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I Was a Saint

A translation of *Je fus un saint* by Henri Vincenot

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Honors Thesis Project

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Introduction

Je fus un saint, published in 1953, was Henri Vincenot's first novel and received one vote for the *Prix Goncourt* that year. By the 1950s Vincenot was already writing plays in Paris. Moving from drama to novels was simply the next step in a lifelong journey of creating art in every possible field. His friend Roger Brain writes of him in a preface to *Terres de Mémoire*, "il est en même temps peintre, sculpteur, dessinateur" [He is at once a painter, a sculptor, a draftsman] and quotes Vincenot, "j'ai besoin de m'exprimer et de m'exprimer par tous les moyens" [I need to express myself and express myself in every medium].¹ Vincenot's first expression of himself in prose came in his novel *Je fus un saint*. This story is set in the 1920s in a Burgundian village, where the child of a railroad guard attempts to reform the morals at his new school, the Catholic Saint-Pancrace. The unnamed first-person narrator struggles to fit into the world of a bourgeois Catholic school, dealing with the class difference between himself and his fellow students as well as the difference between Catholic teaching and the amorality at Saint-Pancrace. His struggles and their outcome bring to life reflect both the tensions in France during the entre-deux-guerre period and those in the aftermath of World War II. By going back to the 1920s for the plot of his novel, Vincenot is giving a new description of the losses of World War I and II through the eyes and imagination of a child.

During this comic – and at the same time tragic – year at Saint-Pancrace, the hero attempts to do something grandiose and worthwhile. He is sincere, idealistic, a mystic and a dreamer. Above all, he is drawn to adventure. Coming from a simple working-class family, being taught by his pious mother, he is at once drawn in by the appeal of a school run by priests. Catholic school opens for our hero a new and enchanting world that imbues everyday life with eternal significance. The narrator writes that he "was taken in by the marvelous possibilities of mediocrity." Already an imaginative and passionate child of the French Republic, the narrator latches onto Catholic mysticism. His new passion drives him to take on a new adventure to become perfect and, by his example, to reform the entire school. He takes as his model Saint John of the Cross, a reformer of the

¹ Brain, preface to *Terres de Mémoire*, 8.

Carmelite order along with Saint Teresa of Avila. These saints play a large role in his life and dictate his approach to becoming perfect and finding the “true” religion.

Although drawn first to Saint John of the Cross by the beauty of his name (Saint Jean de la Croix, in French), the narrator attempts to mimic his unwavering adherence to a strict rule. Saint John of the Cross was a Spanish monk who came from a poor family into the Catholic Church as a Carmelite in 1563. He had a reputation for being severe on his body as well as praying for suffering. He, along with Saint Teresa of Avila established the Discalced Carmelites who followed the Primitive Rule of St. Joseph of Avila. The reformed convents abandoned the exceptions made by the popes and returned to the original Carmelite rule. Saint John of the Cross led the reform for the monks even when he was opposed by his superiors. Similar to the experience of our narrator at Saint-Pancrace, Saint John of the Cross faced the disapproval of his superiors and was opposed to such an extent that he was threatened with expulsion from his own order. He was once imprisoned for nine-months for his reform. Saint John of the Cross wrote poetry – again, like our narrator, an artist – as well as treatises on mystical theology. He died of a serious illness in 1591.

While the narrator takes his advice on mortification from the severe Saint John of the Cross, he draws on Saint Teresa of Avila for his “Great Youth Reform.” Saint Teresa of Avila joined the Carmelite order in 1535 and for many years was plagued by feelings of unworthiness, unable to reconcile her inadequacy with God’s grace. In 1562 she “determined . . . to seek a more perfect life” and founded the Discalced Carmelites.² Saint Teresa of Avila was a great writer of mystical theology, as was Saint John of the Cross, and the young narrator’s pursuit of saintliness betrays its profound influence on him. Mystical theology deals exactly with the type of connection between the soul and God that our hero experiences during his “ecstasies.” This communion of the soul is accomplished through “simplicistic prayer,” which *The Catholic Encyclopedia* explains as “passive or higher contemplation” as opposed to active, purposeful prayer.³ Seeking perfection through mortifications and just such spiritual communion is the type of mysticism that the narrator embraces.

² Zimmerman, “St. Teresa of Avila.”

³ Poulain, “Mystical Theology.”

Perhaps his attraction to these saints and mystical theology can be accounted for by his prior familiarity with the folk Catholicism of his mother. Though the distinction between folk and institutional Catholicism is not made outside of anthropological or literary studies, the difference is stark in *Je fus un saint*. Folk religion in France finds its roots in the French peasants' beliefs in witches, magic, and spirits, in many ways like what is found in African American and South American literature. Historian Eugen Weber presents, in his chapter entitled "The Mad Beliefs," excerpts from primers teaching children not to believe in "ghosts, in specters, in spirits, in phantoms." He goes on to explain the superstitions of the people and their early conflation of priests and sorcerers. Many of the functions of the Catholic Church in mid-1800s provincial France were to perform "magic" and cast "charms." The purported magical powers of the priests, Weber points out, lay in their possession of books at a time when most of the population was illiterate. This exclusive first-hand knowledge of religious material laid the foundation for two different catholicisms to develop – the one rule-driven, grounded in church tradition and doctrine; the other mystic, based on oral tradition and the model of patron saints. This is a dichotomy that our narrator experiences when transplanted to Saint-Pancrace from his public primary school.⁴

The narrator's appreciation of Catholicism is primarily a mystic appreciation. He revels in sermons that "send chills up [his] spine" and the "spiritual agitation" that fills the school. He first discovers that the school's understanding of religion does not correspond to his own during the prayers in Mass. The "demonic cacophony" and "ridiculous mumblings" of the students are far from his prayers, "previously said so thoughtfully with [his] mother." Our narrator thinks that prayer "should be something serious." In these lines he identifies his family, specifically his mother, as the source of his understanding of religion, an understanding obviously not shared by the priests, who – the narrator is troubled to find – "tolerate this scandal" of prayer. Our narrator reveals that, in addition to the devoutness of his mother's faith, she has passed onto him as well the expectation for the priests to match her seriousness: she is scandalized by "these all-smiles, goody-goody abbés who push flattery to the point of joining in [the children's]

⁴ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 23 quoting Ernest Lavisse, 26.

games and rolling up their vestments.” Both the emphasis on mysticism and the insistence on the priests’ grim demeanor are characteristics of folk religion.

Vincenot, as author, plays off of this difference between the narrator’s folk religion and the priests’ institutional religion to create comedy. The priests of the establishment and our hero use the words “scandal” and “delinquent” to refer to opposite situations; they have different understandings of what constitutes a “pagan” practice or “perverse” behavior. For our hero, speeding through the prayer, competition to get to a drinking fountain, and smoking are scandalous. For the Prefect of Discipline, the narrator’s records of his sins are a scandal, as are his and Mimi’s attempt to respond slowly in Mass. The narrator scandalizes his classmates by receiving only an *Ave Maria* for penance after confession – the norm being thirty *Hail Marys*. The narrator’s efforts to be a saint lead the Prefect to accuse him of perverting Saint-Pancrace with his public school behavior, and to call him a “delinquent.” “Perverse” is a term our hero reserves for his classmates who drink alcohol, circulate photos of girls, and smoke cigarettes. It is precisely this dichotomy between folk and institutional Catholicism that creates the comic misunderstandings in the novel.

Seeing the discrepancy between how he thinks life should be at Saint-Pancrace and the actual behavior of the students, the narrator resolves to affect change. The reader sees through the narrator’s naïve eyes, what everyday life is like at a boarding school. The social wrongs he decides to address are bullying, drinking, smoking, and hypocrisy. There is also a homosexual undercurrent running through the text that is common to other novels painting life at a boys’ boarding school, notable *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. There are many similarities between these two works, but one of the unique aspects of Vincenot’s work is his comic tone which manifests itself in the narrator’s keen appreciation for smell, which leads him to describe his classmates’ resistance to modern plumbing and the peculiar smell of each student. There are many ways Vincenot’s work distinguishes itself such as the narrator’s focus on reform and his non-conformity to school morals.

To enact reform our narrator tries to be a saint; he creates a rule for himself, mortifies the flesh by giving up deserts and wine, records his sins such as lust, staring, drawn out conversations, and eavesdropping, and attempts flagellation even though “the

noise of the straps bothered [him].” His attempt to mimic Saint John of the Cross leads to his desire to form a “fraternity.” His “campaign,” therefore, begins to center more and more on the redemption of his friend Mimi. During the narrator’s very first encounter with Mimi he steps in to save him from being bullied by the older students and continues this protective role for his new protégé. As the narrator takes on his call to reform the school, he also takes it on himself to rescue his friend from the immoral influence of the other boarders. The narrator takes “charge of [Mimi’s] sanctification” and invites Mimi to join him in becoming perfect. Throughout the story Mimi strives to be good like the narrator but is continually falling into sin and losing heart. Vincenot, speaking of childhood and adolescent years, writes, “je sais trop bien les couleurs de la noyade” [I know only too well the colors of drowning].⁵ The narrator feels himself in “a frightening cloud . . . the murky color of drowning.” Mimi, too, is drowning in a way. He is sinking into the debauchery and sin that the narrator is trying to pull him out of.

Mimi is trapped between the world of the school and the adventuresome fantasy created by the author. Mimi is caught, like the seagulls he absent-mindedly draws on his blotting paper: “the figures . . . little by little resembled seagulls caught in a sort of net.” Throughout the novel the sea represents freedom and escape from the oppressive, enclosing walls of Saint-Pancrace. Mimi is kept there in so many ways. He is, first of all, a boarder and cannot leave Saint-Pancrace every night like the narrator. He cannot escape the influence of the upperclassmen, even when the narrator tries leaving him stories of his fantasy world in order to preserve his influence overnight. Mimi is left behind to endure the oppressive questions of the Prefect of Discipline, while the narrator tastes the freedom of nature with his grandparents during his convalescence. Mimi eventually dies, still at the school. For the narrator Mimi represents his childhood; he writes, “my childhood left with him. . . the date of his death was, at the same time, that of my entrance into manhood.” If he does represent childhood, then indeed Mimi has no escape from these adolescent years; childhood necessarily dies as one enters adulthood.

Vincenot creates the oppressive atmosphere of Saint-Pancrace by detailing the narrator’s different escapes. The sea is his biggest escape. When dealing with the transition to Saint-Pancrace, the narrator has recourse to his “schooner” the *Santa Anna*.

⁵ Vincenot, *Je fus un saint*, 137.

He writes that in the “darkness of the room” his “bed became a sailboat aboard which . . . [he] had undertaken a campaign to Newfoundland.” The voyage, begun the same day he began attending Saint-Pancrace, allows the narrator to lose himself in his imagination, and transforms his attic room into the “open sea.” The sea and the winds rise and fall with his mental state. One particular night the waves threaten to capsize the *Santa Anna* until he is interrupted by his mother and, after having said a prayer with her, he returns to find that the sea is calm. He ponders, though, “unknown sins that lie in wait . . . just below the surface.” Even this early on Vincenot gives the reader hints that the escape into the imagination as well as into religion is only a temporary fix for the turmoil of the narrator’s life.

Another escape is into the fantasy of his fictional background. As a scholarship boy amid rich, bourgeois classmates, the narrator feels the class difference between himself and the other students keenly. This awareness and his extraordinary imagination prompt him to create a story about his past, passing himself off as the son of a Breton deep-sea captain. At first this lie is just a fictional composition for French class so that he will not feel ashamed for having spent his vacation so simply. But, being a literary success, his story is read to the class as fact. The narrator is, at first, frightened by this deception but is soon drawn in by the adventure of living two lives. He is enchanted by “the exciting pleasure of danger and the unforeseen.” He says, “Had I not been successively a trapper, a gold prospector, and a Comanche? And each evening . . . was I not a fisherman from Iceland . . . ?” The narrator passes over his lie as a triviality in favor of the excitement of role play.

While he justifies his lie as a means to become influential among his classmates and to affect reform, this deception is also one of his ways of coping. His fiction bridges the gap between himself and his classmates. He writes, “I thought I could imagine another me and still be who I was. Alas! My classmates did not give me that right.” Though he feels forced into his deception through the error of conflating the author with the character, our hero stays in this lie for a reason. He takes on the identity of the character he creates because that character, he feels, is more suited for the world of Saint-Pancrace than the son of the railroad guard. Our hero lives two lives in order to cope in two very different worlds he is asked to participate in.

As our protagonist creates more of his fiction, he and Mimi are both fascinated and drawn into the fantasy. Mimi listens with rapt attention to the narrator's imaginative relations of his fictional village. He writes that he is himself "taken in by [his] own fantasy," and that he creates "a life and a world which led [him] each time a little bit further away." This fantasy leads him further and further from Saint-Pancrace, and he calls it a "refuge." The stories of Brittany and deep-sea fishing let the narrator and Mimi both escape from the grey, somber surroundings of Saint-Pancrace. Vincenot frames the image of waves crashing on the rocky coast-line of Brittany (all contained in the imagination of the narrator) with the walls of a classroom out of whose windows the boys can see a dreary fall evening in the courtyard, beyond which we know there are more walls holding them in.

The railroad holds an important place in this novel. Like Saint-Pancrace it is surrounded by a mystic aura, but unlike Saint-Pancrace it connotes for the narrator freedom and adventure. The train is at the same time familiar to the narrator – since his father is a railroad guard – and foreign, since he very seldom rides the train. The smell of his father coming home from work is enough to call up the railroads in the narrator's imagination. He listens to the far-off voices of the trains, singing to him their "little music of escape." Just as the recitation of the Mass became a dizzying whirl of "incomprehensible texts" that still hold power, the narrator recites an "unforgettable phrase . . . so musical, so mysterious . . . : 'NEI CASI DE PERICOLOSO, TIRARE L'ANNELLO.'" The phrase is Italian and translates "in case of dangerous, pull the ring." Though the narrator obviously does not know the mundane meaning of this phrase and in fact remembers it incorrectly, it is the mystic aura and the association with the railroad that makes this sentence so powerful for him.

Certain scenes in *Je fus un saint* are riddled with these "magical" phrases that create a depth of intertextuality, lending meaning to the scenes and, at the same time, representing the influences of the Catholic Church and the railroad on our hero. In the very first scene with Mimi, the liturgy and the schoolboys' interactions are juxtaposed and comment on each other. It is a comic scene on the one hand because the boys are indifferent to Mass, preoccupied with Mimi's efforts to sit next to our hero. Having the liturgy comment on the scene also comically endows it with greater significance,

reaching a climax when Mimi is able to take his seat to the sound of the priest reciting the *Gloria*. Later, the narrator's reading of his stolen copy of *The Lives of the Saints* is accompanied by "snatches of the *Tantum ergo*" from the chapel, suggesting perhaps the spiritual communion with God our hero seeks. Later the narrator purposefully recites bits of the liturgy in order to lend his bare-foot walk back to Saint-Pancrace the religious weight it needs to become a pilgrimage. He "chant[s] the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, then the *Veni Creator*, and finally the *Te Deum*." As both intentional and coincidental insertions into his life, the returning sounds of the liturgy represent the ever-present influence of the Catholic Church.

Within the description of the railroad station, Vincenot also intersperses the sounds of the announcer, what our hero calls "the magic words that the train cars were waiting for." The announcer, "drone[s]" just like the lector at the chapel of Saint-Pancrace, begging a comparison of their two recitations. While the lector calls the congregation to approach the altar of God (*Introibo ad altere Deum*), the announcer at the railroad station calls "Passengers going to Modane, Turin, Rome, Naples, and Brindisi, all aboard!" The sounds and calls from the railroad and the church intrude on our narrator's story representing outside influences on him as well as being a reflection of his own desire for adventure. The Church and the train station call him to two different kinds of adventure, both mystic, distant, and magical to him: sainthood and the sea.

Although both Saint-Pancrace and the railroad are imbued with mysticism, the one is an oppressive environment, while the other represents freedom. At the school and when riding the train, the narrator wanders the hallways. He describes the hallways at Saint-Pancrace as "suspicious" and "obscure" where he loiters before going to confess; in the aisle of the train, though, he staggers along, "intoxicated" by the joy of traveling. Instead of staring at the gloomy walls of Saint-Pancrace, the narrator gazes out the windows of the train at the swiftly passing countryside. He is transported in body, rather than in soul, to new adventures. The narrator points out the difference between the world of trains and prayer when he mentions that, "the world of prayer could very well be unknown" to his father. The railroad is ultimately, for the narrator, not only a pathway to escape to the sea, but the way back home.

The narrator runs away physically from Saint-Pancrace twice, the last time in search of his final escape, his fantasy. His spiritual reform takes the place of his fantasy adventure for a time, but as our hero's religious aspirations come crumbling down, he must turn either to reality or to his fantasy. After Mimi's kiss and profession of love, the narrator realizes that his campaign has failed. Thoroughly confused, and vividly showing his anger over his frustrated attempts to be pure, he ignores the bell to go into the school. When he writes, "I heard it . . . but it was not calling for me," he is not only speaking of the physical bell, but also of his calling to be a saint. He begins to let go and, scaling the courtyard walls of Saint-Pancrace where he is too confined to vent his mixed emotions, he retreats to the mountains outside the village. Once Mimi becomes ill, the narrator abandons his self-mortifications and goes so far as to question the necessity of prayer.

In the devastating aftermath of Mimi's death, the narrator makes one last attempt to live his ideal and have an adventure. Abandoning his saintly pursuits for good, he takes the train to Brittany to find his fantasy. Though he physically leaves Saint-Pancrace and Burgundy, he does not (perhaps cannot) separate himself from the Catholic mindset and concludes, "So, I was not a good Christian. Too bad. I was lost...." The narrator takes the train to Brittany and "finally answer[s] the call of adventure" in a real and tangible way. In the final sections of the novel he does find his fantasy world. He walks about in it and interacts with the people that inhabit it only to wake the next day and find it has disappeared. With no escape left, our protagonist accepts that "quite simply . . . it never existed." Significantly he does not hold out hope that it still could be there, or despair in its "death throes." He admits that his ideal was never attainable and that he cannot live in his dreams. And he returns to the train station.

One final saint that must be discussed because of the implicit reference to him is Saint Pancras – the school's namesake. Saint Pancras (Pancrace, Pancratius) was a Roman saint, one of the early Christians, who was martyred at the age of fourteen. The legend surrounding this young saint holds that he was an orphan and, upon returning to Rome to live with his uncle and converting to Christianity, he was beheaded for not sacrificing to the Roman gods. The idea of martyrdom and ultimate sacrifice overhang our young narrator's story. Our hero welcomes suffering, sacrifices, and even possibly death for his beliefs. When the narrator comes down with pneumonia, he believes he is

dying and thinks that if he is “killed by love, like Jesus. What more could [he] ask?” Later he decides to uncover his fictitious background and tell the truth to his classmates; during the ordeal he thinks, “Was I at the gates of martyrdom?” Though he is not martyred in body, one could say that his childhood is martyred. Not only does the narrator sacrifice his sleep, desserts, and wine to God, but he sacrifices his fantasy by telling his classmates the truth of his origins, and he gives God “the overwhelming sacrifice of my friend, my first, the only friend in my life.” With Mimi die his childhood, his fantasy, and his idealism. Vincenot describes this year in the narrator’s life as a single year of sincerity and perhaps the best one can hope for. *Je fus un saint* ends with disillusionment and its implications in the life of a child.

Our hero experiences in miniature what France experienced after the World Wars. Vincenot captures perfectly in the young narrator the tension between mysticism and moral turpitude present in France during the 20s and 30s. Two major authors from the entre-deux-guerre period describe in their novels the state of France. Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*, published in 1932 and known for its unconventional use of slang, presents a world completely without hope, indifferent to right and wrong, staggering along in the dark. Céline’s narrator, Ferdinand Bardamu, experiences and participates in the moral corruption and hopelessness of the world. He says that he “had always suspected [him]self of being almost purposeless,” a statement in stark contrast with our hero’s sense of a calling from God to reform the school. This year devoted to his calling, though it is the subject of *Je fus un saint*, is nonetheless only a fleeting episode in the narrator’s life – one he refers to as his “tragic and pitiable story.” In Céline’s novel, the only escapes from or exceptions to the dark world are to be found in a dream-like madness or in the old generation of peasants. On these points Céline is echoed by Vincenot. The narrator struggles between burying himself in his imaginary world or staying grounded in reality. The redeeming quality of that reality, though, is found in his grandparent’s generation and in the preservation of that culture. Bardamu admits that there is a quality and vigor in the older generation that preserves them against the deteriorating world, but that does not keep the entire world from “spinning in a night

of peril and silence.” Céline’s characters are horrified by the situation after the Great War, but too worn out to care.⁶

It is exactly this indifference, seen within a strict Catholic school that motivates our hero to “take action against this barbaric behavior which smears pious customs with hypocrisy.” Vincenot’s novel claims to be a tale of rare genuineness, which he suggests is exceptional in an age of insincerity. André Gide, who published *The Counterfeiters* in 1925, would agree. In his novel, Gide explores the lack of genuine emotions, religious convictions, and intentions. The narrator Edouard comments, “Sincerity...if it is myself that I consider I cease to understand its meaning.” The title points to the question central to his novel: is it possible to be genuine? When “all the people [he has] known ring false,” where is honesty? In Gide’s novel, it has no place unless it is placed in a delusional adherence to mysticism or religious conviction. One character admits that she believes “without mysticism nothing great, nothing fine can be accomplished.” Surely our hero’s preoccupation with the Great Youth Reform falls under this evaluation. Gide is suspicious of a mystic or religious conviction, doubting that it leads to anything but a loss of touch with reality. One of his characters reminisces about having been part of a secret society in school, in which he had “a note-book, in which one set down with absolute frankness our failures and our shortcomings.” This exactly describes the hero’s “fraternity” at Saint-Pancrace. Instead of condemning these efforts towards perfection as delusional, Vincenot recognizes them as efforts towards sincerity.⁷

Just as Vincenot’s narrator struggles against the amorality and skepticism of post-World War I France, in writing *Je fus un saint* he offers a counter to the effects of World War II. The Great War left France in doubt of right and wrong; World War II left it in doubt of the very meaning of life. In the intellectual chaos that followed the atrocities of World War II, artists tried to re-make literary forms to capture the new reality that they lived in. Marguerite Duras re-created narrative with the “nouveau roman” in her novel *The Lover*; Samuel Beckett portrayed the meaningless-ness of life in his play *Waiting for Godot*; and French poets and painters explored the reality of thought and dream during the Golden Age of Surrealism. Each tried to create art that addressed the disjointed

⁶ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 202, 323.

⁷ Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, 64, 185, 179, 97.

understanding of the world; they changed conventions, further developed movements, and challenged old traditions that they felt were no longer sufficient to express reality. Vincenot's response, though, is to reach back into the past, not only to a traditional narrative style, but also to his Burgundian and peasant roots in order to find a remedy for a fractured society in the old rhythm of life and in one's native region. Vincenot deals with some aspects of his own past in *Je fus un saint* to re-write his story and find a solution for the confusion of his present. The narrator, like the Surrealists, tries to find reality in his dream, but, reflecting Vincenot's beliefs, he cannot find it there.

The truest reality, and the one our hero must return to, is nature. When the narrator's reform is misunderstood and opposed by his superiors, discouraged and worn out by his devotions, he succumbs to a fever. As he recovers, he is re-introduced to an influence just as strong as that of the Catholic Church – his grandfather. Though the priests, the saints, and the preachers loom over him with unchallenged authority and power to damn his soul, there is another type of adventure that pulls on his heart. When he is hunting with his grandfather he remarks that “all of nature entered into my heart through all the pores of my skin.” A mystifying force as strong as the Catholic Church is nature, with which the narrator quickly becomes enchanted. The freedom he feels enjoying the Burgundian countryside, singing bawdy songs with his half-brother and misbehaving leaves the hero with a tinge of guilt, but it is to this that he returns when everything else has failed him.

Vincenot himself grew up in the region of Burgundy and sets most of his work near the Morvan – the central mountainous area. His later works reveal more fully his love of his native region and the traditions specific to Burgundy. Vincenot is one of the most well-known authors coming from and writing of Burgundy along with the author Colette and the poet Alphonse de Lamartine. Burgundy, a prosperous duchy and royal territory before the French Revolution, has always been famous for its vineyards and breathtaking countryside. Around the time of Vincenot's grandparent's generation the phylloxera crises wiped out most of Burgundy's vineyards and pushed peasants into such poverty that many temporarily left Burgundy to find work elsewhere. Although industry was growing in Burgundy, specifically mining and the railroad, most of the population remained in rural areas until the 1940s and 50s. The cultural wisdom about the land, the

game, and the simple way of life, evoked briefly in *Je fus un saint*, are cultural pieces of Burgundy's history that Vincenot tries to preserve faithfully in his works.

For Vincenot "la vie toute crue est une billebaude permanente" [life, honest and raw, is permanent chaos], recalling the title of one of his most celebrated novels, *La Billebaude*. But life is only chaos outside the peaceful circle of his countryside, and modernization brings confusion into the lives of Vincenot's characters. This confusion that he found in society and individual life after World War II is the result of repeated blows that upset a stable lifestyle. The individuals in Vincenot's works can only be cured by a return to the past and by putting the world back into its natural order. For Vincenot, there is no escape from his native land of Burgundy, and in many of his works the characters cannot find completion outside the countryside of Burgundy.⁸

This is true of the three books comprising a trilogy that Vincenot entitles *Les Années de Colère* (The Angry Years): *Je fus un saint*, *Les Yeux en face des trous* (Looking Through Holes) and *À Rebrousse-poil* (Going Against the Grain). These three novels deal with a narrator who is unsatisfied with the state of things and sets him or herself against the flow. The characters are all reformers, in a way, who set out to fix what has been broken. The hero of *Je fus un saint* takes on a campaign to reform Catholic school morals; Jefkins, in *Les Yeux en face des trous*, speaks out against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization; and Catherine, in *À Rebrousse-poil*, struggles in a low-income school in a Paris ripe for the demonstrations of '68. In each of these novels, the narrator eventually returns to nature. For our hero this return is accompanied with a movement into adulthood and an abandonment of religious mysticism. For Jefkins and Catherine, the return to nature is a return to the old way of life in Burgundy. They all find themselves struggling in a more sophisticated world because what they encounter is a fractured society in need of healing.

In addition to addressing the fracturing of French society after the World Wars by advocating a return to the past, Vincenot's literature participates in the development of themes springing up world-wide during the years following World War II. J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared in the United States in 1951, two years before

⁸ C. Vincenot, *Henri Vincenot*, 13 quoting Henri Vincenot. Completion in Burgundy is especially central to *Le Pape des escargots* and *Les Yeux en face des trous*.

Vincenot published *Je fus un saint*. Both novels are written in the genre of the coming-of-age novel and deal with boys who find themselves on the cusp of adulthood and resistant to the changes they are facing. Both our hero and Holden are skeptical about the wisdom of adults. Holden believes that everyone is phony, saying, “even the couple *nice* teachers on the faculty, they were phonies, too.” Holden does not think that his teachers understand him. For our narrator, as well, the adults are clueless about his mission. His parents are ignorant of his campaign and his “superiors don’t know anything about anything” – they are not to be trusted. Holden and our hero both believe that they have a calling to fix what they find wrong with society. While for Vincenot’s narrator it is the amorality at school, Holden desires to save children from having to encounter adulthood. Salinger and Vincenot both find this divergence from the mainstream and struggle against the authority of adults a central issue for the development of their characters.⁹

Vincenot also contributes to the development of Surrealism in *Je fus un saint*, because of which his novel can be compared with the most prominent book attributed to the genre of magical realism: Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The uncertain line between reality and dream in our hero’s escape to Brittany moves Vincenot’s novel from realism into a surrealistic realm of narration. This last section of *Je fus un saint* was influenced by the Surrealist movement in French art after WWII. Because Vincenot’s narrator is trying to find an alternate reality in his imagination, Vincenot dips into his mind, into his “fantasy village,” bringing it to the forefront of the novel through a realistic portrayal. To distinguish, surrealism is the exploration of the reality of dream and thought (the unconscious mind), while magical realism places magical or fantastic events in a realistic narration (bringing magic into the conscious world). García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, published in 1967, is considered the first novel written in the style of magical realism; however much of his work falls more specifically within the genre of the “crónica,” which is a genre in the same vein as journalism. An equivalent might be the genre of creative non-fiction. By specifying the journalistic quality of his work, García Márquez is highlighting his portrayal not of magic and fiction, but of a different reality altogether.

