

CHAPTER 14

RENÉ AND THE ‘MAL DU SIÈCLE’: A LITERARY ROLE MODEL FOR THE NEGOTIATION OF PROBLEMATIC SEXUAL IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE – THE CASES OF CUSTINE AND AMIEL¹

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This chapter presents the case studies of two francophone men: one a French nobleman born during the French Revolution, Astolphe de Custine, 1790–1856; and one a Swiss philosophy professor and a generation younger, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, 1821–81. For each, the central story of his life was how he related to his own fragile gender and sexuality – Custine was, it emerged, homosexual, whilst Amiel defined himself as lacking in all those attributes of strength, energy and productiveness which he himself defined as truly masculine. The histories of their gender-ing (because it was a process) oscillate suggestively between illness and text. That is to say, their stories are about illness, actual or perceived, selfdiagnosed or socially-determined, and their response – both in terms of diagnosis and resolution – is profoundly textual. By this I mean that they construe their problems in terms of a general cultural malaise exemplified by a piece of high literature, to which they respond textually, re-identifying themselves in the light of it and thus dramatising and playing out the tension between gender, sexuality, health and society that they had to live with. They therefore leave the label of ill health behind, and write themselves towards well-being. Or do they?

The ‘general cultural malaise’ to which I am alluding was what was known in France as the ‘*mal du siècle*’ – the sickness of the century.² The text which defined, exemplified or even *caused* it (as a fashionable trend) is Chateaubriand’s *René*, first published in 1802 as part of his five-volume pro-Christian polemic, *Le génie du Christianisme* (The Genius of Christianity).³ *René* is the story-with-a-moral of a dispossessed young nobleman, in a state of undefined yearning, awash with emotion yet devoid of purpose in life. His older sister decides to become a nun, and on the verge of taking her vows breaks out with an admission of her incestuous feelings for him. This is the catalyst of self-realisation for René who in despair departs for America where he makes a sort of half-life with the Natchez

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the Leverhulme Trust – it was as a Leverhulme Research Fellow at De Montfort University that I first worked on these topics. I would also like to thank George Rousseau, director of that Leverhulme project, who introduced me to Custine and Amiel and with whom I wrote articles on Custine (2001) and Amiel (2002).

2 For a survey of this topic, see Hoog (1954).

3 Chateaubriand (1966).

Indians, married but childless and living separately from his Natchez wife. He is known for his mysterious melancholy. There he learns of his sister’s death, and finally reveals his story to the tribal elders, who, reprimanding him, tell him to ‘temper [the] character which ha[d] already wreaked such havoc’.⁴ He fails to stop yearning and being melancholy, and meets death soon after in a battle.

Chateaubriand explicitly – if rather ambiguously – frames this tragic story of

impossible love in a disapproving context. He is, he says, painting a portrait, undiluted by adventure, of the ‘indistinctness of the passions’ whereby a ‘great misfortune is sent to punish René and shake up those young men who, surrendering themselves up to pointless dreaming, criminally evade their dues to society’.⁵ The ‘pointless dreaming’ very clearly refers to René’s forbidden obsession with his sister while the ‘criminal evasion of society’s dues’ as clearly refers to his refusal to take an active patriarchal role in the tribe and to start a family. That is to say, the problem arises from unacceptable sexual desire, construed as anti-social, even as destructive of society.

There is, furthermore, a specifically literary aspect to the delusion, or ‘*mal*’ – primarily meaning illness here but also the term for ‘evil’ – of this class of young men, and it is reading. The problem, says Chateaubriand in his framing remarks, is that these young men have read more than they have experienced and that their imaginative life has therefore overtaken their real life: ‘the large number of examples to be seen, the multitude of books on the subject of man and his feelings, confer knowledge without experience [...]. One lives, heart bursting, in an empty world.’⁶ To the twin themes of forbidden love and evasion of social duty is added here therefore the issue of reading about ‘man and his feelings’, that is to say reading about things which might not have been experienced and which are manifestly seen as tainting. Here Chateaubriand is extending the eighteenth-century debate about the corrupting effect of novels on women to a new group of vulnerable corruptible individuals.⁷ Inappropriate knowledge and inadequate experience combine to create corrupted literate ‘criminals’ who ‘evade their dues to society’. This is clearly a not particularly coded allusion to behaviours that did not conform to the patriarchal sexual mores of the time.⁸

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⁴ Chateaubriand (1962) p 203. ‘*Modère seulement ce caractère qui t’a déjà fait tant de mal.*’ (All translations are by Caroline Warman unless otherwise noted.)

