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My Suicide

Henri Roorda

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My Suicide
1926

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Balthasar. Before he died, he left behind a brief note to a friend and his final text, *My Suicide (Mon suicide)*.

FOOTNOTES

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made by charitable men, we would facilitate the suicides of those who want to go.

Some friends came again, offering to help me and heal me. I refused, because I know that nothing could clear the desires, the images, and the thoughts that have been in my mind for forty years.

I must take precautions so that the shot does not reverberate too strongly in the heart of a sensitive being.

HENRI ROORDA'S SUICIDE NOTE

6 Nov. 1925

Dear friend,

Yesterday I lied to you. I had to be careful because I do not want anyone to stop me from killing myself. When you receive this letter, I will be dead (at least if I do not fail).

I have exhausted everything in me and around me, and that is irreparable.

Goodbye. H.R.

BIOGRAPHY

Henri Roorda van Eysinga was born on November 30, 1870, and killed himself on November 7, 1925. He was raised amidst revolutionary ideals: when he was a child, his family had to relocate to Switzerland after his father was declared *persona non grata* by the Dutch government, and there his parents befriended the anarchist thinkers Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin. The young Roorda studied math and went on to work as a teacher who was beloved by his students; he was, however, deeply disappointed by his work. Accordingly, Roorda wrote a progressive critique of the prevailing educational structure (*Le Pédagogue n'aime pas les enfants*), as well as humorous columns for the Swiss dailies, which were collected in numerous compilations. He frequently wrote under the name

for things to be beautiful, there first must exist a living being capable of feeling that beauty.

I had an absolutely false idea of life. I attached too much importance to what is exceptional: enthusiasm, excitement, drunkenness. What occupies almost everything in a person's life is daily monotonous tasks, hours of waiting, hours in which nothing happens. The normal man is he who knows how to vegetate.

My crime is not having had compassion for the unlucky person I saw every day – and to think that I am moved so easily!

The time of my suicide is coming. I am so alive that I do not feel the approach of death.

I sometimes look jealously at passersby who are totally without prestige, because they will continue to live.

I remember a cartoon in *L'Assiette au beurre* that showed a lawyer defending a criminal before a jury. This lawyer said, "Yes, we stole, we raped, we murdered. But it was in the name of God, the tsar, and the fatherland." And to think that in certain countries, there are still well-educated, virtuous, universally honored Christian people *who are imperialists!* They do not see what is so shameful in their patriotism. Frankly, being an immoral man, I am not anxious for the respect of good citizens. "How brilliant the sunsets, how warm the air, how huge the sky: the size of own souls."⁵

I will put a bullet in my heart. That will surely be less painful than a bullet in my head. I am not afraid of what will happen to me after, because I have faith: I know that I will not go before the supreme judge. It is only on earth that there are ridiculous tribunals. But all the same I will be afraid. To relax, I will first drink a half-bottle of old port. Maybe I will botch it. If laws were

⁵ Que les soleils sont beaux dans les chaudes soirées!

Que l'espace est profond! que le coeur est puissant! – *Le Balcon*, by Charles Baudelaire

INTRODUCTION

For a long time I have promised myself that I would write a small book called *Joyful Pessimism*. This title pleases me. I like the sound it makes and it decently expresses what I would like to say. But I believe I have waited too long: I have aged, and there will probably be more pessimism than joy in my book. Our heart is not a perfect thermos that conserves the ardor of our youth until the end, without losing anything. Every now and then, the prospect of my very probable and imminent suicide takes away what is left of my good humor. I will need to make every effort to ensure that the content of my book conforms to its title. After thinking it over, I believe that the expression "joyful pessimism" could make some buyers hesitate. They will not understand. *My Suicide* is a more tempting title. The public has a pronounced taste for melodrama. I would like for my suicide to bring a little money to my creditors. So I thought I should go and see Fritz, the owner of the Grand Café. I wanted to say, "Announce a conference on suicide by Balthasar in the newspapers, and add in bold type, 'The speaker will commit suicide at the end of the conference.' Then, in smaller letters, 'Seats for 20 fr., 10 fr., 5 fr., and 2 fr.' (The price of drinks will be triple.) I am sure we will have a crowd." But I gave up on this idea. Fritz would have surely refused, since my suicide might leave an indelible stain on the floor of his decent establishment. And then the police, completely illegally, would undoubtedly have prohibited the performance.

