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# Seeing Nothing in Oneself: Melancholy in Amiel's Intimate Diary.

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## Seeing Nothing in Oneself: Melancholy in Amiel's Intimate Diary

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

**F**irstly, the world is empty. Henri-Frédéric Amiel believed that he was to live in a world filled with elegant gestures and religious injunctions that barely manage to obscure the futility of existence. That's where his "sharpest sense of emptiness of life and the flight of things" (233) stems from, along with the experience of "the emptiness of our existence" (233). There, on the outside, was Amiel's family, incapable of comprehending the philosopher's solitary way of life; his struggles with relating to other people also lurked therein. Amiel often complains of "hurtful timidity, unprofitable conscientiousness, fatal slavery to detail!" (356), which allegedly deprive him of his freedom. It seems that right before he is set to experience something, he ends up constructing numerous elaborate scenarios of the experience in his head which, as a result, deprives him of all satisfaction and stifles his movement:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H.F. Amiel, *Amiel's Journal: The Journal Intime of Henri-Frédéric Amiel* (New York; London: Macmillan and Co., 1983), 82. (nearly all quoted passages will come from this particular edition, from here onwards the locations of all the quotes from this book will be placed in the main body of the article; quotes from the French edition of the *Intimate Diary*, translated into Polish by the author, will be located in the footnotes.

The reason seems to be timidity, and 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. (72)

To the subject exploring it, therefore, the world, even prior to being experienced, already seems to be nothing more than a bleak reflection of itself, an artificially constructed chain of events that constitute an *ersatz* of real life. Probably for this particular reason Stanisław Przybyszewski ended up calling Amiel a “typical epigonus” and counted him among the “herd of dilettantes who, whilst possessing nearly limitless creative capabilities, cannot end up creating anything, who, despite their barren nature, cannot cease to squander their potential by engaging in fruitless attempts at binding will to emotion.”<sup>2</sup> According to Przybyszewski, the *Intimate Diary*'s author, similarly to an entire generation of writers tainted with particular “degeneration,” mires himself in his emotions, picks his scabs, thus impairing his intellect and his will to act. His life is a sham, a charade constructed by a hypersensitive, paralyzing imagination.

It should not come as a surprise that in this precise context Amiel had to notice that “the world is but an allegory” (30). The Swiss philosopher considers George Berkeley, Johannes Gottlieb Fichte, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to be patron saints of this particular revelation, simultaneously admitting that the soul is the only true substance, whereas “the world is but a firework, a sublime phantasmagoria, destined to cheer and form the soul” (31). As a consequence, reality turns out to be only a figment of the human mind and exists insofar as the latter perceives it and gives it a name: “

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” (51).

The subject stands at the center of perception, whereas the world – even if its existence cannot be disputed after the subject's death – is only important to the subject as a hypostatic object of desire. That is why the world never means what it seems it means, either intersubjectively or objectively (if those words still carry any meaning); it is only a projection of the “self,” to whose obsessive presence the *Intimate Diary* is dedicated to. This idealistic assumption is what allowed Amiel to speak about the world in categories

2 S. Przybyszewski, “Misteria (o powieści Knuta Hamsuna),” in: S. Przybyszewski, *Synagoga Szatana i inne eseje*, selection and translation G. Matuszek (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1997), 109.

of allegory – as correctly diagnosed by Stanisław Brzozowski in his essay on the Swiss philosopher's "subjectivity of thought."<sup>3</sup> This dual view of the world and the belief that it not only means more than it seems it means, but even means something else awakened in Amiel "an ironical instinct" (84). The author never stops to contemplate his view of reality because he's convinced that underneath its surface lies something that may contradict whatever is above it.

The existence of allegory and irony in one's worldview results in the inevitable treatment of reality as a vacant form whose emptiness is masked only by the subject's desires. No wonder, then, that Amiel decided to abandon active participation in the world around him, a task he formulated in the explication: "At bottom there is but one subject of study: the forms and metamorphoses of mind" (2). This belief – going against persistent interpretations that look for the reasons behind the writer's decisions in his aversion towards worldly life<sup>4</sup> – seems to be primarily philosophical in nature. Even the sorrow and melancholy permeating the *Intimate Diary* are primarily speculative and literary categories, and psychological categories secondarily – something already explored by Brzozowski, who saw in Amiel's work "a deep sorrow of intellectual extraction."<sup>5</sup> Such an attitude is encouraged even by the writer himself, particularly in his meta-reflection exploring the phenomenon of the intimate diary:

A private journal, which is but a vehicle for meditation and reverie, beats about the bush as it pleases without being hound 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 maybe 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

3 cf. S. Brzozowski, "Fryderyk Henryk Amiel (1821-1881). Przyczynek do psychologii współczesnej," in: S. Brzozowski, *Głosy wśród nocy. Studia nad przesileniem romantycznym kultury europejskiej*, ed. and pref. O. Ortwin, introd. C. Michalski, afterw. A. Bielik-Robson (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), 132-134.