⁹ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 218.

Although, Vincenot and García Márquez are using very different conventions, it is valuable to compare them to see how they both attempt to portray alternate realities. When writing the final, surrealistic scene, Vincenot does not distinguish between real and dream in Brittany, so tangible is the narrator's dream to him. The narrator's movement into his dream is seamless, but what separates Vincenot's portrayal from magical realism is that the dream ends abruptly. No one seems to have noticed or participated in the hero's dream, so that he concludes "it never existed." García Márquez also blends reality and seemingly fantastic events with a matter-of-fact tone, but those events are never distinguished from the rest of the narration as unusual. García Márquez makes amazing statements nonchalantly, as if acknowledging that the reality of his story should be taken for granted: "It rained for four years, eleven months, and two days." Vincenot, on the other hand, drops subtle hints questioning the reality of the situation: "It was as if the *Santa Anna* had arrived in the night, like a phantom boat, mysteriously clean and silent." Like the surrealists, Vincenot explores the real and tangible world of imagination; Marquez takes that a step further asking us to reevaluate our view of life to factor in the supernatural.¹⁰

Vincenot's *Je fus un saint* is important to understanding his later works because in this novel he develops several themes that become prominent in his later writings: the railroad, the region of Burgundy, and the grandfather-figure. Having grown up as the son of a railroad worker, Vincenot is familiar with this world of trains. Our hero relishes the adventure that comes with the railroad and knows the song of the trains by heart. Vincenot develops this theme further in his later works *La Pie saoule* (The Drunken Magpie), *Rempart de la Miséricorde* (The Wall of Misericord¹¹), and *Les Chevaliers du chaudron* (The Knights of the Cauldron), which was made into a television series *La Princesse du rail* (The Princess of the Rail) in 1967. His preoccupation with the region of Burgundy is a major theme that dominates much of Vincenot's later literature and art. In *Je fus un saint* the landscape of Burgundy punctuates the narrator's story. Vincenot's best-known works, *La Billebaude* (Chaos), *Le Pape des escargots* (The Pope of Snails), and *Toute la terre est au Seigneur* (All the Earth Belongs to the Lord), are all set in

¹⁰ Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 315.

¹¹ Misericord carries two meanings, one literal – the supportive seat in a choir stall; the other figurative – mercy or compassion. See pictures on page 59.

Burgundy and present the culture of that region. Finally, Vincenot develops the theme of the grandfather-figure in *Je fus un saint* and carries it on to many of his later works. The grandfather represents the old, wise peasant who is in touch with nature and the past traditions as none of the newer generation can understand. Vincenot's esteem for the grandfathers of Burgundy, founded on his own grandfather, is rooted in his respect for their knowledge and for a dying way of life.

All of Vincenot's writings have in common that they reflect his love for Burgundy. In fact, opening any one of Henri Vincenot's books is like opening a treasure chest of Burgundian landscapes, regional history, and cultural values. In his pages we are introduced to the older generations, *les anciens*, who still remember the fading traditions and lifestyle of the peasantry, which, as historian Eugen Weber argues in his book *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, were the last to change as the experience of the French peasants began to align itself with the changing modern world.¹² His pages are also overflowing with description that captures the beauty of the Burgundian countryside and the flora and fauna found there. Like most of his main characters, he is in love with the simple beauty of nature, and his poet's eye captures the particularities of the animals and plants. This "terre de mémoire" (land of memories) is for Vincenot not only an enchanting countryside that never fails to make his heart beat faster, but a landscape teeming with diverse vegetation and life. He knows the habits and movement of each of the animals that inhabit his "cercle magique" (magical sphere) and can name the trees, flowers, shrubs with a specificity that betrays his knowledge of his home region of Burgundy.¹³ Vincenot novels are important because they affectionately preserve the knowledge of the past, the rhythmic traditions of everyday life, and a simple cohabitation with the wild landscape that is rapidly fading from memory. *Je fus un saint* is an elucidating glimpse into a childhood experience, helping us understand the priorities of present-day France by looking at the influences of the past.

¹² Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 495.

¹³ Vincenot, *Terres de Mémoire*, 55, 18.

I can pride myself in having had one year of sincerity in my life. Not everyone can say as much.

What is more, I like lost causes. To the layman, I always wrote “King” with a capital K, not out of deference for the monarchy – which I don’t care about – but because of Louis XVI. If he had been a bloody tyrant, I would have wanted to assure him of my sympathies in this way: was he not the only king of France guillotined?

Under Calvin, I am a papist. Under Richelieu, I am a *parpaillot*.¹⁴ This is not through a spirit of contradiction; it is through a love for balance.

These, my character traits, explain a life so completely filled with perfect failures that one cannot help but see in it one total success, for such a continuous lack of success ends by raising a delicious melody, above all when time has softened its brutalities and nothing is left but the memory of the effort that one made to get by.

And then, the pleasure of recounting the good moments is only equal to that of recalling the bad, for if the first make you rejoice for having been young, the second console you for growing old.

¹⁴ *Parpaillot* is a derivation of the French word *papillon*, meaning “butterfly.” Following Jean Calvin’s reformation in France the protestants or Huguenots were called derogatively *les parpaillaux* implying that they fluttered from one doctrine to the next .

I did six years at the “communale” school, and then one beautiful day in October I entered the main courtyard of the school Saint-Pancrace where more than fifty motor cars were parked before the grand staircase.

My father, an upstanding employee of the railroad, was holding me by the hand; accustomed to being in last place, which is the place of honest people, he made me wait over an hour before daring to climb the thirty-five steps of the front stairs. It was in this way that I saw most of my future classmates parade before us accompanied by their parents.

From each side of the roundabout, paths curved out and sank into a garden of tall planetrees, still green. Some groups circulated there under the last morning shadows; we saw smiling abbés gathering their students while the “grands” (upperclassmen), their gloves in hand, were coming up next to us to stare at the pretty women.

I was uneasy.

I was much more so when, wearing my nice new school cap, clothed in my gold-buttoned uniform, I found myself obliged to go down the long gallery of frescos at the end of which gaped the office of the Superior like a sacristy after a large wedding.

In these rooms, in the midst of this somewhat pretentious crowd, I was a long way from the public, free, and obligatory primary school, and the prospects of becoming a student in this secondary school seemed grotesque to me; to tell the truth, I was a little disdainful of these grand houses of education because I shared with the people’s children the opinion that nothing ever happened here, and I was persuaded that, in the presence of these virtuous priests, a monotonous calm would reign behind these walls which was preparing the bourgeois well for their dull, indifferent, and useless existence.

Yes, it was boredom that I expected to meet as soon as I set foot in this establishment. So it was with resignation that I let myself be led in front of the man whom everyone called “Monsieur le Superior.”

He was a beardless man, with a shaved head, who resembled – moustache at least – the peasants where we lived, but a peasant who hadn't touched a pick in more than twenty years and whose skin had become flabby and soft.

No one could say a word to him without giving him his title. One said to him: "Yes, monsieur le Superior. No, monsieur le Superior. Certainly, monsieur le Superior."

It was ridiculous. I was annoyed for him. And I didn't know how to conform to this etiquette so, following the tasteful habit of the "communale," I replied with a "Yes, m'sieur" that caused a sensation and scandalized everyone, except for him.

I have always kept this habit, and even today it is still with these familiar words of my childhood that I respond to a bishop, a mailman, a judge, a railroad conductor, and an officer. I am at least as proud of this phrase as of the taking of the Bastille.

"We are going to put him in the third year," said the Superior, "even though he has done neither Latin nor a spoken language yet; because of this, he will find himself disadvantaged in comparison with his classmates who have already had many years of secondary schooling, but if he has as much heart as he has head (I had been first in the canton at the certificate of studies¹⁵), he will know well enough how to catch up with them."

Good Superior! He had the accent of my grandfather and his smile said: I am superior to no one.

I have always regretted, thereafter, that his extensive research did not permit him to devote any time to his students.

When the bell assembled us for the first time this morning on the third of October, it was to direct us right away to the chapel.

It was a very large room that occupied the entire floor of the right wing. You can imagine an immense classroom whose walls would have been painted with trompe l'oeil draperies riddled with the monogram SP. The daylight entered through simple windows armed with colored glass which, due to the great deeds of Saint-Pancrace, were transformed into admirable stained-glass windows. The altar was made of painted wood

¹⁵ The "certificate d'études" was an examination that French students took at the end of primary schooling.

but everything was so over-charged with candlesticks, gilding, and colored plaster statues that I was awed by it.

I was going to kneel on one of the pews reserved for my class when there was an upheaval among my classmates – a student was elbowing his way to get next to me.

The attempt would have been simple if three “grands” had not gotten in his way. He was a delicate, rosy boy. He had the pretty face of a girl and thick, glossy blonde hair. His small, chubby hands were clenching the back of the pew. The “grands” held him back by his clothes. And he, with tears in his eyes, was trying to come over to me.

A senior drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and, holding them tight in his fist, struck the wrist of the little boy who muttered, “Bully!”

“You’re not allowed to sit next to the day student.”

“Bug off, I’ll go where I want.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will. And I’m not your friend anymore.”

This entire conversation was said in one breath and the proctors, asleep in their chairs further down the aisle, had not noticed anything yet.

The bell was already ringing for the *Introibo*. Next the senior pulled a compass used in geometry class out of his bag and placed the point on the hand of his victim.

“If you keep trying, I’ll push!”

Mimi made an effort to free himself. The point of the compass was already touching his skin.

“You’re hurting me!”

“Stay there or I’ll push it in!”

The sight must have been a frequent one, because their neighbors contented themselves with snickering while the priest attacked the *Confiteor*.

“You big Meany,” whined Mimi; and I recited with everyone else: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.

Having undone his belt, one of the snickering boys made a loop with it, bent down and tied it around Mimi’s left leg; then he yanked it.

Mimi, still clasping the pew with his right hand, fell to the floor letting out a little bird's cry. The point of the compass pierced his skin and a drop of blood ran down his hand.

“...*Omnes sanctos, et te Pater...*”

I decided that the time had come to intervene because the sight of blood fired me up. I leaned towards the butcher and, with a left jab right in the face, I put an end to this torture scene which – I found out later – was torturing nobody but me. While the priest recited the *Gloria*, Mimi was able to take the seat of his choice. He got to his seat and, as my reward, threw me a smile which evoked what counts among some of my strongest emotions.

I thought the case was closed, but with a single punch I had just inserted myself, me the new kid, into the ranks of the senior students. As the Superior had foretold, I had just caught up with my classmates in a single bound.

In fact, as we were leaving the chapel, I was rejoined by the torturer who attacked me without explanation. I wasn't ready for his assault, but I grabbed my attacker tightly and threw him to the ground with a turn of the hips.

I see him still flat on his back in the first puddles of autumn where a soup of dead leaves stagnated. I see him again on the ground, I see myself again as well, legs apart, on my guard, ready for battle.

He got up moaning and, without a word, went away.

Then I looked around me: the entire class was there in a circle, silent. I was conscious of my strength and was sorry to have used it, but, off to one side, my young friend was looking at me with an expression of the purest admiration in his eyes, and my chest swelled up with joy while a few boarders, grouped next to the bathrooms, began to chant to the tune of an old song:

“Death to day students!”

The very next day, I was overcome by prayer. We said it two times a day without counting, of course, the *Aves* that we recited at the beginning of each class. The evening prayer was, by far, the one I preferred.

“Let us put ourselves in the presence of God and adore him,” said the lector. His voice rose, monotone and thin.

To tell the truth, we didn’t have the time to understand the meaning of these phrases that habit had ingrained, because reciting them ate part of the words, but in this way the spirit, cradled by this stammering psalmody, could escape in the impatient silence of October evenings.

“Let us give thanks to God for the grace he has given us and let us offer ourselves to him,” droned the lector. My spirit began to whirl like a blank disk whose wax was being engraved forever with these incomprehensible texts. Soon a dizziness took me and, without losing contact with the phrases of the liturgy, my imagination became empty so as to call up the sea, which I did not know, but towards which I felt myself drawn.

“Holy Virgin, mother of God, my mother and my patron, I place myself in your protection and I implore...” said the lector. And I imagined flowers growing in the middle of a path down which an army regiment was about to parade.

“Remember, oh most pious Virgin Mary...” said the lector. And I looked at the profile of my neighbor. I found it pretty and I contemplated it. Then he blushed and smiled at me. I could have wanted the prayer to last all night.

But what came next were the *Ave Marias*, the *Paters*, and the *Confiteors* which, the devil alone knows why, were only composed of two verses. The priest said the first and we all took up the second in a ridiculous mumbling that ended in a demonic cacophony of desks and clogs.

These prayers, previously said so thoughtfully with my mother, became competitions, purely exercises in speed. I have left, from these hours of veritable debauchery, the recollection of the pale voice of the lector, winking like the flame of a candle, soon extinguished by the storm of our united voices.

The character of the syrupy words, of these pious interjections, reeled off at record speed in a dizzying racket, created a whirlpool which, after two mind-numbing hours of

silent study, we gladly let ourselves be swept into. Each of us seized this occasion to finally let loose our tongues. The prayer that should have been for me so sweet became odious and tiring.

It is there that the first misunderstanding took place which was the beginning of this story.

I don't pretend to have heard voices – that at least saved me from the stake – but for me prayer, whatever you may think of it, should be something serious. What is more, the priests who directed the school taught us that every day. Then why did they tolerate this scandal?

In the notebook where I wrote my thoughts, I have written, "...They go much too fast and I don't believe God can hear this mumbling. It would be better not to pray...

...I must reform this. But how?

...I must be a saint.

...I must be a saint."

The next day I wrote in the same journal, "...It's apparent that Satan himself is at the source of this disorder. In this way the prayer that should be a method of sanctification becomes a satanic weapon."

"...Should I talk to a school priest about this? Which one? Maybe the Prefect of Discipline?"

In the evening of the same day, after having thought for quite a while, I took up my writing again:

"Yes, I will choose the priest with the beard, because this morning at Mass he spoke to us about prayer. He spoke very well. He will counsel me and, according to what he says, I will act."

A little later:

"...I have decided to start alone and to continue even if the Prefect counsels me to wait. In any case there are books on the lives of the saints; I will find directions there which I will need before beginning my campaign..."

Because this would be a "campaign." I, the son of a railroad guard, was going to fight for the betterment of my classmates.

My thoughts absorbed me not only the entire length of the road that I had to take four times a day between school and my house, but they even overflowed into my hours of study. This forced me to lessen the amount of time allotted for my homework which, however, I still wanted to be perfect. And it is here that this tragic and pitiable story begins.

Happily in the evenings, to forget these worries, I rejoined my schooner where, once on board, I could breathe in the invigorating air of the open sea.

In fact, as soon as the lights were out in my small room, my bed became a sailboat aboard which, in the immense solitude of an only child, I had undertaken a campaign to Newfoundland.

The darkness of the room represented the ocean horizon pretty well, and the icy rain that drummed on the tin roof of the attic meant that we had crossed into the North Sea.

The work on board was like that on all fishing boats: repairing the lines and the sails, a little bit of woodworking, but above all the hazardous and dangerous gymnastics in the riggings where, suspended between sky and water, one must furl the sails which were taut in the icy north wind, all the while being tossed by the huge swell of the cold Labrador Current. It was a violent but healthy exercise, one to which I gave myself entirely until I fell to sleep, shaking my bed hard until the base creaked beneath my cries as topman.

The fact was the elements had been harsh. Having gotten under way the first of October, the schooner *Santa Anna* was braving infernal mists driven by the opposing winds, and I hadn't finished lashing down the barrels of pickles which, having been shaken, were rolling in disarray across the bridge.

It happened one night that, by a terribly strong blow, I lost four of my dories, which, literally swept off by a wave, were blown like a feather in the wind. And only in peril of my life did I go to lay the others broadside and make them fast.

Crawling along the bridge to escape being blown away in my turn, I was struggling like a madman, when my mother, coming into my room, suddenly turned on the lights and came towards me.

She saw me awake, disheveled and bare-chested, lying in a disorderly bed. I will never forget her stunned face, nor especially her sudden blush, or the trembling of her

chin. She seemed to be making a violent effort not to save herself and run out again and finally asked me, “What are you doing, there, my poor child?”

How could I answer that I was making fast the dories on the bridge of the *Santa Anna*?

So I was silent. She saw my embarrassment and, lowering her eyes, said to me, “You must not do that, my dear boy, Jesus would not be happy.”

Then after an agonizing silence, during which I heard only the shutters banging, she continued in a soft voice, “I don’t want to speak to you about this right now, but I heard everything, I understand what’s going on...I’m your mother...You call tell your mother everything...Without knowing it you could hurt yourself very badly...doing certain things...Believe me, it’s a very serious sin and I know boys who have made themselves terribly ill.”

She stayed there, not daring to abandon me to the powers of evil. To hide her emotions she straightened up my bed sheets, then kneeling quickly:

“We are going to say ten Hail Marys...so that you do well on your Spanish exam.”

I didn’t have the audacity to confess the truth to her. In the returning darkness, I was once again on the bridge of my schooner. But, curious thing, the sea had fallen. It was a smooth calm and I could, in all tranquility, think on all those unknown sins that lie in wait for you, just below the surface, like the menacing reefs scattered along the path of the *Santa Anna*.

A little after – it was almost midnight – I hear the step of my father in the stairwell. His satchel over one shoulder and basket in hand, he had come from doing the 4812, bringing back in his overcoat the smell of transport and the piercing cold of the night. I heard him give my mother two big kisses from underneath his bristly mustache while saying, “Good God, what a *mistral*¹⁶ we had between Donzère and Valence!”

Then he came into my room. I closed my eyes, fearing a painful confrontation. But he contented himself with watching me sleep, then went out to rejoin my mother. The murmuring of their voices kept me up a long time. My father had brought with him into my room the smell of travel and all the din of trains in the Rhône Valley that I knew only

¹⁶ A violent north wind, cold and dry, that blows along the valley of the Rhone all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

in my imagination, because in all my life I had only made one trip, which left me with the unforgettable taste of sandwiches and pure wine on my lips.

Like all sons of railroad guards I never took the train, because my father, tired of riding the rails, spent his leisure time in wooden clogs in his garden by the town gates.

So, curled up in my bed, I listened to what the trains were saying to me. Here was one that passed over the peaks of Poste 2 with a crashing noise like a hammer on an anvil, while a dull rolling was sustaining, from its base, this little music of escape.

Further off, an express train was going flat out towards Marseille in a downpour, and the only sounds I heard were enough for me to imagine the rest: bustle, departures, glimpsed halos on the way and in the train stations, lights of sleeping cities, not to mention that unforgettable phrase, read and re-read, so musical, so mysterious, printed on a enamel plaque, the most beautiful sentence that the poets have ever written: “NEI CASI DE PERICOLOSO, TIRARE L’ANNELLO.”¹⁷

A couple days after the beginning of school was the Retreat, an old and dear custom in religious schools. It was presided over by a serious and sad preacher, the bishop *in partibus* of Tibériade.

As dull as this preacher was, he came to my aid in an unexpected way. In fact, during the sermon, he exclaimed, “Let us listen to Saint Jean de la Croix when he says...”

Of course, I do not remember what Saint Jean de la Croix said, but his name struck me. Saint Jean de la Croix, what a beautiful name!

There was the man that I needed. Yes, Saint Jean de la Croix should give me the strength and the will that would be necessary for me to accomplish my work of reformation.

So I should look to him. I promised myself that I would be actively employed in that direction.

The exercises of this retreat were particularly severe and painful. Their goal more or less was to weed out of our young souls the evil tendencies that, thanks to the leisure of

¹⁷ “In case of dangerous, pull the ring.” Italian. The narrator has confused ‘danger’ (pericolo) with ‘dangerous’ (pericoloso) and has misspelled ‘ring’ (anello); he probably does not know Italian.

vacation, had been able to spring up there. It was also necessary to lead the young recruits who came, like me, from suspicious backgrounds into the spiritual life of the school.

Mass at seven thirty. Sermon at ten o'clock. Sermon at three o'clock. Evening prayers and the Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament at six o'clock.

Do not believe that this systematic imposition of pious exercises bored me in the least. On the contrary, it was dazzling. For, in the place of heroes from secular manuals who, in the rudest undertakings driven by earthly ambitions, always triumph amidst the rejoicing populace, they spoke to me of saints who secretly lost their lives to gain them, of victorious victims, of the poor who are rich, of the weak who are strong, and of the just who die smiling in the jaws of the lion and whose blood is, without looking like it, a new seed of Christians.

No more than that was needed to describe my calling.

So the retreat passed too quickly in my opinion. It was the first time that sin was described to me in such detail; each day was consecrated to the deeper study of one of God's commandments.

One cannot deny that all of the commandments are of interest, but certain ones, I must confess, are thought more particularly to attract the attention of young people.

In all our missals, for example, the sixth and the ninth were dog-eared. As we advanced in the study of our depravity at the rate of one commandment a day, we thought the beginning of the first week seemed long. But the sixth day finally came.

In the morning, a heavy atmosphere of disaster reigned in the school and the students entered the chapel in an unusual calm.

When the preacher mounted the pulpit, a shiver ran through all of us. He spoke of lust softly at first, then with ardor, and finally with vehemence.

The bishop of Tiberáide surpassed by far all that I could have imagined on this subject to such an extent that as soon as he spoke his first sentences, my throat contracted, my hands became sweaty while my feet grew cold. I would have liked to go out, walk in the park, get some fresh air, but it was not possible, for I was deliciously captivated by his gaze which, from up in the pulpit, paralyzed us all. The blood pounded in my temples when the preacher's voice hammered away.

“He is there, the impure one, he is there, there still (and he pointed into the congregation) he is there, the lustful, sitting among us! I see him!”

Ah! No, decidedly, this voice, these words were so unbearable that I would have wanted this sermon to last for hours.

“He is there,” the voice began again, “already dead to life in heaven! Only let an unexpected illness strike him down this instant, and he is dead for eternity!”

Sighs that were almost sobs were heard in the congregation. Certain “grands,” their heads high, pale as death, affected vague smiles, but the corners of their mouths fell trembling and their smiles froze. It was intolerable.

I forced myself to think of something commonplace or funny, like fishing for crawdads in a stream, but how could I escape from this voice that penetrated our souls and said, “It’s a corpse sitting next to you, on your bench at school, a corpse of fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen years, a corpse of a young man! The corpse of a young man who has killed himself.”

I was marvelously appalled. I wondered, “Is it me he’s talking about?”

My poor public school. Poor ridiculous little teacher, would you ever have known how to send chills up my spine that shook me to the point of nausea?

And the preacher continued.

“Happy though, if God allows him to live until his next confession! Because then, washed of all the horrible mire of the most odious of sins, he will be able to rejoin the ranks of the elect. May it be so.”

From that moment it was panic. Each person would have thrown himself at the confessional if he were not obliged to wait for the end of the service. The *Tantum ergo* seemed to everyone as if it would never end, litanies were sung in a rush, and the monstrance, twinkling like the eye of Cain, drew the sign of the cross far too slowly over an abject congregation. When the Prefect of Discipline climbed into the pulpit to ask us to write out the notes for confession, everyone hastily tore a sheet from his notebook, folded it in fourths and wrote: I want to confess, during the school year, to Monsieur Father X.

Those at the head of each row gathered the papers in baskets and, having gone back to our classrooms in the deepest silence, we waited.

I had chosen the bearded priest who held the positions of Prefect of Discipline and professor of Latin. Everything considered, his severe, proud manner fit better with my kind of contrition than these all-smiles, goody-goody abbés who push flattery to the point of joining in our games and rolling up their vestments, which scandalizes my mother.

On the contrary, seen from afar, the Prefect appeared very forbidding and ceremonious and, above all, he wore glasses, or rather a pair of pince-nez whose glare added to his dignity.

He was very careful of his person and appeared authoritarian, vindictive, and quick-tempered. In a word, he was an ideal confessor. In fact, since I had sinned gravely, I needed a rigorous punishment, and it was good that the agony felt before the tribunal of God was in proportion with my unworthiness.

We studied in silence.

From time to time the door was opened and a penitent entered. All of a sudden we read in his face that his sins had just been forgiven: his countenance was clear, his skin brighter, his step lighter.

Instead of sitting still on his stool like the rest of us, he got a book out of his desk, opened it with a decided air, and began studying immediately, taking out his notebook and penholder without ceasing to whistle between his teeth and try to make conversation with his neighbors. All these gestures screamed his re-found innocence, proof that his salvation was assured.

I was finally called.

In my haste, I lost myself in the hallways of this immense building where floated all the odors of vegetable soup, café au lait, and damp sawdust (the kind spread on the floors to catch the day's mess and swept away each night).

Finally, I reached the door of his office. There were about thirty students clustered there, impatient to be cleansed, before a possible catastrophe, of the sins that the sermon had inspired in them.

We waited, silent and still. From time to time a student went out and was replaced by another. They rushed towards the chapel and collapsed in an attitude of true contrition.

I entered in my turn.

Clothed in a thick quilted coat, even though the weather was still mild, my confessor was sitting in an armchair which had twisted feet and was upholstered in beige fabric whose pattern was from no particular time period. In a vast library drowned in shadows, at a luxurious desk, his fat, yellow figure resembled certain portraits of Philippe of Champagne.

He greeted me by my first name and invited me to kneel on the red felt prie-Dieu placed to the right of his armchair. I wasn't pleased with how this was beginning. I would have preferred the grill of the confessional and a hard board at my knees. I began with the usual prayers and, my heart beating, I recited my sins that, by habit, I had grouped in order of the Ten Commandments. He seemed satisfied with it because he professed that the most lively contrition was not without method.

To recreate this drama of nuances that I wish to tell for educational purposes, I must cite this list: I confessed certain trespasses in language (but only the most benign because I never pronounced the least obscenity), one or two instances of gluttony, a few mendacious excuses which were hardly characteristic for me and – I remember it well – a distraction in the middle of a service, to be precise, on the day of my battle.

He waited a moment.

“You have nothing more to tell me, my son?”

“No, Father.”

He seemed astonished. I hesitated in turn. Had I not looked obstinately at the girls in the grade above me in primary school? And one day, hadn't I gazed, stupefied, at an old lady who was in the process of urinating in the gutter? My face must have appeared troubled, because my confessor said, “Think of everything, my son.”

“That's all, Father.”

“Very well.”

He quit his nonchalant posture and made a sad grimace, folded his hands, gave me a long sermon and told me to recite the act of contrition – this took me ten seconds – then I stayed bowed in the most contrite attitude, while he finished pronouncing my sentence for absolution. It was then that I noticed a sickening and troubling smell emanating from

his person: a chemical odor penetrating and fetid, heavy and sick like a rebel illness – the telltale smell of wintergreen topical pain reliever.

Since that time, forgiveness of sins has always been accompanied, for me, with methyl salicylate.

Finally I heard the “Amen, go in peace.”

I was acquitted.

I got up. Then he took my by the hands which he squeezed in his own and asked me, “Are you satisfied with your beginnings here so far?”

I would have liked to say: I am delighted! The confession, the retreat, the evening prayers, the games and above all the sermons on lust, all this delighted me thoroughly.

I did not know how to say anything but, “Yes, Father.”

“Be diligent then,” he told me, “to repay your good father and mother.”

Then he dismissed me.

My classmates were waiting for me at the door.

“What penance did he give you?”

“An *Ave Maria*.”

This was a scandal. Everyone had been condemned to twenty or even thirty Hail Marys. There was silence. I had just astonished my classmates for the second time.

During the next class, Mimi murmured in my ear, “As for me, I had to say thirty.”

Then, because I was listening, he continued, “What are your sins?”

I could not, in all modesty, deliver up the secrets of my soul. But he insisted.

“Tell me! It’s really funny when everyone tells their sins.”

I don’t doubt he would have willingly persisted if the proctor hadn’t interrupted our conversation with the threat of detention next Sunday.

