings to mind a painful loss. On the left side we see a bouquet of wilted flowers. Their red color leads us to think as much of the passion that once burned as of the despair with which every love is underpinned.¹⁹ These particular flowers also seem to fit perfectly with the widespread nineteenth-century belief that “a kind of infectious, charming and sweet sadness [always] permeates frivolous amusements,” as stressed by the Goncourt brothers when they re-interpreted the ambiguous paintings of Watteau, seemingly awash with light-hearted scenes.²⁰ The oppressive atmosphere is further intensified by the letter from the beloved, abandoned near the flowers, and his portrait, on the other side of the window frame. The sentimental woman evidently has difficulty ridding herself of burdensome memories, returning to life and accepting reality, marked as it is by the stamp of loss. She is immersed in continual remembrance, wasting her time opening old wounds.

The woman's suffocation is aggravated by the books she reads, located within easy reach. They are *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, on the desk, by the vase with flowers, and *Mimili*, on the windowsill. These particular choices are arresting. At first glance, their motivation seems banal: Hasenclever's sentimental woman has experienced the same kind of unhappy love affair and consequent emptiness as Werther and Lotte in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or Wilhem and Mimili in *Mimili*. The connection between the novels, published in 1774 and 1816, respectively, and the painting is, in fact, deeper, based not so much on duplication of the idea of romantic love as on the centrality of the melancholia that may be tied to it; that “fearful void” Werther writes that he feels in his heart.²¹ Goethe's

19 Freud draws attention to this problem, emphasizing that love is always accompanied by a highly melancholic fear of losing one's lover; see “Mourning and Melancholia.”

20 Goncourt, “La Philosophie de Watteau,” *L'Artiste*, 7 September (1856), p. 129. In contemporary criticism, Guillaume Faroult has written in similar terms about Watteau's work (“«La douce Mélancolie», selon Watteau et Diderot, représentations mélancolique dans les arts de France au XVIII siècle,” in: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, p. 278); Faroult claims that Watteau's paintings show “a polysemic world of sweet melancholia, simultaneously playful, amorous, oneiric, full of anxiety, but always seasoned with loneliness.”

21 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Victor Lange (New York: Rinehart & Co.), 1949, p. 92.

heroes, similar in this respect to Hasenclever's woman, have a pronounced tendency toward looking out of the window and reminiscing about pain, despite being unable to name it. This is the way Werther describes the ball he attends with Lotte:

We went to the window. It was still thundering in the distance; a soft rain was pouring down over the countryside and filled the air around us with delicious fragrance. Charlotte leaned on her elbows, her eyes wandered over the scene, she looked up to the sky, and then turned to me, her eyes filled with tears; she put her hand on mine and said, "Klopstock!" I remembered at once that magnificent ode of his which was in her thoughts, and felt overcome by the flood of emotion which the mention of his name called forth. It was more than I could bear. I bent over her hand, kissed it in a stream of ecstatic tears, and again looked into her eyes.²²

Lotte is here depicted in a manner exactly like the woman in Hasenclever's painting: sad, looking downward, with tears in her eyes, leaning on her elbow. Her gaze is nervous, devouring the landscape outside the window and the sky before finally coming to rest on Werther. Looking through the window is the sublimation of an ineffable inconsolable sorrow, hence the tears and the reference to the writings of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. If we also consider that Lotte appears before Werther at a key moment in the novel, i.e., the conclusion of the first part, in the moonlight, in a white dress, we will see that Hasenclever's painting is a kind of illustration of crucial scenes from Goethe's novel, as de Staël noted:

Werther created such a vogue for exalted sentiments that almost nobody dares to appear dry and cold, though many are naturally so at heart; hence this obligatory enthusiasm for the moon, forests, the country and solitude; hence these nervous ailments, mannered tones of voice, looks that seek to be seen, all of this apparatus of sensibility that strong and sincere souls disdain.²³

Madame de Staël managed to see in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* those elements that not only determined the melancholy disposition of the eponymous young Werther, but also settled the fate of the novel's reception: "it is not only the sufferings of love, but the sickness of the imagination in our century that [Goethe] managed to illustrate [...]."²⁴ Goethe's characters, like those of Chateaubriand, are thus model melancholics, wallowing in diseases of body and soul, avoiding

22 Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Lange, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther; Elective Affinities; Novella*, ed. David E. Wellbery (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 19.