4 cf. e.g. J. Vuilleumier, "Kompleks Amiela," trans. K. Ostrowska, *Literatura na Świecie* 10 (1991): 108-120. Although Vuilleumier emphasizes that the "Amielism" he describes is not limited to the medical dimension alone, his article is dominated by the pursuit of "pathology" and "timidity springing from excessive introspection, oversensitivity intensified by a pervading feeling of isolation and humiliation" (109).

5 S. Brzozowski, *Fryderyk Henryk Amiel*, 132

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. (388)

Already the genologic idea, as observed by Daniel Renaud,<sup>6</sup> is surprising in this particular instance. What does an “intimate diary” imply? Well, firstly, it sets forth that Amiel accomplished what Jean-Jacques Rousseau feared in his *Confessions*. Amiel managed to conduct a successful experiment on his own self, he replaced experience with writing. Rousseau preferred to gaze at greenery and roam the wilderness, because the world around him has not yet lost either its individuality or its cognitive value:

Then, why not write them? you will say. Why should I? I answer. Why deprive myself of the actual charms of enjoyment, in order to tell others that I did enjoy them? What did I care for readers, the public, or the whole world, while I was mounting to the skies? Besides, did I carry pens and paper with me? If I had thought of all that, nothing would have occurred to me.<sup>7</sup>

Rousseau is fully aware of the derivative nature of narrative; the world is the only true treasure trove of experience and cognition, whereas writing is nothing more than a miserable necessity that distorts the depiction of sensual and spiritual experience of nature. For Amiel, a similar belief is based on misunderstanding, is subject to the logic of the chiasmus, as there are reasons to doubt whether he truly felt writing to be a consequence of experience. We might consider claiming the complete opposite – experience is the product of writing, as only the latter enables us to understand that the world is fiction spun by the subject. That is precisely why a habit of writing down one’s emotions and thoughts is one of the more obvious virtues of having a journal. And if the world is only a fiction of the mind

6 cf. D. Renaud, *Un écrivain en marche vers sa reconnaissance non plus comme malade mais comme écrivain*, <http://www.amiel.org/atelier/oeuvre/etudes> (April 1, 2007).

7 J.J. Rousseau, *Confessions* (Hertfordshire; Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996), 157

in the midst of experience, then the fact that a journal should by definition be “intimate” also seems perfectly clear. “Intimate,” that is dedicate to the subject, its quandaries, idiosyncrasies, reflections. The “self” is the protagonist of the *Intimate Diary* – in the same way it plays a crucial role in the journal of Maine de Birana, as highlighted by Józef Czapski.<sup>8</sup> The point here, however, is not to engage in narcissistic self-intoxication but to gaze deep into oneself, to turn inwards and, as a result, to counteract intellectual despondency.<sup>9</sup>

Despite all that, it quickly turns out that the introspection Amiel proposes is made up of equal parts precision and escapism, a composition brilliantly captured by the oxymoronic phrase “dreamy meditative side.” The “gradual process of thought-clearing” is not as obvious as the *Diary*’s author would like. As much as he tries to capture his own thoughts, to encapsulate the substance of his soul in a speculative way, he’s constantly hindered by his own incorrigible proclivity towards daydreaming, a predilection for conditional construction and a tendency towards wondering what would happen if... Separating philosophical purpose from literary craftsmanship is very complicated in this particular instance. The element of dreaming held Amiel in its thrall, and the author suffered – like many other of his contemporaries (both fictional and real) – from the same condition that plagued Emma Bovary. It is not without reason that Amiel emphasizes 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 power it awakens within us a thousand sleeping germs” (35). The Swiss philosopher also ascertains – to some extent in agreement with what I wrote about an empty world a few paragraphs above – “what a pale counterfeit is real life of the life we see in glimpses” (33). Amiel, therefore, does not place his pursuits neither in the real world (because it does not exist) nor in the world of systemic reflection (which the author does not really care about), but rather in the fairly imprecise dream world. That might seem surprising, and some of us might go as far as ponder how inner dreams might counterbalance dreams of the subject that were already