Even so, a little later my young classmate started the conversation again. He seemed very curious to know the failures of others as well as the habits of their confessor.

Without my asking, he told me, “I am going to confess to the chaplain. He’s funny. He puts his hand on my neck and pats me; it makes me want to laugh.”

So he couldn’t see my troubled face, I looked out the window. I saw the school park and, across the bare branches, I glimpsed the high walls that closed it in.

The retreat ended with a confession followed by general communion, after which our teachers, convinced that our stains from the summer had been definitively cleansed, decided that we could healthily begin work.

In fact, with these somber and terrible days, then this sweet pardon, and finally the closing celebrations, the retreat had swept from our desks the memories of the horrible excesses of vacation. You didn't see groups feebly sitting on the fence anymore, and the team sports got all the success they deserved.

How could I not be won over? The school that had seemed to me so grey, so cold had become an ardent home that attracted me to such an extent that, come Thursday, I was sorry to return to my family.

How stupid I had been to think that Saint-Pancrace would be a sanctuary of boredom! The presence of the priests, at the same time professors and confessors, far from making life insipid – as non-believers would have thought – on the contrary, lent a special savor to everything that would have been commonplace elsewhere, and, thanks to all this spiritual agitation, the most indifferent gesture became deliciously troubling.

The priests? Why just the scent of old linen and their stale breath entranced me.

How I pitied my secular classmates deprived of all these sensations, the absence of which exactly constituted, for me at least, materialism.

Because, to sum it up, materialism is the absence of scandal in association with sin.

It seems right to me, before the real drama begins, to transfer to these pages some extracts of a very precious document. I want to speak about my journal in which, as we were advised to do, I summarized my daily examination of conscience.

So here is what my journal says for the date 15 October:

I am really worried.

We just did our first composition of the year, the typical writing assignment. They asked us to write about our vacation. If I had written about my vacation, the professor would have thought that I was mocking him. All my classmates are rich, they have automobiles with chauffeurs, even yachts; they spend the month of August at Deauville on the coast of Normandy and the month of September at La Baule on the Atlantic coast. What kind of impression would I have given if I had written about my vacation in the poor village in our region, drinking milk, eating bread, bacon and potatoes?

I imagined a vacation at a port in Brittany and I was able to draw from that a pretty good paper. I only know about Brittany because I read about it in books by Pierre

Loti. Without a doubt, it was all that I needed to give the local color, since my professor gave me the best grade and read my paper to the class.

What am I supposed to make of that?

So my first literary success coincided with my first deception, which was not without a lesson, and this success led me, in the end, to what has since been called “engaged literature.”

Can you blame a writer if his readers demand that he identify with his work, espouse the opinion of the characters and keep the heroes’ promises?

I thought I could imagine another me and still be who I was. Alas! My classmates didn’t give me that right. The misunderstanding could have died the moment it was begun, but by the next recess, I was very popular and here is what I wrote in my journal:

...They asked me about Brittany, about sailing, about deep-sea fishing. I should have told them: “Friends, I don’t know anything about it, I made it all up.”

But my head was spinning a bit and I gave some unbelievable replies.

Is that a lie? (All in capital letters in my journal).

The worst, they asked me: Are you Breton? I lost my head; I replied: Yes. I publicly related that, born in Saint-Brieuc (why Saint-Brieuc?), I was the son of a long-term captain and I had sailed a lot.

After all, they had cars and chauffeurs, why couldn’t I have a sailboat?

The day after that:

...This deception is going to cause me a lot of trouble. Yesterday a classmate came over to me. He’s one of the best dressed at school; he wears suits cut from a material that Mama calls tweed. He has some very nice ties and I especially admire his shoes that have soles without nails...

He said to me, “I mentioned you at home; my parents would be delighted to meet you.”

(This is the first time someone has wanted to meet me.)

I Was a Saint

“So come by some Thursday afternoon to take tea with us at our house.”

(As the son of a railroad guard, would I ever have been invited to take tea with the Vacassos if I hadn't lied?)

“My mother spent part of her childhood at Saint-Quay-Portrieux in Brittany; she would like very much to talk with you.”

He continued, very nonchalantly, “You know, my mother is a nut, but in a nice way, you'll like her and I bet she'll stump you on navigation, seaman that you are.”

That's where I am. How will all of this turn out?

Why did I get myself caught up in this frightening spiral?

Soon all the students were sure that the school harbored the son of a bold captain who sailed the world on the high seas. They plagued me with questions and I had to answer them; in a way, I was not displeased with it, because in this way I could live two lives. Little by little the embarrassment created by this lie disappeared and was replaced with the exciting pleasure of danger and the unforeseen. And then, to tell the truth, the lie didn't seem too serious to me; had I not been successively a trapper, a gold prospector, a Comanche? And each evening, as soon as the electricity was out, was I not a fisherman from Iceland, without ever leaving my bed?

So finally, on the date of 7 November, I read:

They imagine that I must know everything about Brittany, the Bretons, and sailboats, this worries me a lot. Tomorrow, or one of these days, I am going to tell everyone that this is only a joke.

But the ways of God are unfathomable, and soon I realized that this deception should be a great help in the enormous enterprise that awaited me. Rather than inciting me to tell my classmates the truth, Providence – with a clear purpose – pushed me on the contrary to intensify this fiction.

This was exhausting work, having to be vigilant at all times, but it raised in me perverse abilities which have served me in life at least as much as the exaltation of my good instincts.

I remember those evenings of study when, whispering behind the lifted lid of his desk, Mimi said to me, “Tell me about your homeland! What’s the port like? What’s the village like?”

And I created, on the spot, the place, the people, the things.

“The sea-cliffs,” I said, “are covered in yellow gorse and purple heather and, in the evening, the women go to wait at the jetty for the fishermen to return. The port is very small, clinging to a cove on the coast like a crab clings to a rock.

“In the mornings, you can smell the salt and the wet sand or even the green smell of the ferns. The fishers go out with the tide, their baskets full of coiled lines like big brown seaweed. The sea is brilliant and the seagulls look grey, tracing in the sky the arc of their flight.”

If I interrupted my story Mimi cried, “More, tell me more.” And I continued, with whatever came to mind.

In this way I constructed a village, a port, a dyke, and this village of brown and white houses, the verdant gully that ran down to the harbor, the grey heath – I still remember all of it – this all constitutes the most beautiful countryside that I have ever seen.

And Mimi listened to me, followed me, docile, in the rocks, in the boats of the port where the funny, thick world of my imagination bustled.

He said, smiling excitedly, “What is it like living in your homeland?”

So I, who hadn’t seen anything, described fishing for this spoiled child, phosphorescent herrings in limed nets and a thousand other strange details that dazzled him, he who knew everything.

The more I talked, the more I had to talk, and I created each minute a life and a world which led me each time a little bit further away.

(O, my fantasy village, built by my magical and innocent hands, you are still standing in spite of all the vicissitudes of life. Often I see you again and, contrary to all that happens around me, neither the houses nor the men have grown old there, and there I take refuge from the weary hours.)

One evening Mimi asked me, “What is your father’s boat like?”

I had to construct a brig, give it a mast, rig it, and coat it in dark green up to the gunwale and white on the superstructure. The sails were grey and maroon, and her name was simply *Santa Anna*. She danced on the waves and in the foggy bay. She sailed past, sails unfurled, and left behind her a wake fresh and fringed with spluttering foam, wafting the lovely odor of salty fish and rigging.

Of course, I carefully chose a crew from among the men of the coast, each one with a name, a face, a voice, and a quirk.

Over them hovered the image of my father, a serious man, always absent, who on returning from his cruises came to watch me sleep, bringing into my room the smells of the high seas.

And this universe grew each day. Mimi demanded it and for him I amplified this setting, already immense, colorful, seething, and smacking of spontaneity; I launched a new dinghy every day, I put a fisherman on board, his lobster traps clogged with algae and limpets, I made him sing while rowing. I composed his songs off the cuff – masterpieces that blew away, that I soon forgot but were gathered up by a blissful middle schooler.

Each day, I depicted a white-washed house, at the end of its meager lawn; I filled it with the shouts of children. An old white-headed lady came out of the house.

In a few days I had built a chapel with a stone depiction of the crucifixion in the courtyard and an inn. The village took form, and I walked around in it, taken in by my own fantasy.

One day, I cast a glance behind me.

I was terrified. But it was too late to back up, one hand pulled me along the road of my dream, I had to play my part. Mimi, with his fill of travels and resort vacations in the most picturesque spots in Europe, could no longer do without my countryside. Each evening he asked me for his pittance and I, enchanted, didn't know how to refuse. I went there again, to this village. I brought with me this poor little rich boy on the rough moors; I went out astride the bowsprit of cutters, to deep-sea fish Tope shark or dogfish. The ocean was like an eye, opaline and agitated by the movements of translucent muscles. Foggy skies greeted us, soft and moist like dreams; I described the movements of the

sails and of the emerald breast coming off the red isles, fringed with enormous shellfish which we scraped away. On returning, the coast-line high and black rose up in the evening, washed by the last storm and dripping with the spray.

Mimi listened to me. All that he had not known how to see in his many travels he discovered in my universe. The class was noisy. We heard the quill pens run over the paper. Outside, the autumn leaves slipped into the humid, cold dusk. Everything was somber.

But even if I had not played this dangerous comedy, everything would have happened, because there was Saint Gertrude, Saint Judes, Saint Fulgent and all the saints, and above all Saint Theresa of Avila and Saint Jean de la Croix.

The people that the fortunes of academics had placed me among were of a race of sermonizers. I suppose that, practically, all one learns at seminary is how to sermonize. They erase even conjugal and familial responsibilities in the life of a priest only in order to, it seems, concentrate better on the science of sermonizing. They also hold him back from the possibility of giving an example with his actions so that he can specialize in giving an example with his words.

So, with classes and the winter downpours began an important series of sermons on the “personal duty” and “humility” which was to have an immense influence on me.

By “personal duty,” it is necessary to understand the long and obscure patience that enabled Saint Marie Alacoque to sanctify herself completely by marking the linen of the Visitandine Nuns or enabled any common maid to attain Heaven by piously washing dishes.

I was taken in by the marvelous possibilities of mediocrity and the admirable success, on the supernatural plane, of gestures that seem like nothing.

As in all domains, the saints were presented to us as an example: the admirable Saint Joseph, the model for his gender, who, being born a carpenter, lived as a carpenter and died a carpenter. Saint Hypogune who, in her cell, gave herself up – to the point of martyrdom – to needlework, because she was born a seamstress. Saint Bénévent l’Hystroite who, until the moment he perished under the teeth of wild beasts, went as peacefully as ever about his professional work of healing people. But above all, Saint Polydore – the most edifying of all – who, being the favorite of the dissolute king of Murène, never ceased to resole shoes.

Excited in this way by thousands of examples, I was dying to imitate these people whom, obviously, they had forgotten to tell me about in public school.

So I had to search for occasions to exercise their virtues. Alas, with this beginning to the school year, I seemed to have only successes. Nevertheless, thanks to God, the math exam came.

Here is what my journal says about it:

The 8th – I got the lowest grade in algebra. The highest grade went to a strong boy with brown curly hair whose name is Chaudurot. He's extraordinary. Curiously, he is last in French and so is kind of playing hide-and-seek with me. This rivalry, pretty pervasive apparently, fascinates the class. To stay faithful to my program H (abbreviation by which I designate Humility in my Secret Code) I must accept with the same smile my first place in French and my last place in Math. Above all, we must not let ourselves win by ambition.

The 15th – Algebra is an exercise designed to compensate for imagination when that is missing. Geometry is a laborious account of what is commonly evident. The goal of using these two sciences is to create an imaginary world for those who lack imagination. A dream is even more real than mathematics, and I wonder if eventually, the latter is not precisely an inferior dream for the use of those who cannot do without discipline, even for dreaming.

The more I submerge myself in this world of cold phantoms, the more I notice that I am made for prayer, for contemplation and not for science.

God wills it as well. Let us conform ourselves to His Holy Will.

The 22nd – I cannot explain the success of Chaudurot among his classmates. In fact, curiously, he has admirers. Certainly, his reputation is not only as a scientist. He influences adherence of the mind, not of the heart, and even less of the soul.

He is the image of a scholar's and a technician's success in the modern world.

It's upsetting and unbelievable.

It's all the more upsetting that Chaudurot is not a good example: HE DOES NOT HAVE A PURE MIND.

I saw him this morning in the corner by the urinals where meetings of this kind usually are held, he was flipping through a pornographic magazine and he didn't content himself with just looking (underlined in the text) at the obscene photos, HE WAS LAUGHING! Yes, he found the strength to laugh over this moral depravity, and not a nervous, embarrassed laugh that's really a cry of horror, but the calm and goody-goody laugh of cynics.

I believe that M. (Mimi, in the Secret Code) has been subjugated by the serene self-sufficiency and skepticism of our mathematician (as well as by some algebra assignments

obligingly loaned, I'm sure). He has a detrimental admiration for this juggler of fractions.

This is serious.

If M. lets himself go to this side, he escapes my moral influence and, besides possibly being lost, he is going to put my S.P. (Sublime Plan, in code) in peril. Because M. is the first step toward the G. Y. R. (Great Youth Reform).

The 23rd – Math is getting me off track more and more. Yesterday, on the board, I proved the equality of two line segments using, quite simply, a ruler.

But really, why waste time on reasoning when you can consecrate it to things of more vital importance?

I was punished, of course, but these trials are good for me: they break me and prepare me for other trials that await, perhaps more severe but so fruitful!

The 24th – Chaudurot, out of a mathematician's pride, intentionally sabotaged his French assignment. He pretends not to pay any attention to literature. M. found this amusing and tried to do the same (poor child, you don't have means, like Chaudurot, to give yourself an F in French!).

I believe that Chaudurot smokes cigarettes that a day student brings him. M. is lost if he continues down this path. What can I do?

The 31st – I've completely stopped taking interest in anything related to science. With this new success in French, God is showing me my path. I am abandoning math for good. Who cares? My personal duty is there.

I am not going to write much more now in my notebook because I am going to commit myself seriously to my work on the G. Y. R. To do this, I must take back from Chaudurot the few admirers that he stole from me, in order to shield them completely from the influence of this skeptical panderer. (They tell me that he's selling photos of women, and those women are...his cousins!)

The 2nd – I decided to give M. each evening a page that I carefully write up during the day. I will begin with descriptions of my Dream Village, tales of adventures, of fishing and cruises (even though I've never travelled). I already have a few of them. They're pretty good, I am not unhappy with them. M., who is very snobbish, takes an interest in

everything that appears even a little extraordinary, and what I've constructed from my imagination seems to have a powerful effect on his little warbling bird brain.

I am not sure about using this childlike subterfuge to realize such a high and exalted work, but it seems to give the anticipated results: already M. waits every evening for his little paper. You should see him, as soon as the bell sounds, watch for me and hold his hand out to me furtively in the passage. I am more at ease this way because I leave him, in a way, in my own hands, above all, a little in my power – a testimony of my will, because without seeming like it, I can influence him in many different ways.

So this evening, I left a little less worried under my hood laden down with the rain (because it rains every day).

The 3rd – Last night, preoccupied by my research on Saint Jean de la Croix, I didn't have time to prepare the daily sheet for M. – I left with the other day students. M. looked at me without saying anything. When he saw that I didn't have anything for him, he looked away and I had to go out without taking his hand.

I slept terribly that night. My mother heard me and came to ask me why I was so agitated.

The ideal, evidently, would be to be a boarder.

The 5th – Yesterday, arriving at school, I was surprised by a group of four classmates gathered around M., in a corner of the courtyard. I approached them quietly.

M. was reading (or rather droning) one of my sheets, I heard my own words. The voice of someone else animated my thoughts, so that they fluttered in the light.

I was dazzled; my heart raced.

The audience was mute.

I listened until he finished reading. When he was done, they stayed silent an instant, then one of them said, "Do you think he could write a novel?"

And M. replied, "He can write all the novels you would want."

The other came back after a silence, "Keep these papers. One day, they will be valuable!"

I Was a Saint

“When he’s a great author,” said another.

“People will buy them off you for a lot of money!” said a third.

“Yes,” M. said back, “but I won’t sell them.”

I waited until we were in class to tell him, “They tell me you are reading my papers to everyone.”

“That’s not true!” he said, turning red.

“If it was true, I wouldn’t like you anymore.”

He looked like he would faint. I felt his hand take hold of the tails of my jacket and pull me as if he would make me fall off my little stool.

I took his hand in mine, pressing it as if to say, “You know, I only said that to you as a joke.”

He came back to himself and set to work again.

So that he would forgive me for being so hard, that evening I prepared him a page that I intended to be the best, and folding it in fourths, I slipped it into a book that I gave him.

Scarcely had he taken it when the voice of the proctor rang out, “Bring me that book!”

M. quickly took the slip out and gave the book by itself to the proctor.

“Give me that paper,” he said sniggering, “I especially need that paper!”

M. started turning red without answering.

“Give me that paper!” repeated the proctor.

M. was crying now, but didn’t answer.

“You refuse?”

The air was unbreathable. M. looked like he had to give in, so I prepared to spring and intercept the sheet as it was changing hands and defend it to the death. I could not have borne it if that big redheaded proctor had read those pages. He was, in fact, a flirtatious and dissolute student that I had met in town in the arms of girls with make-up caked on their faces.

M., pale as death, slowly tore the sheet in a hundred pieces. The class was on the point of applauding.

The proctor got back in his chair, saying, “Very well! Return to your place!”

While M. went back to his desk, I heard a snicker, somewhere; at the back of the class.

I had resolved to go to confession once a week, on Saturday evening, so I could take Communion at Mass the next morning.

It was the most blessed hour of the week.

One by one, in the order of our confession sheets, the proctor called us. We left the classroom then, went out into the obscure hallways where any comings and goings looked suspicious, and I loitered a little. When I arrived in my confessor's office, I recited my sins that I had listed on a piece of paper, and then I hurried to the chapel to do penance. A meditation – eyes closed, face buried in hands according to the purest family tradition – then flooded me with a fresh contrition, and finally I compared my sins with those of the preceding week.

For this, I had started a little notebook in which, day by day, I noted my failings in secret symbols.

On the other hand, Mimi was very irregular. Sometimes he went to confess every other day; sometimes he was more than fifteen days without writing up his confession sheet.

The reasons behind this indifference escaped me. When I asked him about it he responded, "I don't have anything to confess."

"People always have something to confess!"

He looked a little worried then, "You know, I don't like these things and the priests ask you a ton of vicious questions."

"What do they ask?"

"Things."

"But what things?"

"The last one gave me a lot of chocolate, but asked me how I behaved with girls."

"With girls?"

"Yeah. And he wanted to know if I liked it."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Oh, anything really."

“And the one you have now, does he ask you questions?”

“He asks me if I’m not too close with my friends.”

“That’s none of his business!”

Mimi smiled.

“Change confessors!”

“I’m afraid it’ll make him angry!”

“Change confessors!” I repeated intensely.

I didn’t realize the ridiculousness of the situation and I asked him again, “And you tell him everything?”

“Naturally. You have to tell your confessor everything.”

He spoke without looking up, all the while drawing figures on his blotting paper which, little by little resembled seagulls caught in a sort of net. He continued, “While he’s talking to me, he never stops patting my knee.”

“Change confessors!”

Even though I did not believe a word of these boastings, they were the cause of our first quarrel, which lasted the entire day.

In the afternoon, while I was resting on my elbows at the fountain, a voice whispered in my ear, “Information of all kinds, shadowing and investigation.”

I turned around: it was Ventelot.

“Do you want some information?” he asked me.

“I’m not interested.”

“That would surprise me.”

“Be surprised.”

“You aren’t interested to know that ‘he’ was smoking cigarettes that Chaudurot gave him?”

“He’s free to smoke if that’s what he likes.”

Ventelot was at a loss for a moment then said, “Doubtless...but if you ever need any information you can always come to me.”

With that, Ventelot began to talk casually about his investigations, and about his connections with the secret police; he confided, to me only, asking me never to repeat it,

even under torture, that he was not a stranger to certain arrests made recently. While his voice droned in my ears, my mind began to wheel like a great bird crippled and flying out of control: smoking was, in my eyes, the beginning of debauchery. What starts with smoking a cigarette, ends with God knows what!

And Mimi was smoking!

I joined him again as soon as I could.

“I know you smoke.”

“It’s not the first time!”

“It’s wrong!”

“They offered me a cigarette, I couldn’t refuse.”

“And why not? Do you see me smoking?”

“Oh, you! You’re a saint, but I’m not.”

I was so disagreeably surprised by this response that I thought it best to change my tone.

“Well, if you want, since it will do us good, we can, the both of us, become perfect!”

“Perfect?”

“Yes, like Saint Jean de la Croix.”

Alas, the poor little guy did not know Saint Jean de la Croix! He stayed there with his jaw dropped for a moment, then as calmly as ever, he asked me, “Yes, I really want to, but how are we going to do it?”

“By praying and training our will.”

He looked at me and I read in his eyes the great confidence he had in me. “Let’s try it!” he said.

It was as if a festival was going on in my heart. I never would have believed that it would be so easy to win a soul. I had been overjoyed before, certainly, but there had never been a moment that matched this one, not that our friendship seemed stronger, because our friendship didn’t interest me at all, and I even believe that the only sentiment I held for Mimi was disdain, maybe even hate. The interest I took in him came without a doubt from the fact that this child was my first catch. Perhaps the smell that emanated from his skin attracted me, too? Whatever it was, alone I would have hesitated to

undertake my work of reformation. But God sent me a little brother, a disciple, and so the campaign was going to be able to start.

In fact I could not wait any longer because who knew if the next day Mimi would be in the same mood? I wrote excitedly in my journal:

...Tonight we decided to respond slowly and distinctly to the prayer without paying attention to the others. In this way we will have not only a decent prayer, but this first little test will season us for battles to come.

I was ashamed later for the childishness of this initial undertaking but a holy exaltation did not cease to grow in me since the moment when we made the decision.

That evening, at home, my emotions were so radiant that my father, who was on leave, asked me, “What’s happened to you?”

I would have willingly told everything, but would they have understood?

The night was calm. And when the sun rose in the golden sky, I consecrated my day to God, implored him to give me the audacity I needed, and left for Saint-Pancrace where I found Mimi confident and resolute.

With arms crossed, we waited for the hour of prayer. Finally, the lector took up the book and his voice raised, dull and commonplace, “Let us give thanks to God for the grace he has given us and offer ourselves to him. . . .”

Mimi and I solidly united in our resolution, waited, trembling in anticipation, and a little pale. The response was the odious scramble, each one reciting as fast as possible the familiar text. Only Mimi and I, on the contrary, responded slowly, and at first, in the hubbub, no one noticed it. But when the collective rumble ceased, our two voices continued to chant.

At first our classmates were astonished, then a huge burst of laughter rang out.

When the proctor could finally get a word in he said,

“A zero in discipline for these two savages!”

Mimi panicked for a moment, but I imperturbably finished reciting the verse.

This was how I became considered a headstrong boy whom one should be wary of. Sincerity is injurious to society, and the sincere person is a dangerous individual.

The next Saturday, at the public reading of our grades for the week, the Superior paused very long over our two zeros in discipline. His good little eyes fizzled with anger and forbearance.

“That will teach them to clown about during the prayer!” said the Prefect.

I was more agitated by this sentence than by the zero itself and, taking a lesson from this first failure, I resolved not to undertake anything else before I had consulted Saint Jean de la Croix.

As one could imagine, I was more and more attracted by the school. I left it regretfully in the evening, imagining that all the exceptional things that must be happening were going on in my absence and thinking I would die of despair. I love the sounds, the silences as well as the odors.

In the evenings when the sleepy students were shut up, they fermented furiously, because, even though the bathrooms of Saint-Pancrace were pretty modern, the students did not yield to them willingly, or, if they were forced to, they contented themselves with a pretense of cleaning up, so that I could recognize each student by his “smell.”

When they were assembled, all these little fumes mixed to create lukewarm stench, dull and inert, specifically masculine that, having stewed for a long time, became a sort of somber and vague harmony, very much superior in quality to these artificial, chemical, and overall disagreeable smells that emanate from a well-washed society.

These emanations saturated the walls, the furniture, the clothes and the books as well as my soul. They formed, without my noticing it, the only breathable fluid without which I thought I would suffocate.

Among these fragrances, Mimi’s had an extraordinary power over me. It stood out clearly from the others and incited me to outdo myself and especially to speak and to convince. Often, in breathing it in, I had a goodly desire to weep. Other times I would run away very quickly, I would fearlessly reach dangerous and mortal zones where I would be able to combat tirelessly the powers of horror and debauchery and to make a blinding light burst forth there.

If I try better to define Mimi's smell, I can say that it was more alive, more musky, more sharp, and more violent as well.

It reminded me a little of the wild smells of autumn: the fermentation of faded dahlias.

One day, by accident, I took his neck-warmer in the place of my own. I noticed it at once of course, but I acted as if nothing happened. Not without some misgivings, I kept it first in the corner of my desk just until the smell had saturated my books, then I put it in my pocket, and my hands became impregnated with his odor.

I didn't give it back until it had lost all its charm, because then it seemed suspicious to me, like a dead body, and it didn't bring me any pleasure.

One evening Mimi asked me, "Do you see girls on the street?"

"Of course!"

"Every day?"

"Yes, every day."

"And you don't speak to them?"

"Definitely not."

He seemed satisfied.

The 9th – Yesterday, I was called to see the Prefect. More somber and more yellow than ever, he waited for me in his office. I approached on the thick wool rug just outside his office, where you could walk without hearing your steps, like a deaf person who speaks without perceiving his words.

Briskly, with a short and bitter voice that he had at bad moments, he said to me:

"I don't like at all these stories about papers being passed in books!"

In an instant, I was covered in sweat. The room resonated in a sinister way and, in the corners consumed by shadows, the large black armchairs were looking at me. Only the priest's pince-nez put a little life into this office rank with pharmaceutical odors.

He brought his face close to mine and, said with the bad breath of a hepatic, "You should keep these goings-on for the public schools, monsieur, and not come pervert us here!"

An immense despair rose in my chest. I wanted to respond but he interrupted me, “Be quiet! Go!”

And he showed me to the door.

I went out into the far too large hallway and rushed to the chapel. I entered the little sanctuary and threw myself onto a bench to sob. When I was calmer, I began to pray and speak to Jesus, my role model. I told him: Jesus, what have I done? Tell them all that I love you and that I want your kingdom to come!

Consolation was born out of this conversation held in the crackling silence of the night lamps. From the stained glass windows, a grim daylight shone in. I was well.

I heard a step behind me and got up to leave. The Prefect was there, himself engulfed in prayer, his face buried in his fat hands.

He didn’t lift his head.

As I went back up to my class, I saw, in the obscurity of a landing where the stairs turned, two shadows that embraced like two lovers in the road. As I approached, the couple separated and I saw the two silhouettes run away that I thought I recognized: one big and already a man, the other small, and more delicate. They both disappeared in the shadows and I stayed there, stunned, and more discouraged than ever.

I was assailed in this instant by a persistent notion of danger. I didn’t dare understand the sin they charged me with. I would have wished to withdraw into obscurity. I was afraid of the light to the extent that I didn’t dare go back into the class and that I stayed in the coatroom, bundled up in my hood until the bell sounded.

The same evening, I went home by narrow alleys where the street lamps reflected in puddles of water between the tall grey walls. I spent the night meditating, on my knees on the wooden floor, my arms crossed, I prayed for more than two hours.

At first, it was a lifeless lament, then, under the effects of the cold and the pain caused by my posture, I felt a wave of well-being penetrate my soul. It was sweet, like redemption.

At the end of my strength, in my long night-shirt, I fell into a sort of daze that took the place of sleep. The Christ! The Christ noble and veiled, suffering from injustice and

torn by misunderstandings! It was He who miraculously supported me...My arms, like His that were crucified, caused me a lot of pain at first, but then, as if really nailed to a cross, they stayed suspended in the void without my having to make the slightest effort.

The next day, I was serene, as if isolated in my own secret joy, and that hour of the night spent in prayer left me such a memory that I resolved to repent as often as necessary to regain this state of joy in which I lived the entire day and the next.

