PAUL VALÉRY
TRANSLATED BY MARTHIEL
AND JACKSON MATHEWS

Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 15

MOI

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BOLLINGEN SERIES XLV

The Collected Works of Paul Valéry

Edited by Jackson Mathews

VOLUME 15

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J. M.

MOI

Autobiography

I WAS BORN at Cette [Sète] on October 30, 1871.

My father, a native of Bastia, was a customs official there. I have few or no memories of my earliest childhood. But the pageant of a seaport, things belonging to the sea, the boats below our windows were food for my eyes in my early years, after which we *see* nothing except by effort.

As a I child I lived in *imagination*. Horror of violent games. I began to read fairly early.

I was very impressionable. My sensitivity caused me to suffer cruelly. Childhood terrors.

In 1878 I was enrolled in the town grammar school (after attending various small schools).

The location of this school was remarkable. Halfway up St. Clair "Mountain" (180 meters in altitude) on which the town is built, overlooking the port. The playgrounds were terraces, one above the other, from which the sea and the comings and goings of ships were in view.

I suffered in leaving all this, in 1884 when we went to live in Montpellier. There, the playgrounds were like wells.

The classes at Cette were so small that I necessarily stood high. I was first out of four without much effort. When I was twelve, I was seized with a passionate desire to be a sailor. The visits of the fleet drove me out of my mind. I suffered from this intense love as one suffers from love. But my father

did not look favorably on my imagined vocation, and, besides, I did not understand the first thing about mathematics.

Montpellier, in 1884.

The lycée had the dreariest possible effect on me. I felt lost in the corridors of the third form. No personal relations with my teachers. The few efforts I put forth produced very meagre results. Boredom overwhelmed me. I was a very mediocre student and remained so to the end of my studies. To me, the teaching seemed completely uninspired and repugnant, and in short nothing more than coercion. The simple and foolish idea of the baccalaureate dominated everything. The baccalaureate: a bogey and an expedient.

Little by little I made an "inner life" for myself.

I read a great deal of Hugo and Gautier. We begin with the picturesque and the romantic.

In the second form, this predilection became more specific. I fell in love with Architecture, to the point of setting out to read Viollet-le-Duc. I took the notion of making a résumé of the great dictionary—which I began, even copying the illustrations, but gave up before finishing the letter *A*.

The following year, 1887, my father died and was buried at Cette in the cemetery which I called "Le Cimetière marin" [The Cemetery by the Sea].

I passed the baccalaureate examinations despite my professor's predictions. Passed philosophy also and entered law school in 1888.

I began the study of law as many others have done, without having the vaguest notion of what I wanted to do.

I wrote a few poems.

Our student life was very easy. We passed our time in conversation, walks, a few classes, after which we held forth in the beautiful gardens of Montpellier or at a café. All sorts of odd things began to interest me—even anthropology. I measured skulls!

But it was only in the following year that literature took deeper hold of me.

In September of '89 I read Huysmans' *A Rebours*, which made a tremendous impression on me. It was a manual of art and the most "advanced" literature of the time. The names of Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Villiers appeared there with quotations from their work.

The literary fever made astonishing progress in me in those few weeks.

Then in November, when I was barely eighteen, I volunteered for military service to profit by the law of 1872 which had just been replaced by the law of 1889. I was refused the deferment I had hoped for, and joined the 122nd infantry regiment to begin my year of military service.

A very hard year for a very young and very frail volunteer. I was of a nervous temperament. No muscles.

I do not know how I stood it. We were subject to a mechanical regime in the intensive use of weapons. Boredom and constant pressure. Nothing to feed the mind. Corporals were being created, not officers. The initial good will of the sixty-nine volunteers changed to loathing for the profession.

On Sundays I shut myself up at home, and as a reaction against the stupidity of the week I wrote poetry.

That period of my life has affected me deeply. I recall that, in order to protect myself against that lethal boredom, I trained myself during the long marches or during hours of guard duty *to imagine* with all my powers other scenes and

landscapes, completely different conditions—imagined so *precisely* that I was able to create for myself another life to mask the deadly reality.

In the month of May 1890, the celebration of the sixth centenary of the University (1290–1890), four days of leave. On the fourth day, by pure chance, I made the acquaintance of Pierre Louÿs. *A capital event.* An encounter at a café. A correspondence began between us, an intense exchange of likings and desires.

Pierre was already deeply involved in the movement. From him I learned what was going on. He founded a little review, *La Conque*, and induced me to send him some poems.

My first poem, "Narcisse parle," had a success that astonished me. Unexpectedly, Chantavoine praised it in the *Journal des Débats.*

I was then in my second year of law.

My law studies suffered as a result of my preoccupation with poetry. I met André Gide, who sent me Mallarmé's poems, then impossible to find in the provinces.

And I discovered Rimbaud. These two poets had a most powerful influence on me. Moreover, they made me despair —one for his perfection the other for his intensity. I thought I had seen the limits of the art of expression.

On the other hand, I read a great deal of Poe, in whom I found a scientific bent, a taste for precision, rigor, and reasoning that joined forces with my old love of Architecture.