Balthasar.

I LIKE THE EASY LIFE

After working hard for thirty-three years, I am tired. But I still have a magnificent appetite. It is this fine appetite that made me do so many stupid things. Happy are those who have bad stomachs,

because they will always be virtuous. Perhaps I did not observe the rules of hygiene well enough. In living hygienically, it seems one can grow quite old. This never tempted me. From now on, I would like to lead a comfortable and primarily contemplative existence. With an intoxicated mind, with fleeting emotions, I would like to admire the beauty of the world and enjoy “earthly nourishment” from morning until night. But if I remained on earth, I would not have this easy life that so tempts me. To repair the mistakes I have made, I would need to carry out monotonous tasks and bear terrible privations for a long time to come. I would rather go.

STOCKPILE

My dream of an easy life is not an impossible dream. Every year, more virtuous or more able men than I achieve it. They are sensible individuals who, in anticipation of their old age, have stockpiled supplies their entire lives. A French statesman once gave the young people of his country some brutal advice: “Get rich!” This remark used to scandalize me, for I received a moral education of superior quality. Eloquent speakers told me, “Always defend the cause of the oppressed!” I took this to heart, and in my family I was always the champion of our good servant. But perhaps injustice, as has been claimed, is better than disorder, because each time I made my timid interventions they provoked regrettable scenes. Without misleading me, my educators could have told me: “Humanity is poor; this means that it must work tremendously, never flagging, to make the various riches that the earth can produce usable. Desirable or useful things are in short supply. This is why the farsighted man, through his cunning or through a few happy accidents, keeps the supplies that he needs to persevere locked in cabinets – most frequently, in safes. Because he knows he will age. A day will come when he will not want to produce anymore, but will still feel the need to consume. On this day, he will not be able

Lies, hypocrisy: perhaps these are what best distinguish man from animal.

I adore wine. It momentarily rejuvenates my exhausted soul. Vice is loving something too much. There are two types of virtuous people: those whose desires are weak and who easily resist temptation, and those who deliberately go against their true nature. These latter types are rare. Among them are madmen who torture themselves to please God, and exceptionally good people who sacrifice themselves out of love or pity. They are the only ones who can make me feel my inferiority. The others are not any better than I am. They are prudent people who do not love anything passionately. They progress slowly in life, and they never fall because they do not lean left or right. Those who succeed, those capable ones, they are tightrope walkers. Why should we be virtuous? For life to continue. And why should life continue? God cannot answer man’s every “why.” If he did respond, he would undoubtedly say that he created the world because he could not do otherwise, and he would decline all responsibility. We are all the same. In a slim collection of philosopher Charles Secrétan’s reflections, I found these words: “In the creature’s love of God, the goal of creation is attained.”⁴ But if God wanted only to be worshipped, he could have found less cruel means.

Myself, I could only love a human God.

My suicide will be judged harshly. But since the great majority of people are mediocre and unintelligent beings, what importance should I give to public opinion? Oh, no! Respectable people are not better than me. I am comforted when I compare myself to those who speak for the state before the masses. What prudence! What banality! And often, what baseness!

Walking around, I looked closely at a few passersby. I worked out their way of life, their habits, their mentality. I thought of everything they would be unable to do. The individual is everything;

⁴ Dans l’amour de la créature pour son Dieu, le but de la création est atteint.

For a few days, many things have not interested me at all anymore. Everything related to literature seems so shallow, and it would be difficult for me to take part in the discussions that rouse men. I find conversations more insipid than ever. But I have developed a true idea of the infinitely precious things that I will lose. It seems to me that I can now better distinguish what has value in life. I am happy to see the sky, trees, flowers, animals, people. I am happy to SEE. I am happy to still be alive. I would like to put my hands on Alice's breasts one more time *to not be alone*.

