CONTENTS

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.

INDEX