I felt developing in me a sort of will toward an *intellectual* art, premeditated works requiring the presence of all the faculties of the mind. I posed to myself many questions about aesthetics, and gave great importance to reflections on *Ornament.*

At the same time I became acquainted with *Music*, that is I saw operating in me the liaison between music—an art I knew nothing about beyond simple works and popular operas—and my own preoccupations.

Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony and the prelude to *Lohengrin* sent me into transports. Wagner's great influence on me dates from that period.

Those few months of 1891 were for me very full ones.

I changed visibly.

I went to Paris in the month of October. Pierre Louÿs took me to see Mallarmé.

I returned home for my third year of law.

All the preceding *themes* were aggravated.

I could write poetry only with great difficulty. A love affair finished me.

Finally, having taken my law degree—and just barely—I went to spend a month in Italy, where I suffered an acute mental martyrdom. Despair in every direction. Extra-lucid nights.

And I passed through my inner 18 Brumaire which led to the advent of "Mr. Teste".*

This meant that I resolved to think with rigor—to *not believe*—to consider as null and void everything that could not be brought to total precision, etc. . . .

I began to construct for myself a "philosophy"—which was, moreover, the exact contrary of philosophy—and I set about looking into the exact sciences.

I went to Paris in November 1892.

I lived in the rue Gay-Lussac, in a student hotel. Mixed company—professors, foreigners from all countries, prostitutes, etc. . . .

* Valery's English.

I went to Mallarmé's, to Heredia's. I saw Huysmans fairly often.

I attended the Lamoureux concerts.

And I did nothing. Nothing visible. My friends began not to understand. Even I did not know where I was headed. No profession, no regular studies, nothing produced, not even any projects.

But enormous mental activity. I studied mathematics, but in a very odd spirit, as a *model* of acts of the mind. I met Schwob, who showed me what erudition could be—until then I had despised it.

Furthermore I owe an infinite amount to my friends and acquaintances. I have always learned from conversation. Ten words are worth ten volumes.

It was at about that time that, greatly bothered by my totally hidden future and by living without any justification in the eyes of my family, I agreed to write an article on Leonardo which Mme Juliette Adam had asked of me at the suggestion of Léon Daudet! Knowing very little about Leonardo, and in short being surprised by her request, I accepted for the reasons stated above and I imagined a Leonardo of my own! In 1894 I went to London, which attracted me. There I saw Meredith and various other English writers. I greatly enjoyed that city, which is so foreign to us.

In 1896, an English friend indirectly found a job for me in London. The story of this incident is very curious. Without knowing what I was going to do there, I fell into the hands of a certain Lionel Dècle (from St. Quentin), an adventurer, explorer, journalist, etc. . . .

A berth was found for me in the press service of the Chartered Company, where I observed the journalistic tricks of a great enterprise.

I soon returned to France, brought home by a severe case of flu.

I had written the article on the German methodical conquest to be printed in England.

At that moment in my life I had not found the politician or the businessman who could have made a career for me.

I was very much interested in all questions of organization and general policy.

It was no doubt an illusion, but I *saw* the modern world and the coming changes with intensity and keen interest.... I saw policy on a no doubt too grandiose scale of time and space.

In 1897, no longer able to endure being without employment and anxious about the future, I was so stupid as to take the competitive examination for the post of draftsman in the War Ministry, and I had the misfortune of being accepted.

Three years of "hard labour"* in the branch of artillery equipment. It was hard work. The period of the 75-millimeter cannon, Fashoda, and the Dreyfus affair—eight ministers in succession. ...

Finally, in 1900, I married.

Mme Mallarmé and her daughter had introduced me to the Mlles Gobillard, nieces of Berthe Morisot.

I married the younger in May 1900.

A month later, my friend Lebey invited me to become secretary to his uncle, Edouard Lebey, director of the Agence Havas.

* Valery's English.

I remained with him for twenty-two years. He was an incurable invalid, afflicted with a progressive paralysis that, to the end, left his mind unimpaired. I took charge of his business affairs and the business of the governing board of the Agency.

My employer was a consummate businessman. He was always affectionate and exceptionally considerate of me. But in order to keep me by him . . . he never said the word that in 19– would have made me the director of the Agency, which everyone expected, except me.

From 1900 until 1913 I pursued certain very abstract studies to which I would like to return. I think that I went rather deep into various questions that have been little explored.

I owe to these studies, which were not at all meant for publication, a certain way of thinking that perhaps has its value.

Studies of attention, dreams and waking, time, number, language, etc.

From 1909 to 1914 my life depended on the health of my wife, who happily recovered.

In 1912, Gide and Gallimard kept after me to publish my early poetry. I refused categorically. They got together a manuscript of early poems taken from reviews and submitted it to me. I read through those outmoded verses with a less-than-indulgent eye.

But finally, since I was weary of my abstractions, I decided to write some verses as an exercise.

These few lines grew into *La Jeune Parque*, after four years of work.

They were beginning to interest me when the war broke out. I expected to be called up with the last contingent. But

nothing happened, and I did not even stand guard over the most insignificant railroad culvert.