8 cf. J. Czapski, “Ja” in: J. Czapski, *Tumult i widma* (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1988), 167-177. This particular aspect of both Amiel’s and Maine de Birana’s journals was also examined by H. Elzenberg (cf. *Kłopot z istnieniem* (Krakow: Znak, 1994), p. 329)

9 This, among other things, is what the aforementioned Elzenberg was looking for in Amiel’s work. In his book, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (121) he interprets Amiel’s *Intimate Diary* and Rembrandt’s self-portraits in the following way: “My deliberations focus on the obsession with self-portraits, on attention given to oneself and one’s condition. A modern characteristic, even more so because in this approach we can sense the presence of *den Grübler*, a plumbing, probing self-analyst.”

evaluated in the real world. However, we might quickly realize that the inner dream may have therapeutic purposes. It is an attempt at compensating for what is missing from the real world – the latter being nothing more than a hypostasis of the subject exploring it, and a highly imperfect one at that.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we should look for the Promised Land which is “the land where one is not” (53). This, in essence, is escapism combined with unconsolated pain, the latter a result of experiencing the emptiness of the world – Michel Braud wrote extensively on the subject, highlighting that “the diarist ... considers his life to be akin to ceaseless mourning: for God, for himself, for his future demise, for his hopes and dreams.”<sup>11</sup> In such an approach, the world is just fiction, and the subject grieves for himself, because – according to previously discussed logic – he was forced to replace experience with writing and to live only vicariously, the latter a dream also for Rousseau, albeit one labeled with a very important epithet – it was a “derivative dream.”<sup>12</sup> The author of *Confessions* could treat the dream as something that introduces a little diversity in his reality; in his *Intimate Diary*, it became Amiel’s only reality.

Shifting one’s gaze inwards may yield insight that is not necessarily altogether pleasant. Inside his own self, Amiel yearned to discover a radiant center that would spin a reality he inhabited. If it were to emerge that reality is empty and just a product of forms conjured up by the subject in the midst of experience, then the interior of the subject should be the source of these illusions. However, reaching that center-source seems to be nothing short of impossible. Meditation is not about “being hounded to make for any definite end,” and thought meanders, is lost in words, “synonyms, these waverings, these repetitions and returns upon one’s self” – like in a maze devoid of both an exit and a central point. This awkwardness reveals a somewhat anti-systemic streak in Amiel’s thought process, as well as – as observed by Maria Janion

10 It also seems that it is one of the reasons behind Amiel’s withdrawal from active life and into contemplation, as life is equivalent to the imperfect dream directed outwards and petrified in interpersonal space; contemplation, on the other hand, is the inner dream that remains pliable, resists the element of conclusion that Amiel so deeply hated: “So 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.” (12)

11 M. Braud, *Le diariste solitaire...*, <http://www.amiel.org/atelier/oeuvre/etudes> (April 1, 2007); on that subject see also M. Braud, “L’extase, la mélancolie et le quotidien dans le «Journal intime» d’Amiel,” *Modernités* 16 (2002): 118-119.

12 On this subject, see J. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Przejrzystość i przeszkoda*, trans. J. Wojcieszak (Warszawa: KR, 2000), 413-426.

– Amiel’s “preoccupation with void reincorporated into the void.”<sup>13</sup> What sort of void are we talking about? Well, it seems that the emptiness of the world is not a result of the fact that it is only a projection of the “self” and lacks tangibility, but rather stems from the fact that the “self” is empty. This is the place where Amiel diverges from the philosophers whose claims he championed. The substantial “self” does not exist, it is as dispersed as the world which it is destined to inhabit, and what Amiel attempts to do is nothing more than substantializing the void. A similar issue was observed in the *Intimate Diary* by Georges Poulet<sup>14</sup> who did not bring up melancholy, but focused instead on analyzing the inwards (toward the within) and outwards (towards intersubjective reality) shift present in Amiel’s work. According to Poulet, nothing can impede the shift, and the Swiss writers ceaselessly circles between the experience of uncanny and alien nature of his own existence and the world that threatens the identity and integrity of the subject. The author of *Amiel et la conscience de soi* tries his hardest to ameliorate this sort of negative logic and, as a result, focuses on the positive mechanisms that allow Amiel to exert control over both himself and the world through reflection. Poulet’s deeply humanist attitude, however, is not always defensible, and the negative element (associated with the melancholia he decided to omit) of the *Intimate Diary* cannot be easily marginalized. One of the primary reasons for this state of affairs is the literary character of the philosopher’s notes, out of which a coherent system (and that’s what *Amiel et la conscience de soi* had in mind) can emerge only at the expense of the anti-systemic elements; the latter, however, are indispensable for Amiel’s deliberations. The intention is to celebrate the void inside the hollow subject which Poulet, on his part, refuses to acknowledge. Meanwhile, Amiel considers this to be one of the most fundamental experiences – as evidenced by an entry dated 19 December 1877:

Two forces of contemplation: the first degree encompasses the world that evaporates and becomes pure dream; the second degree comprises the “self” that turns into shadow, a dream of a dream.<sup>15</sup>

13 M. Janion, “Introduction” to the Polish edition of *Amiel’s Journal*, H.F. Amiel, *Dziennik intymny*, 17. On that subject, see also A. Zawadzki, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku* (Krakow: Universitas, 2001), 126.

14 G. Poulet (introduction entitled) “Amiel et la conscience de soi” in: H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime*, tome premier 1839–1851, texte établi et annoté par Ph.M. Monnier avec la collaboration de P. Dido, préfaces de B. Gagnebin et de G. Poulet (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1976), 45–94.

15 H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime*, tome onzième avril 1877–juillet 1879, texte établi et annoté par Ph.M. Monnier et A. Cottier-Duperrex (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1993): 360 [Quotes from the French editions of the *Intimate Diary* are translated from Polish into English and are not



Precisely for this reason Amiel's records are permeated with the most intense melancholy, corresponding to inconsolable grief for his own self – which I already brought up after quoting Braud's work (Poulet himself labeled the same phenomenon a state of "ontological vagueness"<sup>16</sup>). This is the melancholy of a philosopher who became a writer in order to finally comprehend that he is neither. Only words remained of that particular journey.

That is why one of the previously quoted passages from the *Intimate Diary* focuses so deeply on words; that is also why Amiel tries explicate the way he writes, because he cannot really elaborate on what he is writing about. The penetrating feeling of inadequacy of expression appears in crucial 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 even in the closest intimacy. (70)

Amiel, however, does not surrender; Renaud even observes is that "what is most surprising about this opus, a piece of literary work unlike all other, is undoubtedly the author's brilliant virtuosity and mastery of language."<sup>17</sup> Writing simultaneously allows him to avoid descending into madness and unremittingly reminds him of melancholy.

Like Gustave Flaubert before him, Amiel is obsessively attached to stylistic perfection, to precision and aptness of his phrase. And just like the author of *Madame Bovary*, he also unhesitatingly declares that "his object is style" (389). This pursuit of the perfect phrase, or rather the obsessive envisioning of it, often paralyzed 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

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sourced directly from English editions of Amiel's journals, therefore bibliographic information refers to French printings – *trans.*]

16 G. Poulet, "Introduction" to: H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime. L'année 1857*, éditée et présentée par G. Poulet (Paris: Bibliothèque 10/18, 1965), IX. Also in his *Amiel et la conscience de soi* (83), Poulet observes that the lack of hope and an experience whose nature we might brand schizoid caused that "Amiel loses all substantiality in his own eyes."

17 D. Renaud, *Un écrivain en marche...*

the ideally best expression, and so great is the number of possibilities which open before me at every step. (355)

Amiel, literature's passionate lover, now stands afraid of the pen and the empty piece of paper; his prolific output sacrificed at the altar of the flawless phrase:

I am a heifer offered to Proserpine; I stagnate, my evasions and my silence leaving me sterile. Everything moves, creates, radiates inside its own sphere, while I wither and shrivel. A wide chasm separates me from the work, distances grow to infinity as my imagination ceaselessly enlarges the object, while distrust boundlessly diminishes the subject. Talent is nearly equal to zero, when the task becomes overwhelming. – The essay terrifies me as much as a book does, the task is fairly simple, yet it scares me as grand undertakings do, as do words that are hard to pronounce, as does any other task before me.<sup>18</sup>