“To not feel until my last hour
That my heart is splitting;
To not cry, for man dies
As a baby is born.”³

For more than twenty-five years I was passionately interested in a problem that I considered very important. Today I see my error: I was not interested in it because I recognized its importance; rather, without doubting myself, I affirmed its importance because I took it up. Observe those who for a long time have been occupied with national defense, or public hygiene, or schools, or “art for the people”: each of them is a victim of the same illusion; each one fervently accomplishes his task without according much importance to what others do. The real importance of problems cannot be measured. The universe will have much less importance when I am gone.

No longer having any work to undertake, I sometimes feel like I am on vacation.

I am a player who would like nothing better than to keep playing, but who does not want to accept the rules of the game.

There is so much hypocrisy in those who go on living. Would social life be possible without lies? No.

³ Pour ne pas sentir à ma dernière heure
Que mon coeur se fend;
Pour ne pas pleurer, pour que l'homme meure
Comme est né l'enfant. – *L'agonie*, by René-François Sully Prudhomme

to rest and enjoy life unless he has his stockpile. “Social wealth is limited in quantity; work is tiring; the human being is condemned to age and weaken. *That, we cannot change*. These three conditions explain the envy of the poor and the precautions that the rich man takes so that his safe is not broken into. They explain the laws that men have made so that there may be an enduring social order.” This is what my educators should have explained to me. But they mainly talked about progress and the society of the future. For many years I was the convinced collaborator of utopians who were preparing the happiness of humanity. Because the poor are very numerous, they may manage to establish “justice” in the distribution of supplies. The prospect of a well organized socialist state, in which individuals will enjoy material security, does not bother me at all. When we are sure of getting the food we need each day, we can think of other things – we have a free spirit. In today's world, where “liberty” reigns, most men are anxious. But if socialism triumphs, what kind of food could a person count on? Will he have to settle for bread, for milk, for fresh vegetables, and for “egalitarian” macaroni without cheese? Frugality, abstinence, and virtue will undoubtedly be mandatory, so that there may be enough food for everyone. Opulence for all would demand an awesome collective effort. As for me, I would like a society in which work chores are reduced to a minimum, and every day one has many hours to love, to enjoy one's body, and to play with one's intelligence. My dream is absurd. No matter how you conceive of it, lasting happiness is impossible. It is perhaps not wrong to tell man, “You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow.” But must man wish for life to continue? Society defends itself against the egotism of the individual because it wants to go on. Why go on? Toward what desirable future are we going? The Creator, who appears to be very intelligent, must say to himself every so often that his work is pointless. I am rambling. To think, to reflect, is the work of an imperfect intelligence. The Infinite Intelligence does not think – it merges with absolute stupidity! God surely says nothing at all. If you talk to me about

the best interests of humanity, I do not understand. But I like saddle of venison and aged Burgundy wine. And I know what may exist of the marvelous in poetry, in music, and in a woman's smile.

MONEY

I have already said it: those who educated me were not stubborn, greedy peasants. They were generous utopians. At the age of twenty, I really believed that money was not important. They had made me feel all the ugliness of the capitalist regime. What also distorted my judgment was that no one was cruel to me. I always had such good friends that I continue to think too well of myself. Once or twice, following their friendly suggestions, I tried to put away some supplies. But I ate them right away. Today I see my serious errors all too clearly, but it is too late. I understood the important role money plays in modern society belatedly. Now I know. When I enter one of the magnificent banks recently constructed in Lausanne, I feel a sacred emotion; I am in the temple of the living religion. There are no hypocrites among the faithful whom I encounter there: none of them doubts that his god is all-powerful. Money makes happiness. During the Great War of 1914, rich men generously sacrificed their children on the altar of the fatherland. But later, when the fatherland needed money, these virtuous men put their fortunes in a safe place. Their consciences did not tell them to make the ultimate sacrifice. Not only can the person who has enough money live comfortably, hygienically, and agreeably, but he also has the leisure to cultivate his "private flowerpot," *Humble geranium or triumphant palm tree*. The rich man can change his life. The poor man cannot hope to. If the profession he has engaged in for some years suddenly repulses him, he must continue anyway. To take on a new apprenticeship, to begin in a new direction, all of this would require money. The poor and the rich can make the same mistakes, but these mistakes will have

That's all. I will kill myself soon. I do not deserve this punishment. I am sure that I have had fewer terrible thoughts than most of those good citizens who succeed and who will never think of suicide. The beautiful verses that I have recited to myself spread purity in my soul. Every day they have brought me one minute of emotion. Oh, I would like to stay on earth!