In 1917 *La Jeune Parque* was published in a limited edition of 600 copies, which sold out in three months.

Immediately after, I wrote "Aurore" and "Palme" with great facility.

Soon the poems of *Charmes* began to take form.

To my great astonishment, I found myself taking on the figure and rank of a *poet*.

I tried to put together my ideas about poetry, my general ideas, and my instinctual feelings about music. It was then that I was urged to write, and so became a slave to prefaces, essays, etc. The rest is known. I go into society and pass for one who likes it. The unexpected has always guided me. I have never asked anything—pursued anything outside myself. And I have rarely said no.

I have a rather pronounced inclination for things of the mind. None for the things of life. I do not like facility. And I greatly dread the difficult. I owe everything to my friends. My entry into literature to Pierre Louÿs, into the Academy to Hanotaux and a few others, my work to circumstances and even to publishers.

Etcetera. . . .

P.V.

Moi

PAUL-AMBROISE VALÉRY was born on October 30, 1871 of a Corsican father and an Italian mother. On his father's side, he knew nothing or almost nothing about his ancestry. On his mother's side, he learned from certain bundles of legal documents, certified at the tribunal of Rota (?), that he was descended from a family of northern Italy that numbered such illustrious members as a certain Cardinal de Grassi and the famous Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan and conqueror of Bayard. Although he came of Mediterranean stock, his ancestors bequeathed him his clear blue eyes and his hair. His complexion, moreover, was white before it was burnt by a military sun.

A rather poor student at the university, he came out of it with the usual asinine diploma, bringing from his lessons only disgust for prescribed things and a love for his own fantasy.

At the age of twelve—perhaps before!—he was already possessed with *Notre-Dame de Paris* and certain obscurities known as *Han d'Islande* and *Bug-Jargal*. Then came poetry. He never even read Lamartine, nor Musset, but rather the *Feuilles d'automne*, the *Voix intérieures*, etc.

. . . Meanwhile the young man drew, painted, and questioned certain objects, searching for multiple light.

He studied the learned arts of the Middle Ages, of Byzantium, and a little of Greece.

Finally Baudelaire conquered him. Then the *Others*. And he could one day claim the merit, himself a provincial among provincials, of having discovered and cherished a few of the secret poems which manifest the solitary Glory of Mallarmé.

The task of explaining his exact mind and of reflecting the various currents of his thought in the too clear mirror of writing is illusory. You might as well try to explain the vagrant Whirlwind!...

Yet here are certain traits that may be real.

He detests what is called sentiment and Rolla is loathsome to him. Not that he does not have his tears and his anguish, but to him it seems ugly to make of them a rule of life or a theory of art. He understands all the kinds of affection, but for him they must be beautiful. He abhors easy weeping and melting over detestable love, with no splendor and no *recklessness*.

He adores the religion that makes beauty one of its dogmas, and Art the most magnificent of its apostles. He adores above all his own kind of Catholicism, a bit Spanish, very Wagnerian and Gothic.

As for pure belief, this is what he thinks (meaning above all to be frank, and above all, with himself):

"The crudest of hypotheses is to believe that God exists objectively.... Yes! He exists and the Devil too, but within us!

"The worship that we owe Him—this is the respect that we owe to ourselves and it should be understood as the search for the Better by way of our strength in the direction of our aptitudes.

"In two words: God is our *particular ideal*. Satan is that which tends to turn us away from it."

Women are for him graceful little animals who have the perverse ability to draw the attention of too many minds. They are placed on the summit of the altars of art, and our elegant psychologists know better, alas, how to note their bitchy sulking and their catlike clawing than to analyze the difficult brain of an Ampère, a Delacroix, or an Edgar Poe.

Finally, to terminate this autopsy, let us say that he has *loved* very little, and always by way of a dream.

He is made up of many different persons and a principal witness who watches all these puppets bobbing.

. . . . . .

To him the future seems mostly glum. The obligation to work frightens him, for he has always chafed under rules. *However one must live!* . . .

He regrets writing verse, which can *break* a *career* and make him lose a *good place*; moreover, he writes poorly and makes it too much his own to *please* others.

He has few illusions about things. But many inner illusions. He often thinks that there is nothing outside himself and ends by believing it.

His particular sign: he reduces all theory to schemata and strives to fit it into his practical life.

P. VALÉRY

This is between us.

Three Wakings

NIGHT IN THE BARRACKS

TEN O'CLOCK. In my loathing, I wander about the dark stony courtyard, consoled a little by the vast splendor of the night, a night like the somber velvet cushion on which a jeweler pours rivulets of diamonds. A cool soothing calm scarcely troubled by intruder lamps flickering beneath the archways, by the flash of a bayonet, the distant rumble of wheels, or the whistling of an invisible man. A trickle of water purls in the water trough.

The far-off sound of carriages plunges me again into the anguish of my imprisonment amidst the stupidity, the brutality, and the square heads under their kepis.