⁵ Chateaubriand (1962) p 173. Extract from the 1805 preface to the first separate edition of René: ‘*Ce n’est pour ainsi dire, qu’une pensée; c’est la peinture du vague des passions, sans aucun mélange d’aventures, hors un grand malheur envoyé pour punir René, et pour effrayer les jeunes hommes qui, livrés à d’inutiles rêveries, se dérobent criminellement aux charges de la société.*’

⁶ Chateaubriand (1962) p 170. ‘*Le grand nombre d’exemples qu’on a sous les yeux, la multitude de livres qui traitent de l’homme et de ses sentiments, rendent habile, sans expérience. [...] On habite, avec un coeur plein, un monde vide.*’

⁷ For an excellent overview of this debate and especially of the views of the *philosophes* about it, see Trousson (1996).

⁸ The explicit mention, let alone discussion, of non-heterosexuality was extremely taboo in francophone society of the time: see Aron and Kempf (1979) pp 141–57.

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It is difficult to give an adequate idea here of the extent to which Chateaubriand really was felt to have touched a cultural and emotional nerve: the noble melancholy of René was both identified with and in fact imitated, and also condemned in accordance with Chateaubriand’s own dialectic. Suffice it to say that the extremely influential French literary critic Sainte-Beuve – who himself had been overwhelmed by René when he had first encountered it⁹ – wrote in 1849 that ‘René’s sickness ... has been the sickness of our entire age’.¹⁰ In short, we can

say four things: that this illness/evil seems to be created and framed by textual engagement; that it was viewed in terms of a cultural phenomenon; that its symptoms were alienation, marginalisation and withdrawal from mainstream patriarchal productive society; and that at its core is sexuality, forbidden sexuality moreover. It thus simultaneously provides society with a coded way of naming – or euphemising – suspect sexuality, and also offers a possible identity or role model for those who might actually ‘suffer’ from such a malady.

Custine was one such. He came from an ancient and respected noble family – his grandfather was Adam de Custine, general of the armies of the North until 1790, and his father was also a soldier. Both were guillotined during the terror, when Astolphe was three years old, and his mother, Delphine, was imprisoned for six months during the same period. In the preceding year he had already lost his older brother, then six, to the smallpox vaccine that their mother had bravely yet trepidaciously given them. The decimation of the family – of its members, wealth and status (although these last two aspects were partially reconstituted under Napoleon) – was clearly traumatic. As an adolescent and young man, he was an extremely troubled character. In 1811, his mother wrote that ‘Astolphe feels he is the most unhappy person in the world, and between you and me the particular cast of his spirit and character has condemned me to a life of ever-lasting tears’.¹¹ Custine himself informed his mother that his ‘indisposition is an illness whose cause is much more serious than its effects: people are often in much worse pain without being as ill as I am’.¹² This statement seems almost wilfully obscure. In fact what happened to Custine in these formative years – his twenties – is that he repeatedly bumped his head extremely seriously – it occurred on his travels with his mother around Europe in 1811, 1813 and again in 1815 – at the Congress of Vienna – and each time he was bedridden for months.¹³ Such was his

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9 ‘I read René and shuddered ... what I saw in it was a perfect image of myself’ (*J’ai lu René et j’ai frémi ... je m’y suis reconnu tout entier*), cited by Waller (1992) p 170.

10 As quoted by Hoog (1954) p 42.

11 ‘*Astolphe se trouve l’être au monde le plus malheureux, et par la tournure de son esprit et de son caractère, condamne ma vie à des larmes éternelles; mais que ceci soit entre nous*’, 17 September 1811, Delphine de Sabran to her mother; quoted by Maugras and Croze-Lemercier (1912) pp 438–39.