A person who is totally devoid of malice can still do enormous damage. I would like to ask forgiveness of someone, but the words that I need to say do not exist.

Over the course of a day my mood often changes. There are moments I forget that I will die. So I smile and hum the tunes that I like. There is still a great store of joyfulness in me. To destroy all that is a waste. I never knew how to be frugal.

I have the pleasure of writing this little book about my suicide. While I work, my thoughts are as pure as a child's.

Many people consider suicide a crime. But they do not acknowledge that there are two types of boorishness: that of criminals and that of honest men. A minimum of boorishness is indispensable for life. A philosopher said, "I do not know what a criminal can be, but the heart of an honest man is hideous."

Since I hid a loaded revolver in my bedsprings I do not fear the future.

I really love life. But, to enjoy the spectacle, you need to have a good seat. On earth, most places are bad, though it is true that the spectators are usually not very demanding.

Every now and then my suicide seems a little like a "farce" to me. Oh! Why is the line that separates trivial things from serious things not better marked?

Am I unhappy, or do the hopeless words that I say to myself make me think that I am? It is impossible for us to distinguish our real pains from our imaginary ones. Which is real? Which is not?

Music calms me. I feel that it forgives me. I am sure that all the poets would forgive me. (I do not speak, of course, of those patriots who compose poems for the state.)

“Think of how many furtive looks men and women exchange when they see each other in the street or in some public place. Too moral or too timid, they repress their instincts. In the world, millions of hearts are going hungry.”

“In a profound darkness in which she could not see my white hair, I want to madly hold in my arms a woman who would feel the same way I do.”

“It’s impossible. We are all condemned to solitude. A French doctor could say, ‘Most men die of sorrow.’ This doesn’t stop life from going on. Nature only wants a momentary coming together of the sexes, and it is in vain that the individual searches for lasting happiness in love.”

“Man is condemned to sorrow because he has imagination, because he thinks, because he abandoned his animal nature.”

“Philippe, you’re right. There are hearts that our stupid morality condemns to a youth that is too short and an old age that is too long. Old age is useless. If I had created the world, I would have put love at the end of life. People would have been sustained until the end by a great and confused hope.”

LAST THOUGHTS BEFORE DYING

Everything is physiology. My reasons for going would not be enough for someone other than me. My way of feeling is not the same as everyone else’s. To keep me in this life, my friends offered to help. But I am so used to the idea of my imminent death that I refused. The prospect of recommencing a life in which there would, again, likely be worries and humiliations does not tempt me. I have to believe that there is an essential motivation in me that is all used up. The reasons I have given thus do not explain everything. The truth, as a writer tells it who wants to be sincere, is always something more or less “organized.” There are abnormal existences that end very naturally in suicide.

less serious consequences for the rich. If I had money, I would not inflict the death penalty on myself, and I could console the one whom I harmed so much. The rich man has a choice: he can be generous or not be. If he wanted, he could lead a life of poverty for a few years. The poor man does not have the choice. When a man has an iron will, he can very well do without wealth. Ordinarily, though, the pauper replaces the “indomitable spirit” that he lacks with resignation. Very poor, very honest people are undernourished beings. Watch them: their souls radiate no warmth. They are nourished just enough to be able to *continue*. Besides, that is the only thing that society demands of them. I imagine the faces the rich would make if the poor made a habit of killing themselves to shorten their gray existences. They would surely say that it is *immoral*. And what wouldn’t they do to keep their prisoners from escaping! It is easy for the rich man to forget his great sorrows: he can leave, and, in changing his setting, every now and then he can also change the course of his thoughts. Who knows if, in paying this high price, he will not find the woman who will love him “for him”? When she has a lot of money, an ugly woman appears less ugly. The rich Monsieur T. speaks with so much self-confidence that one does not notice right away that he is an idiot. As for the poor man, he is exposed to humiliations every day. Because they are poor, spouses who have stopped loving each other, people who hate each other, often must continue living together. Separation is not in every budget. The rich man is not forced to be a hypocrite – he has security. Having money means being able to count on the future. Money is a life to come. The poor will always be among us: a society composed only of the rich would not be viable. But for the individual who has no taste for hard labor, there remains a recourse – that is to go.