It seemed to me that I bordered on ecstasy and, when sleep overtook me around three o'clock in the afternoon, I held the math professor exclusively responsible.

The time to act had come. Should I have sought the counsel of my confessor, as I had planned to in my project? Could I, on the contrary, undertake alone my grand reform of school morals?

My first step was a series of expeditions to the school library. My goal was to research documents about the saints in general and Saint Jean de la Croix in particular.

First, I had to determine the time of day when the library was deserted. That was in the evenings between five and six o'clock.

Next, I needed to find a way to get in (it goes without saying that like all the libraries of all the scholarly establishments, this one was closed to students).

Only one means of access seemed usable to me: the roof of the bike garage, then the cornice which ran all the way along the house, fifteen to twenty feet off the ground.

I made my first try one foggy evening. The street lamps in the road formed yellow halos. I was pretty cold. I succeeded in reaching the window, but it was closed, and I had to turn back, promising myself to repeat the operation as many times as necessary until I succeeded.

Providence could not do anything but reward such perseverance – the life of Saint Jude that I had just read assured me of it – and, in his final sermon, hadn't the preacher commented on the Evangelist's words: "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened unto you?"

The second time the window was open.

As soon as I was in the library I was afraid; not with the silly fear of cowards who fear being punished, but simply because the library contained a modest collection of stuffed wading birds, and I had not taken three steps when I ran into the big grey Camargue crane which, stiff as a pole, fell in one piece on the wood floor.

In falling, it made a soft, mysterious noise. A cloud of dust rose in the semi-darkness while the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), the Red-Footed Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), and the Collared Pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*) glared at me with their glass eyes.

After having conquered my fright, I opened the glass cabinet doors and began searching through the eight thousand volumes that were so well hidden from us.

I had just undertaken the third shelf of the bookcase when I heard a noise in the hallway.

And, scarcely had I reached the cornice when someone entered the room. Happily I was able to get down to the ground without a problem.

The prospect of returning to this lifeless menagerie became a nightmare, but was this not precisely the sign that God used to encourage me? Aren't God's privileged made to follow a path riddled with traps?

The third expedition, carefully timed, was the recompense for my efforts and my tenacity. In the first minute I put my hand on a large volume entitled *The Lives of the Saints*.

I retreated nimbly and, hidden in the little English classroom, I took to reading the work while snatches of the *Tantum ergo* rose from the chapel. Alas! The author spoke of Saint Lin, Saint Clot, Saint Agostin, and even Saint Agoard and Saint Aglibert, but he was silent on Saint Jean de la Croix.

However, by leafing through this thick work, I fell on Saint Theresa of Avila, also Spanish, who the author said had maintained a spiritual friendship with Saint Jean de la Croix.

For me, this spiritual friendship between a nun and a saint made him even more admirable; men capable of maintaining relations of spiritual friendship with women seemed extremely rare to me.

This boring book presented the lives of all the saints to an extent that would have exasperated anyone else, but I found it delicious that Saint Gertrude, from the age of nine, mistreated her "members destined for the conjugal bed," only to die a virgin at the age of thirty.

I admired, too, that Saint Fulgent trained himself from the crib to endure burns only to die at the stake when he was in his forties.

Furthermore, the book taught me that Saint Theresa had been a reformist. I had suspected as much, but from that day on I was convicted that I could not be a good person without reforming something.

Even though it was silent on Saint Jean de la Croix, the book was to reveal to me that Saint Hilgobert, king of the Salsones, pagan without shame, had found in his wife Saint Hegoine such an example of virtue that he suggested to her, at the end of two years of marriage, that they should live forever in fraternal love, and that this abstinence got the couple canonized together.

After the first reading I had to find a hiding place, for I couldn't think of carrying the book back to the library each night.

The best thing would be to hide it in the old heating grate. The grate was covered by a panel of wood that yielded without difficulty. I attempted to introduce *The Lives of the Saints* into the cavity, but I wasn't able to because the grate was already full with bottles of liquor, spirits, rum, whiskey, and with cigarette packets.

Troubled, I closed the grate back up and looked for another hiding place.

I finally found a little kiosk in ruins at the back of the park, hidden in the boxwood and tall wild carrots. I was temporarily able to conceal the octavo there.

That same evening a sort of miracle happened. Going home, I saw in fact, in the window of the book store a book on whose cover was printed the name of Saint Jean de la Croix in thin Elzevir. I entered the book store. They insisted on showing me the work, but the price was much too high.

Even so, I resolved along the way to make all sacrifices necessary to procure it.

I went back home beaming with the joy that this event caused me – an event which certain people would have put down as luck.

This comfort, though small, proved helpful in bearing the blow that awaited me: my parents had received a letter from Saint-Pancrace informing them that their son was showing signs of indiscipline and perversity.

How could I fight against such an injustice any other way than with penance?

So I attempted to pass the night in prayer.

Having gone to bed early, I waited until my parents were asleep. Then I got up and knelt as I had the first time, my arms held out as on a cross.

It began to grow cold.

I implored God, “You who put to death the hounds that pursued Saint Damien, You who closed the waters of the Red Sea on the cruel Egyptians, You who put out the flames that were to burn Saint Apolline, deign simply to open the eyes of everyone to the truth!”

In the night I heard the long whistles of the trains, faithful to their schedules.

I heard the prostitutes who gathered beneath my window curse at the wind and the rain.

“What a rotten job!”

And, taking their faults into account, going past my own pain, I prayed for them like Saint Vincent de Paul prayed for the galley slaves.

When I got back in my bed, I didn’t have the strength to pursue my voyage to Newfoundland, and that night the schooner had to sail without a captain.

For Christmas there was a second miracle: my grandmother gave me a sufficient amount of money to buy *Saint Jean de la Croix*, which I read as soon as possible.

I was only in the first chapters when I understood the necessity of establishing a rule.

Rule. A word that sounds like the strike of a lash on thin backs in the hallways of monasteries.

Yes, I had to have a “rule.” I could not live without a “rule.” How had I managed to make it this far?

So, temporarily, I drew up a rough schedule of my time that would serve as the basis for a future rule. I was careful not to make it too severe. In fact, I wished to gain disciples, and I did not want to discourage them with too great a rigor. After all, what had come of the fraternity dreamed by Father Charles de Foucauld? Nothing. Charles de Foucauld had seen only one little brother come to him who, at the end of only one year of experience, had to abandon the hermitage of Beni-Abbés, repelled by the great severity of his rule.

This is what I did not want to expose myself to because, without absolutely counting on one day forming a “fraternity,” I thought of it secretly with emotion and fervor. I suffered too much as an only child to throw away the sole chance I had left to have “brothers.”

Here is the *Provisional Rule* that I developed:

- Prayer at 6:30 – Prayer and consecration of my day. – Psalms of Praise. Short meditation.
- 7:00: Wash up.
- 7:15: Leave for Saint-Pancrace.
- Use the fifteen minutes of travel time to recite the *Veni sancte spiritus*. Short meditation.
- 7:30: Students' Mass.
- From 8:00 to 11:30: Class.
- From Saint-Pancrace to Home: Devotions to the Virgin, our Heavenly Mother. Recitation of the *Angelus*.
- Lunch.
- Return trip: Thanksgiving and 10 *Hail Marys*.
- Studies from 1:30 to 2:00. Meditation.
- Classes.
- From 4:30 to 7:00: Homework, lessons, examination of conscience. Meditation.
- Return trip: 10 *Hail Marys*.
- 9:00: Bed.
- From 9:00 to 9:30: Meditation.
- Wake at midnight. From midnight to 12:30: Recitation of the Psalms of Matins.
- Wake at 3:00. From 3:00 to 3:30: Rise and Meditation. Ecstasy.

It was obviously modest, but it was, after all, only a rough sketch.

Alas, it's one thing to predict thirty minutes of meditation and quite another to meditate for those thirty minutes. At that point I realized that the first condition for making my way toward sanctity with any chance of success was to have a robust imagination. Thanks to God, mine did not lack resources and happily, Friday's sermons furnished me with an inexhaustible theme: the Flesh.

In fact, the way our schoolmasters made use of the term was so disconcerting that a magic halo seemed to crown it for the sole aim of focusing our attention on it.

We all felt sure that religion – at least the religion that was cultivated at Saint-Pancrace – was, in sum, centered thereon.

Reading the Bible, for example, showed us that its uses of the word “flesh” were contradictory.

Not only was the word “flesh” opposed to the spirit, but it was charged with a certain negative sense, and when I read, for example, that the flesh and the blood could not inherit the kingdom of God, it appeared quite clearly to me that the flesh and the blood were diabolical things. And yet the preacher and our professors maintained that the Word was made flesh, that Christ, who came without sin, had redeemed the flesh, and that He was resurrected in the flesh.

Next came the Gospels. There also I found distressing passages in which read, “The man shall leave his father and his mother, shall cling to his wife, and they shall form one and the same flesh.” After which they advised me to avoid carnal attachments which were nothing but disorder and death.

And yet this contemptible flesh must be resurrected (this was an article of faith) in order to participate in the glory of God in the world without end.

So much contempt following the promise of such honors and glory distressed me.

What an inexhaustible source of meditation! What treasure for an adolescent! This body, exposed to so many temptations, subject to such weaknesses, guilty of such crimes, could be the instrument of salvation, and mastered, mortified, suppressed, could become a source of sanctification.

They taught us a beautiful prayer that I repeated each time my purity was in peril: it was addressed moreover to the Most Holy Virgin. It went this way:

“O my Sovereign and my Mother, I offer all of me to you and as proof of my devotion, I offer you my body, my eyes, my mouth, my heart, all of myself, and since I belong to you, O my Mother, keep me as your own and your property.”

This seemed an extremely smart deal to me. Who wouldn’t exchange all these fleshly things for an inestimable treasure? For that matter, I thought the list seemed much too short, and I added with ardor my feet, my hands, my torso, and even (why not?) my sex, the object of so much worry and the source of such frequent occasions to sin which embarrassed me so. No one could keep it better for me, wasn’t that true? No one was better than the Very Pure Virgin without stain, the Immaculate Conception.

To master one's body voluntarily is a difficult thing that, at first attempt, had appealed to me, but which necessitated severe training.

Yet Saint Jean de la Croix was strict on that subject.

My first experiment was with food. Plain water having always repulsed me, I decided to drink it exclusively.

So at the dinner table, I did not accept wine anymore. My father noticed and insisted that I drink some. He professed that it was the moment that you stopped drinking wine that you began to get in trouble. But I held out and he gave in.

One day, plain water not being a punishment for me anymore (one gets used to everything), I resolved to deprive myself of dessert. To refuse it seemed impossible because my parents were alarmed. So I took some, but I did not eat it. Under some plausible pretext, I left the table carrying with me my share of the dessert, and I got rid of it.

That was very hard. Proof that the method was good, and I should expand it.

It was in this way that I successively refused myself all my favorite dishes: smoked herring with onions, sauerkraut, plum pie, chocolate, my morning cup of coffee that my mother replaced begrudgingly with a soup that I neglected to salt so that it was inedible.

Finally, it came around to my uniform, and I restricted myself to wearing my cap, my beautiful school cap, completely straight on my head, "like a wheel of cheese" as they said, and to wear my cloak "like a choir boy," that is to say buttoned from top to bottom, which gave the silhouette of a funnel.

I felt deliciously ridiculous dressed this way, for the girls scoffed as I went by.

Because I refused any occasion to look at myself in the mirror, I did not see at all that bristles, and not just fuzz, were beginning to grow on my cheeks and on the fat of my chin. My classmates alerted me to it.

"You should shave," they told me one day.

For the first time in five months, I resorted to a mirror.

What I saw in the mirror frightened me: my cheeks were pale and sunken, my cheekbones jutted out, and my eyes, though small, appeared huge in my bony, grey face: the face of Saint Jean de la Croix, just as I had imagined it, after the style of the Greeks.

In short, I saw on my cheeks small tufts of stupid, dull hairs, grouped haphazardly and, on the tip of my chin, a flowering that, on my waxy skin, was like a trace of soot corresponding to the blue rings under my eyes.

I was as ridiculous as I wished, but after this I was careful to shave.

Of course, all these ideas did not come to me spontaneously. It was Saint Jean de la Croix who prompted a great part of it.

It was unimaginable, in fact, the ease with which this man found occasions to mortify himself in the most commonplace acts of everyday life.

He described his practices with such passion that the most revolting mortification became attractive to me. If, for the time being, I did not practice any of them, at least these texts were a great help in imagining new ones.

The 4th – Saint Jean de la Croix scares me.

I've just read a marvelous chapter. Unfortunately, I cannot imitate it in whole for the moment, but I have begun with great success to refuse myself the pleasure of walking on the sidewalks. I modestly follow the brook. All this, of course, without abandoning my prayers or my nightly mortifications.

The 6th – Tonight I did not wake up at three o'clock. I broke the rule. What's more, it is becoming more and more difficult to wake myself at midnight.

So I only cover myself in the evening with my sheet and my small blanket.

Inevitably the cold will wake me.

The 7th – I woke up easily tonight. I was shivering, my jaws clenched, my heart contracted. The night seemed darker.

I thought of the terrible phrase of Saint Theresa who perfectly describes the glacial silence of the cloister: "You do not know what it is to be cold for seven years."

The 9th – The cold system gave good results for three nights, no more. I became accustomed to the schedule, and I slept till morning like a log.

I absolutely have to find something else.

The 10th – I set the alarm on my clock. It made barely enough noise to wake me at midnight. I can finally do my exercises like they are planned in the rule.

The 11th – I began again tonight, but it resulted in a regrettable event: when I was in the middle of prayer, and the souls of all the monasteries met in mine, the door of my room was opened wide, and my father appeared in his night shirt; his thin hairy legs, his bare feet, his disheveled hair gave him a great resemblance to the Burghers of Calais. I wanted to burst out laughing because this was the first time that I had seen my father dressed this way.

When he saw me on my knees, he retched.

(Pardon him. A railroad guard is not familiar with the life of saints, and the world of prayer could very well be unknown to him.)

He could not speak. He made what sounded like a sad cluck.

“I forgot to pray,” I told him.

Leaning on the frame of the door, he seemed to faint. He made a brutal gesture with his hand, opened his mouth, froze, took a breath, and swallowed his saliva. The draught caught and lifted the tail of his shirt. I felt as if I would melt with pity.

Finally, he was able to say, in a voice that I did not recognize as his, “Go to sleep!”

“But, my prayer...”

“Go to sleep!”

I rose and went back to my bed. He waited.

“Go on, hurry up, I’m cold!”

To tell the truth, I was expecting this hostility. Don’t all those who want to do something great face opposition from those who are closest to them? I’ve heard of people who suffer because they do not have a family, but no one says anything about those who suffer from having one.

When I was under my covers he closed the door and, as I felt myself being watched, I did not dare get up again and finished my prayers in bed.

A little later I heard my father get up. It was the day for the Indian Mail Express. He prepared his basket, ate his slice of bacon, drank his bowl of soup and then his cup of coffee with a splash of eau-de-vie.

His shoes squeaked one last time on the stone floor of the kitchen, then he opened the door and left without coming to kiss me goodbye.

I imagined him, bundled up in his long scarf, following the road along the railway, reaching the light of the marshaling yard, stepping over the fence at the railroad ties, breathing in the odor of the briquettes, then climbing into an icy car while an announcer droned, "Passengers going to Modane, Turin, Rome, Naples, and Brindisi, all aboard!"

It was high time to jump out of bed and recite Lauds before my mother awoke.

One of my cousins came at that time to spend several days at our house. She was a girl of twenty whom I had not seen in many years because the relations between her parents and mine were – I don't know why – rocky at times.

Each one of her visits was a cause of astonishment for me: I had seen her successively develop breasts, hips, calves, not to mention the changes in her face which, each time, filled me with wonder.

This time, when she greeted me, I was blown away by her smell: it was the same as Mimi's!

This revelation made me reflect not on biology, as one could believe, nor on the curious fact that the body of a boy could have a feminine fragrance, but on the suspicion which now surrounded Mimi's smell, because in the future it would be good to deprive myself of breathing it in. Difficult task, since we sat by each other in class; but I looked forward to this new sacrifice, because the sense of smell had always been the foremost of my senses.

So I resolved to condemn my nostrils quite simply with an effort of the will, an inhibition of the olfactory senses, in the same way that I had come no longer to experience pleasure in tasting a plum pie when I was obliged to eat it.

This curious act of my will was the result of extraordinary efforts, but it was done: the most savory plates could, when I wanted it, be transformed into paper maché as soon as

they came into contact with my lips. In this way I could almost fast, in the face of my parents, without consuming any less food.

This phenomenon, which was not far from being genius, allowed me to escape the spying gaze of my mother of which I had the most atrocious memory.

The nervous tension necessary to realize this type of miracle induced vomiting which I hid by isolating myself in the bathroom. So I was able to practically accomplish the searched-for fast without raising the suspicion of my family.

My family! I often thought at that time that the saints, those whose names figured into the hagiographies, were orphans. How I envied them.

So I managed to suppress my sense of smell as I had curbed that of taste, and I reached that point with such ease that I was ambitious not to stop there.

I thought of Saint Gertrude “mistreating her members destined for the conjugal bed.” Why did I not attack that area as well? By an act of will could I not also erase my sex?

I gave myself to numerous and repeated exercises until the day when I learned that certain Mongol and Tibetan wise men did the very same in order to be chaste and reached, in this way, surprising results. If the practice was employed by pagans, it was Satan who inspired them and, relieved, I abandoned these demonic practices.

The 18th – Yesterday evening, coming back from recess, M. gave a small cry when opening his desk, “Someone stole my record!”

I understood right away. I had already noticed that they were watching us more and more.

Today I bought two padlocks and four hooks to close both our desks.

The 19th – I installed the locks this morning. This evening the supervising student read us a note from the Direction forbidding the installation of locks, hooks, or other methods of closing desks.

The 21st – Yesterday, recess was hectic, we played ball in a playground which, because of all the rain, resembled a field after the beet harvest.

Everyone was spattered with mud.

When the bell rang at the end of the game, everyone rushed and crowded around the drinking fountains.

I Was a Saint

Alas! Although we are in a Christian school, I have to say, the strongest are always first. This isn't the first time I have participated in this disgraceful scene, but since my arrival at the school, God is my witness, I have started to take action against this barbaric behavior which smears pious customs with hypocrisy. Now, more than ever, I feel capable of fighting it.

I clenched my fists in silence when, all of a sudden, I heard the anguished voice of Mimi calling me.

I made my way out of the crowd.

"He hit me."

"Who?"

"Him."

And he pointed to Michel, whom I had beaten so thoroughly several months earlier for the affair at the chapel. This big bully was waiting for me, already en garde, ready to pounce. Of course, he had provoked this encounter. He had been looking for revenge for a while.

All our classmates made a circle around us. I did not want to fight; I was going to urge my adversary to make peace. But I didn't have the time to. He was already on top of me.

I did my best to stay on the defensive, but it was impossible, he would have beaten me, his attack was so violent. I considered for a moment letting myself be made a fool of. I thought of Christ defeated who also could have, if he had wished, confounded all his enemies. Nevertheless, he did not do so. I should have imitated him, yes I should have, but defeated, would I have retained my influence over my classmates?

So, reluctantly, I attacked, going hand-to-hand. After we circled for a moment like two angry cocks, I threw myself resolutely into the assault. I was not able to grab him by the waist, but it was not long before I had him on the ground. I don't know how it happened, but suddenly we were both rolling in the mud.

The floor work was about to begin. I was sure to win because this had always been my strong point: grappling, twisting, all that you do on the mat, but suddenly we heard the voice of the Prefect, "Get up, you big fools!"

We got up. Michel disappeared, and I was alone standing in front of my confessor.

“Congratulations, you’ve certainly done it now! Bringing your manners from the wrong side of town! A brawler, that’s what you are! A pretty-boy brawler!”

This phrase turned around in my head for a long time. It made a frightening cloud before my eyes, the murky color of drowning, and the rest of the day seemed terribly long, but thanks to God, night came, the sweet night that belonged entirely to me. I was finally able to put my thoughts in order.

I did not go to bed, and a long meditation brought me to the following conclusion: if the campaign of deprivations and sacrifices brought such poor results, it was because it had been insufficient.

I could not find anything more to do to extend this path of mortifications than the point to which I had already come. It was impossible for me to fast more without alarming my parents and, for the rest, such childish disciplines seemed an insufficient response to the insults and suspicions that my confessor had heaped on me. I supposed now that the monstrosity of his mistake called for a reaction equally monstrous; so, quite naturally, that’s how bodily punishments, though they repulsed me, became called for.

The idea came to me in the dark one cold night in December. Oh, I was not yet thinking of flagellation. The noise of the straps bothered me.

I easily found in my schoolboy’s closet a rough cord of hemp. I tied it around my stomach several times at the waist, and the punishment began.

In *Saint Jean de la Croix*, it said that mortifications must take place in the dark. So I felt my way back to my bed.

What started as a pricking which disappointed me and made me doubt the efficiency of the process soon became a belt of fire so intolerable that I was certain to obtain justice, sooner or later. And I began to cry for joy before falling asleep.

Extract from my journal.

The 23rd – A meteor just flew into my life.

A new student came today. His name is Schwartzbachermann. His father is an officer and has just been stationed in our village. He has lived in all the garrisons in France and

I Was a Saint



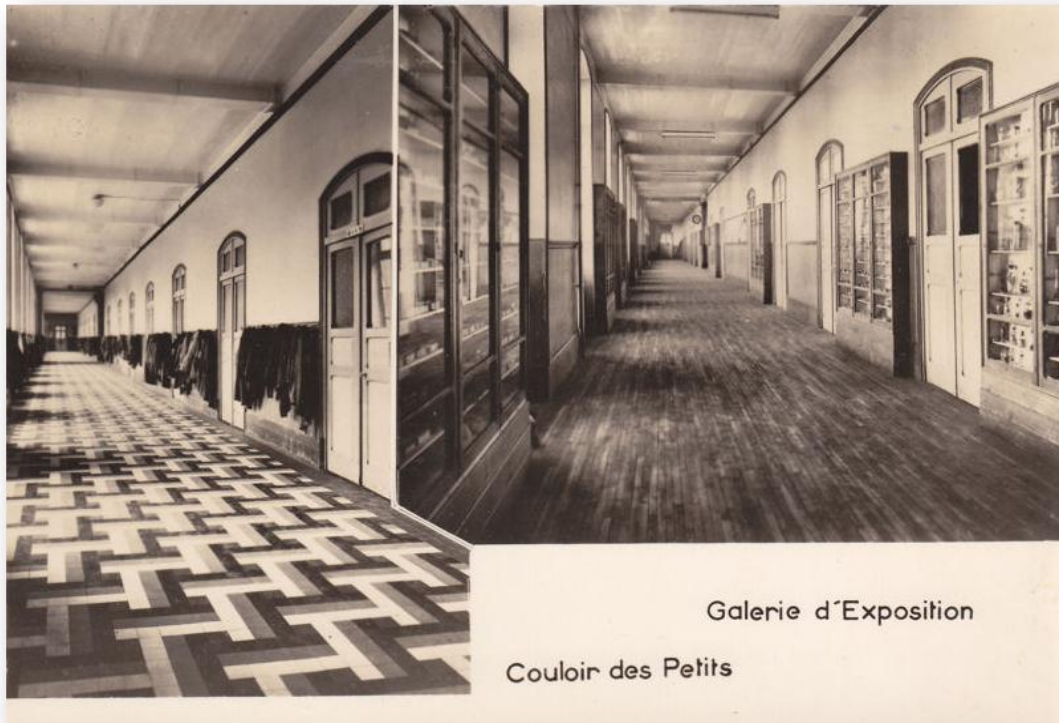
Two decorative wooden misericords



Burgundy countryside and a village kitchen garden



École Saint-Joseph in Dijon,
Burgundy



Hallways and coat racks outside classrooms at Saint-Joseph.



Priests and faculty of a Catholic boarding school



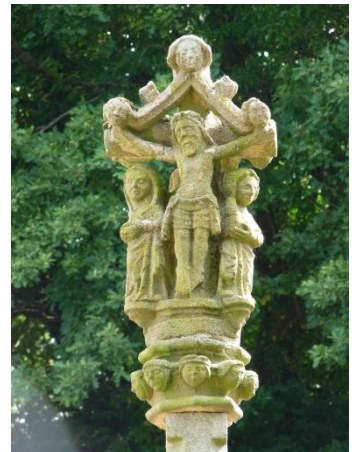
Saint Jean de la Croix



The Breton Coast



A depiction of Calvary or a *calvaire* in Brittany





The Burghers of Calais by Rodin



The Indian Mail Express



Bridge to the General Hospital in Lyon



Fourvières District in Lyon seen from the Rhône

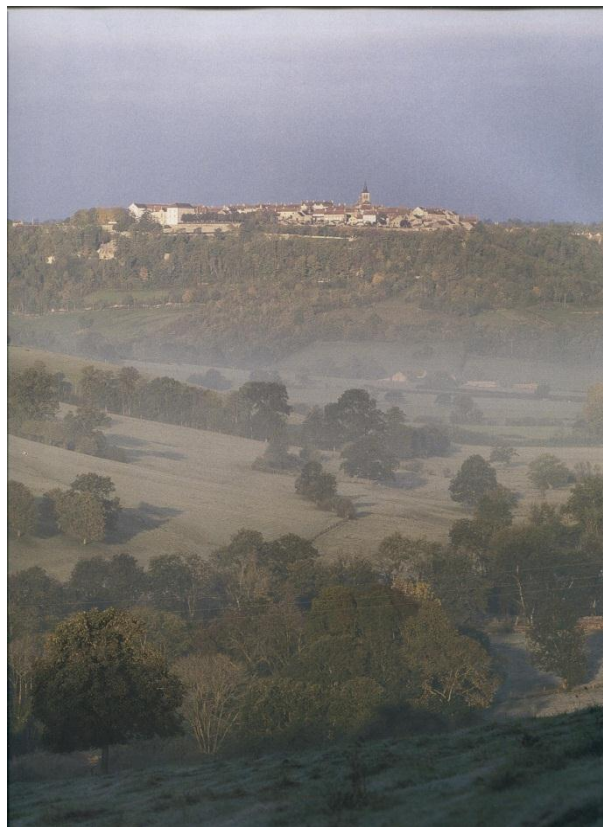
I Was a Saint



A young boy and his grandfather



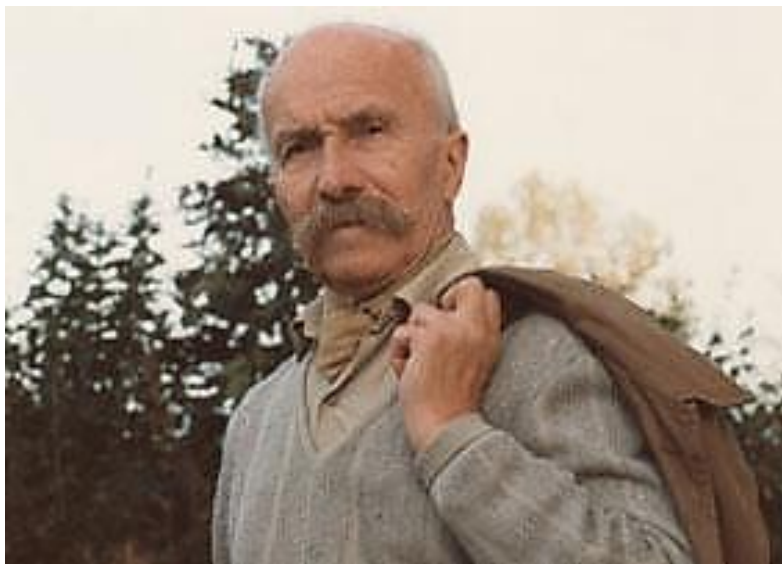
A Corpus-Christi Procession



Hills in Flavigny, Burgundy



Low-tide in Brittany



Henri Vincenot ca. 1970

knows everything. He has long hair and a stubborn manner: I spotted him at once. It didn't take him long either to realize that we were made for each other. He approached me without delay, and we talked for a long time in low tones.

