FIRST, SUFFERING

"The universe cries. The concrete blocks of a wall bear a record of the violence with which they have been struck. Concrete cries. Grass moans between the teeth of animals. And man? What shall we say of man?"
The world is suffering unfolded. At its origin it is a node of suffering. All existence is an expansion, and a crushing. All things suffer into existence. Nothingness vibrates with pain until it arrives at being, in an abject paroxysm. Beings diversify and become complex without losing anything of their original nature. Once a certain level of consciousness is reached, the cry is produced. Poetry derives from it. Articulate language, equally. The first step for the poet is to return to the origin; that is, to suffering. The modalities of suffering are important; they are not essential. All suffering is good. All suffering is useful. All suffering bears fruit. All suffering is a universe.

Henri is one year old. He is lying on the floor. His diapers are dirty. He is bawling. His mother is walking back and forth, her heels clicking against the tiles of the floor, looking for her bra and her skirt. She is in a hurry to go to her evening rendezvous. This little thing covered with shit, moving around on the tiles, exasperates her. She begins to cry herself. Henri bawls all the more. Then she goes out. Henri has got off to a good start in his career as a poet.

Marc is ten years old. His father is dying of cancer in the hospital. This pile of worn machinery, with tubes going down the throat, and intravenous drips: this is his father. Only his eyes are alive; they express suffering and fear. Marc suffers too. He too is afraid. He loves his father. And at the same time he is beginning to wish that his father would die, and to feel guilty about it.

Marc has work to do. He should cultivate in himself this suffering, so particular and so fertile: this Most Holy Guilt. Michel is fifteen. He has never been kissed by a girl. He would like to dance with Sylvie, but Sylvie is dancing with Patrice, and she is manifestly enjoying it. He is frozen. The music penetrates to the deepest core of his being. It is a magnificent slow dance of surreal beauty. He never knew he could suffer so much. His childhood, up until now, had been happy.

Michel will never forget the contrast between his heart, frozen with suffering, and the overwhelming beauty of the music. His sensibility is being formed.

If the world is composed of suffering, this is because it is, essentially, free. Suffering is the necessary consequence of the free play of the parts of the system. You ought to know this; you ought to say it.

It will not be possible for you to transform this suffering into a goal. Suffering is, and by consequence can never become a goal. In the wounds which it inflicts upon us, life alternates between the brutal and the insidious. Know these two forms. Study them closely. Acquire a complete knowledge of them. Distinguish that which separates them, and that which unites them. Many contradictions will then be resolved. Your voice will gain in force, and in amplitude. Given the characteristics of the modern era, love can scarcely manifest itself anymore. Yet the ideal of love has not diminished. Being, like all ideals, fundamentally atemporal, it can neither diminish nor disappear.

Whence a particularly striking discordance between real and ideal, and a particularly rich source of suffering.

The adolescent years are important. Once you have developed a sufficiently ideal, noble, and perfect sense of love, you are done for.

Nothing, henceforth, will suffice.

If you do not date women (whether through shyness, ugliness, or for some other reason), read women’s magazines. You will experience suffering that is almost equivalent. Go right to the bottom of the absence of love. Cultivate self-hatred. Hatred of oneself, contempt for others. Hatred of others, contempt for oneself. Mix it all up. Form a synthesis. In the tumult of life, always be the loser. The universe is like a discotheque. Accumulate frustrations in great number. To learn to become a poet is to learn how to live.

Love your past or hate it, but let it remain present to you. You should acquire a complete knowledge of yourself. Thus, little by little, your deep self will detach itself from you, and slip beyond the sun, while your body will remain in place, swollen, blistered, irritated, ripe for new sufferings.

Life is a series of destruction tests. Pass the first of them, and fail the later ones. Ruin your life, but not by much. And suffer, always suffer. You should learn to feel the pain in every one of your pores. Each fragment of the universe should be a personal injury to you. And yet, you must stay alive—at least for a certain time. Timidity is not to be looked down upon. It has been considered the sole source of inner wealth; this is not far wrong. In fact, it is in the moment of delay between will and act that interesting mental phenomena begin to be manifest. The man for whom this delay is absent remains little more than an animal. Timidity is an excellent point of departure for a poet.

Develop in yourself a profound resentment toward life. This resentment is necessary for any veritable artistic creation. Sometimes, it is true, life will appear to you as simply an incongruous experience. But your resentment should never be far, never out of reach—even if you choose not to express it. And return always to the origin, which is suffering.

When you provoke in others a mixture of horrified pity and contempt, you will know that you are on the right track. You can begin to write.