23 Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, p. 216.

24 Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, p. 147.

people while hoping faint-heartedly that their gaze might be noticed. The same could easily be said of Hasenclever's painting. The world presented in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, like that depicted on the canvas, is bathed in the pale light of the moon,²⁵ and the characters seem to be constantly looking out the window. A particularly overdone example that confirms the above generalization is the description of Werther after his suicide: "From the blood on the chair, it could be inferred that he had committed the deed sitting at his desk, and that he had afterwards fallen on the floor and had twisted convulsively around the chair. He was found lying on his back near the window. He was fully dressed in his boots, blue coat and yellow waistcoat."²⁶ One may wonder what one is looking at and what the point is of staring at this until we are blue in the face. Neither Werther nor the sentimental woman could provide an answer.

Wilhelm, in the novel *Mimili*, would also be hard pressed to answer that question. He is able to describe the love taking shape in his heart only through the metaphor of the gaze: "But when the queen of my dreams opened the window of that sorcerer's cabinet, my transfixed gaze encompassed the far-flung space of the world of rocks and glaciers that lay before me."²⁷ That vague, remote space, and the "melancholia [...] of the heart's last adagio"²⁸ after the eponymous heroine with tears in her eyes has finished playing on the piano that accompanies it, as well as Mimili's "lily-white neck,"²⁹ express the same kind of irresolution that Goethe's young Werther and Hasenclever's sentimental woman grappled with. Love, whether withering or taking shape, is also clearly a crucial theme here. Its depiction would be deprived of some of its dramatic flair, however, without persistently looking out the window, which represents either an attempt to tear oneself away from existing reality, or a search for the sensory equivalent of discordant and obscure emotions.

It should be underscored that in the case of Hasenclever's painting, what matters is not only the fact of looking through the window, but also the object of the sentimental woman's gaze. In fact, what lies outside the window, which

25 See Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, esp. pp. 76–77, where Werther reads from his translation of some of the songs of Ossian, including the injunction, "Rise, moon, from behind thy clouds!"

26 Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 87.

27 Heinrich Clauren, *Mimili. Ein erotischer Roman ans der Bizdermeierzeit* (München: Wilhelm Heyne, 1976), p. 14. The author is indebted to Anna Artwińska for her assistance in translating and interpreting the novel.

28 Clauren, *Mimili*, p. 41.

29 Clauren, *Mimili*, p. 24.

was intended to liberate the woman from stale repetition, offers nothing more than a superficial form of escape. Beyond the window, a pale moon reigns over a landscape in which we see a small hillock with a solitary tree and a tract of still water. We thus find once more the props traditionally linked with melancholia, of which Goethe, too, was perfectly aware, when he had Werther chatter on endlessly about “hills,” “wooded hill[s],” “bushy hill[s],” “mountain[s],” “the slope of the mountain,” “rock[s],” “sea-beat rock” and the “rolling” or “immeasurable sea,”³⁰ as well as the moon. Neither is it difficult, in the outdoor landscape of *Sentimental Woman*, to spot forms of scenery whose popularity had grown quickly in the nineteenth century thanks to Alphonse de Lamartine and his long poem “Le Lac,” published in the book *Méditations poétiques* in 1820. In “Le Lac,” we read, for example, of “an eternal night of mist,” the “dear waters” of the lake, a “sheer precipice,” an “immeasurable distance.”³¹ It thus appears that the gaze of the woman, the aim of which was to free her from the suffocating melancholia of the room, and to be one with the pole of difference, introducing a note of individuality, of the sentimental woman’s own deeply-lived experience, is yet another empty surface. It leads not to freedom and unrepeatable states of feeling, but to another repetition, another prop sprung from melancholic fantasy.