In the barracks. On a cot without sheets, between my overcoat and a blanket. Voices in the background, whispering. Yawns, flickering of the single dim light hanging from the ceiling. Someone snuffs it out. Now it is only a blue dot in the darkness; it swings rhythmically. A pale light trembles in the narrow windows. Bodies turn over in the covers. Someone swears. Now and then, a patch of light criss-crossed by the black bars of the window grating is projected onto the ceiling, and the whole image revolves across the room as the lantern outside passes by.

I cannot sleep. Sonnets of Heredia, verses of Mallarmé

come back to me. I say them over to myself without savoring them, without enjoying them.

Someone is snoring. One loudly, another softly. Both follow a mysterious rhythm. An oppressive odor bothers me. I cannot identify it because it envelopes me, but I imagine it rotten. I go down to the courtyard.

The cold is pleasant. Morning is coming. It is still dark. The sky is faintly dappled. Suddenly a flicker of light toward the east, between two roofs. A cry of light, still dim and distant. As if in reply, the blare of a bugle tears the silence. A sharp bizarre phrase rising out of two or three notes.

Reveille.

And arms stretch in the cots, while a breath of light comes into the dark room, pits the iron pitcher with white, lights up the metal of the guns. . . .

Uproar in the stairways. Water splashes in the water basins, and a wholesome morning wind bellies the new army overcoats appearing from all sides.

November 17, 1889
Morning

* * *

Sometimes I do not know whether I am more awake than asleep or more asleep than awake?

There is a conflict at times between the *one who thinks* and the one who wishes not to think but to sleep, and *that which is thought* and which wants to develop, to see its future.

Thus there are two possible outcomes to this moment.

Some mornings (today perhaps?) when I wake and sit down with this Notebook, I don't quite recognize myself.

I see myself as more stern, more stony than I am by nature, and old. I see myself as an old man, without pity for anything mental that tries to masquerade as total, and insignificant.

For, bear in mind, the *mark of the real* is *absolute insignificance.*

I get up. I go to make my first ritual cup of coffee without knowing whether it acts as substance on my chemistry, or a taste and stimulant through sensation, more than by molecular change in my composition, or a nervous effect of chronometric repetition. For it is possible to make these three hypotheses.

Thus I move about, and on the one hand I feel Ideas (very diverse) invading me, contesting life, etc., etc., but on the other hand I am aware of myself moving about and acting out of total automatism and somnambulism.

I am aware of my own phantom, my regular ghost. Everything I do has already been done. All my steps and gestures can do without me, as the imperceptible and essential acts of vegetable life *can do without us.*

My "lucidity" illuminates for me my mechanical nature. And—the last straw—it belongs to that nature. I am given to discovery and the unexpected at that early hour.

January 1944

* * *

Waking up. There is no phenomenon more exciting to me than waking.

Nothing *tends* to give a more extraordinary idea of... *everything*, than this autogenesis. This beginning of what was

—which also has its beginning. *What is*—and this is nothing but shock, stupor, contrast.

Here, a state of equidifference takes place as if . . . there were a moment (among the most unstable) during which no one is yet the *person one is*, and *could again become another*! A different memory could develop. Whence the fantastic. The external individual remaining, and the whole psyche substituted.

May 1944

Mediterranean Inspirations

TODAY I am going to confide in you; I am going to talk about myself. Do not imagine that I would venture to tell you the kind of secrets that everyone knows from his own experience. What I want to talk about has to do only with the relations between my mind and my sensibility in their formative period and the Mediterranean sea, which since my childhood has been ever present to my eyes and to my mind. These will be only a few specific impressions, and a few perhaps general ideas.

I begin with my beginning. I was born in a middling-sized seaport situated at the end of a bay and at the foot of a hill, whose mass of rock juts out from the line of the shore. This rock would be an island if two sandbanks—sand constantly washed up from the mouth of the Rhone and deposited by sea currents carrying the pulverized stone of the Alps toward the west—did not attach or join it to the coast of Languedoc. The hill, then, rises between the sea and a vast saltwater pond where the canal du Midi begins—or ends. The harbor it overlooks is made up of canals and docks connecting this pond with the sea.

Such is the place of my origin, about which I will make the ingenuous remark that I was born in one of those places where I should have liked to be born. I am happy to have

been born in a place where my first impressions were those that came from facing the sea and from being in the midst of human activity. For me there is no spectacle to compare with what can be seen from a terrace or a balcony pleasantly situated above a harbor. I spent my days looking at what Joseph Vernet, a painter of beautiful seascapes, called "the various activities of a seaport." From that vantage the eye takes in the intoxicating expanse and the uniform simplicity of the sea, while, closer by, human life and industry traffics, builds, maneuvers. At any moment when the eye turns to nature—a nature eternally primitive, untouched, unchangeable by man and constantly and visibly subject to universal forces—it sees exactly what the first man saw. But closer to land it first notices the erratic work of time continually reshaping the shore, and then the reciprocal work of man— the accumulation of constructions with their geometric forms, straight lines, planes, and arcs—contrasting with the disorder and accidents of natural forms, just as the spires, towers, and lighthouses built by men contrast the falling and crumbling shapes of geological nature with an opposed will to construct—the stubborn and as it were rebellious work of our human race.