He seems to burn with the fire of the Prophets and seeks his way in the teachings of the Old Testament. He especially admires Abraham. One can easily guess why. He talks about him eloquently and with a passion that brings me back to sacred History. Yes, I concede now that there are ideas to exploit and examples to follow in the Old Testament Scriptures as well. I made amends for my oversight and in the process took a lesson in humility.

I hope I spoke properly when telling him about my own preoccupations. He literally leapt to embrace me and treated me like a brother.

This time I have a friend (I don't dare say disciple because he is stronger than me), and I thank God for him.

The 24th – Long talk with Schwartz (that's what we call him for short). I am dumbfounded by the extent of his knowledge and the rigor of his faith.

The 25th – Long talk with Schwartz. He confided in me his ambition to reach "perfect perfection," even if he should lose his life in the process.

Those were his very words. What exactly is he trying to say by that?

The 26th – I told Schwartz about my ideas on scholarly morals. His face lit up. So I dared to tell him about my efforts. He studied my rule for a long time. His eyes sparkled. His mouth became contorted. Then he lifted his head and gave me an extraordinary look, saying, "This is clearly insufficient. It's childish, but it's not bad all the same."

Then he looked like he was thinking deeply. Tomorrow he will no doubt talk to me more at length about it.

The next day, when I got home from school, a railroad worker came knocking on our door.

My mother went pale the moment she saw him. He noticed.

"No, it's not serious," he said.

"An accident?"

“Pft, a small bump in the marshaling yard at Badan. His train derailed, but he’s not hurt much.”

“Where is he?”

“At the general hospital in Lyon.”

“May we go see him?”

While asking her questions, my mother had already gotten her coat and her new small purse.

“Of course you may go, with your son, naturally . . . you could catch, for example, the 115.”

“At 6:42,” said my mother who knew the number and time of all the trains.

From the landing I had perfectly heard their conversation though it was held in low voices. My mother got my white shirt and my new suit and said, “We are leaving on the 115 for Lyon.”

So I was going to see Lyon! The Rhône, the water that ran all the way to the Mediterranean!

And a little later we boarded an overheated car where I lent my amazed ear to the song of the piping.

I hardly had time to enjoy the spectacle of our station where the cars groaned as if the men were making them suffer martyrdom. Our departure came all of a sudden, the switchings glimpsed with their tangle of tracks under the gaze of bright points, the bumps of the crossties, the ruckus of shunting, then the night.

Finally, I applied myself to tasting the pleasures of travel. At times the compartment was emptied of fugitive gleams of light. The stations, shivering with all their bells, watched us pass; then we fell once more into the darkness of extensive countryside seen through the droplets of water that rolled slantwise on the window-pane.

Intoxicated, I went staggering down the aisles, having decided, in spite of the worry that was necessarily squeezing my heart, to take advantage of the pleasures of travelling along the way.

The waters of the Saône reflected upside-down images of gas lamps amidst the roar of metal bridges. My forehead against the icy window-pane, I persisted in peering through the shadows so that I could see, at last, unknown horizons.

Even so, I was gripped with anxiety: my father was without a doubt in danger of dying and I did not feel the slightest grief. I had been told over and over how much I loved him and that I should expect to suffer enormously. Alas! It was nothing like it: I walked to and fro in the aisle and surprised myself by whistling.

I made an effort to take on the attitude of a young-man-whose-father-is-dying. But it was impossible.

I enjoyed travelling so much that it was stronger than what they call filial love. Although I knew that my father did not observe the sacraments, I decided to undertake his conversion. I took my mother's hand. She was holding a rosary, and I told the beads with her.

I used each *Ave* as if it were a projectile (the rosary, this rapid-fire prayer) to shoot my guilty indifference, imploring the Holy Virgin to give me at least some tears.

As we passed through Perrache in Lyon, the Rhône left me with an unforgettable impression. It made a dull, hushing sound and, in the darkness, these green waters glowed like a large phosphorescent strip.

I would have stayed for hours watching it cascade, but I had to tear myself away from the show to go finally into the general hospital. In a bed, I saw a heap of bandages out of which emerged a disheveled moustache and a swollen eye.

It started to smile, that eye, once it looked up, and that gave my mother renewed courage.

His voice as well, though a bit choked, must have done her good. He laughed, "Some damage to my right leg and bruises everywhere."

"Are you in pain?"

"Imagine that I have just received a volley of hits with a club. That's all."

"And the doctor?"

"Oh, he's in perfect health!"

"Don't joke around, Joseph."

“The doctor doesn’t have anything to see to. He has only to wait until I stick myself back together.”

It was true, with the exception of a crack in his pelvis and a large sore on his shoulder blade.

We were asked to leave, and my father wished us a goodnight, adding, “In any case, I’m finished with night shifts! I will have it easy!”

Nights! The nightmare of lower railroad workers. The nights of those who, like monks, wake for other people.

I stayed a moment by him and in a murmur said to the wounded man, “You see, your job is dangerous, you should always be in a state of grace.”

He smiled through his bandages and answered, “And what do I need to do to be in a state of grace?”

“Confess, take communion, and go to Mass.”

“Tell me, did Christ do all that?”

“Of course not, but. . . .”

“Then why do you want me to do it?”

I made a sad face. He saw that and took my hand.

“I will think about it,” he said, “Yes, I will think about it.”

It was late when we left the hospital. My mother had already asked the way to return to Perrache. Far from the sound of trains, we were lost. For us, the rallying point would always be the train station.

I was able to lean on the parapet the whole way back. It was not raining anymore. On the contrary, a wind from the north swept away the clouds and, lit by a ray of moonlight, I could see the district of Fourvières perched on a hill overlooking the rest of the city and the Saint-Just district beside it. As we passed through the changing countryside, I saw such fabulous palaces in the high-rising Lyonnais houses that, for the first time in my life, I cherished the chance to be the son of a railroad guard.

We stayed two days in Lyon where a pilgrimage to Fourvières was obviously called for; after which, proud of my distant adventures, I returned to Saint-Pancrace.

I found the school in an understandable uproar: Schwartzbachermann had just shot his sister with a revolver.

He had refused to answer to questioning, and when the examining magistrate had asked him the reason for this act, he had replied, "I killed her because she did not believe in God."

Here is what my journal says:

The 1st – Ventelot warned me that I would be interrogated by the police this evening. In fact, at 4 o'clock I was called into the Prefect's office. A severe-looking man was waiting for me there.

"You were a friend of Schwartzbachermann, and you held long conversations with him, so they tell me. Did he confide any secrets to you?"

"No, monsieur."

"What do you think of this young man?"

"I have only known him for a few days, but I thought he was one of the most pious of my classmates."

The man looked at the abbé who wanted to speak, but he interrupted him with a gesture.

"Did you not notice that he was reading any suspicious books?"

"He read the Bible."

The Prefect cut in, "We are not talking about that. The Magistrate was alluding to bad books."

"The worst books are not those one would think, Father," said the man.

Then he turned to me, "Did he have any favorite heroes?"

"Yes."

"Which ones?"

"Abraham."

The two men looked at each other, then the judge made a sort of grimace. Then he said to me very kindly, "Thank you, my boy." And I left.

The 2nd – Everyone is talking about the Schwartz affair. In general, no one understands anything. As far as it concerns me, I see the disastrous influence of the Old Testament in this crime. Only the Gospels, etc.

The 3rd – Rumor has it that Schwartz came from a Protestant family and that he only got into our school thanks to a fraud.

There was talk about the affair for a few days, then life went back to normal. And I went back to my worries: more than ever Mimi sought out my guidance and counsel, and all my classmates had their eyes fixed on me. I realized it when my French assignment was read out loud and they all went so far as to applaud, for example. Or when, having been requested to elect a right-hand man to the division, they gave me a hundred voices out of a hundred and eighty-three voters.

I was a prisoner to glory and to virtue. I did not savor either one, for the hairshirt (my hemp belt) reminded me ceaselessly of the hateful conflict that existed between me and my confessor, but, careful to preserve the influence I had over my classmates in order to achieve my goal, I continued to feed my legend.

During the course of windy and icy evenings then, I pretended to fear for the men in my family who sailed somewhere on the ocean and, finally, to excuse certain inevitable absences, I announced that my father was at the hospital of Chang-Si, after having suffered, in the seas of China, the greatest typhoon that had ever been seen.

If suddenly I had cried out to my fellow students that I was a simple boy, son of a railroad guard presently hospitalized in Lyon, there would have been an extraordinary scandal, at the school Saint-Pancrace and perhaps in the whole village.

Confession became more and more painful for me and, each time, I was obliged to go take a walk in the park. It was in doing so that I glimpsed one day the embracing couple that my presence had already separated one month earlier. This time I approached without a sound, and they did not hear me. They stayed pressed against one another. Leaning on the hand-rail, I hear them murmur what seemed to me such despicable things that I leapt back and began running blindly, suffocated by the thick fog that the wind had blown in off the Saône.

Once I got back in the park I felt more at ease. Even so, my thoughts brought back sometimes their conversation and other times the repugnant vision from the stairway.

In the end, it was the only vision that filled my dreams that night and my thoughts during the following day. I was so shocked by it that I talked to my dear Mimi.

He started to smile gently and answered as naturally as ever, “That was Binchard and his string.”

“His string?”

“Yes.”

“What is that?”

He looked at me, astonished, then said, “A string, a trick, you know. It’s Leroy and Bingoud, it’s Charles and Mémot, it’s Blainville and Charmoz.”

Then he turned on his heels and left.

The next morning, when I opened my desk to take out my little blotting mat and my protective cloth cuffs, I found, pinned where it was obvious, an enormous piece of string.

For the first time, I had just gotten a clear look on life, and I was struck by my solitude. The icy solitude of an only child.

Brutal had been the revelation.

Brutal was my reaction.

My hairshirt, tightened each day a notch more, pricking better each night, seemed to me like a joke. Besides, in all sincerity, I simply got used to it.

That is why, having concealed leather laces, and having armed them with a knot at the end, I made a lash of them and attempted to whip myself.

It was a total failure. My hand, my fist, my arm absolutely refused. I should have obeyed them. But there was the example of the great ascetics and La Trappe Abbey, that they spoke to us so often about, was not very far away.

I am ashamed of these hours – both magnificent and hideous, but at that time they seemed sweet to me compared to the spectacle at the boarding school where so many abject suspicions stewed.

I was not so weak as to hate. Would I have had the strength? All was now drowned in a fleecy greyness that muffled me as though I was half-asleep. The noise of the others' lives didn't reach me anymore. In a few months, I had grown another few inches, and I felt in my body a painful listlessness.

My features, like my spirit, had put on weight; my sleep-heavy eyes and my negligent dress made me look lazy and disheveled. So, my eyes fixed on a shining point, somewhere in front of me, my mouth half-open, my hand soft, my stomach hollow, my back rounded, I let myself be overcome by the joy of suffering.

Through a series of pious lies and holy tricks, I succeeded each morning in leaving the house a half-hour earlier in order to fast. It was still dark, and the gas lamps lighted the empty streets where the cries of the street-cleaners resounded.

The mass of trees in the Francoeur garden merged with the sky as I walked along. My bare hands were exposed to the cold though I could have put them in my pockets; but pockets were, to quote our schoolmasters, a devilish invention designed to ensnare youth of religious schools.

My steps sounded crisp in the early morning. Still vibrant from my pious wakefulness, my stomach tight beneath my hairshirt, I rushed down the streets that lead to the cathedral. The Taillandier printer, like me submissive to a nightly Rule, rumbled

from all its rotating drums. I stopped a moment in front of the cellar windows to watch the comings and goings of the typographers, then I set off again for the cathedral, anxious to arrive. I slipped down Rue de la Misericord and, all of a sudden, having detoured through the planetrees, I saw “her.” Her two towers rose up more clearly than the morning shadows, pierced with thin windows like blades. Her stone was softly radiant and, in the breaking dawn, the chasm of the great portal opened.

I threw myself into this silent and cold refuge. The padded doors closed behind me with a dull cannon-like sound, and suddenly I was surrounded by the smell of incense and old surplice.

A small bell tinkled. All was somber except for the altars where the shadow of a priest stood out. I advanced, guided by the white path up the aisle, in the midst of a population of empty chairs. The confessionals rustled with the fingering of the rosary.

As I neared the Holy Table, I heard the murmurings of the priest, and my eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

I saw then two or three old women who smelled somewhat of urine. It was good because no one was there to spy on me or threaten me. Jesus and me, all alone.

My knees became imprinted with the thick straw of the chairs, and little by little the high stained-glass windows became tinted with a milky gleam.

A Mass ended. The priest left, preceded by a servant, a pale man with a moustache. Another priest came back, preceded by the same servant and another Mass began in front of the still empty chairs, punctuated with the infrequent cannon booms from the great door.

Bells, murmur, *Introibo ad altare Dei*

With that the bells of Saint-Justinian sounded the quarters of the hour, and several pigeons fluttered their wings by the rows of gargoyles.

I was well.

I feverishly awaited the consecration. At the Elevation, as one should, I raised my eyes to contemplate the host and the ciborium, and I felt myself grow closer to God. This was different from the icy emptiness of my room or the hubbub of the road and, although my fingers were numbed by the cold, I felt warmth invade the apse. My heart was in raptures.

I hid my face in my hands and looked into my soul.

“Have I progressed?”

A voice that came straight from the tabernacle or the oil lamp (I don’t know) answered, “Yes.”

“Can I hope to bring along many classmates?”

“Yes.”

“Should the Prefect’s contempt encourage me to persevere?”

“Yes.”

Then came the time for communion. I did not dare approach the Holy Table. Even though I was fasting, what would happen if there were still some forgotten sins in the recesses of my soul?

I contented myself with a spiritual communion. When the officiant said the *Ite missa est*, I felt myself visited by an extraordinary force, and the drama that overshadowed my life disappeared.

At this point I was no longer worried about being among the first to arrive in the courtyard of Saint-Pancrace, and I started playing marbles as if I had nothing else to do.

And then Ventelot approached me again.

One day, he came up to me and furtively slipped a calling card into my pocket, then ducked away.

I read on the paper, “For all your shadowing, intelligence, investigation, direct yourself to Ventelot, private detective.”

A little later he told me, “I’ve seen that your business is not going very well. If you need me, I am at your disposal. I work for very few classmates, and above all I do not concern myself with day students, but since I like you because you are poor too”

“Poor?”

“Yes, you were born here, not in Saint-Brieuc. Your father is a railroad guard, not a deep sea captain, and today he is accompanying the 4812 . . . Is that true?”

“It’s true.”

“Don’t worry, they will never know. They’re too stupid and you’ve done a great job impressing them.”

As I held my tongue Ventelot continued, "I know lots of other things too: the Prefect of Discipline is a writer like you."

"A writer?"

"Yes. He carries his manuscripts to some printer in town, but no one wants to accept them and that's what makes him cranky. That's why he is jealous of you."

There was a silence. Ventelot whistled between his teeth, then he smiled.

"But that's not what you're most interested in. Mimi smoked three cigarettes, Thursday, on the road with Michel and Leroy. They were hiding behind the fence of the stadium and, when the proctor who accompanied them had his back turned, they went into the sports café and drank a bottle of white wine. Michel gave something to Mimi. I couldn't figure out what, but I will if you want to know."

"Thanks, Ventelot, you're a great chap."

"At your service, and if you're ever in a hard spot"

"Ok, if you'll let me return the favor."

"Sure!"

The joy of seeing a new disciple come to me did not make it any less upsetting to know that Mimi returned to his former transgressions. But I had to keep my eye on Ventelot in order to assure myself of his loyalty.

So that same evening, I decided to try my hand at shadowing him which took me into one of the shadiest streets in my home town, in the tanneries district.

Night fell. One by one, the street lamps lit up. Ventelot doffed his school cap, put it in his pocket and began to stride forward. Beneath one of the gas lamps, the face of a girl lit up at his approach. I was hidden in the corner of a porch. I saw my poor friend approach the girl. Then they both went towards the darkest part of the road together. They stopped in front of a wall where the humid plaster flaked off under the rain.

There, in the greyness, they stayed for a long while and the rain began to fall harder. They did not seem to mind it and stayed there, motionless, while the regular sound of the rain drops pattered along the walls.

My heart was broken. Such a good fellow, too! Could I accept help from a perverse classmate?

Thereupon, they separated.

Ventelot passed in front of me. I wondered if I should follow him or if it would be better to continue the investigation with the young girl?

I set off running, splashing through the puddles. Very soon I caught up with the poor child. She thought it was her friend who was coming back and she turned around. I saw a crumpled young face, not without beauty, but the raindrops looked like tears on her cheeks, and because of that, and because she had put white powder on them, her face resembled the walls of that district.

Her uncurled hair hung under her Cloche hat. Poor Ventelot! Poor lost couple!

Having started walking away a little faster, she turned at the corner by the slaughterhouses and took still another gloomy road. Almost having lost sight of her, I surprised myself by running to catch up with her again. Why? Without a doubt it was to excite my disgust and to keep me from being attracted to women.

Now I could make out, on either side of the road, large sordid and uniform buildings that administrations build in order to lodge their people and to preserve the harmful influence of individual comfort. The run-off from washing clothes and cabbage soup came out of alleyways.

She disappeared at the corner of these tenements. She was without a doubt, like me, the child of a railroad guard or of a car-man, and perhaps it was through her that Ventelot knew my origins.

I heard a voice, "Coming home at this hour?" Then the loud-speaker of the marshaling yard blared, "Attention the 64 train! The 64, attention!"

On the road I was following I met men who spoke about the railroad. Their shoes squeaked against the clinker.

All this human rubble, slum, mediocrity, and fatigue horrified me; happily, other worries would monopolize my thoughts until night, and I gave up to God the care of dictating my response to Ventelot. Must I lose hope of incorporating him into the fraternity that I had dreamed of founding?

Mimi seemed not to understand the tragedy that was going on around him. He seemed to be an inoffensive dunce leading his little life without complication and I made him horribly upset. He was crying.

“You don’t like me!”

“How can you expect me to respect a classmate who is depraved?”

“I’m not depraved.”

“You smoked three cigarettes on Thursday, in the road, and you went into a café, Michel, Leroy, and you, and drank sweet white wine.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know everything.”

“Michel gave me some cigarettes and”

“I don’t understand you: Michel beats you up, you call me to help, and then you accept his cigarettes and go to a café with him.”

“He’s really nice to me now; he gave me a silver cigarette holder, I couldn’t very well refuse to use it.”

“Give me the cigarette holder! And give me the cigarettes.”

“If you want them, go find them.”

“Where are they?”

“Since you know everything, you must know where they are.”

He pronounced these words with a mocking smile. Cut to the quick, I said, “They are in the heating grate, with the rum, the whiskey, and the rest.”

“That’s not true!”

“If it wasn’t true, you wouldn’t be making that face.”

He held his tongue, then softly said, “How did you discover my hiding place?”

“I didn’t discover anything, but I can read you like an open book.”

He set down his pen-holder and seemed to meditate. I felt that he was at my mercy. I told him, “I would give anything if there weren’t any Thursdays or Sundays.”

“Why?”

“Because every Monday and Friday morning when I come back to school, you have a cloudy complexion and groggy eyes.”

“It’s that noticeable?”

“Of course.”

He sighed.

“What do you want? When you are here, I behave, but as soon as I don’t see you anymore, I let myself go.”

The hour for action had just struck. Just behaving myself better was no longer enough. I felt capable of bringing ten, twenty, thirty, even a hundred classmates to me. I chose carefully the moment to ask him, “But why do you hang around these idiots?”

“Well, I have to hang out with someone. Oh! If you were with me all the time, I feel very sure I wouldn’t do anything bad.”

From this day, I took charge of his sanctification and, in the refuge behind our lifted desks, we undertook this delicate task.

In the morning, he waited for me in the corner of the courtyard. At first glance I knew what he wanted to tell me.

“I did it,” he said. “I started again last night.”

He made me look at him and asked me, “At least, it doesn’t show too much, does it?”

“It shows at first glance. Everyone must be looking at you.”

He took a small mirror out of his pocket and looked at himself.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Of course, you’ll get used to it. The drunkard doesn’t realize that his breath implicates him. And you, you are deteriorating without noticing it.”

He was appalled. At times, during our studies, he interrupted his work, grew pale and, pointing to his lower stomach.

“It hurts there.”

“Those are stomach pains.”

“I’ve never had stomach pains like this.”

“What do you want me to do? Even though I might see you rot away I couldn’t do anything about it. You are the one holding your destiny in your hands. Even so, I stayed up again all night long praying for you. You’re going to be the death of me.”

These words agitated him. He wanted to know.

“Naked like the other times?”

“Yes, but don’t repeat it to anyone.”

Then he whined pitifully, “It’s at night that it gets me, or rather the evening, but without me wanting it, I swear.”

“Ok, I will spend the night in prayer again for you and I promise you that we will get there.”

At this time one can read in my journal:

... I gave M. the thing in my notebook about spiritual accounting. This system filled him with wonder. He could not imagine that you waged war against temptation with numbers and signs lined up in columns.

He was eager to get one and bought a little notebook just like mine in all respects. He adopted the same notation as me: for the sin of lust a cross, for a bad thought a circle, for staring a square, for a drawn out conversation a diamond, for an overheard conversation a dot.

He started the work bravely, but what holes there are in his marshmallow soul! His God is a goody-goody God, petty, informal and a joker who loves him and protects him from his wrath. He thinks that his existence, his health, and his comfort are necessary to the world economy and that the practice of the sacraments for him is an assurance against eternal punishment.

The 12th – M. is discouraging. Does he believe God alone is enough? . . . I remember a phrase of Schwartzbachermann: “We have chosen the difficult path.”

I actually seem to be on a path covered in slippery mud. I am not advancing.

Or isn’t the problem rather that I am not worthy of the least success?

The 14th - This morning when I arrived, “he” was waiting for me. His face was lit up with a smile. Without saying a word he handed me his notebook of sins. For a whole week the columns were empty. He was happy, he was exultant. For me the joy was not less.

Oh! If I could redeem him definitively from evil and make him a disciple! Others would come soon.

The 18th – He is holding strong. One diamond for the week is wonderful.

The 19th – This morning he was not to be seen. I did not find him until we were in class. As soon as he saw me, he blushed and didn't say a word. I asked him for his notebook.

"Oh, you leave me alone with your antics," he answered.

"You were the one who asked me to help you to become pure, I'm helping."

"All that is just a big joke! I'd like very much to see your notebook; it's bound to be a good one!"

All my efforts for a month are destroyed.

The 22nd – Someone stole my spiritual notebook. The thief is not Mimi. I am worried.

The 23rd – Someone stole Mimi's notebook. Tonight, we immediately began a serious investigation. Ventelot will be of precious assistance.

M. is appalled by this disappearance, a state of mind which does not keep him from returning to his shameful habits.

Sunday night: Everything is going bad! I took communion at Mass this morning without having gone to confess. It was a good communion, but when I came out of the chapel, the Prefect of Discipline was waiting for me on the stairs and led me into his office. When he was seated at his desk, he said, "I noticed that you approached the Holy Table and that you took communion. Yet you did not come confess last night. Perhaps you went to ask absolution from one of the priests of the establishment?"

"No, Father."

There was a long silence.

"I am obliged to remind you," he said in a changed voice, "that the act of communing without being in a state of grace is a very serious sin, the most serious of all. That is called sacrilege."

This word frightened me so that I felt my head swirl, my vision faltered, and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was laid out on the rug between the Prefect and the house doctor.

I am certain that the Prefect had misunderstood my faint.

I am excommunicated.

I want to obliterate myself deeply in prayer tonight to put my thoughts in order and to ask for counsel from God.

I Was a Saint

My confessor believes me guilty of terrible sins. I know well that that is not at all important, but I am at my wit's end.

Nothing is as painful as passing for a delinquent.

That same night, after a long period of thanksgiving, on my knees at the foot of my bed, clothed only in my hairshirt, to which I added my two horsehair gloves, I compared my sacrifices to those of Saint Jean de la Croix. I was ashamed that my efforts were so weak, and without hesitation I attempted to give myself several large strikes with the whip, but either I was too tired, or I still lacked the necessary will-power because I could not succeed in really hurting myself.

Exhausted, shivering, I went to bed and I felt extremely dizzy.

When I got sick a few days later, I hardly noticed it because the fever had the same vertigo effect as the exaltation I felt certain evenings. The starvation was sweet and familiar to me, and the pain on my right side resembled the pain that I inflicted on myself with the end of a whip for the good of my soul.

My nights were frightful and in the morning, just as I had a moment of calm, I fell back into anguish, asking my mother, “The mailman hasn’t brought anything for me?”

I waited for a sign that my disciple was still loyal to me.

Alas, there was none.

Exhausted by my privations and my vigils, I was easy prey for fever. To tell the truth, I gave myself up to the feverish torpor, I was happy. Had I perhaps arrived at the end of my battle and Jesus was doubtless going to recompense me for such good intentions? I seemed to see the frame of my life disappear, there was nothing left anymore but my soul. And no one knew anything about that except for God himself who drew me into His marvelous presence where all efforts to keep oneself saintly are needless.

It was finished. At last all was going to be at peace. My only regret: I was so far from having finished my work, but God was the only judge, and I chanted the *In manus tuas Domine*.

I had gone as far as I could. I was killed by love, like Jesus. What more could I ask?

In this way my last hours would have been the most beautiful hours of my life.

This lasted twelve days, after which, sadly, I came back down to earth, stunned by all that I had foreseen and glimpsed of this heavenly world which refused me. All I had left was a dull, persistent pain in my right side and underneath my shoulder blade.

When I regained consciousness, my grandfather was next to me. He had come from his village. He took my hand saying, “Get well quickly and I will take you with me to the woods to hunt duck or even to catch rabbits in the blackberry patch.”

That promise carried me to our countryside like a burst of fresh air. I glimpsed the field, the orchard, the watering hole. I blushed, but I found as much charm there as I had in the antechamber of paradise.

I finally learned that I had had pneumonia and that for ten days they had considered me as good as dead. I was extremely proud at the thought that I had run a real danger and that so many people had prayed for me.

Finally I received a letter from Mimi, which read:

“The Prefect of Discipline came into class and told us that you were very sick and that they even feared you might die. I was very unhappy and when he told us, ‘Let’s recite an *Our Father* and a *Hail Mary*’ for him, I burst into tears. That night the Prefect called me into his office and said, ‘You like your classmate very much, don’t you?’ Then I told him that you were my friend and that if you died I would die of grief as well. He told me that I shouldn’t get attached so to a creature but only to the Creator. He told me other things, too, that I cannot tell you in this letter, but I promise I do love you and that the Prefect can do what he likes.”

Presumably, the letter was brought to me by a day student and hadn’t been censored. It was serious and this could cause the expulsion of any accomplices, but the letter did me good because I read in it the love of my disciple.

On reading it a second time, I felt grieved: during my absence they were trying to separate us from each other. Why?

The next day a second letter reached me. It was even more serious than the first:

“The Prefect made me come to see him yesterday. He showed me the little cover where I put your works (I did not tell you but I keep them to re-read) and which had disappeared. He is the one who took it out of my desk. He asked me what it was. I explained to him that I kept your writings. ‘Why?’ he asked me. ‘As a souvenir and in case he becomes famous.’ He started to laugh, then became angry. He took me by the arms and yelled at me, ‘But what on earth do you see in this delinquent?’ Then he looked at me and said gently, ‘At least, you do not let yourself be drawn into witchcraft.’ I replied, ‘He is my friend and I will defend him till death.’ ‘He is a monster,’ he said tearing up the papers. ‘He’s a monster!’ Then he said, ‘I don’t understand how a serious young man can let himself get tangled up with such a scam artist!’”

After that my friend assured me of his loyalty, but I could not read what followed. The fever returned with a delirium that did not leave me all the night.

A long period of depression followed even though I had learned the depth of his friendship.

Another letter said this:

“I am very troubled. The Prefect called me in to show me our two stolen notebooks, yours and mine. ‘What are these?’ he asked me. I did not want to reply, but he insisted and I told him, ‘It’s a secret.’ He gave me detention for three Sundays and three Thursdays, and every day I had to submit to his terrible interrogations, threatening to put me out. I finally told him that it was our way of counting our sins and that it was thanks to this accountability that you had achieved perfection. He sniggered, ‘What kind of a hoax is that?’ ‘It’s the truth!’ ‘It’s a lie!’ he cried. ‘Everything that comes out of your friend’s mouth is a lie, everything! I will not lift your punishment until I know the truth.’ It was no good crying; he didn’t want to believe anything. I am so unhappy. –Mimi.”