12 ‘*Mon indisposition est une maladie grave par sa cause bien plus que par ses effets; on est souvent beaucoup plus souffrant sans être aussi malade que je le suis*’, 27 January 1815, Astolphe to his mother: quoted by Maugras and Croze-Lemercier (1912) pp 483–84.

13 See Luppé (1957), Muhlstein (1996) and Tarn (1985).

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susceptibility that he began to dream of a special helmet head-protector.¹⁴ Farcical as this sounds, Custine himself always made the most extensive claims for his malady. In 1817, he wrote to a friend that ‘I have suffered internally from incomprehensible ailments [...] I shall never be able to communicate the pain that has been hounding me since childhood.’¹⁵ To an intimate young male friend (Edouard de la Grange) he writes repeatedly about his illness. At a crucial point in his self-revelation he talks in veiled terms about his head injuries:

... a series of [...] accidents, [...] repeated with a sort of fatality, [...] gave me an

illness of the brain from which, for three years, I suffered morally and physically as much, I believe, as it was in me to bear. If I were able to tell the precise story of my soul during that terrible crisis, it would make a significant chapter in the book of human misery. Yet, however great the loss incurred in descending, against my will, into the very depths of my being, where the two natures meld and where physicality and morality no longer have any limits, I am still not sure whether I would prefer to have back the force of youth and life that I lost there at the price of the wisdom I gained.¹⁶

This curious passage is simultaneously vague in terms of specifics, sublime in its claims for misery and emphatic about the actual problem: again and again he refers to ‘moral’ *and* ‘physical’, to ‘the two natures’, to ‘physicality and morality’ unfettered by ‘limits’, to the fact that he suffered this ‘against his will’. To be inferred is, I think, a reference to physical desire in mortal combat with the moral will. Neither appears to have won or lost: instead, we have the allusion to extreme suffering, and to the self-knowledge achieved, which seems to have been worth it. Custine had met Edouard de la Grange at a ball in 1818 and for a couple of years they corresponded very passionately, at least Custine did. Custine, at age 28, was about six years older than his friend, more experienced perhaps, and this letter is one of many that allude to impossible suffering, unspeakable feelings and intuitions of fundamental harmony. La Grange seems never to have responded in kind, yet Custine’s hints cannot have passed unnoticed. In tandem with his many references to illness are his many references to *René*. Custine’s mother, it should be said, had had a real-life love affair with Chateaubriand.¹⁷ Custine tells La Grange

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14 ‘I’d like to have a special head-protector made, a sort of reinforced wire hat, perhaps a cap of polished sheet metal, what do I know? If I were king, I’d get my entire privy council on the job!’ (*J’ai envie de me faire un étui pour la tête, un bonnet double de fil de fer, un bourrelet de tôle vernie, que sais-je? Si j’étais roi, je convoquerais tout mon conseil pour imaginer un gardetête!*), 27 January 1815, Custine: quoted by Luppé (1957) p 56.

15 ‘*J’ai souffert intérieurement de maux incompréhensibles [...] je ne pourrai jamais dire la douleur qui m’a poursuivi dès mon enfance*’, 1817, Custine to Rahel de Varnhagen: quoted by Luppé (1957) p 67.

16 ‘*Ce sont des accidents pareils, mais renouvelés avec une espèce de fatalité, qui m’ont causé une maladie du cerveau, dont, pendant trois ans, j’ai souffert moralement et physiquement tout ce qu’il m’est donné, je crois, de supporter. Si je pouvais faire l’histoire exacte de mon âme pendant cette terrible crise, ce serait un chapitre important des misères humains. Quelque perte que j’ai faite en descendant malgré moi dans les profondeurs de mon être, où les deux natures se confondent, où le physique et le moral n’ont plus leurs limites, je ne sais si je voudrais retrouver la force de jeunesse et de vie que j’y ai perdue, au prix des lumières que j’y ai acquises*’, 27 July 1818, Custine to the Marquis de la Grange: Custine (1925) pp 25–26.