Thus, at the same time, the eye encompasses the human and the nonhuman. It is this that the great Claude Lorrain felt and magnificently expressed and, in the noblest of styles, exalted—the order and ideal splendor of our great Mediterranean ports: Genoa, Marseille, and Naples, all transfigured, by the architecture of the port, the contours of the shore, the perspective of the water, making a sort of stage set, where only one actor moves, sings, and sometimes dies: LIGHT!

Halfway up the hill I spoke of was my school. There I learned *rosa, the rose*, without being too much bored, and I was sorry to leave after my second year. The very small number of pupils allowed each of us to satisfy his pride. There were four in my grade, and, by the simple law of probability, I was first one time out of four without trying at all. Those in the final form were even more fortunate since they were only two. Inevitably, one got the first prize and the other the second. How could it have been otherwise? But fairness demanded that the one receiving the second prize should win the first prize in composition, and the other (naturally) the second. And so on. . . . To the strains of a military band, both would march down from the platform on prize-day, crowned with laurels and carrying gilt-edged books. . . .

> Corneille claims that there is no glory without risk:
> *To win without risk is to triumph without glory!*
> (*Cid:* II, 2.)

But Corneille was mistaken, and the mistake is naïve. Fame and glory depend not on effort, which is generally undetected, but on proper staging.

This school had rare charms. The courtyards overlooked the town and the sea. There were three terraces, one above the other: the *little ones*, the *bigger ones*, and the *biggest* were blessed with horizons of increasing vastness, which is not altogether true in later life! So, there was always something to look at during our recreation time, since there is always something happening at the frontier between land and sea.

One day, from the height of our happily situated schoolyard, we saw a prodigious cloud of smoke rising into the sky, much thicker and more voluminous than the usual smoke from the steamers and freighters putting in at our port.

The noon bell had hardly rung when the day-pupils rushed out the doors in a yelling mob to the mole, where a crowd had been watching a good-sized ship burn for several hours. It had already been towed from the docks and left to its fate beside a fairly isolated jetty. All at once flames shot up to the crow's nest, and the masts, undermined by the fire burning furiously in the holds, suddenly came down with all their rigging, as if mowed off, stripped, abolished, while a great jet of sparks leapt up and a sinister muffled roar reached us on the wind. You can imagine that many a student missed class that afternoon. By evening, the beautiful three-master had been reduced to a dark hull, apparently intact but filled like a crucible with an incandescent mass whose fiery brilliance intensified as night came on. The hellish derelict was eventually towed out to sea, and finally sunk.

At other times we would be on the lookout from our school for the arrival of the fleet, which came every year and anchored a mile off shore. How strange the battleships of that time were, the *Richelieu*, the *Colbert*, the *Trident*, with their rams shaped like ploughshares, their sheet iron armor plates at the stern, and, beneath the flag, the admiral's bridge, which filled us with such envy. These ships were ugly and imposing; they still carried a considerable structure of masts and spars, and their bulwarks were lined with the crews' sea-bags in the old-fashioned way. The fleet sent ashore its boats, beautifully kept, decorated, and equipped. These long boats skimmed over the water; six or eight pairs of oars, perfectly synchronized, were shining wings flinging out, every five seconds, a flash and a swarm of sparkling drops. In the foam from their sterns trailed the colors of their flag and the edge of the scarlet-bordered blue rug on which the officers sat, dressed in black and gold.

These splendors engendered many a naval vocation; but between the cup and the lip, between the schoolboy and the midshipman's glorious life, there were very grave obstacles: the incorruptible forms of geometry, the systematic snares and enigmas of algebra, the grim logarithms, the sines and their fraternal cosines discouraged many a boy who despairingly saw, between the sea and himself, between his dream-navy and the real navy, the implacable surface of a blackboard falling like an iron curtain. So he had to be content with melancholy gazing at the open sea, and enjoy only through his eyes and his imagination, and direct his thwarted passion toward literature and painting, for at first it seems that desire is enough to open up those careers which look so attractively easy. Only those who are predestined suspect and exact of themselves at an early age all the imponderable difficulties. For such there is neither a course of study nor an examination.

These dreamers, whether budding poets or painters, contented themselves with the impressions lavished on them by the ever-eventful sea, creator of extraordinary forms and projects, mother of Aphrodite and soul-giver to many an adventure. It could still be said in the days of my youth that History lived on these waters. Our fishing boats, many of them carrying on their prows the same emblems used by the Phoenicians, were in no way different from those used by the navigators of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Sometimes at twilight I would watch these sturdy boats returning to port, heavy with their catch of tunny, and a strange feeling would possess me. The sky, extremely clear, but suffused with fiery rose at its base and its blue fading to pale green toward the zenith; the sea, already dark, with breakers and spume of a dazzling white; and, toward the east, just above

the horizon, a mirage of towers and walls which was the phantom Aigues-Mortes. At first nothing could be seen of the fishing fleet but the sharply pointed triangles of their lateen sails. As they came closer in, one could make out the heaps of enormous tunnies they had caught. These powerful fish, some as large as a man, blood-spattered and glistening, would remind me of men at arms whose bodies were being brought ashore. It was a picture of epic grandeur which I was fond of calling "Return from the Crusades."