TO ARTICULATE

"A force becomes movement once it enters into action and develops in time."

If you do not succeed in articulating your suffering within a well-defined structure, you are done for. Suffering will swallow you whole, from the inside, before you have had the time to write anything at all. Structure is the sole means of escaping suicide. And suicide resolves nothing. Imagine if Baudelaire had succeeded in his attempt at suicide, at twenty-four. Believe in structure. Believe in the ancient metrics, equally. Versification is a powerful tool for the liberation of the inner life.

Do not feel obliged to invent a new form. New forms are rare. One per century is already a brisk pace. And it is not necessarily the greatest poets who are at the origin of them. Poetry is not a reworking of language, not essentially. Words are the responsibility of society as a whole. Most new forms are not produced from scratch, but by slow
deviation from an antecedent form. The tool is adapted, little by little; it undergoes light modifications; the novelty which results from their conjoined effect generally does not appear until the end, once the work is written. It is entirely comparable to the evolution of species. You will emit, at first, inarticulate cries. And you will often be tempted to regress to that stage. This is normal. Poetry, in reality, proceeds articulate language, though not by much. Plunge again into inarticulate cries, each time you feel the need. It is a rejuvenating bath. But do not forget: if you do not manage, at least from time to time, to emerge from it, you will die. The human organism has its limits. At the height of your suffering, you will not be able to write. If you feel you have it in you to do so, try all the same. The result will probably be bad—probably, but not certainly. Never work. Writing poems is not work; it is a charge. If the use of a specific form (the alexandrine, for example) requires an effort, renounce it. This type of effort never pays off. The same cannot be said of the general, on-going, and consistent effort to overcome apathy. This is indispensable. On the matter of form, never hesitate to contradict yourself. Bifurcate, change direction as often as necessary. Do not try too hard to have a coherent personality; this personality exists, whether you like it or not. Neglect nothing which could possibly procure for you a modicum of equilibrium. In any case, happiness is not for you; this has been established, and for quite some time. But if you can manage to grasp one of its simulacra, do so. Without hesitation. In any case, it will not last. Your existence is nothing more than a tissue of sufferings. You think you can manage to lay them out in a coherent form. Your objective, at this stage: to live long enough to do it. TO SURVIVE

"The literary career is all the same the only one where you can make no money without looking ridiculous."
(Jules Renard)

A dead poet does not write. Whence the importance of remaining alive. This simple reasoning will sometimes be difficult for you to adhere to. In particular during periods of prolonged creative sterility. Your clinging to life will appear, at these times, painfully pointless; in any case, you will not be writing.

To this, only one reply: ultimately, you know nothing about it. If you examine yourself honestly, you will have to agree. Strange cases have been known to occur.

If you are no longer writing, this is perhaps a prelude to a change of form. Or a change of theme. Or both. Or it is perhaps, in effect, a prelude to your creative death. But you know nothing about it. You will never really know this part of yourself which compels you to write. You will know it only through contradictory forms which merely approach it. Egotism or devotion? Cruelty or compassion? Any of these possibilities could be argued for. Proof that, ultimately, you know nothing about it; thus, do not behave as if you did. Before your own ignorance, before this mysterious part of yourself, remain honest and humble.

Not only do poets who live to an old age produce more work overall, but old age is the seat of particular physical and mental processes, of which it would be a shame to be ignorant.

That said, survival is extremely difficult. One could consider adopting what could be called Pessoa’s strategy: find a little job, publish nothing, and await death peacefully. In practice, one would be going forward to meet significant difficulties: the feeling that one is wasting one’s time, that one is not in one’s place, that one is not being esteemed at one’s true value. . . All this would rapidly become unbearable. Drinking would be difficult to avoid. In the end, bitterness and acrimony would wear you down in wait at the end of the road, soon to be followed by apathy and irreversible creative sterility. This solution, then, has its disadvantages, but it is generally the only one. Do not forget psychiatrists, who have at their disposal the power to grant sick-leave. However, a prolonged stay at a psychiatric hospital is to be proscribed: too destructive. One should use this only as a last resort, as an alternative to destitution. The mechanisms of the welfare state (unemployment payments, etc.) should be taken full advantage of, as well as the financial support of friends who are better off. Do not cultivate excessive guilt with regard to this. The poet is a sacred parasite.