17 See Luppé (1957), Maugras and Croze-Lemercier (1912), Muhlstein (1996) and Tarn (1985).

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about the enduring impression *René* and its author made on him: ‘I recognise in my anxious heart the echo of the sentiments and words of *René*, and I cannot go near its author without being afraid of what is analogous in myself to his innate sadness.’¹⁸ I am *René*, says Custine, inviting his friend to transpose the interpretation. Many are the occasions on which he dramatises himself in the same romantic manner as *René*, talking of streams and torrents, abyss and chasm,

incompleteness, love and yearning.¹⁹ Custine makes it clear that René's veiled incestuous feelings convey an important message about his own. Incest, being socially taboo, becomes analogous to homosexuality.

La Grange evidently chose to be deaf to his meaning and in fact halted the correspondence altogether once scandalous evidence relating to Custine's homosexuality emerged in 1824, disgracing him, casting him out of polite society and forcibly relieving him of the necessity to communicate via mysterious codes and allusions. However, *René* was never left behind, and the extent to which Custine had internalised it as a role model is evident from a fragment from *Letters from Russia*, the book for which he was and remains best known: 'these reveries, I know, are no longer appropriate for someone of my age; M de Chateaubriand was too great a poet to paint us an ageing René. [...] yet my destiny [...] was to show you how a man born to die young grows old; a subject which is more sad than interesting, oh thankless task of all thankless tasks!'²⁰ In brief, Custine was an 'ill' person, ill essentially because of his impermissible sexuality, actually ill and ill according to his accounts of himself, but as he points out 'it is extremely stupid to think that the malady is always where it appears to be. Problems start and end in the mind'.²¹ As we have seen, he uses the descriptions of his sufferings to do something other than communicate in a straightforward way his symptoms: he wants to talk about illness as code. In this context, illness is not what it seems, it is the mind talking – and specifically in his letters to the man he hopes to woo, Custine uses illness to allude politely to the unmentionable. By heavily emphasising the epic, even sublime, nature of his anguish, and by identifying himself as a René, he creates a non-sinful, unpornographic, unthreatening version of the sexual misfit which is also admirable, noble, even desirable. Illness is the code used by society to encrypt taboo desire – thus René is diagnosed with a mysterious malady – and it is illness again that Custine recodifies into text and intertext in order to communicate his essential nobility.

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18 '*Malgré les efforts que j'ai faits pour me soustraire à son empire, malgré de longues absences, malgré ses propres conseils et le soin qu'il a pris lui-même d'effacer en moi les premières impressions qu'il y avait produites, et dont il craignait la vivacité, je reconnais, à chaque occasion, dans mon coeur inquiet, l'écho des sentiments et des paroles de René, et je ne puis me rapprocher de son auteur sans m'effrayer de tout ce que je trouve en moi d'analogue à sa tristesse innée*', Custine, 19 October 1818: Luppé (1957) p 123.

19 See Luppé (1957) p 31.

20 '*Ces rêveries, je le sais, ne sont plus de mon âge; M de Chateaubriand était trop grand poète pour nous peindre un René vieillissant. [...] pourtant mon destin [...] était de vous montrer comment vieillit un homme né pour mourir jeune; sujet plus triste qu'intéressant, tâche ingrate entre toutes les tâches!*', Letter 21: Custine (1843) p 125.

21 '*C'est une grande bêtise, que de croire que la maladie soit toujours où elle paraît. L'esprit commence les maux, et je crois que c'est lui aussi qui les finit*', Custine to Rahel, 20 July 1817, Letter 35: Custine (1870) p 213.

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Amiel shadows René in a less masterful and more hopeless way. Not rich or well-connected like Custine, Amiel miserably performed the functions of a philosophy professor in Geneva from 1849 until his death in 1881. What makes