In this entry, dated 22 December 1858, the philosopher analyzed the dissonance that on one hand exists between himself and the world, and on the other between himself and the work he dreams of. The rift – heretofore separating Amiel from what's external – is internalized, absorbed by the subject. His own dreams and projects also become impossible to realize as the distance that separates them grows ever greater. Amiel dreads intentions that are maximalist in nature, he's paralyzed by the obligation of writing a short essay or even uttering a single a word. This state of affairs seems to have been caused by his overuse of hyperbole. The withering and shriveling subject cannot embrace and control his hypostases. This disinheritance, the loss of oneself, both effectively bar Amiel from picking up the pen. The writer, then, admits his own impotence, acknowledges his inability to create, and complains about it despite having covered more than 17,000 pages of his *Intimate Diary* in ink. Amiel, however, does not consider these reams of paper to be a work of literature; it is merely meagre propedeutics, a paltry imitation of the desired text – “I am always preparing and never accomplishing” (58). Whatever work of his has found its way into print is also subject to his withering criticism:

all my published literary essays are little else than studies, games, exercises, for the purpose of testing myself. I play scales, as it were; I run up

18 H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime*, tome troisième mars 1856–décembre 1860, texte établi et annoté par Ph.M. Monnier et A. Cottier-Duperrex (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1979): 608.

and down my instrument. I train my hand and make sure of its capacity and skill. But the work itself remains unachieved. (58)

The same incertitude and trepidation also can be observed nearly half a century later in the reflections of Walter Benjamin, another author who clashed with challenges presented by writing the impossible opus. Staggering under the weight of papers of index cards, the author of *The Arcades Project* wrote a letter to Gershom Scholem, dated 28 October 1931, in which he admits to treating his work on the text as constant “prolegomena and paralipomena.”<sup>19</sup> In Amiel’s case, this sort of hesitation often led to two kinds of consequences.

Firstly, the author of the *Intimate Diary* clearly fears the finite perspective, dreads the accomplished task, is scared by any idea that encompasses the totality of human experience – “it is love of truth which holds me back from concluding and deciding” (356). Perfectly aware of that, in his essay on Amiel Brzozowski wrote:

Writing is an endeavour and this endeavour, as do all others, requires one to close one’s “self” to a certain degree. The decision to assume a specific point of view is never an easy one, especially when one knows that there is a veritable multitude of such points and is capable of assuming each and every one of them.<sup>20</sup>

According to Amiel, there is no system that would warrant relinquishing our pursuits for, there is no single point through which all modes of experience would traverse. In a sense, the Swiss philosopher defends the notion of diversity against recurrence and equivalence of phenomena. This particular choice seems especially fateful and marked with melancholy, because against prior claims and declarations, Amiel is willing to subvert his own subjective experience, and to do it *ad nauseam*. That does not mean, however, that the role of the subject is in any way diminished in this particular case, quite the opposite. We remind ourselves that Amiel’s first step was to define the world as a fiction spun by the mind in the midst of experience. By remaining faithful to that statement, Amiel has to ascertain (and does so without any reservations) that there are as many worlds as there are subjects – therefore it is the task of the individual to not only comprehend that objective reality is just an illusion, but also to understand that a plethora

19 W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, ed. G. Scholem and T. W. Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193.

20 S. Brzozowski, *Fryderyk Henryk Amiel...*, 139.

of illusions compete against one another in order to create the most exact portrayal of the world. To prevent the establishment of such a totalizing perspective, Amiel is forced to acknowledge both the validity of his own doubts as well as distinctness of other points of view. Recognizing their independence requires proper understanding – that is, empathy – which makes multiple appearances throughout the philosopher's journal.<sup>21</sup> This is how the philosopher's syllogism-based reflection concludes: the world is a fiction of the experiencing subject – because there are numerous experiencing subjects, the number of worlds is correspondingly high – and whatever conclusion as to their ontology we may arrive at would be fundamentally false. That is why the writer fears summaries, finished sentences, and the accomplished “work” – although it might seem that he wishes to complete his opus more than anything else.

Thus, we can now examine the second consequence of Amiel's previously described hesitations and his belief that he continues to conduct preparations which, unfortunately, is not equivalent to accomplishing anything. The “opus,” that is a text encompassing the totality of experience, turns out to be impossible to create. Therein lies the greatest drama of any man venturing to spend his life writing. Amiel already discovered the void or the absence of the world, undertook to substantialize the emptiness located within himself, and now he must also recognize that the “opus” he aims to create is nothing more than proof of the absence of the “opus.”<sup>22</sup> In the entry dated 4 July 1877, we find the following statement: “although itself not a work of art, the journal interferes with all other works of art whose place it seems to occupy.”<sup>23</sup> The recorded text is just another mask concealing another void.