It was on this bad note that I started recovering.

I understood right away that this recovery would be dangerous for my soul.

April came, and I was unfortunately not able to resist all the charms of this unforeseen vacation. I'm not only talking about the clear sunny days or the first flowers of spring, but also of the rhythm of work and the delicious dishes that my grandmother cooked slowly over the fire. I didn't know how I could refuse the pleasure of the walks I took hot at the heels of my grandfather, that great cross-shrubbery runner, indefatigably cheerful man who was invited to the farms simply as he passed by.

Laugh, drink, eat, enjoy, drink, and eat again to set off once more and lie in wait for all the joys and all the feasts, the nostrils open to breathe in every breeze, every smell, the ear strained to seize all the joyful crackles of the forest, the eye weathered to catch the secret passing of game. That was the life of my grandfather and his friends.

In all sincerity, I could not keep myself from finding this good.

Time passed without my being able to take up my "rule" again. How far I was from my nights of prayer!

I reasoned thus: It was the sickness that reduced me to this, so I had to first recover my health, after which I would take up the struggle again. But I noticed that one gets used to well-being much faster than to rigor. Should I be surprised at all that I woke up late, drank wine, ate pie again, and reveled in the smell of primroses that grew through the dried winter grass? It was not suddenly, but by successive capitulations that my ardor began to wilt.

So, one evening, my grandfather burst into the kitchen.

"A bag, Clementine, give me a bag!"

His long face was red with excitement. He laughed heartily and then said to me, "Come along!"

He whistled to his dog, and there we were setting off with great strides while my grandmother cried after us, "Don't let him catch cold!"

The sun was low on the horizon behind the great trees through which shone the lake. All of a sudden we heard a shot.

“You hear?” the old man said. “It’s the count hunting ducks; we’re going to gather up the left-overs.”

When we arrived at the edge of the pond, we hid behind the reeds. The water sparkled, more clear than the sky. A punt gun drifting in a skiff, black like a floating tree-trunk, approached a group of ducks in the middle of the pond who flew off all together.

Then we saw a flash from the boat and when the sound of the shot reached us, the flight of ducks passed noisily over-head.

“Watch carefully,” whispered my grandfather.

Five ducks flew low; one fell not far from us into the mud on the shore. The two others hid themselves in the bramble of the wetlands.

“Watch, watch closely!”

The dog had already left like an arrow through the reeds, her nose to the ground. Out on the lake, the count and his guard fished out the victims. Then, we saw them head for the bank, moor their skiff, and soon we could make out, in the evening fog, their small yellow carriage drive away.

All became calm again, and, little by little, the familiar sounds began to be heard: the herons flew back with long graceful beats of their wings and the grebes started cruising again holding high their periscope necks, while the moorhens, chattering, took up their pursuits once more. On the side of the water gates, the sound of a bell, from afar the crack of a whip, then nothing more.

At that moment we came out of our hiding place. Already the dog was swimming; it attacked the injured duck, crushing its bones, and brought it back to dry land. Then it was our turn. Until night fell, we went along the rushes. Sometimes, on the edge of a puddle we heard a lapping sound. My grandfather approached holding the dog by the collar. The duck bolted flapping the mud with its injured wings.

“Go, on top of him!” whispered the old man letting go of his dog. I then watched with beating heart the zigzagging chase and muddy splashing.

We got the animal, still fluttering, and, crouched behind a bush, we were on the watch again.

When the bells sounded for the *Angelus*, it was night. I would have liked to continue our quest for birds. My cheeks were burning and my whole body was aflutter.

“Let’s go!” muttered the old man.

We came back by the shrubs without saying a word, like thieves, and with one shake, the old man emptied his bag on the beaten ground of the cellar. The fluffy grey ducks were spread out, their wings half open, their beaks bloody and two drakes, velvety-feathered, with brilliant necks and shiny heads, seemed like they wanted to fly – their necks were stretched out and their feet tucked away.

I crouched down. My hands began to run along the downy feathers of the neck and chest. My fingers played with their webbed-feet, in the warm and troubled groove that lead to the rump, wet with droppings.

My grandfather said, “Great God, what a meal!” My throat, thick with joy, suffocated me. Yes, alas! I was happy. All of nature entered into my heart through all the pores of my skin. Besieged by so many temptations, how was I to resist?

The next day, after a night of frightening sleep, we had duck ragout, croutons with verjuice, and clear dry white wine; where were my nights of effort and my days of privation? My proud boat was sinking slowly filling with water in all parts and no one was there to stamp out my pride and fill me with contempt.

Never, no never had I read, in any serious book, that such a debauchery could have a good result and, at the very moment that I began to deplore it, my grandmother made me drink a new love potion and my grandfather, a joyful and sarcastic Merlin, swept me off to other enchantments.

In fact, after the swamp was the forest where we carted off the wood we were permitted to cut and where we stayed entire days, lighting huge bonfires.

At noon we scattered the fire and tended the embers to heat our bowls and cook the eggs and milk which we ate, our stomachs to the fire, our faces red, our eyes lost in the far off Morvan scenery. I foolishly let myself be lulled by all these easy lullabies. Day after day, everything crumbled. I spent my nights sleeping like a farm worker.

Upon waking, I put on my velvet trousers and I went to harness the mares, eager to set off again, and we continued climbing by the orchards.

Sitting up in front, the reins in hand, I tried to crack the short whip. When we stopped, the horses relieved themselves, leaving enormous piles of manure that steamed,

making the air smell with an acid stench, then we set off again, without a care in the world, the lunch bag hanging from the step.

How could I resist? How could I go back to the ecstasy?

And then there was Norbert.

Norbert was my foster-brother. He was a boy who swore like a sailor since he was four years old, but he did it with such warmth of heart that no one could hold it against him. He worked like a man and was still as rascally as a kid, leaving the plow to go saw the boards of the footbridge and to put frogs in milk pails. I liked him a lot because he professed that girls were hairy, nauseating creatures.

On Sunday, we left together, walking side by side, and our great pleasure was to put our pants down together, our bottoms to the wind behind haystacks.

Often Norbert said, "Suppose we play frog?"

"Play frog?"

"Yeah, with straw up our butts!"

He pulled a dry wisp out from a bunch of straw and, laughing like a devil, stuck it up his butt, saying, "Blow, little guy, inflate me!"

I tried to blow, but I was laughing too hard to do it.

He roared, "Blow, come on, blow, for Christ's sake! Don't you have lungs?"

I forced myself to, but it was too funny to see the yellow straw in his pink, well fed, bottom! Then, letting out a loud fart, he cried, "Hold on, blow up that one then!"

And his sister, who watched us from the henhouse, laughed with all her heart.

Thereupon, to make up for lost time, we picked up the pitchfork and spread the cartload of manure in ten minutes, singing like crazies, "For a sou I'll buy a girl, for two sous I'll bring her home."

Songs like that are only obscene in the hallways of school.

At Saint-Pancrace, I would have spent three nights in prayer to expiate each one of these crimes. Here, they didn't even ruin my appetite, and the cabbage soup with bacon went down as smooth as silk.

In my room, decorated with a single, enormous, black crucifix, I now felt out of place.

There were still services. I tried two or three times to regain the emotions I felt at the chapel in Saint-Pancrace, but Mass was just ordinary and the priest was easy-going. Nothing was as it should be. When I was not being insulted by the Prefect, I was good for nothing, and yet I still heard the voice of Mimi crying, “I am so unhappy!”

One day, there was an event that should have made me stop and think: I was going to see the priest and I had just crossed the garden when the idea came to me to go in through the kitchen. It was God, for sure, that inspired me because, through the skylight, I was witness to an overwhelming sight. The priest was there, on his knees on the tiled floor, his arms held in a cross, his face turned up to heaven, his lips mumbling, between the sink and a bag of dirty linen.

I was paralyzed with emotion. The priest mortified himself, too, and yet he had the reputation of someone who enjoys life. He was an ordinary country priest but I had before my eyes the proof that he did not neglect any occasion to mortify himself. I was ashamed.

Then, I saw him get up, take hold of an iron container, dirty and dented, get back on his knees and drink some sort of broth from the bowl. Sometimes he drank the broth, sometimes he tried to grab with his teeth, like a dog, the vegetables he was eating.

When I came into the room, he was still on his knees, but having heard me come, he made as if he was sorting his dirty clothes. He smiled from ear to ear and called out, “Have you come to help me do the laundry?”

I was disconcerted. I would have had to see him, several minutes earlier in ecstasy, to believe that this untidy, jovial priest could have such a profound spiritual life.

All my preconceptions of saintliness were over-turned with one swoop and the image that I had of Saint Jean de la Croix changed drastically: instead of hallow cheeks, ashy complexion, long boney hands, maybe did he have a rosy face, a soft look, and chubby hands?

To a certain extent, it did me good to think thus, because saintliness didn’t seem anymore like something inaccessible, and, at the same time, I regained both hope and an ardent desire to take up my struggle again. And I was even angry at having been

distracted from my ideal. Everyone looked ridiculous next to the priest lapping his soup up like a pig.

Why did it have to happen that on leaving the presbytery Norbert told me, “Come quick! The Stephans are here!”

We set off running.

The Stephans had in fact just arrived at their usual campsite, at the foot of the sign that read: *Gypsies are prohibited from parking on the property of this town*. Their two trailers, filled to the brim, overflowed with red wicker and, at the small windows surrounded by molding, more than ten faces appeared.

Arranged in the pasture, one green, the other bright pink, perched on their large wheels, the two trailers brought to life a usually deserted corner of town. A fire was already lit beneath a cauldron for doing laundry and M. Stephan, surrounded by his four sons in velvet vests, was splitting the wicker.

Further off lying on a cart, Bruno, the only brunette in this white-blond family, played his guitar, and no one thought to reproach him. He was the only musician in the family and everyone found it normal that he consecrate to music the time that the others spent at basket-making.

Furthermore, when he began to make baskets, it was entirely different from the large laundry baskets, always the same, which the Stephan family was known for all over the region. His own baskets were kinds of wicker marvels, all diverse, intertwined with multicolored rushes, and sold for much more than the others.

When he saw us, he sat up and started to laugh, then he strummed his guitar from which came a marvelous melody. He did not speak to us or shake our hands. He contented himself with playing.

Crouched next to him in the shade of the trailer, we listened to him plucking out a prelude. All of sudden, he began to sing things that I have never heard anywhere else, neither before nor after. I wanted to skip, to jump, to give myself up to the most carnal of dances. In one fell swoop all my good resolutions fell apart and, most incredible of all, I accepted a dirty cigarette that Bruno took out of his pocket and handed to me without ceasing to sing. And there I was lighting it and pulling long draughts of smoke. In front

of my eyes, a veil formed that blurred everything yet without erasing the poetic quality of life. On the contrary, everything disappeared and only the beauty remained.

My stomach was upset, but that night I had to return to the trailers because the night, I knew, would be even more beautiful. So I pretended to go to bed, and when I heard the signal I took my little sac that I had prepared and I leapt out the window. In the darkness, Bruno waited for me in his usual spot. When he saw me, without saying anything, he plunged into the wilderness and began to run all the way to the old quarry.

Several boys were already waiting for us, and in the fields we heard voices coming from all directions.

When they saw Bruno, everyone was quiet. He gathered up a bundle of dried brambles and twigs, a bunch of straw, a bundle of firewood, and, making the cry of a jackdaw, he set it all on the fire.

We heard a small joyous sparkling, then when the flame reached the firewood, it became an exciting and cruel hum fed by the breath of the southern wind.

Bruno signaled us to approach without ceasing to strum appropriate chords on his guitar, then letting out a big cry he gave the sign to begin; each of us took an armful of dried grass and ran to throw it into the inferno while the guitarist gesticulated, chanting incomprehensible words.

The fire grew larger in the center of the quarry. A great excitement took hold of us. One gathered up by hand some still green brambles, another ransacked Father Lépée's acacias, and another sawed young ash trees all of which we brought with frenzy to throw into the flame.

Without saying a word, their teeth clenched, the kids tried to outdo each other. Everyone wanted to make the best find. A willow, hollow like a chimney, was attacked and cut into by twenty knives. It didn't take more than five minutes to fell it and it was carried to the inferno, then the enormous, half-rotted trunks that lay dormant along the ditch were hoisted up, rolled along, and thrown on the fire. Finally, I had the idea to carry over the fence stakes from a meadow. One by one we pulled them up, then the fence wall itself came.

The fire was now a fright to see. It was more than 30 feet wide and the quarry was brighter than in daytime, peopled with huge furtive shadows.

Bruno, dancing a frightening jig, held us with the charm of his music. All of a sudden, he rushed towards the quarry-workers' shack. Shoulder first, without ceasing to strum his devilish instrument, he pounced on the siding and, to our great astonishment, the shack collapsed. There was a rush: everyone grabbed a stay, a beam, an armful of boards and the entirety of that small shanty disappeared into the flames.

Bruno had mounted a pile of stones. He was not playing anymore. The roar of the fire faded to the background. And he raised his voice:

"Feast and consume, lord of the Fire, master of all, devour and digest, fart with joy and shit your residual ashes, in order to remain healthy so you can swallow us all one day, rich and poor, straight and crooked, male and female."

And the dance began again.

It was at this moment we noticed that the girls were there and that the most bold had entered into the dance.

Leaving the farandole, each of us came to present his gift at the feet of Bruno. He crouched down and opened the packages one by one. As soon as he had found the first bottle of brandy, he opened it, drank a mouthful, and threw the rest in the fire. This made a long flame, clear and loud.

A girl slipped next to me.

It was "her."

The next day the mailman gave me a letter. It contained important information. I opened it and read:

"I have written you several times and you haven't responded. I've been punished and tormented and haven't wanted to betray you and you haven't even sent me a word. I've had enough! To begin with, your stories about purity make me laugh.

I have found a much better friend than you. He is blond and he is very nice.

I wish you a good day."

Early the next morning I left, a sack on the end of my stick. I made a large detour to avoid Norbert and the Stephans' camp, then once on the road, I walked with all my heart. I had resolved to pray so that I wouldn't lose a single moment, and I added a pause after every five times through the rosary, but when I got to the thirtieth round, I had a marvelous idea. Sitting on the shoulder of the road, I took off my shoes and, having tied the laces together, I hung them around my neck and continued on my way with bare feet, praying all the while, the great Italian poplars punctuating my penance.

It felt like a grandiose procession between tall, straight trees instead of church candles. I only interrupted my prayers to chant the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, then the *Veni Creator*, and finally the *Te Deum*. The most beautiful *Te Deum* of my life. Those who have participated in a middle-class *Te Deum* can understand me pretty well.

As I walked along I felt my sins grow heavy, detach from me, and fall off; I knew that when I arrived at Saint-Pancrace those that remained would weigh less than a feather.

I met people who stared at me with open mouths. An old man cried, "Hey look! There's a competitor in the Tour de France, good people they are!"

I wished for mockeries which would add value to my sacrifice. To tell the truth, more than anything else I was met with astonishment. I really couldn't wear a sign indicating my intentions. Yet, as I passed through the village, the kids followed me slapping their thighs and yelling, "Giddyup!" and the dogs didn't wait to be called to join them. In these pagan times when pilgrims to Compostelle do not pass any more along these roads, a bare-footed man caused a bigger commotion than an automobile. Never had any Roman emperor been more proud of a triumph than I was, and the hills of Burgundy began to seem a bit like Golgotha.

Praying all the while, I thought that my example would perhaps elicit a revival of piety in our countryside.

When I had finished my twelfth rosary, my feet were burning, my heels especially, and my big toes were swollen, but the more lively the pain, the more it seemed light to me. I was practically running and, far from being worn out by the six hundred *Ave Marias*, I saw with joy that the road stretched out before me.

Of course, my joy overflowed when I started leaving a trail of blood in the dirt. Never before had I been so close to resembling Jesus. I stopped to contemplate my blood-stained feet, and I resolved not to stop again for the rest of my journey.

At that point – my grief turning my mind to serious topics – I began to consider my life. Not the future, like any ordinary ambitious person, but the present, which I considered to be, in the very words of Jesus, the dough in which I must be like a grain of leaven.

I did not take notice that thinking of the world and of God eventually always led me to think about myself. In fact, spiritual life, in the most general sense, never leads to anything but oneself. The priest speaks of the drama of souls. This drama is only played out in the mind. The mind is the author, main actor, and the audience. Charles de Foucauld, who wanted to save the Touaregs, did not have to look farther than himself to create his own performance. Like him, I had rapidly arrived at the point where I could not cheat anymore with the rules of the game. Now I either had to surpass or to resign.

If I had lacked imagination, I would have resigned. As it was, I had to surpass myself and so I saw that God had well prepared my way (if he had done otherwise, I would have arrived at the same conclusion. That is one of the beauties of faith). When my suffering was becoming intolerable, I understood that I had exhausted all the methods to constrain and sacrifice my senses and that there was nothing left but to humiliate myself.

In a few miles of equivocation (walking loosens the mind), I had made my resolve: I had to gather together the students of Saint-Pancrace and, in front of all my classmates, discredit myself publicly, make a fool of myself for love of Christ, by confessing that I had lied, that I was the son of a railroad guard, a very plain and ordinary postal train guard (who, it's true, accompanies the Indian Mail Express once a week).

As soon as I had made this decision, I started to run. What fresh wind had thus flooded me, enabling me to run down the road, my feet mortified in this way, exhausted under the noonday sun? I wasn't even tempted to stray into the cool grass on the shoulders. I did not think of anything but this odious public confession or the thorns of this crown that burned me in a different way than the gravel of the department of Ponts et Chaussées. I already saw myself admitting my guilt, trembling with shame in front of five hundred shocked students.

The old buildings of Saint-Pancrace would shake on their foundations, for a similar event could not have happened since the establishment had sheltered the dark mortifications of monks.

I did the twenty-second mile in a true state of ecstasy. I did not even notice that, when close to a bridge, I collapsed on the side of the road. This bridge was pretty well traveled and, when I came back to myself, I was at the center of a crowd. Several automobiles had stopped, and the people had laid me down on a bench; of course, I got up quickly.

They offered to take me back in a car. I refused, explaining that I had fallen to sleep. They begged me to put on my shoes and I did them the favor of complying with this request. I waited until I was alone before taking off my shoes and continuing.

I arrived at Saint-Pancrace that morning at the end of July when the year-end exams had begun. In truth, those exams were much less important than my work of reformation which I had to revive though I didn't really know by what means.

The courtyard was flooded with sunlight, and the students, like livestock in the fields hounded by a bad case of flies, were grouped in the shadows of the sycamores. Heavy murmurings rose from the crowds.

No more the joyful cries and lively, healthy games that I had known. It was evident that a weighty unrest tormented the students, huddled in the corners along the railings.

A few students, with a shuffled step, ventured to pass through large splashes of sunlight where they seemed to wander like birds of the night, then, caught by the darkness that ate away at the deserted tennis courts, they disappeared again into the indistinct mass of uniforms beneath the trees.

The proctors prowled around the herd with ugly looks, their hands were behind their backs, and they appeared worried.

I stopped in plain daylight and looked at them.

Absolutely nothing happened.

I walked forward slowly. They could not even see me anymore. Not one classmate came up to me. And yet hadn't they prayed for me to get well?

I walked forward again. Only Ventelot, separated a bit from the group, acknowledged me discretely. I stood face to face with the school. I knew that the monster was looking at me, but it didn't seem to recognize me anymore.

And yet hadn't they applauded my literary successes only a few weeks earlier? Had I not captured the complete attention of the school for months on end? All this had been washed away by the daily scrubbing of the commonplace. And no doubt this was nothing to the rest of the students.

The bell itself sounded tired and fake. At the bell's call the hoard slowly stretched out and disintegrated, as if at random, to gather mechanically into unsettled ranks which I also joined.

The bell sounded a second time. They hardly seemed to recognize me. We went into our classes at a deathly slow pace. The boarding students looked dirty and ragged to me, the faces were sad, and their complexions muddy. They had all grown thin.

I confided in my journal:

The 26th – When I arrived, I looked for Mimi and at first I didn't see him at all. He was hidden behind a group and he avoided me by pretending not to have noticed my arrival. His hair is long. A lock that falls over his eye gives him the look of a scoundrel and his mouth has some sort of bitter turn to it whose origin is easily guessed. Behind his graceful face mistreated by lust, you can glimpse a poor little soul without any bravery or pluck. Decidedly my bare-foot pilgrimage between two lines of Italian poplars will not be useless. And even how much more mortification is going to be necessary to increase my direct involvement? I've decided to take as role models both Saint Jean de la Croix and Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The first for his secret life, the other for his public life.

In our ranks, Mimi was again invisible. I didn't find him until we were in class, and when I sat next to him he turned red. Every eye was fixed on us. A mocking murmur welcomed this initial contact. Now I knew what I had to work with: not only had I not been forgotten, but I knew now that this indifference hid a curiosity that I would be able to use to my advantage.

Mimi lost his footing; he grew pale and blushed alternately. Then, calmly, I said to him in a low voice, "Thanks for your last letter."

"It was nothing."

His voice was thick with embarrassment.

"It was something. You gave me precious information about you. I had proof, for instance, that you are not burdened by gratitude."

"Gratitude for whom? Why?"

"Gratitude for the one who pulled you out of the grasps of sin, who gave you the joys of purity."

At that he laughed out loud. "You are not going to start again with your nun's sermons, are you?" he said in a voice that I was not familiar with.

I lost my temper. "So that's what I get for all my efforts"

But the proctor told me that I would get detention next Sunday.

I was furious and slammed my desk.

"Leave the classroom!" cried the proctor.

I left noisily.

As I paced in the hallway to pass time, I saw the Prefect coming. Try as I might to hide myself in the folds of the coats hanging on the coat-pegs, he saw me.

He fixed his near-sighted eyes on me and, walking straight towards me, his soutane flowing to either side, he said, "What are you doing there?"

"The proctor sent me out of class."

"Is it for this that you came back from the country?"

"No, monsieur."

"If it is your intention to take up your dissipated life here, you could have stayed back there."

This accusation was more than I could bear: I drew myself up.

"I came back because my duty called me."

He started to laugh a bitter, biting laugh that he used so well. "What kind of hoax are you getting at?"

"It is not a hoax. God called me here."

I believed he was going to faint. He stood there with his mouth open, his breath short and whistled. "Do not blaspheme, you unhappy child!"

He waited a moment, then, in a low voice said, “And what task has God imposed upon you here?”

I did not answer. My honor as a student forbade me to speak. He would have had to kill me before he could make me speak another word. The conflict between me and Mimi was no one’s business, and the Prefect, after all that had happened, was the last person that I would speak to about the Great Reform.

He led me into the class saying to the proctor, “Give this fanatic detention for four Sundays.” Then he left.

He was hardly in the hallway when all of the students began to sing The Great Mute¹⁸, a sort of irrepressible hymn that each one hummed with their mouths shut. The Prefect rushed back in. He was livid.

“Toutin, Leblanc, Moruteux, Laffaix, and Tainturier, you will have detention this Sunday.”

Calm and calculated, I took my place, and while the vanquished left, I put on my shiny black cuffs.

Without knowing it, the Prefect had just shown me my lieutenants.

The 27th – Yesterday’s events gave me back a lot of popularity, but I cannot expect to succeed in my undertaking since I have not made my public confession.

The 28th – I am anxious about this confession. It is a terrible trial, a fearful weapon to fight against the devil. I offer this humiliation in advance for the redemption of my classmates.

The 29th – How can I practically realize this confession so that it really achieves its purpose?

I am not backing out.

The 30th – I will do it tomorrow.

I am going to spend the night in prayer to ask for strength. I will really need it, the more the hour approaches, the more I feel incapable of attempting it. Yet I must. Perhaps I only have an influence over my classmates thanks to this very lie. I have to stop this

¹⁸ The song title refers to the imposed political silence of the military, whose members were not allowed to vote until 1945.

ambiguity soon. And above all, I cannot see any other way than to destroy myself in this fashion.

The students gathered slowly on the soccer field. The news had spread by word of mouth. Some came out of curiosity, others because they smelled a scandal. I was hidden behind a large boxwood tree. I saw them arrive in groups.

The courtyard, white with sunlight, emptied slowly. Without a doubt, beneath the trees, some indifferent boys read their books without seeming to notice this uncommon movement, but little by little, all of the school would be assembled.

The proctors, astonished, stayed in the shadows of the chestnut trees.

By staying hidden behind the trees, I reached the scaffolding on which were raised temporary altars. Curtains still hung there. A few vases, hidden behind the stage, had been filled by last night's storm, and the dead bouquets lay scattered. All this still smelled of incense and the wilted petals strewn the platform where I had planned to appear.

It took no less than four hours of nightly prayer to conquer my hesitation and to resolve to announce the lie to all my classmates. To my natural apprehension (this was the first time I was speaking in public) was added the fear of losing all my friends, but this was precisely what I counted on to crush my pride, to destroy myself in the Lord and to apply all my worth to the betterment of everything. The time had come to use my fault.

I was trembling. Even though the storm from the night before had made the weather cooler, sweat was beading on my temples.

My notice said, "Meeting at 1:30 in front of the temporary altar." Now the clock had just sounded the half-hour, and the crowd of students was grouped on the lawn.

Hidden behind the platform where the storm had left big puddles of water, I now saw Chaudurot, with a mocking attitude, Michel, Ventelot next to Mimi, and so many others. All their faces, turned toward the platform, were so intimidating that I felt myself paralyzed.

I was going to need to appear, climb the eight steps, face them all, and expose myself voluntarily to their gibes, their mocks, and maybe even their violence. This made me think of Christ flogged and the thought of flowing blood and blows gave me courage.

I implored the Holy Spirit. There was a great wrenching somewhere, I don't know where (perhaps in my stomach), and I was forced to my knees, pressing my two hands on the ground so as not to fall. The cold mud brought me back to myself.

My shirt was wet and spattered with dirt. A murmur rose from all the assembled students. There were three, maybe four hundred of them. Was it really necessary to climb up on the platform to tell them the most stupid and commonplace of truths?

Then a sentence came to my mind that had been the focus of the last sermons we were told: "Strive to enter in at the strait gate."

At that thought, I came out of my hiding place with a dash, I advanced, I climbed the eight steps.

The murmuring ceased. All was silent. Only the large trees continued to sing softly a song like bees. The sun was hidden behind a cloud.

Everyone saw me.

The faces of a few, who thought it was a hoax, changed. I signaled Mimi to come closer. He did not move. So I signaled Ventelot who came forward with an important air. From afar, we could hear the wheels of the trams squeaking at the bend of the parade grounds.

"My dear friends!"

My voice seemed to be lost in the foliage. A few boys came closer to hear me better. I lost my composure.

"Dear friends..."

I heard a laugh. That was it, the punishment was beginning, I readied myself to receive their blows, and in one breath I admitted it.

"My dear classmates, I have lied to you. Many of you take me for the son of a rich Breton ship-owner. It's not true. My father is only a modest railroad guard and I was born in this village, on the Rue des Carrières."

What would happen? Was I at the gates of martyrdom?

Nothing happened. A lazy breeze blew its agreement into the chestnut trees. When I opened my eyes, I saw my listeners still attentive. No one moved, no one laughed. No

one had the thought to begin the jeering that I expected or to lead the boys in an assault on the platform to stone me.

Was I really going to leave this odious scene without falling beneath the unjust blows of my brothers? I was astonished. The crowd was still silent and motionless; now it was their stillness that frightened me, and I lifted my voice once more.

“I ask your forgiveness for having lied to you all so foolishly!”

My shame struck me cruelly. I staggered down from my place of humiliation. I passed through the crowd that split to let me through like the Red Sea before Moses, and no one made a hostile gesture, not even my best friends, not even Mimi. They made a wall to either side of me, and I could hear my own footsteps. Slowly, they followed back into the courtyard; then, bursting with joy and love, I ran to throw myself on my knees in the chapel where I tasted something much sweeter than deception.