I LIVED BADLY

In his final moments, the dying Socrates remembered the rooster he owed to one of the deities of his time, and he was eager to honestly “put his affairs in order.” When you owe no more than a rooster, that is easy. Me, I owe a thousand roosters, and since I know that I will never have enough energy or virtue to restore them all, I will inflict the death penalty on myself. This will put an end to the intolerable anxiety in me. And I like to think that the justice of men will be satisfied. So I recognize the seriousness of my mistakes. I should have lived differently. One should not rely too much on the supplies of neighbors. But I cannot judge myself too severely, because I always had excellent intentions. When I used to say, “I’ll return your rooster on September 30th,” I was absolutely sincere. I was even so assured of my sincerity that an hour later I was thinking of something else. And as I have always had a rich appetite, I would happen to eat, without meaning any harm, the roosters that I should have safeguarded until September 30th. Full of optimism, I vaguely counted on the future. I had often heard it said that fortune comes when you sleep.

I looked down on storekeepers for a long time. I thought that my soul was more beautiful than theirs. When Monsieur K. would tell me with pride, “I have always honored my signature,” I did not admire him. His commercial integrity is certain. But when he has not signed any papers, K. has fewer scruples. If he has the chance, he is not afraid to scrimp and save a little from the meager salaries of his employees. And he does not always respond to his clients’ questions with total loyalty. The law does not require the retailer to tell the whole truth to the first one who comes around; it does not punish all kinds of human boorishness. A professor who receives his pay at the end of the month is often a naïf who makes an absurd idea out of life, because he has too much time to spend on disinterested speculation. In our world of traders and financiers, the normal man is he who, from morning until night,

made to live in a world where a person must consecrate his youth to preparing for old age.

THAT WHICH LASTS TOO LONG

Philippe came back to my house. He told me, “There are things inside us that last too long. Yesterday at the café, I saw an old man stretch his trembling hand toward the blouse of the young woman bringing him a glass of beer. It was hideous. “I’m determined to die before I look like that awful old man. Because the same danger threatens us all. Our heart doesn’t want to forget. There is an age in which our need for love is explained by the species’ will to live. But, a long time after that, when he can no longer play a useful role, man can again become obsessed by desires that serve no purpose. I don’t know if it’s society or nature that is responsible for the disharmonies from which we all suffer. A pointless question, anyway, because it’s all mixed up. I told you that every day I go to Adrienne and ask her for tenderness. She lets me look into her eyes for a long time and timidly caress her shoulder. I could contemplate the adorable line of her neck for hours without getting bored. When she is close to me, I have certainty, I have faith; I know that there is something infinitely good in life. Nothing is better than this ‘free’ love that is condemned by honest people. “I realized that too late. For a long time, I loved chimeras and held only emptiness in my arms. Reassured by my timidity, Adrienne sometimes has an encouraging smile. But, at the moment of holding my hands out to her, I balk: I am embarrassed! She is young and I’m not anymore. I could be her father ... do you understand that?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Another person would be satisfied just caressing her soft skin. But me, I’m starved for tenderness.”