The dialectic of repetition and difference and the related ambivalent position of the viewer of the picture are concentrated, lens-like, in the woman’s gaze. This gaze was intended to allow her the opportunity to say something from herself and about herself, without the need to resort to traditional, time-honored objects typical of the representation of melancholy. This gaze was intended to offer hope for the removal of pain, the closing-up of the well of melancholia about which Charles d’Orléans wrote. It was supposed to be an essential element in a therapy through communication, i.e., the sharing of private doubts and sorrows with another person. It was, finally, to be what Kristeva calls a discourse of despondency, which must be articulated in order for the despondent person to return to health; to reality; to become once more at home in themselves. Kristeva underscores: “For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia. I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest

30 See Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 7, 29, 36, 40, 43, 48, 51, 76–81, 123, 128, 132, 135, 221, 237–239, 272, 274.

31 See Alphonse de Lamartine, *Le Lac* (Paris: Hachette, 2013).

in words, actions, and even life itself.”³² Kristeva thereby suggests that initiating the process of communication amounts to an attempt to break away from the “orbit of Saturn,” an attempt to break free from the clutches of melancholia. Until we begin to speak, we shall be consumed by melancholia. To engage in communication means, after all, to attempt to say something about oneself, without repetition, without quotations or footnotes. This may be what Hasenclever’s sentimental woman desires, but her hopes are shown to be barren. The attempt to break free from melancholic junk by means of her gaze is a painful failure because it is only possible to look at other melancholic junk: the solitary tree, the hill or the moon. In a certain sense, the sentimental woman is transformed before our eyes into a prostitute; instead of loving, she merely repeats. Since there is nothing original here; since the painter has replaced invention with repetition; any claim to Bidermeierian moral rigor has vanished among the quotations and commentaries: the allusions and clichés.

The viewer of Hasenclever’s *Sentimental Woman* thus shifts between a banal reservoir of objects, such as repetition, and the desire to escape from an oppressive atmosphere, i.e., difference. It would be difficult to state unambiguously whether Hasenclever was more invested in depicting an abstract idea of melancholia or rather in showing the internal, highly intimate drama of a particular woman. Thus we see the return here of the Baudelairean idea of ineffable beauty, neither the fulfillment of a continuously duplicated schema, nor the modernist tendency toward emphasis on the particular; the endemic; the variable. The beauty of Hasenclever’s painting eludes such divisions, and this occurs primarily due to the melancholia in which it is ineluctably sunken.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile here to go so far as to renounce the concept of beauty and replace it with discreet charm, a term that would appear to correspond to both the indeterminacy at the heart of Hasenclever’s painting and the idea expressed by Baudelaire in *Squibs*. The aesthetic of melancholia is in fact closer to something unassuming, delicate, unspoken, i.e., discretion, and to a pleasurable impression seasoned with a hint of dreams, i.e., charm, than to ponderous definitions of no less ponderous concepts, i.e., beauty. In the case of the *Sentimental Woman*, this seems all the more apt, given that it is practically impossible, in preparing an interpretation of the painting, to choose a single nineteenth-century definition of beauty that fits. Hasenclever’s canvas turns out

32 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 3. On this subject, see Dominique-Antoine Grisoni, “Les Abîmes de l’âme,” interview with Julia Kristeva, *Magazine Littéraire*, October–November (2005), p. 24–28.

to be just as much a search for an invariant idea of melancholic beauty, as revealed by the elements typical of that iconography, as it is an attempt to show the beauty that issues from the woman's deeply-lived and internalized melancholia, as revealed by her gaze, her attempt to initiate communication, and the reference to auto-eroticism, a manifestation of the inbred and intimate. To choose between the two is, finally, impossible here, and the viewer of the painting is inclined rather to continue drifting back and forth than to rule in favor of a single, precise definition, which merely takes away the pleasure of looking.