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. (243)

21 Empathy as the crucial element of Amiel's critical method was also explored by S. Brzozowski, see *ibid.*, 132-133.

22 On this particular subject, A. Zawadzki wrote the following: “The postulated order of the opus ... turns out to be a project that is impossible to accomplish: the text is destined to exhibit the characteristics of a fragment, a draft, a trial run. ... As a consequence, the descriptive power of intimist discourse is all but subverted, while the journal, unable to capture the essence of life, is revealed to be a sham.” (*Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna...*, 129).

23 H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime*, tome onzième avril 1877–juillet 1879..., 129.

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of obsessive scribbling and covering pages upon pages in ink is not to discover some abstract order, bringing some intention to life, but to preserve one's own incidental nature, to defend against the only absolute there is – against the void. Only in such a context can we comprehend the previously invoked claim that for Amiel style was the object of writing. For the sake of certainty, the philosopher adds that the journal “though it takes the place of everything, properly speaking it represents nothing at all” (366). On the other hand, there is nothing that could be represented – in both meanings attached to the definition of the French verb *représenter*. In the first meaning, representation is equivalent with depiction – a non-sensical endeavor for someone perceiving the world, the subject, and the work as nothing more than masked void. In the second meaning, to represent is to make something present once again – but that undertaking also seems unreasonable, as we do not really know what once was present and what may be present again.

Probably this type of rationale was behind another definition of “private journal” that Amiel put forward:

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 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. (366)

The journal and the associated inward gaze are both melancholic in nature, as they are the site of another unresolved bout of grief, of rediscovered emptiness. The journal has no practical goal, its essence lies in meandering and constant tripping over the relentless commemoration of loss. Albert Béguin was probably right to consider Amiel a loyal follower and heir of the romantics<sup>24</sup> – because the melancholy of the philosopher, often colored by psychology and metaphysics, is the result of a senseless pursuit of absolute values as well as losing one's bearings in sorrowful landscapes or in a world whose image in the journal is taken straight from romantic novels and paintings:

24 cf. A. Béguin, *L'âme romantique et le rêve* (Paris: Corti, 1946), 353.

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? (272)

This aspect of melancholy in the *Intimate Diary* is decidedly derivative. I believe the way in which the reinterpretation of romanticism allowed Amiel (before Sigmund Freud) to combine melancholy with not only sadness or nostalgia, but with the aforementioned sensation of loss, to be much more important.

The logic of loss was the primary force that determined the course of Amiel's life. His biography is riddled with its painful appearances. Amiel witnessed the premature demise of his younger sister; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was only 11 years old and his father committed suicide two years later (he drowned himself in the Rhône). It seems that losing his mother was particularly hard on the philosopher, Marie Claire Grassi goes so far as to believe that this tragedy is the reason for multiple entries (for example 16 October 1864 or 9 May 1867) in which Amiel openly declares his desire to return to his mother's womb.<sup>25</sup> To some extent, the journal was born of the same aggressively possessive relationship. Between 11 and 12 of April 1850, Amiel discovered a cache of family documents while staying over at his uncle's house in Monnaie. Eight years later he managed to relocate the entire batch to his home; among the documents was his mother's journal. That last bit of information allowed Albert Py to claim that "another journal precedes the *Intimate Diary*, the latter provides a foundation and to some degree *authorizes* the latter, simultaneously serving as the source of its voice."<sup>26</sup> These, however, are not the only events in Amiel's biography that might have fueled his melancholic proclivities. The writer was engaged twice and both betrothals were broken off by Amiel due to his pervasive doubts.

We should not disregard either the traumatic experiences of the boy or the embarrassing secrets of the man, especially given their frequent reappearances throughout 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" (82). Amiel agonizes over his lost illusions and the failures of his adulthood that he believes stem from these fantasies: he did

25 cf. M.C. Grassi, "Amiel ou l'oeuvre mélancolique" in: *Malinconia, malattia malinconica e letteratura moderna*, a cura di A. Dolfi (Roma: Bulzoni, 1991): 284-285. On the same subject, see G. Poulet's remarks in *Les métamorphoses du cercle* (préface de J. Starobinski), (Paris: Flammarion, 1979): 347-350 and "La pensée indéterminée" in *Du romantisme au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1987), 2: 132-133.