and I am also writing it to protest in advance against the severity with which I will be judged. I feel the need to defend the egotistic individual against the demands of morality. It is staid people, the friends of order, who maintain the stability of the social edifice. So it is important that their numbers be considerable. It is they who start families. They make little ones in their image, and these, in turn, reproduce, and life continues. They are told, "Grow and multiply!" And they obey. Must we unreservedly admire these respectful beings who are so good at playing their role of good citizen? What would life's appeal be if society were composed only of such beings? It is perhaps their lack of imagination that lets them be so uniformly virtuous. They live prudently, only allowing small, authorized things into their lives; they monitor their gestures and words; they never have great desires; they do not know elation and adoration. And respect often makes them dumb. From time to time, disorder must break out in the world so that new things may be born. Disorder is always provoked by bad citizens, fanatics drunk with words. I understand these people. I excuse their weaknesses. Like them, I need to live drunkenly. I need many dazzling minutes in my life. Poetry and music can provide these. And I also become excited when thinking of the work that I will begin. Would we begin a task if first of all we were not moved by the beauty of what we will create? Good wine and meals also gave me moments of profound joy. There are wines that are so noble that in drinking them, I feel the need to thank someone. Finally I feel strong, I am not afraid of anything; an immense confidence fills me in the all-too-rare moments when a woman smiles at me. It is obvious: the Great Mechanic did not construct my little internal machine with much care. He forgot to put in a regulator. This explains the disordered movements of my soul. It has been impossible for me to resemble those prudent, patient, and far-sighted beings who from the age of twenty stockpile for their final days. For me, normal life is joyous life. The unreasonable individual that I am does not want to take into account all the facts of the great problem. I was not

thinks only of money. He knows that life is a battle that starts again every day. He understands the need to be attentive and careful. I observed him many times: in his conversations, the banker M. never reveals himself completely; he is a man with thoughts to hide. In judging myself better than K. and M., I was vain and stupid. You need strength to make and save money; you need none to spend it. These men's ways of getting rich often lack elegance, but they are legal. Monsieur K. did his duty. He has his stockpile and he will be able to give a small dowry to each of his daughters. My intelligent taste for luxury never helped me grow stronger; as a delicate man I lived to lavishly spend the money others earned. I will go, because it would be too difficult to bear the consequences of my shameful lack of foresight. Young people, get rich!

IT'S A BAD DEED

Rousseau would tell me that my suicide will be a bad deed because, in living, I could still do a little good. Yes, my old Rousseau, you are right; but if I kept living, I would also do plenty of harm. I would not be cruel – there is no cruelty in me – but my egotism could cause suffering. All the same, Rousseau's objection bothers me. By going, I abandon the companion-victim who, during the long voyage we made together, always carried my bag. A person gets used to his companion's generosity very quickly. There must be many of these couples, with one partner the devoted servant of the other, and the other never even noticing. For society to continue in its current form,¹ individuals must marry and start families. But in the vast majority of cases, marriage is a link that causes suffering. Two people "who are made for each other" are not necessarily made to live together, from morning until night and from night

¹ Will there one day be a society that is very different from our own, in which individuals will be able to come together and separate from each other more easily?

until morning, for forty years straight. Because they are endowed with sensitivity and imagination (by the simple fact that they are alive), man and woman are unable to obey the representative of the state who tells them, “From now on, your feelings must not change.”

Philippe came to see me, and I listened to his secrets with great interest. He has been married for twenty-five years! Those who marry never know what they are doing. Philippe is one of those men who can only love ideas in a lasting way. His very lively taste for philosophical speculation made him inattentive, a dreamer not particularly concerned with the people in his milieu. Because his mind was elsewhere, he often forgot to be affectionate. After one year his wife was already suffering from loneliness in their marriage. He told me, “Bit by bit, without my noticing, I let all the threads that connected me to a partner I loved, who is pretty and worth much more than most women, wear out and break. We gradually lost the habit of intimacy and tender words. Today I see the harm I caused *without malice*: my partner has been alone for twenty-five years. But it is too late. I would like to tell her that I think of her very fondly, but that is impossible for me. My affectionate gestures of the past would now be so unusual, so unexpected, that shyness paralyzes me. And then, in my mind, a husband’s duty is perhaps nothing more than a moral *notion*. Under ashes, the fire ends up going out. “We live together without telling each other the things we constantly think about. She never complains – but her presence is for me a reproach. And now, because I suffer like her from this mute life, I escape every day and seek the appearance of tenderness from the girl who serves me my tea and my port.” Marriage can be an atrocious thing.