But this imposing sight led to another, of horrifying beauty, which you will forgive me for describing to you.

One morning, the day after a large catch of huge tunnies, I went down to the sea to swim. First I walked out on a little jetty to enjoy the beautiful light. Looking down all at once, I saw only a few feet away in the marvelously still and transparent water, a hideous and resplendent chaos that made me shudder. *Things* of a nauseating red, masses of a delicate pink or of a deep and sinister purple lay there.... I recognized with horror the dreadful heap of viscera and entrails of Neptune's flock, which the fishermen had thrown into the sea. I could neither flee nor endure what I saw, for the disgust caused by that charnelhouse struggled in me against my sense of the real and exceptional beauty of that confusion of organic colors, of those ignoble trophies of glands from which bloody wisps still trailed, and of pale and quivering pouches held by invisible threads beneath the polished surface of the perfectly clear water, while the infinitely slow movement in the limpid depths sent an almost imperceptible golden shimmer over all this shambles.

The eye admired what the soul abhorred. Torn between repugnance and interest, between flight and analysis, I forced myself to muse on what an artist of the Orient, a man with

the talents and curiosity of a Hokusaï, for example, might have drawn from this sight.

What a print, what variations on the theme of coral he might have conceived! Then my thought turned toward the brutal and the bloody in the poetry of antiquity. The Greeks were not averse to describing the most appalling scenes. . . . Their heroes worked like butchers. Their mythology, epic poetry, and tragedies are full of blood. But art is comparable to that limpid and crystalline depth through which I saw those hideous things. Art gives us eyes that can take in everything.

There is no end to my early impressions of the sea! I cannot take time to tell you about everything that diverted me, held me spellbound on the harbor docks; to describe, for instance, some of the boats that now scarcely exist, types centuries old driven out by steam and gasoline; the strange xebecs, for example, of an oriental elegance of form with their slender and curiously designed prows, their tall lateen rigs rising as sharp as a pen stroke, and surely identical with the ships of the Saracens and the Berbers in the days when those fearsome visitors came plundering our shores and carrying off ladies and damsels. My xebecs were used only for the transport of excellent products. Their hulls were painted yellow and brilliant green (a triumph of pure color) and on their decks lemons from Portugal and oranges from Valencia were piled in vivid pyramids. On the calm, green water around them floated some of this yellow or red fruit, either fallen overboard or thrown away.

I will not try here to evoke the heady mixture of odors which make a dock's atmosphere an olfactory encyclopedia or a symphony: coal, tar, spirits, fish soup, straw, copra—

teeming, vying with one another to dominate and sway our associations of ideas. . . .

But in these modest confidences, let me proceed from the concrete to the abstract, from impressions to thoughts, and now evoke simpler sensations, deeper and more complete, those sensations of the whole being which are to colors and odors what the form and composition of a speech are to its ornaments, images, and epithets.

What are these general sensations?

I plead guilty before you of having been truly possessed by light, truly possessed by water.

My recreation, my only recreation, was the purest of all: swimming. I made a kind of poem about it, a poem that I call *involuntary* since I did not go so far as to give it form and write it down. When I made it, it was not my intention to sing of the state of swimming but to describe it—which is quite a different thing—and it verged upon poetic form only because the subject, swimming, moves and has its being in the heart of poetry.

SWIMMING

I seem to rediscover and know myself again when I return to this universal water. I know nothing of harvests and vintages.

The *Georgics* mean nothing to me.

But to plunge into the mass and the movement, to be active from head to toe, to roll in that pure and deep element, breathe in and breathe out the divine saltness—this for me is nearest to love, the activity in which my body becomes all signs and all powers, as a hand opens and closes, speaks and acts. Here all the body spreads itself, draws itself in, under-

stands itself, spends itself trying to exhaust all its possibilities. It touches *her*, wishes to seize *her*, embrace *her*; it goes mad with life and its own freedom of movement; it loves *her*, possesses *her*; with *her* it engenders a thousand strange ideas. Through *her*, I am the man I wish to be. My body becomes the immediate instrument of my mind, and yet the author of all its ideas.

All is clarified for me. I understand to the full what love might be. Excess of the real! Caresses are knowledge. The lover's acts would be models of works.

So, swim! Plunge your head into that wave rolling toward you, breaking over you and rolling you.

For several moments I thought I would never be able to come out of the sea. It cast me up, sucked me back into its irresistible folds. The withdrawal of the huge wave that had heaved me onto the sand rolled the sand with me. In vain I dug my hands into the sand; it drained, gave way, sank down under my whole body.

While I was still struggling feebly, an even larger wave came in and threw me like flotsam to the edge of this perilous place. At last I walked along the wide beach, shivering, and drinking the wind. It was a southwester, which caught the waves broadside, curled and ruffled them, covered them with scales, and burdened them with a net of smaller waves which they carried from the horizon to the breakwater and the surf.