him remarkable is his exhaustive, hypochondriac diary, all 17,000 pages of it.²² Amiel's illness was chronic if undefined, his male gender vulnerable to the attacks he himself launched on it in his diary. Barren, sterile, onanistic, 'femmelette' in the evocative French term – perhaps womanlet, sub-woman in English – these are all insults he fires at himself.²³ His illness is a more advanced version of the '*mal du siècle*' (illness of the age) that Custine also suffered from but in the end overcame and turned to his advantage. Amiel also used it as a cultural identifier, also searched for intimacy, also located himself within its constituency.²⁴ When still a very young man – 24 years old – he announced that the notion that 'everything [was] to be found in books' was a delusion and expressed the fear that he had 'lost [his] life to [books]'.²⁵ In fact he was to live his life irrevocably textually, through the pages of his private diary, a genre of personal outpouring that *René*, again, had done much to launch.²⁶ He became stuck in the intimate confessional form. He had read too much, done too little, was unable to 'pay society's dues' and marry, remained awash with emotion that needed an outlet. I would stress that this is not my diagnosis but his own; at one point, for instance, he writes: 'What, really, am I doing here, quill in hand? I am day-dreaming, listening to the deepdown murmur of feelings and fears. Where does it lead? To the knowledge of one's misery. And that's not the way to get better. To ruminate over pain only exacerbates the weakness of the patient.'²⁷ Over the course of his 30-year daily dedication to the diary, it becomes his drug – 'my pharmacy' Amiel calls it, in 1850, and so it is, in more ways than one:²⁸ 'this diary is an outlet; it lets out my virility, which evaporates away in the sweat of ink. It has often dispensed me with the need for a friend or wife [...] it still delivers me from my active self. I have sometimes thought that producing these pages was a

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22 Amiel (1976–94).

23 29 March 1858: Amiel (1979) vol 3, p 484.

24 See for example the following passage: 'Link with Pellegrin. We met more than a year ago at Rolle and are now friends. Intimate and confessional letters have already been exchanged; he made me read in his soul; I tried to do the same. The thing is concluded. A sensitive, delicate, religious soul, he is worth much more than me, but he loves me, and that makes us equal' (*Liaison avec Pellegrin. Nous nous sommes connus il y a plus d'un an à Rolle, maintenant nous sommes amis. Des lettres de confiance intime ont déjà été échangées; il m'a fait lire dans son âme; j'ai tâché d'y répondre. La chose est conclue. Ame sensible, délicate, religieuse, il vaut bien mieux que moi, mais il m'aime, et cela nous égalise*), December 1840: Amiel (1976) vol 1, p 185.

25 Amiel (1976) vol 1, pp 206–07.

26 Girard (1986), and Didier (1976). For a summary see Rousseau and Warman (2002) pp 238–39.

27 '*Au fond, que fais-je ici, plume à la main? je rêve tout éveillé et j'écoute bruire en moi la tempête des impressions et des craintes. A quoi cela mène-t-il? A connaître ses misères. Ce n'est pas ainsi qu'on les guérit. Cette rumination de ses peines ne fait qu'augmenter la faiblesse du malade*', Amiel, 18 July 1872: Amiel (1989) vol 9, pp 349–50.

28 A decade later, he writes '*[le journal intime] est ma pharmacie, et doit chercher à être mon miroir; non à m'amuser*', Amiel 7 April 1850: Amiel (1976) vol 1, p 689.

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replacement for life, a sort of onanism, a ruse of cowardly egotism, a way of

escaping duty, of betraying society and Providence.’ It is a malady which multiplies textually through cumulative self-diagnoses. For Amiel, the confessional role model, that noble, literate, mysterious, brooding young man, turns sour – in fact, it turns back on itself. The diary dramatises its preoccupation with narcissism, making great stockpiles of self-description which routinely crush their author with their accusation of non-performance. One such is the following: ‘a private diary is the portrait of an individual given over to two sterile occupations, chasing after or savouring himself.’ Amiel was not able to write himself out of illness: in his culturally-inherited perception, writing is not only an addiction from which he cannot free himself, but also the illness itself. He never combats the notion that self-reflexive writing, or more simply writing about feelings, was a morally corrupting force. Instead he derives his entire selfdenigratory self-definition from his status as an (ill) writer. Reading and writing seem to have been pathologised – if reading is a symptom, writing is the fullblown disease, yet it seems to have been a disease that people wanted to infect themselves with. When, after Amiel’s death, the diary was published – for which, it should be noted, Amiel had made extremely careful arrangements – it was hugely popular, quickly translated into English, German, Italian and Russian, running into five editions in four years. Tolstoy and Nietzsche are just the most important of the figures to have responded to it.²⁹ The diary whose topic was predominantly lack of health and sterility itself gave birth to a hundred diaries. Marie Bashkirtseff, Paul Claudel, André Gide and Paul Valéry all wrote diaries which were to some extent inspired or influenced by Amiel’s.³⁰ It seems possible to advance also that the areas of private subjectivity that he explored and deplored were the ones most intensely focused on by psychoanalysis and literary modernism, both of which he foreshadows.