26 A. Py, "Amiel ou l'oeuvre éconduite," *Ecriture* 18 (1982): 72.

not end up becoming famous, either as an academic or as a writer. Jealousy suffusing his phrase, Amiel writes:

The names of great men hover before my eyes like a secret reproach, and this grand impassive nature tells me that to-morrow I shall have disappeared, butterfly that I am, without having lived.

He fears not for himself, but for his name, the latter doomed to oblivion. The fear is accompanied by this astonishingly sincere confession: "It breaks my heart to be introduced" (253). In this sense, *Amiel's Journal* is also an attempt at protecting oneself, at preserving an existence rocked by the rhythms of loss and suffering. The penetrating awareness of that fact unleashes a "melancholy of memory" (275), that is a belief that memory is just a vague reflection of lost experience. Not only individual memories are melancholic; melancholy itself is embedded deep in the essence of 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" (105). Amiel abandoned active public life and fears that his feeling of loss will only be intensified – through the loss of his own name. He is bothered by the feeling that nobody will remember him after his death, and that he will be wiped off from the face of the Earth forever. The writer in Amiel is also obsessed with Saturn, the protagonist of the dreadful myth and patron of time understood as a "medium of constraint."<sup>27</sup> The irretrievable past opens wounds in every person suffering from bouts of melancholia, however, they also fear the approaching future and the inevitability that accompanies it. Therefore, the melancholic has to overcome the certainty of loss lurking both behind and before him. In this unfair fight, Amiel made the journal his confidant because the order of writing not only manages to evade the blandness of everyday life and painful oblivion, it also enables the author to control the overbearing and imposing future, that is death. Writing gives the author shelter, a place to work through his own failures and his anticipated – and thus mollified – death.<sup>28</sup> In an entry dated 21 December 1860, Amiel admits that he had placed all his faith in his journal to protect him from the evils of the world. In spite of that claim, however, the index cards he continued to cover in ink also posed a threat to the

27 S. Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 116.

28 The Swiss philosopher repeatedly touches upon this topic; in an entry dated November 16, 1864 he notes: "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." (149)

philosopher – his life evaporated with each scribbled word, and writing itself is equal parts liberating and addictive. The *Intimate Diary* is, beyond all doubt, a therapeutic device, one that allowed Amiel to soothe his shivering thoughts and introduce a little order into his chaotic mind. It seems, however, that incidents from one's biography and the darkest corners of the mind are the most important elements of the modern definition of loss.

However, it turns out that philosophical renouncement or – in the words of Paul Gorceix<sup>29</sup> – the metaphysical nature of Amiel's melancholic proclivities turns out to be much more significant in this particular case. Because the philosopher's desires know no bounds, he tries to encompass the totality of existence and ends up falling prey to the insatiable hunger for insight and experience. Everything keeps slipping through his fingers because his mad pursuits require him to keep moving, he cannot stop to focus and explore any notion in any deeper way as other things constantly demand his attention. This is the source of his haste and the feelings of impermanence, transience, and irretrievable loss plaguing the philosopher. Life brings the "inextinguishable flame of desire, and an agony of incurable disillusion" (103). The interminable procession of forms makes him feel like something inside him has been lost, while other things vanished without ever being noticed. This is also how Amiel's obsession with the loss of an object that he cannot even name is introduced:

I am indeed always the same; the being who wanders when he need not, the voluntary exile, the eternal traveler, the man incapable of repose, who, driven on by an inward voice, builds nowhere, buys and labors nowhere, but passes, looks, camps, and goes. And is there not another reason for all this restlessness, in a certain sense of void? of incessant pursuit of something wanting? (82)

The quoted passage clearly depicts the philosophical renouncement I mentioned before. The experiencing subject has no place of its own, has no familiar space where it could feel at home. Its life is defined by the flight of things, people, and places – in effect, the meaning of his existence lies in loss and grieving for something that the subject cannot even name. Amiel confesses:

I feel myself then stripped and empty, like a convalescent who remembers nothing. ... I feel myself returning into a more elementary form. I behold

29 cf. P. Gorceix, *La problématique de la mélancolie chez Henri-Frédéric Amiel* [en ligne], Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, Bruxelles, 2007, <http://www.arlfb.be/ebibliotheque/communications/gorceix090906.pdf> (April 13, 2007).



my own unclothing; I forget, still more than I am forgotten; I pass gently into the grave while still living. (105-106)

In the grave, Amiel longs for what he failed to accomplish while still alive! – “I had failed in the task of life, and that now life was failing me” (232). Just like Emma Bovary, Amiel can never find himself in the right place at the right time. That is why he continuously cleaves himself into a present “self” that writes or reminisces and the lost “self,” that is a self that already passed away or one that was never even born as a result of making wrong choices or the reluctance to pursue active public life.