I have great hopes that this confrontation was only a beginning. Would this perhaps give me just as much joy as would martyrdom?

The next day I wrote in my journal:

July 1st – I will have to make a special edition of my paper. I have already sold 268 copies, a number never before reached. Even though I have the help of Tainturier and Ventelot, it took me no less than five hours to photocopy it. There are numerous demands and my vendors (Laffaix, Mortureux, Leblanc, and Toutin) are overloaded. I did not expect this. Deo Gratias!

(I am not thinking of finding the lesson in these events; it won't be until much later that I will be able to pick out the important moral from my career as a journalist.)

July 2nd, 6 pm – Six of my classmates just approached me: Toutin, Leblanc, Mortureux, Laffaix, and Tainturier and Ventelot.

They told me, “If you ever need us, you have only to say it.” I welcomed them with joy.

I, who have wanted for so long to make disciples without having ever succeeded, now have six little brothers. But do I have the personality and the virtue to keep them? Won't I dampen their fervor with excessive caution, bore them with failures, and frighten them with abrupt demands?

7 pm – After reflecting on it, these six little brothers are invaluable and none of them can wear a hairshirt and I really think that they admire more in me the part that beat Michel twice than the pitiful emulation of Saint Jean de la Croix. I don't believe them capable of mortifications, but is it necessary for the soldiers to know the strategies and the art of warfare at the same level as the general, and aren't they still asked to be brave and obedient?

9 pm – I am staying awake praying and thinking of my friends: Ventelot is carrying on a guilty relationship with this girl, and I strongly suspect that Toutin wants to do the same. There, certainly, I have a religious mission to undertake, but first things first: to begin with, we must establish a secret code.

July 3rd – Ventelot (he is decidedly the most interesting in spite of his odious liaison) sent me, from his seat, a secret encoded message, it read: S.O.S. Urgent meeting of the fraternity. Important communication about the scandal.

In the same way I sent an urgent summons to my six brothers, and I waited.

The noises of the class were muffled, like the movements of a wild cat. At my side, Mimi was agitated, worried. He has noticed our confabs, and our secret diplomacy has caught his attention.

Between classes we grouped together, and Ventelot made his report. He had been shadowing several suspects, and he was able to give us precise information. The way he is taking to this proves that he is both audacious and clever. He's a policeman. He doesn't quite have the touch yet. He likes the risk and the plotting, but not the Ideal. Yet he does not lack ardor. He has a dull, contained flame that sparkles in his looks, which I like.

Be that as it may, here is what he just told us: a circle has been formed for about a month (he gave us names). They meet often, smoke gold-tipped cigarettes, drink white wine (brought by Binchon whose father owns a café), make cocktails, get drunk, and, once drunk, give themselves to dirty actions.

I cannot believe that Mimi could have fallen so low. Ventelot affirmed that he was the most perverse and quite bluntly told me, "As for Mimi, he's a lost cause. All the others make fun of him and fight over him!"

It's really a shame, but it's no longer just Mimi who is in danger, it's the entire class that is in trouble. We must act. I declared, "We must campaign in our paper for the purification of the class, for the reform of school morals."

"That's a good idea," said Toutin. "But how?"

I had an idea.

"Let us create a committee from among the students, who will be responsible for the entire group's faults; let us call for student representation on the disciplinary committee."

They were all in agreement. And I continued, "We will fight against payment for protection from bullying, hypocrisy, tattle-taling, and especially the pornographic influence of certain ringleaders that we now know. It will be necessary for the delegates to the disciplinary committee to demand the expulsion of certain nefarious individuals. For the basis of the system, let's create committee meetings, class assemblies, and between-class gatherings."

"We could capture the ringleaders and torture them!" suggested Ventelot.

In reality, without having thought of torture, I had already imagined some direct action against the individual. I reflected on this thought. Even though I hated violence, perhaps here was an idea that I should not neglect. Didn't Saint Augustine say, "One must always preserve charity in one's heart, even when one is compelled to do outwardly things that seem harsh to men, and one must smite them with severe, but beneficial asperity, since their needs must be preferred to their contentment?"

I replied, "We will see. Let us first organize our campaign."

"Will we inform the authorities?" asked Mortureux.

"Of course not!" I cried. "I am only too well placed to know that our superiors don't know anything about anything. We cannot trust people who commit serious psychological errors that I could cite for you."

Then I gave my orders: Ventelot and Leblanc would continue the investigation. We must know where and when these meetings are held. The others are going to run off three hundred copies of the next edition that I am in the process of writing up. We will all try to distribute them as widely as possible.

When we came back into class I looked at Mimi: my occupations had separated me for a moment from my dear classmate. I saw him with new eyes: he was pale, his eyes were tired, his look shifty, and his hands sweaty. I tried to stare at him, but he turned away, sniggering foolishly. He frightened me and, even though an algebra exercise required all my attention, I started to pray.

My prayer was interrupted by an important incident: the Prefect of Discipline called me into his office. I greeted him. He did not respond. Pacing back and forth, circling me, sometimes agitated, sometimes calm, he made me submit to an all-out interrogation. Laying out on the table our two sin notebooks, he said to me, “What is this?”

“Notebooks.”

“What are the signs that appear in them?”

“Conventional signs.”

“What do they mean?”

“They have very different meanings.”

“I want to know the meaning of each one.”

“The notebooks are guides for our confessions. Each sign corresponds to one of the sins that I have confessed to you, but I cannot give you the meaning of each one of them, because, at the same time, you would know the sins of my classmate.”

“I am his confessor,” he said softly.

“I know, but I cannot break his confidence. Call him in here; he will tell you, if he sees fit. I have no objection.”

The Prefect then seemed to understand the seriousness of my preoccupations because he began to reflect. His face was much softer, his hand played with his beard, his breathing was slower. Finally, he turned back to me, took me by my shoulders, and said to me in a very sweet voice, “Explain this to me, my son!”

I believed that the time had come to confide in him. Finally the veil was going to be torn away. My heart was overflowing, but I could not resign myself to tell him the story of my slow progress, my pious efforts, my mediocre sacrifices; I also did not want to denounce the perverse club: it was not my business. Not being able to speak of myself or of others, I kept silent.

He straightened up swiftly.

“You risk being expelled, I am only waiting for another scandal before chasing you from this house. I do not want any black sheep among us!”

In my journal, the same day:

...Ventelot, all out of breath, came to speak to me, “Michel just gave Mimi some money!”

“How much?”

“Several thousand.”

“Where are they now?”

“At the back of the park.”

“Let’s go.”

We quickly gather the five others, and we reach the deep parts of the park. Like snipers, we form a line more than three hundred feet long, and we are beating down the smallest bit of underbrush when Tainturier, who is going along the left wing cries, “There they are!”

In fact, Michel and Mimi are just coming out of hiding and are running to reach the open field. We cut off their retreat. They are cornered in the part of the park where the gardeners dump the dead leaves. Are they going to defend themselves?

We keep them in the corner, and Mimi starts to cry. Michel is pale. Ventelot and Mortureux are on top of him, but he refuses to fight. He sniggers, “So what do you want?”

We let Mimi go, who runs for his life. Michel alone stays in our hands. He is full of himself.

“Torture!” growls Ventelot who is preparing himself for I don’t know what brutality.

A storm is raging in my head. I have in my hands one of the culprits. I even suspect him to be the instigator of the club; I have strong reasons to believe him to be a dangerous scoundrel. I know he is violent and hypocritical. He has wreaked havoc on Mimi’s soul as well as many others. If Ventelot’s reports are correct, one would say that the person that we have in our hands is a malevolent being.

"Why did you give money to Mimi?"

"I never gave Mimi any money."

"I saw you!"

"It's not true."

Ventelot is furious. He repeats like a refrain, "Torture! Torture!"

In the walkway, a shadow comes our way: it's the Prefect of Discipline who is reading while walking. Michel is the one who gives the alarm. Crouched behind the pile of leaves we wait for him to pass. We see him in front of us; he is holding a pen in hand, he stops, then starts to speak.

"Gentlemen, the small work which I am presenting to you today is the fruit of twenty years of experience as an educator..." He interrupts himself then starts again while walking away, "Gentlemen, this minor opusculum..." Then he disappears behind the boxwood trees, and we begin our interrogation again,

"Torture!" repeat the others, tying his silk scarf around his neck.

"You only want me because I took your friend!" Michel sneers.

A punch closes his mouth; his lip bleeds a little.

I think of the words of Saint Augustine: "One must always preserve charity in one's heart, even when one is compelled to do outwardly things that seem harsh to men, and one must smite them with severity. . . ." What should I do?

All of a sudden, I think that we, who set ourselves up as righters of wrongs, are sinners. Doesn't Ventelot have a liaison with a girl? Is he not scandalous as well?

"Let him go!" I say quickly. While our prisoner flees, I turn towards my men. "We do not have the right to carry out justice as long as we are not perfect ourselves!" Then to Ventelot, "When are you going to see your girl?"

"This evening," my classmate responds courageously, "at eight o'clock, on the Rue des Bornes."

"Let me go in your place; I will explain to her. A redresser of wrongs must himself be irreproachable!"

I saw the girl, and I asked her to give up seeing Ventelot who, for his part, was on his honor to never see her again.

She sniffled and her eyes grew watery. She said, sniveling, "But I love him so much."

"Prove your love by giving him up."

"I could never."

"Yet, you must, mademoiselle, it is more serious than you think."

"But how can I?"

"Pray, mademoiselle, pray without ceasing."

"I don't have enough faith."

"It will come to you if you ask for it. Goodbye, mademoiselle."

"Goodbye, monsieur."

And I left her.

As if to repay Ventelot for his sacrifice, Providence had crowned his research with success. He was waiting for me, transfigured, his eye sparkling. He announced, "The club is meeting this Sunday, but I still don't know the time or the place of the meeting."

"Stick to them like a leach. Permanent state of alert. Battle stations."

From this moment on, orders rang out: the fraternity was on the brink of war. Since I had ordered the breakup, Ventelot had gotten even better, he was obedient and devoted. On Thursday, I had the great joy of seeing him fill out a confession bulletin, and Friday morning, at Mass of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I saw him approach the Holy Table and take communion for the first time since we returned to school in October.

Sunday came.

I spent the day with the boarders since I had detention. When it was time for evening studies nothing had happened yet, but Ventelot was sure of his facts.

"Wait for night," he said.

When it was time to leave, just when I was going to pass from the back door to the caretaker's house, I ducked into the large shadows and waited, as had been agreed.

The huge clock of Saint-Pancrace sounded the quarters and the half hours and that kept me company because the wait was a long one. Slowly night fell, a beautiful July night, dark and warm. The park filled with noises, gratings and murmurs. One by one the lights went out. I waited, motionless, in the trees.

All of a sudden the kitchen door opened, a shadow came out and made its way towards my hiding place. It was Ventelot.

“We have them,” he said, “follow me!”

We stealthily went up the stairs. Ventelot was leading me. I was surprised when I saw him take the stairway towards the attic. We soon arrived in the attic space and, in the darkness, I felt hot breaths. It was the others who were waiting for us.

We went forward now into the narrow, over-heated attic that ran along the entire building.

“Halt!” whispered Ventelot.

Now we heard the sound of the huge clock, a low hum, the rhythm of the blows and the grating. Finally, underneath the door that led to the mechanisms, there appeared a ray of light.

With my eye up against the lock, I saw eleven silhouettes moving around a candle. I recognized them all.

They were idly laid out on blankets and cushions. Four bottles of champagne, uncorked and upside-down, lay in front of them. The smoke from cigarettes thickened every second and Mimi, his eyes lazy, his hair in disorder, a gold medal dancing on his red belly, took a carefree position, a cigarette in his mouth.

Above their heads, the enormous mechanisms of the clock were interwoven with the axes and twitching gears, accompanying the orgy of these hissing reptiles.

Each of us in turn looked through the keyhole. The bottles being empty, we saw one of the boys get up and open two more, then he returned to his cushion. Suddenly, a new noise began and grew. The wheels started turning, the gears, still motionless, began to vibrate, the grating went up in a frenzied spiral, a heavy lever rose and fell back with a dull, mysterious grunt while the enormous vibrations of the bell clattered ten times in our heads.

Ten o’clock sounded on the clock of Saint-Pancrace.

What were we to do?

My men would have been upset if I had let the enemy escape. I had to act now and the author of *The Lives of the Saints* had failed to envision such circumstances.

“Oh, Saint Michael the Archangel, lend me your breastplate and your lance! Give me strength and invulnerability!”

Opening the creaky door, I entered the small room. Among the depraved there was a moment of disarray. Mimi looked as if he would faint.

I looked at them all one after the other, forcing myself to model my attitude off of Saint Irene staring down the fierce beast in the arena.

I counted a lot on our calm and dignity to impress our poor adversaries, but Ventelot and Tainturier, for appearance’s sake, were already trampling the left-over snacks, smashing bottles, and sacking the hateful cushions.

This done, there was a moment of hesitation that could have had heavy consequences, but thanks to God, I had a stroke of genius: having seized the candle, I left, surrounded by my friends, leaving the others dumbfounded in the darkness.

The next day, I arrived at school surrounded by a new aura. The story of the clock affair had gotten around. When I came into the courtyard, each group’s secret discussions were in full swing.

Michel was boasting in one corner, but it was impossible for me to find Mimi. Someone had seen him going towards the classroom soon after my arrival. I went up after him.

I found him in a small study room, slumped over a bench; he was crying. When I came in, he seemed not to hear. I touched his shoulder. He swished his hand if to chase away an unwelcome fly.

“Mimi, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to kill myself.”

“How? With what?”

He motioned to the window, tragically.

“Where is the time when we would drive out sin?”

He wept grievously on the bench.

“Where is the time when you would pray with me?”

His sobs redoubled.

“Where is the time when you would wear a hairshirt?”

At these words, he sat up, unbuttoned his jacket, his pants, and his shirt and showed me a harsh cord of hemp that was wrapped around his stomach. He said to me, sniffing, "There it is!"

He still had not been able to get it into his head that "hairshirt" was a masculine noun.

He came back down into the courtyard a few minutes after me. Everyone was waiting for us. He came up to me and shook my hand. Without a doubt, anyone who had looked attentively at me would have noticed that my being radiated with such light that it made the sun pale.

As the summer heat made soccer impossible, we played a game of marbles for the next fifteen minutes.

The courtyard was deserted. The students, arranged beneath the elms, talked about the coming summer vacation. Mimi came and crouched down next to me and, when the game was over, he whispered, "I need to talk to you. Come with me."

He went around the soccer field and disappeared into the park. I followed him. He was waiting for me in the under-brush, hidden by an elder tree in full bloom, covered with bees. His eyes sparkled. He came towards me smiling.

"Will you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you."

He took a bag out of his pocket and a wad of ten thousand-franc bills.

"Here's the cigarette-holder and here's the money."

Before I could even be surprised, he wrapped his two arms around me and gave me a wild kiss on the mouth, then murmured, "You are a great fellow. It's you that I love."

While Mimi ran away as fast as he could, I stayed there, standing under the trees as though stuck through with two lances, scarlet, at the same time burning and icy cold, vibrant and dead-still, half covered in a shadow of doubt: my hard-fought battle was ending lamentably, and Satan triumphed in the very moment that I had prepared for the glory of God. Was grace abandoning me? Had I ever possessed it? The cigarette-holder in my right hand, the bills in my left, the kiss burned onto my lips, I thought of my disciples. I could never again stand before them.

The bell sounded now to call the students. I heard it well enough, but it was not calling for me, and I stayed hidden in the trees. I heard the cries fade and then stop altogether. I heard as well the shuffling of my classmates who entered their classrooms. The doors shut. Finally, all around me was the silence of July afternoons.

I picked a blade of grass to chew on.

A murmur came from the classrooms: prayers recited, noise of desks. I broke a branch and whipped the tree trunk with all my strength, I hit it until all the leaves were torn to pieces, then running between the shrubs, crawling in the open areas, exhilarated by the twigs that whipped my face, I reached the enclosing wall and scaled it. I fell into a small alleyway. My uniform hat in my pocket, I set off running to get out of the village and I climbed a hill until I couldn't see the town anymore; only then did I stop, red with sweat and out of breath.

I was in a ravine crossed with dwarf pines. Further up was bare wasteland in full sun. I lay down there, on the yellow grass of my childhood. The sky thrilled with the song of the larks that flew up into the sunlight.

A moment later two brats who were playing hooky in order to go thieving noticed me and started looking for a fight.

"Where are the others?" one asked me.

"What others?"

"It's useless to play innocent, you know the secret."

"What secret?"

"Come on, no stories! It's time to pay your ransom."

"Come and get it!"

The leader approached me while the other tried to take me from behind. I moved back all the way to the quarry where they started fighting me. I got rid of the weakest one easily and after a violent struggle, the other rolled onto a pile of trash and slid into the ravine. The two fellows got up and looked at me with surprise. I was already off on my way. For the first time, I was not ashamed of my violence, never had a kick in the gut cost me less remorse. What would I have done if someone had come to me to speak about gentleness and sacrifice?

I wandered until evening in the laburnum trees on the edge of the rockslide and, on the rocky horizon that dominated the valley where I climbed, I started to yell as loud as I possibly could. I did not know what to do with this strength that I felt roaring in me for the first time.

In the evening, I met three girls on a small road, and I looked them square in the face. One of them asked me, “What? Do you want my picture?”

She used the informal ‘tu.’ That coming from a strange girl did me good, but I did not reply to her.

The death of Mimi is impossible to recount, it was so brutal, and yet what a place it holds in my life!

He died of typhoid not long before the day of the awards ceremony. While on a walk, he drank water from the canal. He was weak and didn’t even know how to resist the temptation to slake his thirst. That same evening he was confined to bed, shivering with fever and delirious. Everyone saw in it the punishment from God, but I didn’t know what to think of it. My flesh, my face, my skin, even my breath was changed.

In the morning, I went to the infirmary to ask how he had passed the night, and that evening I tried several times to get into the quarantine room, but I always ran into the Prefect of Discipline who guarded the door fiercely. And yet, I would have liked to see in his face and read in his eyes the effort that could still save him. One day, I was able to get into the little room where he fought, alone, against the phantoms that I knew so well. With each breath he uttered a hoarse and regular cry. Sometimes he stammered and fell still again. Then the sound of a step forced me to retreat.

The Prefect often came into class, making us kneel on our stools and pray privately. His fat, waxy cheeks beneath the hair of his beard seemed to tremble. His eyelids lowered slowly and his steady hands folded, solemnly and implacably. You could have said that he was strangling someone.

When he did that, thick and fluid saliva rushed into my mouth and sweat beaded on my temples.

“You know, gentlemen,” he said, “that one of your classmates is stricken with a very serious illness”

I readied myself to follow him in his prayers; I felt him to be a sure guide who knew how to say to God the necessary words. Was he not a priest? My pride melted in an instant, and I was grateful that he came thus to my aid.

“Let us ask the omnipotent God to keep him for the love of his family,” said the priest.

And immediately the spell was broken: how could a priest say such stupidities? What would God think of a priest who asked for the healing of the body?

What odious pagan idea could this man in priest’s clothing be following in asking a favor so basely material? Even according to his own teachings it was necessary to accept the death of Mimi, praying simply that God would forgive him his sins and welcome him into His Eternal Peace. And was there even need to pray? Didn’t God, in His infinite mercy, know absolutely what He should do? I started to think that praying was an insult to God and that the only possible prayer was the paraphrase of *Thy Will be Done*.

The Prefect then began to lead ten *Hail Marys*. I joined in the communal prayer, but I disassociated myself with its object; my lips recited the words of the *Ave Maria*, but my thoughts were devoted to the opposite intentions: may he die, may his body return to nothingness, if it pleases God, even if (especially if) I must have a broken heart.

With the rosary finished, the Prefect’s eyes, which had been hidden up till now beneath his limp eyelids, looked up towards a point on the ceiling, and his lips sent towards heaven these revolting words: “Jesus, heal him!”

And the others, spell-bound, repeated three times over, “Jesus, heal him! Jesus, let him live!”

And all these sheep bleating in fear struck up a hymn of weakness and skepticism: “Let him live!” It was hideous and grotesque. I clenched my teeth so as not to give into this paganism, to this sheepish fear of death so far from submission and confidence in God that we were taught in this very house. I stopped praying. I gave Mimi over to God. I gave Him the overwhelming sacrifice of my friend, my first, the only friend in my life.

In an effort to raise a debate and to counterbalance these deplorable backwards sermons, I chose, during recess, the most inactive groups, and I tried to throw there the yeast of my faith.

“Why do we pray for Mimi to be healed?”

Sometimes they answered me by shrugging their shoulders and then going back to talking about tennis. I distanced myself from them, horrified. Other times there happened to be a boy who replied, “You were happy enough, when you were sick, that we did a novena for you to get well!”

I answered, “I never asked to get well. As God’s my witness, I called for death with all my strength!”

One day, the proctor that we had named “Mehari” heard me, (I was speaking loudly on purpose), and he said to me softly, “But your parents, my boy”

“My parents have nothing to do with it,” I interrupted, beside myself. “With one word, Jesus could have fixed everything on Good Friday. He didn’t do it. He brought his mother all the way to Calvary. Why do we take such precaution with our parents in these circumstances, if not out of cowardice?”

The proctor was silent, looked at me for a long time, and then rejoined a group of his colleagues. I approached them, but I couldn’t catch a word they were saying, not because their voices didn’t reach me, but because they seemed to speak in a language I didn’t understand. I managed to retain these phrases, though:

“Filial cynicism, my dear fellow, is quite frequent at that age and is, in most cases, only a manifestation of the greatest innocence.”

“With animals, where it is the rule, is that innocence?” said a sarcastic seminarian.

“Certainly, Father,” cried the others vehemently. “With savage individuals”

I went away. I was disheartened and disagreeably surprised to hear students lose themselves in this maze of senseless words. What was the use of being educated if they were incapable of living in the familiar world where I got along easily? I started again to calculate the good that Mimi could draw from his agony, but, hour by hour, I grew overwhelmingly troubled.

That evening I went to bed, and underneath my sheets I fingered the hideous hemp of my hairshirt. I took it off and threw it haphazardly into the dark. I heard it fall, heavy

with sweat and grievous vanity, into the toilet bowl. The wet noise completely disgusted me.

What was the good of continuing to play the game if everyone cheated?

The next day the heat was crippling, and in the classes, where all the students were drowsing, a frightening monotony reigned. The entire establishment seemed frozen in fear. No one dared to speak in a loud voice in the hallways, and during recess everyone gathered next to the gates as if to attempt a massive escape.

At first I was drawn towards the chapel where I entered not to pray but to sit and attempt to think in the calm and coolness. When I opened the door of the sanctuary I saw the Prefect there, slumped over, his head in his hands and his eyes strangely fixed on the lamp at the altar. I stayed a moment on the doorstep then began to roam the hallways secretly in order to look for the arrival of the doctor and to follow him with my eyes from afar. Then, finally, I opted for sitting in the courtyard and not thinking at all, and I completely refused to join in the prayers of the novena.

Mimi died before the nine days of prayer were out.

When he died I was ready. I wasn't myself anymore. My childhood left with him. He liberated me from so many constraints, and freed me from such ignorance that the date of his death was, at the same time, that of my entrance into manhood.

You could say: but you hated him, this spoiled, rich child. So his death should not have made you despair.

Certainly, but in him I lost the instrument.

When he was dead, frightening things started happening. First, they left him in an isolated room of the infirmary that they transformed into a chapel of rest, but there were some sordid problems with matters of hygiene, and our superiors were upset with the school's doctor. So the house was troubled with the coming and goings of functionaries. Ridiculous discussions were heard even in the death chamber.

I tried to get in there several different times, but the door was locked, and I felt I was suffocating there in the hallway, motionless, pressed against the dividing wall.

On the third try, I had brought a bunch of skeleton keys that I didn't even know how to operate.

It was the night before the awards ceremony. Outside, the heat wave put everything to sleep. In the hallway, on the other hand, it was almost cool and, going through the door, the smell of flowers brought by friends and professors reached me. I could almost imagine I was next to one of those repositories for the Feast of Corpus Christi around which circled children in pink and blue dresses, scattering petals.

I stayed motionless for an instant, listening to see if anyone was coming, then I got out my ring of keys. When I had inserted the skeleton key into the lock, I heard the floor crack. A slow, muffled step approached the door, which opened softly. It was the Prefect of Discipline who appeared, looking deeply moved. His face was painful to see, for one could have said he was laughing.

He said to me, "You again. What do you want?"

He spoke in a low voice, as he did in the confessional, using a familiar tone with me for the first time in a long time.

I was so surprised that I could not respond. He repeated himself.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see him."

He signaled me to enter and showed me to the prie-Dieu at the foot of the bed. I did not kneel down. We both looked at his charming little face, a bit hardened in death. We stayed for a moment like this, then it was the priest who threw himself onto the dark red velvet of the kneeler. He made what sounded like a sob, and I hear his voice so feared and so loved saying, "My God, my God!"

I was still standing. I did not move. I did not fold my hands. I went out, my eyes dry, my lips firm. Anger brewed inside of me. My greatest suffering was not to know that others had touched and clothed the dead body, and not that others had the right to stay alone with him. All that did not make a difference to me.

I did not attend the visitation or the burial, and I left the village while the death knell sounded. I went back to the wasteland, and I walked as I had done before on the day of the kiss.

I did not find any more grief or weakness within me. Not only did the remembrance of the kiss cease to inspire any disgust, but my body was also inundated with Joy, yes Joy. A good Christian, I knew, should always be worried whenever his body takes pleasure (at least that is what I had learned). So, I was not a good Christian. Too bad. I was lost, and I had nothing more to do at Saint-Pancrace, not in the chapel, nor in the church, nor in an honorable family. The kiss had brought up in me such a trembling that I felt for the first time that there were other things besides what I knew and that the priests had not told me even an eighth of what needed to be said. I waited until evening, lying on the grass.

My decision was made.

At eleven o'clock at night I entered the train station where I took a one-way, first-class ticket for Saint-Brieuc. For the first time in my life I was paying to travel, but I was rich. Didn't I have the ten thousand francs from Mimi? I handed over two of the bills in the wad, they gave me change, and I went out onto the platform.

The night was starry, and the Pullman wagons, lit up as for a festival, passed over the switches at Hut 2 coming into the station.

I calmly climbed into a passenger car and settled onto the comfortable cushions of an empty compartment. Through the door I could still see the shadow of the churches, then, after changing engines, there were the sighs of the brakes. The announcer barked the magic words that the train cars were waiting for, groaning, and the train left at last for the ocean.

I should have slept. I could not. I was alone in my compartment, so I started walking from one door to the other to try to glimpse in the night the fleeing countryside.

On the way, I saw the light of the block posts where I knew that a working man like my father, bending over his levers, oversaw our crossing. I had lowered the window pane. A rough warmth whipped in my face and, above the din of the train, I heard the hum of crickets. Bent over the door of that first-class compartment, I finally answered the call of adventure.

I arrived at L gu  at four o'clock in the afternoon. And right away, I wanted to see the ocean. I saw it for the first time between two slate roofs; it was grey-green and looked like the descriptions I had given of it. A moment later and I was strolling in the neighborhood down by the port. The salt water that rose slowly at the docks was lifting two flea-ridden freighters with red and black shells and, further on, a beautiful sailing ship.

On seeing this vessel, I had great hope. In a heart-beat I was on the dock and, not without emotion, I read, painted in marvelous white letters on a grey-black background, her name: *Santa Anna*, then, in smaller and less artistic letters: Savorna.

I asked a passerby, "When does she sail?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"And where is she going?"

"To Huelva in Spain. She's a Spanish vessel."

The dream was over. Reality arose, luminous, out of the fog of expectations.

I looked at the *Santa Anna*. She still listed a bit, the water in the docks not being high enough to float her yet. Her rear panel was decorated tastefully with a figurehead of a woman surrounded in flowers and bouquets.

A small copper-gilded porthole opened a curious eye, and the riband was a sculpted garland running to the height of the mizzen mast.

The bridge was deserted and clean, the sheets well washed, the irons freshly repainted, and there was no trace of cargo. It was as if the *Santa Anna* had arrived in the night, like a phantom boat, mysteriously clean and silent, to set off again even more silently, thanks to a favorable breeze.