A happy man with bare feet, I walked, drunk with walking on the mirror continually repolished by the infinitely thin wave.

And now I shall raise somewhat the tone of these confidences.

The port, the boats, the fish and their odors, swimming—they were only a kind of prelude. Now I would like to try

to tell you about a profounder action of the sea on my mind. It is difficult to be precise in these matters. I am not fond of the word *influence*, which indicates ignorance or a hypothesis, and plays a great and convenient role in criticism. But I will tell you what is evident to me.

Certainly nothing so formed me, permeated me, instructed—or constructed—me as those hours stolen from study, hours seemingly idle but really given over to the unconscious worship of three or four undeniable gods: the Sea, the Sky, the Sun. Without knowing it, I recaptured something of the wonder and exaltation of primitive man. I do not know what book could match or what writer incite in us such states of productive wonder, of contemplation and communion, as I experienced in my early years. Better than any reading, better than the poets or the philosophers, a certain close observation without any definite or definable thought, a certain lingering over the pure elements of the moment, over the vastest and simplest objects, the most powerfully simple and perceptible in our sphere of existence —the habit this imposes on us of unconsciously relating every event, every person, every expression and every detail to the greatest and most stable of visible things, moulds us, accustoms and induces us to measure without effort and without reflection the true proportions of our nature, to find within ourselves without difficulty the way to our highest level, which is also the most "human." In some way, within ourselves, we possess a measure of all things and of ourselves. Protagoras' statement that *man is the measure of all things* is characteristic and essentially Mediterranean.

What did he mean? What does it mean to measure?

Is it not to substitute for the object we are measuring the symbol of a human act whose repetition obliterates this

object? To say that man is the measure of all things is thus to set up against the diversity of the world the ensemble or group of human potentialities; and it is also to set up against the diversity of our moments and the mobility of our impressions, and even the particularity of our individuality, our own unique and, as it were, specialized person confined in our local and fragmentary life, a ME who sums it up, dominates and contains it, as a law contains the particular case, as the sense of our own powers contains all the acts possible to us.

We are conscious of this universal Self, who is not our accidental self, determined by the coincidence of an infinite number of conditions and chances, for (between you and me) how many things in us seem to have been drawn by lot! . . . But I say we can feel, *when we deserve to feel*, this universal Self who has neither name nor history, and for whom our observable life, the life received and lived or undergone by us, is only one of the innumerable lives that this same Self might have adopted. . . .

You must excuse me. I have allowed myself to be carried away.' . . . But do not imagine that this is "philosophy." I do not have the honor of being a philosopher. . . .

If I allowed myself to be carried away, it was because to look at the sea is to look at the possible. . . . But to look at the possible is, if not quite philosophy, at least a germ of philosophy, philosophy in a nascent state.

Ask yourself how a philosophic thought could originate. As for me, I never attempt to reply when I ask myself this question, for my mind carries me at once to the shore of a marvelously luminous sea. There, the perceptible elements (or aliments) of the state of mind from which the most

general thought, the most comprehensive question germinates, are brought together: light and space, leisure and rhythm, transparency and depth. . . . Do you not see that our mind experiences at such a time, discovers in that prospect and that harmony of conditions, all the qualities and all the attributes of knowledge: clarity, depth, expanse, measure. . . . What it sees represents for it what is in its essence to possess or to desire. The mind's contemplation of the sea engenders a vaster desire than any that can be satisfied by the possession of a particular thing.

It is as if the mind were beguiled, initiated into universal thought. Do not imagine that I am now leading you into subtleties. It is known that all our abstractions originate in such personal and individual experiences; the words that compose our most abstract thoughts are taken from the simplest common language, words we have corrupted by using them to philosophize. Do you know that the Latin word from which we have taken the word *monde* ["world"] means simply "adornment"? And you certainly know that the words *hypothèse* ["hypothesis"], *substance* ["substance"], *âme* ["soul"], *esprit* ["mind" or "spirit"], *idée* ["idea"] or words like *penser* ["think"], *comprendre* ["understand"], are the names of elementary acts such as *placing*, *putting*, *seizing*, *breathing*, or *seeing*, which little by little took on extraordinary meanings or overtones, or on the other hand were progressively stripped until they lost whatever would prevent combining them with almost unlimited freedom. The notion of *peser* ["weighing"] has almost disappeared from the notion of *penser* ["thinking"], and *respiration* ["breathing"] is no longer suggested by the words for *esprit* and *âme*. The creation of abstractions, which the history of language teaches us are repeated in our personal experience,

and it is by the same process that the sky, the sea, and the sun (which a while ago I called pure elements of the moment) suggested or imposed on contemplative minds the notions of infinity, depth, knowledge, universe—ever the subjects of metaphysics or physical speculation and whose very simple origin I see in the presence of exuberant light, space, movement, in the constant impression of majesty and omnipotence and sometimes of superior caprice, sublime wrath, or chaos among the elements always ending in triumph and the resurrection of light and peace.