Thus we arrive at the third form of loss that appears in the *Intimate Diary* – this time, the matter revolves around the consistent, homogeneous “self” of the subject. In Amiel’s case, this aspect of the self is simply unachievable. First of all, its rupture appears whenever the philosopher observes reality, attempts to understand other people, or just describe objects. It is possible that his empathizing attitude facilitates his comprehension of what he is observing, however, it also poses a threat to the identity of the subject. Brzozowski accurately observes:

This ability to reconstruct other people’s thoughts and emotions may lead to significant revelations in the fields of history or psychology. It also poses a great danger to the person privileged by this capacity. It is undoubtedly corrosive to their personality, their own way of thinking and feeling.<sup>30</sup>

Another rupture of the subject appears whenever he takes up the pen and realizes the differences between the writing “self” and the experiencing “self.” Finally, the “self” made up of flesh and blood opposes the “self” that wishes to inhabit the sphere of absolutes. This procession of oppositions leads to the disintegration of the subject, to the fragmentation of identity, and may even invalidate the facile parallels between the author and other romantic writers. Romantic melancholics to which the critics often compared Amiel had no such trouble with subjectivity. Although they fell prey to history and unforgiving nature and remained at odds with the rest of society, they nevertheless avoided the disintegration of the subject. Meanwhile, in Amiel’s approach, the subject is undone right before our eyes, and the process is directly related to the modernist dominant of the Swiss philosopher’s text. From this perspective, Amiel is not as much the heir of

<sup>30</sup> S. Brzozowski, *Fryderyk Henryk Amiel...*, 136.

romantic melancholy, as he is (as correctly diagnosed by Gorceix<sup>31</sup>) a forerunner of modernist melancholy – especially its Viennese interpretation: Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote a penetrating study of the *Intimate Diary*, while Amiel himself invokes baron Ernst von Feuchtersleben, the first professor of psychiatry at the University of Vienna and author of *Zur Diätetik der Seele*, in his writing.

It seems, however, that the Swiss philosopher's solution is far more radical than the one Viennese doctors, writers, and philosophers discussed throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. Amiel's goal is not as much about the disintegration of the subject as it is about 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. (71)

I have lived the impersonal life – in the world, yet not in it, thinking much, desiring nothing. (207)

This “craving for namelessness,”<sup>32</sup> as Brzozowski put it, is proof of ultimate loss and of a void that nothing will ever fill. Amiel ceases to consider himself a separate being, he loses himself – as emphasized by Renaud<sup>33</sup> – in order to dedicate his reflection to mankind in general. This final loss is absolutely irretrievable. There is no world (as it was just a figment of the mind), no great work (as it keeps dissolving into textual fragments), and no subject (as it is lost, both in the psychological and philosophical sense). The melancholic experience of loss and void is striking and all-encompassing in Amiel's work; it also strips him of the will to fight – because what is there to fight for? The price of ceaselessly gazing into the abyss of his own “self” turned out to be incredibly high, because the subject ultimately lost himself 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. (273)

31 cf. P. Gorceix, *La problématique...*

32 S. Brzozowski, *Fryderyk Henryk Amiel...*, 138.

33 cf. D. Renaud, *Un écrivain en marche...*

The emptiness of the world, the work, and the subject relentlessly swallows up whatever happens to appear on the surface. Nameless, this void, dominating both the outside world and the inner depths of the subject, the latter becoming a hypostasis of itself – a process which Amiel describes in a very poetic way: “Life is but the dream of a shadow” (173). Another time, the philosopher compares himself to a “balloon” which – akin to a soap bubble – is “a plaything of every breath of wind, surrounded by the emptiness of the atmosphere, and even more empty inside itself.”<sup>34</sup> Leaving such a void is practically impossible, and the subject is doomed to endlessly grieve his own demise, because after withdrawing from public life and society altogether, he could not create another myth for himself that would prevent him from quivering and introduce a measure of order into his inner chaos.

*Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz*

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34 H.F. Amiel, *Journal intime*, tome troisième mars 1856–décembre 1860, 787–788. On the subject of the “soap bubble” metaphor in Amiel’s work, see G. Poulet, *Les métamorphoses du cercle...*, 335–337.