inspirations. “Ah, the first flowers and their perfume!”² Every day I must speak to the children entrusted to me of things that will occupy a very small part of their life. In my heart I excuse the “lazy” ones who find it all boring. To hold their attention I must make noises and use much of my good humor. The school is at fault for teaching everyone too many things that are interesting only to certain specialists. The child, we say, must learn to obey. Fine! But adults must learn to command reasonably. I was built to love my profession. My cordiality would have certainly been helpful if, instead of being the master of my students, I could have been their mentor. The prospect of taking up my lessons again would depress me less if those who pay me said, “You will give these children the best of your thoughts.” I hardly resemble those civil servants who are proud to be “cogs” in the social machine. I need to be moved by the truths that I teach.

STAIID PEOPLE, GOOD CITIZENS

I have compared myself more than once, and with some shame, to people who are very staid and who, every day, simply do their duty, are thrifty and sober, and give their children a good education. Looking at them, I have said, “Here is how I should have lived.” I do not have any of the ridiculous disdain certain “bohemians” have for the bourgeois. Some of the virtues that staid people possess are of an inestimable value; to not have them is to be continually at risk of committing the most serious offenses. There are modest employees and small-business owners who, for thirty or forty years running, make every effort to ensure their children will have better lives than their own. Thinking of them, I easily become emotional. (It is true that emotion comes easily to me – I have a taste for tears.) But I am writing this last book to explain myself,

² Ah! les premières fleurs, qu’elles sont parfumées! – *Nevermore*, by Paul Verlaine

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Everything good in me I owe to society. In today's world, if I had to count only on my superior skeletal force, I would not be able to feed or defend myself. Even the individual who can live alone in the wilderness was first nurtured in a social environment, which fitted him with all the weapons he needs. I would not know how to speak if I had not been born among humans. Humans taught me to think. Society showed me all the beautiful things that made me love life. I know that to go on, society needs violence and lies, but it was society's writers who spoke of justice and put the spirit of revolt in me. I owe to others everything I have: my ideas and my joys, as well as my clothes. But, soon enough, society takes back everything it gave us. After putting in our minds exciting images, it stops us, with its morals and laws, from satisfying our desires and often our most urgent needs. Its educators begin by cultivating in us the taste for what is beautiful; then it makes our life ugly, turning us into machines. Society is strongest: it easily gets rid of individuals who embarrass and bother it. But in many cases the individual is right – he is already the representative of a better society. In revolting against society, he sometimes accomplishes his social duty. For life to continue, men must consent to be machines for long hours every day. But the machine is not everything. We make automatons and maniacs of those people whose task is to enrich the inner lives of young people. For thirty-three years I have taught my students elementary mathematics. Every year, every day, I deliver the rules and unchanging formulas. (As for my digressions, they are certainly against regulations.) There are phrases that I have had to say so often that disgust sometimes stops them on my lips. The state does not give those who teach schoolchildren the chance to change their work and thus rejuvenate their thoughts. What about young people's enthusiasm? No, enthusiasm is dangerous. Me, I like beginnings, departures, new