I sat down on the pier. A short gentleman went by with calculated steps, smoking his pipe. A man came up behind me and stayed there, motionless, contemplating the pretty form of the sleeping sailing ship.

"Beautiful boat," I said to him.

"Why yes," he responded with his Breton accent.

"A pleasure boat?"

"A square three-master? I don't believe so."

"Is she carrying something?"

“I don’t know. I was at sea when she came; I have never seen her before today.”

Had the *Santa Anna* come for me alone? Now she began to drift, surrounded by terns and gulls, and each of her slow movements shook the white bridge that connected her to the pier.

As soon as I put my foot on the plank, I felt in all of my being the balance of the ocean that animated, all the way to back of the inner harbor, the smallest boats and transformed them into nostalgic continents. I was a part of this swelling movement that made the blackest flotsam seem alive with this deep breathing. The *Santa Anna* was breathing in that same way, in the harbor of Légué. Carried along by the weight of the masts, she accentuated each sigh of the swell and thus already seemed to be under way. I felt firmer and more sure here than on the ground where everything was so strange, so difficult, and so contrary to me, and it was with great hope that I drew near the pretty little pine door that commanded the entrance to this curious ship. On a copper plaque, duly polished, I read again the dear name of “*Santa Anna*.”

I knocked.

The silence on board answered me. I knocked again. Under my fist, the door returned a deep resounding noise. The entire vessel vibrated.

I supposed that all the crew must be on shore, and I wandered the bridge in every direction, slowly, caressing the sheets and seeking to find, on this well-washed bridge, any of the traces that cargo never fails to leave on a vessel, but the planks were so meticulously caulked that I could find nothing.

On the forecastle, I saw at last, lying on the bridge in the shade of a roll of cordage, a man who appeared to be sleeping. Flies rested on his face, and he chased them away with a mechanical wave of his hand.

I approached him and asked in Spanish, “Man, where is the captain?”

He did not answer or move. I touched his shoulder, he got up with a jump and smiled, making me understand that he was mute, he then signaled me to follow him.

He was bare-foot, short, wore a red flannel belt and a small Spanish beret. He trotted along in front of me, leading me towards the small neighboring roads. He stopped in front of a café and made a gesture meaning “he is there,” and ran back to the docks.

The bistro was empty. Only an old woman was there knitting behind the counter. She came to me.

“The captain of the *Santa Anna*, is he here?”

“Heavens, my boy, yes, he’s in the courtyard.”

Crossing the room, I passed into the small courtyard where six bronzed men were chatting and drinking. I went straight up to them.

“I would like to speak with the captain of the *Santa Anna*.”

A short, broad-chested man stood up. “That’s me.”

“If you are going to Huevla,” I began, “and if you are in need of someone for the voyage, I am your man!”

“You’re in the right place. I have need of a seaman, and I am going to Huevla, putting in for two days at Lisbon.”

“Will you take me?”

“Yes. What’s your specialty?”

“I have only ever done fishing, but fishing is sometimes much harder than coastal shipping.”

“What kind of fishing?”

“Newfoundland.”

“Aboard what vessel?”

“She had the same name as yours: *Santa Anna*.”

He frowned; the others laughed.

“You’re French?” asked one of the drinkers.

“Yes.”

“So how is it you speak Spanish?”

“I learned at school.”

“So,” another said, saluting me. “Very happy to have among us a master student.”

“How old are you?”

“Take me, I’m very strong.”

They all laughed at me.

“What was the young girl like,” said a third. “Was she blond or brunette? Did she cheat on you or maybe, is she dead?”

The captain had a glass brought and filled it from a demijohn that he had set on the ground. The wine was thick, very rich in color, and strong. The label read 16%. I drank the glass in one gulp, because the walk had made me thirsty. I had scarcely set my glass down when they filled it up again, laughing.

“Go on, drink, *hombre*,” the captain said, giving me some hard pats on the back.

“As for the papers and formalities . . .” I began.

“Yes, yes, we will see to that later, *hombre*!”

I was still very thirsty and could not keep from drinking another large glass of this disgusting wine. I wanted to seem like a sailor who is not afraid of alcohol.

“As for the work,” I was saying, “I will be exemplary if someone first tells me the names of all the sails and sheets in Spanish . . .”

“Never fear, master schoolboy, we will explain all that, you will know the Spanish that we speak on the docks, and you will quickly forget your literary Spanish; save that for exams.”

I got up. “Since that’s that, *senores*,” I said. “I will come back tomorrow morning, at dawn, with my pack.”

I intended to buy myself clothes in town, along with some provisions, but they kept me there, saying, “Drink some more good wine, my boy! You’re already half Spanish in your talk, now you must become a real Spaniard in your stomach. Sit down and drink with us!”

They filled my glass again, then a young sailor started dancing to the music of his harmonica, snapping his fingers to imitate the sound of castanets. Little by little I grew accustomed to the atmosphere, and the anxiety I had felt at first left me. I was well. I liked adventure. I was a sailor on the *Santa Anna* bound for Huelva.

The music was so lively and the dance so frenzied that I got up and started imitating the steps of my colleague. I felt that I succeeded as if through magic and that I miraculously followed the Andalusian rhythm.

Yet, because of the turning, I began to feel a sort of dizziness that I resisted. To put up a good front, I danced this *jota* like a madman. When we had finished our part of the dance they gave us a standing ovation, and I collapsed where I was.

“Son,” the captain said helping me up. “I have never seen anyone dance like you!” Then, turning to the others, he cried, “This is the man we need!”

At this moment, the swarthy, poorly clothed sailors seemed like giants to me, colorful, and endowed with a fizzy intelligence.

“Drink, master schoolboy,” they said to me. “Now that you’re a sailor, it’s good to live it up while you’re on land.”

So I drank. The harmonica played without respite. At times I got up to dance vigorously and light-headed, at other times I contented myself to listen and to stare past the young dancer.

“Ay!” the men cried with each reprise, and the young man dashed off, indefatigable.

Other people arrived. I thought I saw that there were some women. I got up and said some nice things to welcome them, then I fell into a deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes, I was in a dark nook, lit by a square porthole. We must have been at sea. Excitement welled up in me. I got up with difficulty. The room where I found myself was cluttered with scrub-brushes, cordage, buckets, and nets.

Had we left the bay? Was I still going to be able to see the coasts of Brittany when I was on the bridge? I called. No one answered. I figured that they were all working, and I made my way to the narrow door. It then seemed that the movements of the boat became more pronounced. I was not surprised because I had read in books that the wind picked up once you had left the shelter of the Saint-Brieuc bay.

I opened the door with great difficulty.

Before me, from a porch, I saw the pier, white in the sun, the salt-water of the docks, and then the hill Sous-la-Tour. I ran down to the pier: it was deserted. I looked at the docks: they were empty.

I sobered up on the spot. A man dressed in white walked by, a camera in hand. I approached him.

“Has it been long since the *Santa Anna* left?”

He seemed taken back and stammered a few excuses.

“...the sailing ship...,” I said, “the sailing ship that was there?”

“I didn’t see a sailing ship.”

I must have looked rather upset because he asked me in a kind tone, seeing my torn clothes, “Were you a sailor aboard that ship?”

“Yes, monsieur, they left without me.”

“My poor boy,” said the Parisian, who didn’t know anything of the sea. “My poor boy, the captain will have you whipped!”

I did not correct him, and I interrogated a boy who was fishing gobies¹⁹. He hadn’t seen anything either. I went along the pier and entered a hotel in Sous-la-Tour to eat a good bowl of eel soup, some snails, and a tomato salad. I drank water, of course, and I bought the newspaper from a little hunchback who was passing by. I read the date: 13 July.

I remembered that it was the day of the awards ceremony at Saint-Pancrace.

With this thought, I get up.

It must be somewhere, towards the West, in the rising fog of the sea that my dream village is to be found! Since Mimi’s death I have never thought of it without becoming nauseous. Unsuspected by anyone, it pulses still in my breath.

Will I join in its death throes? Or rather, will I go ascertain, on the cliffs, that it no longer exists, that it died with my classmate?

No. I will admit to myself quite simply that it never existed, because I feel a frightening weariness with everything that has to do with dreams.

I know it is a sign that the educators have realized their victory.

I will not stay another minute in this country where I find nothing but corpses, and I go back to the train station.

I knew one year of sincerity.

Not everyone can say as much.

¹⁹ A goby is a small coastal fish capable of attaching itself to rocks (Vincenot’s note).

Original Preface

We are in 1952. Henri Vincenot has been writing since forever but he has not yet been in print. He paints, sculpts, and is involved with theater. Moreover it is the theater that will open the doors to publishing for him. A young troupe of railwaymen – the Companions of Tivoli – directed by Jacques Ducrot, preforms at a university and amateur theater contest organized by the Minister of National Education. Their play is entitled *Ceux de vendredi*, a modern passion of the Christ played in masks, in the Greek tradition, and which Vincenot wrote as well as having conceived the costumes, set, and music.

The jury is composed of, among others, Jean-Louis Bory, Jean-Jacques Bernard (the son of Tristan Bernard), Léon Chancerel, president of the History of Theater Society, Gabriel Marcel, Charles Vildrac. Won over by the performance, they award first place to the Companions of Tivoli and ask to know this unknown author by the name of Vincenot. Jean-Louis Bory, learning that Vincenot has “a cabinet full of manuscripts”, as they say in Burgundy, proposes that he bring one of his novels to Robert Kanters, a reader at Julliard. Taken by the manuscript of *Je fus un saint*, Kanters decides to publish this text which fits into the literary tradition of coming-of-age novels. Kanters leaves Éditions Julliard and informs my father, “Your contract is ready at Julliard but I couldn’t give you a hand. I’m leaving for Denoël.” To which Vincenot answers, “I only know you. I will follow you to Denoël.” Fidelity of an author to his publisher, very much in line with my father’s behavior... Éditions Denoël then proposes a contract for seven novels! Thus the publishing ventures of Henri Vincenot begin with *Je fus un saint*.

This publication, with the financial benefits that followed it, resulted immediately in permitting the restoration of the decayed hamlet of La Peurrie. It is at this time that it is appropriate to add the anecdote reported by Robert Kanters in his memoirs, “We spoke of the contract and I proposed [to Henri Vincenot] an installment of fifty thousand francs, which was normal in his case. He seemed to reflect, as if he was counting it up in his head and was weighing the mediocrity of the sum, then he answered me, ‘No, thirty thousand,’ and he explained to me that it was the exact amount he needed to reroof the houses of a village he was working on.”²⁰

²⁰ Robert Kanters, *A perte de vue : souvenirs*, Le Seuil, 1981, p.236 (C. Vincenot’s note).

Éditions Denoël presented *Je fus un saint* in 1953 for the prix Goncourt. It obtained one vote. The prize was awarded to Pierre Gascar for *Les Bêtes*. The previous prize was presented to Béatrix Beck for *Léon Morin, prêtre*, a book that had greatly interested my father. The responsibilities of priests had always held his interest: I remember he had been solicited by the curate of Saint-Pierre of Montmartre, chaplain for those called late in life, while he was studying at HEC Paris.

It is said that in every first novel, the author writes himself. It is true that here Vincenot highlights his own adolescent experience. Certain elements in the novel look back directly to the life of the author: the passion for Brittany and the lower-class fishermen that he discovered during a childhood convalescence and loved to such an extent as to speak of them again in other books, notably *L'Oeuvre de chair*; as well as the early Burgundian village and the grandfather, “jovial and sarcastic Merlin,” so evoked in *La Billebaude*. After obtaining the Certificate of Studies at the age of twelve in a public school in Dijon, Henri pursued his secondary studies at the school Saint-Joseph, well-known in the Burgundian capital. There he found the secular clergy teaching, the peculiar world of boarders, and it is there that he lived out his “childhood crisis”: awakening of the senses and instinctive urges similar to the desire for heroism in order to attain holiness and the desire for purity.

Child of a railroad worker like the author, the hero of *Je fus un saint* also has an attachment to his own people and manifests a desire to go against society: “Because this would be a ‘campaign.’ I, the son of a railroad guard, was going to fight for the betterment of my classmates,” for the most part sons of families that a “grand house of education” like Saint-Pancrace was preparing them “well for their dull, indifferent, and useless [bourgeois] existence.” An only child like Henri, he suffers from his solitude: “I suffered too much as an only child to throw away the sole chance I had left to have ‘brothers.’” The solitude of a sincere “anarchist” which he always was: “This was how I became considered a headstrong boy whom one should be wary of. Sincerity is injurious to society, and the sincere person is a dangerous individual.” The solitude also of an artist considered by the Prefect of Discipline to be a “clown” and hoaxer; and yet the hero writes a newspaper for his classmates.

As in the two other works of the trilogy “Les années de colère,” *Les Yeux en face des trous* and *A rebrousse-poil*, following a brutal upheaval the idealistic main character is confronted with a portion of society with which he must integrate: the institution of religion. Facing the separation of the real life of the students and their behavioral façade, the boy, animated by a holy anger, reacts to this hypocrisy not by breaking the rules of discipline but by pushing them for all they’re worth. He chooses for himself an “idol” that makes his role model, Saint Jean de la Croix, and he constructs himself a way of life based on asceticism and on a wish for maximum reform.

Above all, *Je fus un saint* presents us with the humor of a man who does not take himself too seriously. Thus, in order to evoke Saint Jean de la Croix, the author writes, a bit amused: “It was unimaginable, in fact, the ease with which this man found occasions to mortify himself in the most commonplace acts of everyday life.” There is implicitly an ironic questioning of modern life, such that we find fully developed in *Les Yeux en face des trous* and *A rebrousse-poil*. And if the novel finishes on a sad note of disillusionment, we sense the “cheer” of an author who always knows, in his novels as in his life, how to “put things back in their place” with a punch line or, to counterbalance a serious moment with a comic scene, such as the appearance of the father in his night shirt, who, with all his good sense and his workman’s fatigue, knows how to put in perspective the mystic fever of his son.

This distancing is the fruit of a work finished in 1952 on a childhood manuscript. The humor is much less evident – if we except the first pages – in his sequel to *Je fus un saint*. In fact, my father wrote a sequel to his first novel, still unedited to this day, and for which a “title still need[ed] to be found.” If we judge from the material used (a mean yellow paper from the time of the war, that the pen catches on), this text dates from the forties. When, much later, Vincenot re-read his manuscript, he added with a felt pen on the cover: “Bad manuscript, unedited, and for reason. Review nevertheless.” The publishing of this manuscript is justified by the fact that the author, if he never took up this text again, was inspired by certain passages for his two much later works: *La Billebaude* and *L’Œuvre de chair*.

In *La Billebaude*, Vincenot writes again, modifying and developing his reminiscences on the Burgundy countryside and certain picturesque characters from his childhood. In this way, the grandparents, rapidly described, would find in 1978 the place – majestic and symbolic – that they had in the eyes of little Henri. In *L'Oeuvre de chair* (1983), it's the "subject of Brittany," presented very literally, which would take on as well all its symbolic power.

As it is, this unedited book, as we see, contains certain discrepancies in composition. For example, the "I" of the first pages takes, in the greater part of the text, the place of the declared hero. But, we understand, the interest in this manuscript is elsewhere than in the form: very autobiographical, the sequel to *Je fus un saint* is the inescapable connection between the novel of 1953 and those of the eighties. It enlightens us on the spiritual evolution of the author, on the maturation of his ideas, and through this, on the genesis of his work.

-- Claudine VINCENOT

Translator's Notes

As I approached the project of translating Vincenot's novel *Je fus un saint*, I found no set guidelines or steps for going about a translation. My process, therefore, was experimental; I learned as I went, discovering online dictionaries and terminological lexicons along the way. My goal was to create a translation of this novel that remained as true as possible to the original text and yet read easily in English. I wanted to preserve the French-ness of tone, setting, and plot while still communicating an understandable story to an American audience unfamiliar with France. In addition to difficulties related to historical allusions, cultural references, and idiomatic expressions, I had to preserve Vincenot's humor. To explain the scientific and creative work that went into this novel, I will detail my process, how I approached certain difficulties, and my revisions.

To begin, I did a preliminary read of the novel to get a feel for the basic plot, setting, and tone of the author. That done, I went back and slowly worked through the novel, word by word, sentence by sentence and passage by passage, translating. I became quickly more familiar with the *passé simple* than I could have in any French course and encountered not only Vincenot's particular choice in vocabulary, but Catholic, railroad, and nautical terminology. As I tackled unfamiliar words, I first consulted a French dictionary for the French definition of the word. Once understanding the actual definition of the word, I would try to find the appropriate English word that would fit with the context and had the right tone for the passage. If I was still unsure how to translate the word or phrase, I looked it up in a French-English dictionary, examined the different possible translations. If none of them fit exactly, I searched more broadly in different dictionaries. With particularly difficult passages that I still was unable to translate, I consulted a native speaker. And finally, I searched regional Burgundy dictionaries for certain regional sayings.

My difficulty with translating particular passages rich in terminology was that I was not merely giving the meaning of the French term, but searching for an equivalent in English terminology. By consulting terminological dictionaries and lists of French-English terminology, I was able to translate the narrator's enthusiasm for ships and the

sea. A passage especially rich with terminology is a scene where the narrator pretends to sail through the harsh northern winds on the *Santa Anna*:

“Le travail à bord était celui de tous les voiliers pêcheurs : réparation des lignes et des vêtements, petits travaux de menuiserie, mais surtout gymnastique harassante et dangereuse dans les enfléchures où, suspend entre ciel et eau, il fallait carguer des voiles raides dans la bise glacée, secoué par la grande houle de courant froid du Labrador. Exercice violent, mais sain, auquel je me donnais tout entier, jusqu’à tomber de sommeil, secouant durement mon lit dont le sommier grinçait sous mes ahans de gabier.”

“The work on board was like that on all fishing boats: repairing the lines and the sails, a little bit of woodworking, but above all the hazardous and dangerous gymnastics in the riggings where, suspended between sky and water, one must furl the sails which were taut in the icy north wind, all the while being tossed by the huge swell of the cold Labrador Current. It was a violent but healthy exercise, one to which I gave myself entirely until I fell to sleep, shaking my bed hard until the base creaked beneath my cries as topman.”

Another passage which exemplifies Vincenot’s use of technical terminology when dealing with areas of the narrator’s interest is when the narrator accompanies his mother to the railroad station to visit his father in the hospital in Lyon:

“Tout de suite ce fut le départ, le triage entrevu avec son écheveau de voies sous le regard de points lumineux, la bosse de triage, le coucou de manœuvres, puis la nuit.”

“Our departure came all of a sudden, the switchings glimpsed with their tangle of tracks under the gaze of bright points, the bumps of the crossties, the ruckus of shunting, then the night.”

One of the first considerations when I began translating was the decision between leaning more towards a literal or a paraphrase translation. Having compared different translations of *Beowulf* for a previous project, I appreciate a more literal translation because the tendency is, otherwise, for the translator to omit difficult passages and to impose their own interpretation on the work. I aimed, therefore, at a translation that was true to the content and stayed close to the author's original words. By staying close, when I could, to the words and syntax of Vincenot, I achieved in creating a tone of recognizably older sounding English. One passage in particular where this is apparent is at the beginning of the novel when the narrator remarks that he saw more than fifty "voitures automobiles," which I rendered "motor cars." Because I would not allow myself the shortcut of omitting phrases or passages, I was forced to re-word passages and stray at times from a literal translation in order to convey in recognizable American idiom certain passages of the story.

For the most part I tried to translate using words of English-derivation as opposed to words of French-derivation in order to mimic the young narrator's simple language and to avoid a pretentious-sounding text (not that words of French-derivation are pretentious in and of themselves, but the American reader associates many of these words with an attempt to mimic European manners). When translating the verb "répondre," I used "answer" instead of "respond;" with the noun "parfum" I translated "smell" instead of "perfume," thereby avoiding the connotations that accompany "perfume." While I was careful about translating with cognates, since more often than not it leads to an incomprehensible text, there were certain passages where using cognates was appropriate, such as the phrase: ". . . une odeur chimique pénétrante et fétide," which I translate: ". . . a chemical odor penetrating and fetid."

The final step of translation was revision. During this step I double-checked my translation against the text, reworded and rephrased sentences that sounded too French, and straightened out the syntax to make passages flow in English. One such passage required some rewording as well as moving around clauses. My early translation read:

The presence of the priests "far from making life insipid, as the miscreants could have believed it, on the contrary, lent a special savor to everything, commonplace

elsewhere, and the most indifferent gesture became deliciously troubling, thanks to all this spiritual agitation.”

After revision this same passage read:

The presence of the priests “far from making life insipid – as non-believers would have thought – on the contrary, lent a special savor to everything that would have been commonplace elsewhere and, thanks to all this spiritual agitation, the most indifferent gesture became deliciously troubling.”

While I was translating the text, I also had to communicate context and capture the tone of the author. In order to translate Vincenot’s humorous tone, I needed to identify how he creates the comedy in *Je fus un saint*. In this novel, there are two narrators: the older narrator, who is telling the story of his childhood; and the younger schoolboy narrator, who writes the journals. The difference between these two narrators is vast. The older narrator is realistic, while the schoolboy narrator is idealistic; the older narrator is a skeptic, while the schoolboy narrator is a mystic. In fact, the older narrator is identified by his matter-of-fact tone and the schoolboy by his elevated, glorious tone. Vincenot’s comedy comes into play when the older narrator impersonates the younger and undermines his idealism with matter-of-fact realism. In order to communicate this, I had to pay special attention to when each narrator was speaking and preserve their respective tones. For instance when the narrator comes down with a fever, he writes, impersonating the schoolboy, “I was killed by love, like Jesus. . . . In this way my last hours would have been the most beautiful hours of my life.” Then the realistic narrator speaks, “This lasted twelve days, after which, sadly, I came back down to earth”

For idiomatic expressions, cultural context, and speech idioms, I had to rely on a native speaker; for this I consulted Professor Bernard Dubernet of Louisiana State University. His explanation and insight into difficult passages was invaluable. Not only was he able to explain the meaning of specific words and idiomatic expressions, but he also communicated to me the cultural references made and connotations involved. Being able to consult M. Dubernet truly opened up the story for me and was crucial for me to

fully understand the novel and communicate several fascinating bits of French culture. M. Dubernet unraveled for me the *plus-que-parfait du subjonctif*, explained what it means to call someone “une fondue,” and related how workmen in France, often having to work long hours, mix strong alcohol with their coffee in the early morning hours to help them wake up.

I will give examples of two idiomatic expressions that M. Dubernet shed light on and how I approached their translation. The first is the phrase “c’est du propre,” which I encountered twice in the text. The literal translation of this phrase is “that is correct”; however, it means the opposite and carries with it the connotation of a moral wrong. In the first instance I was not able to retain the idea of saying one thing to mean the opposite, and had to simply write, “It’s wrong!” thereby communicating the moral sense of the expression, but making it more straightforward. In the second instance, while the narrator and Mimi are speaking about their notebooks where they record their sins, I was able to use an American idiom that captures the moral connotations as well as means the opposite of what is said: “I’d like very much to see your notebook; it’s bound to be a good one!”

The second idiomatic expression I wish to discuss and the most difficult is the expression of calling two close friends “des ficelles.” This literally means “strings,” though figuratively it can mean, a trick, ruse, or artifice. The way it is used in Vincenot’s novel is to refer to two boys who are good friends, but it also hints at homosexual behavior between the two. In order to translate this, I wanted to preserve the word “string” not only to retain schoolboy slang but also because in the paragraph following its use, Mimi gives the narrator a piece of string, indicating they are now “strings.” The word string, however, carries no such figurative meanings or connotations, so I accompanied it with the word “trick.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “trick” can be “applied playfully to a small or amusing person, animal, or child” – a definition it identifies as an American colloquial expression. It can also be used as slang in the U.S. to mean “a casual sexual partner,” thereby carrying a latent sexual connotation that fits with the suggestions within the novel. So I translated Mimi’s reply to the narrator’s question about “stings” as, “A string, a trick, you know. . . .”

Capturing the speech within the novel was one of the most challenging tasks. In addition to finding recognizably older American idioms to translate the schoolboys' speech, I also had to tackle the speech of one of the priests at the school. In a certain instance where the Prefect of Discipline finds the narrator in the middle of a fight, he says, in the French:

“Mes compliments, c’est complète! Tout à fait les mœurs du faubourg des mégisseries! Un bagarre! Un bagarre pour un minois!”

Initially stumped, I proceeded to write out an extremely literal translation:

“My compliments, it’s complete! Exactly the morals of the Tanneries neighborhood! A fight! A fight for a pretty face!”

Obviously, this is incomprehensible, but it gave me something to work with. For the next phase of translation, I attempted to capture the tone as much as possible.

“My compliments, you’ve done it! You have mastered the manners of a hooligan! A brawler, that’s what you are! A pretty-boy brawler!”

This last rendition bordered on far-fetched. For my final translation I made the beginning more colloquial, tried to capture the connotation that his manners are coming from the slums (“faubourg”) and lower-class workers (in the “mégisseries”), and preserved the sexual innuendo in the last line by specifying that the narrator is fighting over Mimi. The passage reads:

“Congratulations, you’ve certainly done it now! Bringing your manners from the wrong side of town! A brawl, that’s what this is! A brawl over a pretty-boy!”

Within the novel I encountered several cultural references that would not be understood by an American audience. For some of these the best approach was to include

a footnote explaining the significance of the reference, as with the “certificate of studies” and The Great Mute. However, I encountered one reference that needed explanation within the text of the story. The narrator speaks frequently of the hallways in Saint-Pancrace and, on one occasion, comments that it is filled with the odors of “soup aux légumes, de café au lait et de sciure de bois humide (celles des balayages).” The smells of the hallway are easy enough to recognize – vegetable soup, café au lait, humid sawdust – but the parenthetical is puzzling. It translates literally, “those of the sweepings,” meaning the sawdust. Thanks to M. Dubernet, I discovered that this referred to a practice common in France up until the 50s or 60s of spreading sawdust on the floors of kitchens, restaurants, dining halls in order to catch the dirt, grease, and mess of the day. The sawdust would absorb the mess and need only be swept away at night to have a clean floor. To communicate this fascinating bit of culture I expanded the parenthetical to say, “(the kind spread on the floors to catch the day’s mess and swept away each night).”

Finally, there were the regional Burgundy sayings. Vincenot, though noticeably proud of his native region, did not incorporate too many regional sayings. He writes beautifully of the flora and fauna of Burgundy, describing the mountains of the Morvan, but I only encountered one instance where he used the name of a regional song. While the narrator is making his barefoot pilgrimage back to Saint-Pancrace, the boys of a village he passes through jeer at him chanting, “À la bisqu’en corne.” To decipher this phrase I searched through a regional dictionary, *Patois et Locutions de Pays de Beaune* by Charles Bigarne. I found a phrase “tenir un enfant à la bisquancorne,” which, given the definition, means “to give a child a piggyback ride.” While this is the meaning, it would not have made sense in the context. In consultation with my professors, especially Professor Brenda Osbey, I rendered the passage, “the kids followed me slapping their thighs and yelling, ‘Giddyup!’”

Translating *Je fus un saint* was a challenging but rewarding project. To some extent I was able to rely on convention, as when dealing with the formal and informal “you”-forms and when referencing the gender of French nouns; but most of my work was a creative process of capturing the essence of Vincenot’s work. I enjoyed the investigation and research that was involved finding different phrases, tracing cultural references, and discovering English names for plants and animals of Burgundy and Brittany. As I worked

slowly through the book I came to appreciate the poetry of the French as well as understand the novel at a level one only can in their native language. I cherish the privilege of making such a great work of literature, such a unique story, and such a charming author available to the English-speaking world.

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Pictures were drawn from the personal library of Dr. Elisabeth Oliver, Director of the Interdepartmental Linguistics Program at LSU; from "The Most Beautiful Villages of Burgundy" by James Bentley and Hugh Palmer. Thames and Hudson, Ltd.: London, 1998; from "A Village in France: Louis Clergeau's Photographic Portrait of Daily Life In Pontlevoy, 1902-1936" by Louis Clergeau and Jean-Mary Couderc. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: New York, 1996; and from other online sources.