Conclusion

The charmed sunset linger'd low adown
In the red West: thro' mountain clefts the dale
Was seen far inland, and the yellow down
Border'd with palm, and many a winding vale
And meadow, set with slender galingale;
A land where all things always seem'd the same!
And round about the keel with faces pale,
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.¹

In Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous poem, the Lotos-eaters find themselves in "mild-eyed melancholy," perhaps because their gaze no longer has any purpose, nor is held in the midst of its wanderings by any object. They have pale faces and draw near in silence because they no longer await anything. Their life has been lived out. The Lotos-eaters have forgotten the world, their loved ones, and, finally, their own identities. They look around, but recognize neither objects nor landscapes. Reality has lost its meaning for them because they are no longer able to connect feelings or thoughts to images; nor memories; nor anything. They look and yet somehow do not see. What is happening around them does not draw their attention. So one might guess that the true kingdom is located somewhere deep within the psyche, in the soul, but neither is that the case. The gaze of the Lotos-eaters seems rather an indifferent gaze that disallows all exploration, as though there were nothing to be examined. It is thus a gaze that might be compared to a window, which lets images in from the outside, and out from the inside, with equal ease. A windowpane is indifferent to what is happening; whose reflection is shown; where a story takes place. Homer refers to this, indirectly, in Book Nine of the *Odyssey*:

So they went straightway and mingled with the Lotus-eaters, and the Lotus-eaters did not plan death for my comrades, but gave them of the lotus to taste. And whosoever of them ate of the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus, had no longer any wish to bring back word or to return, but there they were fain to abide among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and forgetful of their homeward way.²

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- 1 Alfred Tennyson, "The Lotos-eaters" (excerpt). The Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45364/the-lotos-eaters> (accessed 3 September 2017.)
 - 2 Homer, *The Odyssey*, with an English Trans. by Augustus Taber Murray (London: William Heinemann, 1919). Perseus Project, Greek and Roman Materials. <http://www>

The guests of the Lotos-eaters, after tasting of the lotus, not only forget their way home, but also the dilemmas that plague them, above all, their homesickness. Together with their hosts, they look into nothingness, and their gaze becomes lost in the void because, as Frédéric Pellion emphasizes, “[...] the melancholic gaze always lacks a goal, it is cut off from its object.”³ Neither do the Lotos-eaters even know what they might have remembered. For that reason, their gaze is not only one of “mild-eyed melancholy,” but is, above all, empty. There is not much more to be added here. Any kind of description seems incomplete; clumsy; wide of the mark, to recall the words of Descartes. We think we know what that gaze expresses. We think we see sadness in it, but we are unable to precisely describe the “many changes taking place in the movement and shape of the eye.”

We encounter the same problem in connection with the mythical figure of Bellerophon, found by Jean Starobinski to be one of the first melancholics. In that story, Starobinski writes, “all is distance and absence. Bellerophon wanders in the void, far from the gods, far from people, through a boundless wilderness.”⁴ He is a hero who met, after numerous successes, with the bitterness of defeat; was brought down by the gods and condemned to solitude, as Homer describes in Book Six of the *Iliad*:

[...] but when Bellerophon came to be hated by all the gods, he wandered all desolate and dismayed upon the Alean plain, gnawing at his own heart, and shunning the path of man.⁵

Regarding this gaze, Jan Parandowski writes: “**With insane eyes, whose light was dimmed by the misery of failure**, he walked away into the desert, where, keeping away from people, he lived out his shame in solitude and oblivion.”⁶ Here, as in the case of the Lotos-eaters, we see empty eyes, a gaze bereft of any goal. Like them, Bellerophon lost the object of his desires, albeit abstract. He could keep neither fame, nor wealth, nor power. Now he wanders in the desert and only remembers his former greatness. It is curious that his eyes, too, are devoid

perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0136%3Abook%3D9%3Acard%3D82 (accessed 3 September 2017).

3 Frédéric Pellion, *Mélancolie et vérité* (Paris: PUF, 2000), p. 305.

4 Jean Starobinski, “La Mélancolie au jardin des racines grecques,” *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 5 (2005), p. 39.

5 Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Samuel Butler (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898). The Perseus Project, Greek and Roman Materials. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0217%3Abook%3D6%3Acard%3D102> (accessed 4 September 2017.)