To conclude: my two case studies present two individuals of vulnerable sexuality or gender both subsumed within a particular literary and textual approach to identity and more specifically to ill identity, given then a particular name: the ‘*mal du siècle*’, the illness of the age. So perhaps I could end by claiming that nineteenth-century francophone culture developed and dealt with issues of gender, sexuality and health through the medium of self-conscious literature such as *René* as well as through the parallel medicalising discourses that Foucault concentrates on in his *History of Sexuality*. When I say ‘dealt with’, I mean that society was able to disapprove, diagnose and offer cures all at once. This literature provided a platform to discuss – via the languages of euphemism and emotion – those tensions, giving access both to the ‘doctors’ of society (to be understood within the broadest sense) and to those who were diagnosed as sick. This sickness was internalised by its sufferers – via identification with René and his literary progeny – and its sufferers were then able to claim it as a special sort of identity. Thus, disapproval, diagnosis and ‘perversion’ or illness were all able to co-exist. This phenomenon is attested to by the fact that, although Custine and Amiel may

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²⁹ Merian-Genast (1931).

³⁰ Stroeve (1993).

have been socially marginalised in terms of the patriarchal structure of society, their works were widely read. This was also the case for the numerous ‘Renépoets and René-prosers’, as the contemporary literary figure Maxime du Camp called them, throughout the century.³¹ Perhaps we may feel therefore that what nineteenth-century francophone culture was doing – as well as condemning and repressing – was creating a literary space which allowed private subjectivity to flourish and which rehearsed the issues of gender, sexuality and health. Whether it enabled subjects to write themselves towards well-being, as was posited at the beginning of this piece, is another question. In both cases touched on here, writing is a confessional and self-conscious process, as much about selfdiscovery as about revelation of the soul to others. Writing about the vulnerable self allows it to emerge into visibility, to gain an identity where none had existed, yet its virtuality quality – that is to say, the fact that this fledgling identity exists and looks at itself primarily in textual form, and more precisely in confessional writing – confines that existence to a sort of ghostliness. The writer may know and define his or her self, but that self-definition exists in a private and intimate space – a diary or a letter, for example. This self therefore is not public and does not have a recognised existence in the wider society where its specifically vulnerable quality, as defined by weakness and sensitivity on the one hand and nonpatriarchal sexuality on the other, remains problematic. If it is forcibly made public, that self is invaded and imperilled, its private quality torn open. When left intact in the intimate sphere, it still leaves the individual vulnerable or compromised in society, as the written self has no public equivalent. So the problem remains that although new, hesitant identities were being developed in textual self-referential spaces, they were confined to them. Their private quality meant they could not create an equivalent public category to inhabit. This construction of the textual self as marginal and marginalised was perpetuated, of course, by the parameters within which it was conceptualised. Thus, as has been shown, the very activity of reading was construed as harmful to the youth who were supposedly tainted by impossible dreams and unreal experiences. Society allows the textual parallel world to exist, and yet condemns it both for its virtuality and for its all too real effects. Chateaubriand’s *Le génie du Christianisme* is a case in point: he himself both creates and damns the vulnerable René. Custine and Amiel both suffered from and extended this sense of being confined to the textual self. The more they experimented in new definitions of the self, the greater the discrepancy between lived and conceptual self-reflecting selves grew, hence Custine’s curious feeling, mentioned above, of being the living materialisation of a long-dead character in a book; hence also, in Amiel, the increasingly fevered relationship between convoluted and denigratory self-description on the one hand and attempts to stop writing and ‘start living’ on the other. So, if nineteenth century confessional writing brings new marginal identities into textual life, it situates them in almost impossible tension to a normative society which denies them any real public equivalent, and this means, of course, that these fledgling identities never get to breathe with any ease: they are condemned to remain sick.

31 Camp (1991) p 29, cited by Call (1988) p 4.

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