I have just spoken of the sun. But have you ever looked at the sun? I do not recommend it. I tried it once, in my heroic days, and thought I would lose my sight. But I repeat, have you ever thought of the immediate importance of the sun? I do not mean the sun of astrophysics, the sun of astronomers, or the sun as the essential agent of life on this planet, but simply the *sun as sensation, sovereign phenomenon,* and its effect on the formation of our ideas. We never think of the influence of this conspicuous body. . . . Imagine the impression that such a star must have made on primitive minds. All that we see is *composed* by it, and by composition I mean an order of visible things and the slow transformation of that order which constitutes the entire spectacle of a day: the sun, master of shadows, at once part and moment, a dazzling part, and every dominant moment of the celestial sphere must have imposed on the first reflections of humanity the model of a transcendent power, a single master. Moreover, this peerless object, which hides in its own blinding light, played an equal role, visible and convincing, in the fundamental ideas of science. The observation of the shadows it casts must have served as the basis for a complete geometry, the kind called *projective.* This no doubt would not have been

thought of under an eternally clouded sky; nor could the measure of time have been instituted, another primitive conquest first accomplished by observation of the displacement of the shadow of the *stylos*, and there is no physical instrument more ancient or venerable than a pyramid or an obelisk—gigantic gnomons, monuments whose character was at the same time religious, scientific, and social.

So the sun introduced the idea of supereminent omnipotence, and the idea of the order and universal unity of nature.

You see how it is that a clear sky, a distinct horizon, and an admirable shoreline can not only be the conditions for attracting life and the development of civilization, but they can stimulate the particular intellectual sensitivity that is scarcely distinct from thought.

And now I come to the dominant idea which will sum up what I have said and which for me is the conclusion of what I will call "my Mediterranean experience." I will do no more than specify a notion that is widely known, after all—that the Mediterranean, by reason of its physical features, has played a role or function in the formation of the European mind, of historical Europe, insofar as the European spirit has modified the entire human world.

The physical nature of the Mediterranean, with its resources and relations determined by it or imposed upon it, is at the source of the astonishing psychological and technical transformation, which in only a few centuries has sharply distinguished Europeans from other men, and modern times from earlier centuries. It was the Mediterraneans who were the first to take sure steps along the way toward precision in methods, in search of the necessity of controlling phenomena

by the deliberate use of the powers of the mind, and who started the human race on the extraordinary adventure we are still living, whose developments no one can predict and whose most remarkable trait—and perhaps the most disturbing—is our increasingly marked estrangement from the initial or natural conditions of life.

The vast role played by the Mediterranean in this transformation which spread to all mankind can be explained (in so far as anything can be explained) by a few simple observations.

Our sea is a limited basin; any point on its shore can be reached from any other in a few days of coastal sailing or overland travel.

Three "parts of the world," that is to say, three very dissimilar worlds, enclose this vast salty lake, with many islands in its eastern part. There is no noticeable tide, or if noticeable it is almost negligible. The sky is rarely clouded for long—a happy circumstance for the navigator.

Finally, this enclosed sea, on the scale of primitive man and his means, is situated entirely in the temperate zone, the most fortunate situation on the globe.

The populations living along its shores are extremely diverse, differing in temperaments, sensibilities, and intellectual capacities, and living in close contact. Thanks to the ease of movement I spoke of, these people kept up relations of all sorts: war, commerce, trade (whether voluntary or not), of things, knowledge, and methods; they mingled their blood, their speech, their legends and traditions. The number of ethnic elements thrown together or in contrast throughout the ages, their customs, languages, beliefs, laws, and constitutions have engendered an incomparable vitality in the Mediterranean world. Here competition (one of the most

striking characteristics of the modern era) reached a singular intensity very early: competition in markets, influences, religions. In no other region of the globe has there been such a variety of conditions and elements brought so close together, creating a richness again and again renewed.

All the essential factors of European civilization are products of these circumstances—that is, local circumstances have had effects (and recognizable effects) of universal interest and value. In particular the formation of the human personality, an ideal of the most complete and perfect development of man, was sketched out and realized on our shores. Man as the measure of all things; man as the political element and member of the city; man as a juridical entity defined by law; man as equal to any other man before God, and considered *sub specie aeternitatis*—these are almost entirely Mediterranean creations whose far-reaching effects need not be recounted.

Whether in the realm of natural or of civil laws, the type itself was defined by Mediterranean minds. Nowhere else was the power of language, conscientiously disciplined and directed, so fully and usefully employed; language ordered by logic, employed in the discovery of abstract truths, constructing the universe of geometry or the relations which allow for justice; or, again, mistress of the forum, the essential political means and a regular instrument for the acquisition or the conservation of power.

Nothing is more admirable than to see, within only a few centuries, the most valuable and among them the purest of intellectual inventions deriving from these coastal people. It was here that science broke away from empiricism and practical use, here that art cast off its symbolic origins, that

literature was clearly differentiated and divided into distinct genres, and that philosophy tried almost all the possible ways to consider the universe and to consider itself.

Never and nowhere else, in an area so restricted and in so brief an interval of time has such a fermentation of minds, such a production of riches been observed.