6 Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian* (London: Puls, 1992), pp. 209–210. Emphasis mine – P.Ś.

of light. Clearly this may be understood metaphorically; we would then read it as equivalent to a burned-out gaze, expressing disappointment and dejection, as well as doubt. Eyes dimmed of light may, however, also be understood literally, as dark eyes. Such, indeed, are the eyes of the allegorical figure that the young Baudelaire, in keeping with a rich rhetorical tradition, called Melancholia in his “Épître à Sainte-Beuve” (Letter to Sainte-Beuve) in late 1844 or early 1845.⁷ It should be added that Baudelaire depicts the eyes of Melancholia both as black and *blue*, which perfectly matches the melancholic reveries familiar from both Dürer’s engraving and texts by Rousseau.

The gaze of Orpheus after the second loss of Eurydice must have been similarly empty and dim or burned-out. Czesław Miłosz recalls that dramatic situation in his poem “Orpheus and Eurydice”: “He turned his head / And behind him on the path was no one.”⁸ The reader may wonder what follows or what a gaze that cannot see anything looks like. Miłosz very discreetly gives us his answer.

Firstly, since Orpheus is longer gazing at any object, he is rather able to see nothing than unable to see anything. He wanted only to see Eurydice, but once he has lost her a second time, there is no longer anything that can hold his attention. The phenomenon of the melancholic gaze has been captured by Vincent Carraud, who stresses the way it pierces passionlessly through the finite world, being “[...] pure passage, drifting that cannot be arrested by anything.”⁹ For that gaze, no hidden meaning or hope exists. Orpheus knows that he will never recover Eurydice a second time and that there is no promise of happiness concealed behind the repeated loss. For that reason, the world seems empty to him, meaningless, in some sense impossible to re-inhabit. Orpheus is, from this perspective, yet another case afflicted with disinheritance.

Secondly, since the world has been shown to be so inhospitable, the only redemption can be found within oneself. In the final stanza of “Orpheus and Eurydice” Miłosz underscores that: “Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!”¹⁰

7 See the reprinting of the poem and commentary on it in Patrick Labarthe, *Baudelaire et la tradition de l'allégorie* (Genève: Droz, 1999), pp. 112–123. See also Starobinski, *La Mélancolie au miroir. Trois lectures de Baudelaire* (Paris: Julliard, 1997), pp. 15–23.

8 Czesław Miłosz, “Orpheus and Eurydice,” trans. from Polish by the author and Robert Hass, *The New Yorker*, May 17 (2004), p. 83.

9 Vincent Carraud, “Les Modes du regard,” in: *Esthétique et mélancolie* (Orléans: Institut des Arts Visuels, 1992), p. 18.

10 Translator’s note: The tendency noted here is stronger in the original Polish, where her name is cried out (by a mysterious something, rather than everything; it is an impersonal, i.e., subject-less, construction) *in him* (*w nim*). T.D.W.

Orpheus therefore takes a look inside himself, because his pain is what is most important here. He looks there, however, only to find himself persuaded that to go on living without Eurydice is senseless: "How will I live without you, my consoling one!" The void that he had experienced in the world a moment earlier thus comes to rest within him. His gaze is once again unable to fix itself on anything. Orpheus has become a witness to his own death.

Thirdly, the consciousness of this failure must have reached him just before he left through the gates of Hades. It can hardly be accidental that the mythological gates are presented in Miłosz's poem as "glass-paneled doors." If Orpheus has entered the underworld through them, he must likewise pass through them on his way out. The attempt to bring the myth up to date is accompanied in this case by a clear awareness of what reflection means: the hopeless self-examination of the void within the void. It is the unattainable desire to be someone else and somewhere else. Orpheus already knows before reaching the gates of Hades, however, that nothing will come of that plan.

No less bitter was the knowledge acquired by the whole procession of nineteenth-century figures mentioned in this book. For them, the melancholy gaze was both a sign of superiority and a curse. It was a sorrowful form of oblivion in the midst of the desert of life.

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