THE ETHICS TEACHER AND THE PHYSIOLOGIST

Ethics teachers are civil servants (among the professionals there are, by the way, many amateurs) paid by the state to intimidate the individual while he is still young, so that later he will be ashamed to show himself as he is. This is an excellent way for society to defend itself and, in the process, reduce the size of its police to a minimum. When I came into the world, if my memory does not deceive me, I was perfectly innocent. At what age was I corrupted? And why was I corrupted? The gentleman who speaks for God tells me, "God had the goodness to give you the freedom and ability to distinguish good from evil." I respond to him, "God forgot to give me enough will to resist temptation." The man retorts, "You were free. If you had wanted to, you could have." I reply, "Why didn't I have enough will to want to?" This discussion will not end. They want me to be "responsible" in order to have the right to punish myself: that's all. By instilling a feeling of duty in the individual, the state is cleverer and less brutal than if it contented itself by invoking the law of the strongest in case of conflict. Often, to satisfy our true desires, our true needs, we can harm our neighbors. So our social duty is to frustrate our underlying nature; the individual must become what he physiologically is not. We should not be surprised if an educator's work on the young produces many hypocrites and a few rebels. Can we seriously tell a very stupid young man, "Your duty is to become intelligent"? The moralizers are usually reasonable enough not to do so. But they reproach the dreamy, lymphatic person for expending less energy than the vigorous man in perfect health. They recommend the same sobriety to the sick as they do to the individual whose stomach is excellent and whose appetite is enormous. Regardless of the essential differences that already distinguish us from each other when we come into the world, the educators show us all the same model

and tell us, "Here are the virtues that you must acquire." An ethics teacher and a physiologist who know my life would not use the same expressions to describe me. And if my portrait was made by a theosophist, it would be different once more. Yet I am who I am. Our judgments of others depend above all on our own habits of mind. They will speak harshly of my horrible egotism and my lack of morals. But there are many ways of being egotistic and there are also many ways to be moral. I would like to be judged by a physiologist-psychologist who has carefully studied the little mechanism that controls my soul's movements. I am inclined to think that a transmission belt has been broken for a while in my little internal machine. In the beginning, it is this belt that communicated to the cog of my *will* the movements of my *emotions*. Now my generous thoughts (I have them sometimes) do not have the power to make me act. Indeed, my essential motor, the so-called "vital instinct," must be in very bad shape, because without being ill, I prefer death to an existence that will have daily chores, worries, and privations, as almost all forms of existence do. A friend remarked to me that if I continued to live, my life would still appear desirable to most people. He is right. But I do not understand these old, poor, and unhappy beings who absolutely want to *go on*. What do they hope for? Among them, there are recluses who like no one and invalids who increase the burden that their relations bear. I need to live drunkenly. Many times, going to school in the morning, I was depressed because I was beginning another day *in which there would be nothing*, nothing but the accomplishment of a professional duty. I am not a virtuous man, because this prospect was not enough for me. I need to glimpse moments of exaltation and joy in the near future. I am not happy except when I adore something. I do not understand the indifference with which so many people endure these empty hours every day in which they do nothing but *wait*. My impatience, which led me to so many mistakes, surely must also be explained by the nature of my imagination and the state of my nerves. (It seems that I still care a little about what will

be said about me after my death, because I am trying to exonerate myself. But really, what others say about us is too ridiculous!)

I am an egotist who loved very much. I wasted my tenderness like I wasted my money. There must have been a production defect in my thermal engine, because heat constantly escaped that was immediately lost in the immense void. Those who approached me were often warmed up in a minute by my tepid radiance. One day I had a lot of trouble grabbing hold of an old countrywoman, seventy years old, who wanted to kneel before me to kiss my hands. Tricked by the sound of my voice and by my absolute lack of arrogance and stiffness, she thought that I was basically good. Yes, I am good, but an inactive kind of good. I am much less useful than certain people who are stiff because they are resolute. There are prudent people who only cautiously release the strings to their heart. They do not know how to give a good welcome to the stranger who approaches. Me, I smile right away if the stranger has a pretty head. This is due to the extreme mobility of my zygomatic muscle. One time an old philosopher told me, "Benevolence is at the core of your nature." And, as the servants say, I could provide even more good references. If the conditions of my life had been different, no one would have suffered from my egotism. In particular, in the land of plenty, I would have fulfilled my social duty in an exemplary way. An immoral man is sometimes nothing more than a moral man who is not in his place. I say all of this to reassure myself. Today I would be less disgusted with life if for twenty years I had really been good to a single person, ignoring the rest of humanity. The harm I did is irreparable. I made a soul despair. I destroyed something infinitely precious and unique. I did an evil thing that I could not pay for with all the sentimental money I gave away, cent by cent, to strangers.