The poet is a sacred parasite: like the scarabs of ancient Egypt, he can thrive upon the body of wealthy societies in a state of decay. Yet he also has his place at the heart of frugal and strong societies. You do not have to fight. Boxers fight, not poets. All the same, it is necessary to publish a little bit; this is a necessary condition for posthumous recognition to take place. If you do not publish a certain minimal amount (be it only a handful of texts in some second-rate review), you will go unnoticed by posterity—just as unnoticed as you were during your life. Even the most perfect genius must leave behind a trace; leave it to the literary archaeologists to exhume the rest. This can fail; it often fails. You should repeat to yourself at least once a day that the important thing is to do your best. Studying the biographies of your favorite poets may be useful to you; this may permit you to avoid certain errors. Never forget that as a general rule, there is no good solution to the problem of material survival, although there are many very bad ones.

The problem of where you spend your life will generally not present itself; you will live where you can. Try simply to avoid overly noisy neighbors, who are capable quite by themselves of bringing on a definitive intellectual death. A little professional experience can provide some knowledge, usable eventually in a later work, about the functioning of society. But a period of destitution, where you would plunge into marginality, can provide other kinds of knowledge. The idea is to alternate.

Other realities of life—such as a harmonious sex life, marriage, and children—are both beneficial and fruitful. But these are almost impossible to attain: as far as art is concerned, they are virtually unknown territories. In a general way, you will be tossed back and forth between bitterness and anguish. In both cases, alcohol will help. The important thing is to obtain the few moments of remission that will permit the realization of your œuvre. They will be brief; make an effort to seize them.

Have no fear of happiness; it does not exist.

STRIKE WHERE IT COUNTS "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."
(II Timothy 2:15)

Do not pursue knowledge for its own sake. All that which does not precede directly from emotion is, in poetry, of no value. (The word "emotion" should be understood, of course, in the broadest sense. Certain emotions are neither agreeable nor disagreeable; this is in general the case with the feeling of strangeness.) Emotion abolishes the causal chain. It alone is capable of making possible the perception of things in themselves. The transmission of this perception is the object of all poetry. This shared goal of philosophy and poetry is the source of the secret complicity which links the two. This does not
manifest itself essentially through the writing of philosophical poems; poetry must discover reality in its own, purely intuitive ways, without passing through the filler of an intellectual reconstruction of the world. Much less through philosophy expressed in poetic form, which is most often nothing other than a miserable dupery. Yet it is always among poets that a new philosophy finds its most serious, most attentive, and most fruitful readers. Likewise, only certain philosophers will be capable of discerning, of bringing to light, and of using the truths hidden in poetry. It is in poetry, almost as much as in direct contemplation—and much more than in antecedent philosophies—that they will find material for new representations of the world.

Respect philosophers; do not imitate them. Your path, unfortunately, lies elsewhere. It is indissociable from neurosis. The poetic experience and the neurotic experience are two paths which cross, intersect, and most often end up merging; this by dissolution of poetic are in the bloody torrent of neurosis. But you have no choice. There is no other way.

Your unceasing working over of your obsessions will end up transforming you into a pathetic wreck, consumed by anguish and devasted by apathy. But, I repeat, there is no other way. You must attain the point of no return. Break the circle. And produce some poems, before crushing yourself into the ground. You will have glimpsed immense spaces. Every great passion opens up a prospect on eternity.

Ultimately, love resolves all problems. Likewise, every great passion leads ultimately to a zone of truth. To a different space, an extremely painful one, but from which one can see far, and clearly. Where purified objects appear in all their clarity, their limpid truth. Believe in the identity of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good.

The goal of the society where you live is to destroy you. You have the same goal with regard to society. The weapon that it will use is indifference. You cannot allow yourself to have the same attitude. Attack!

All societies have their points of least resistance, their wounds. Put your finger on the wound, and press down hard. Delve into the subjects that no one wants to hear about. The other side of the scenery. Insist upon sickness, agony, ugliness. Speak of death, and of oblivion. Of jealousy, of indifference, of frustration, of the absence of love. Be abject, and you will be true.

Belong to nothing. Or else belong, and then immediately betray. No theoretical engagement should hold you up for very long. Militancy makes one happy, and yours is not to be happy. You are on the side of unhappiness; you are the dark adversary.

Your mission is not, above all, to propose, neither is it to construct. If you can do this, do it. If you end up with insupportable contradictions, say so. Because your most profound mission is to delve toward the True. You are the grave-digger, and you are the cadaver. You are the body of society. You are responsible for the body of society. You are all responsible, in equal measure. Embrace the earth, you scum!

Determine innocence, and guilt. First in yourself; this will furnish you with a guide. But also in others. Consider their behavior, and their excuses; then judge, in all impartiality. You have not spared yourself; spare no one. You are rich. You know Good, you know Evil. Never renounce the separation of the two. Do not get bogged down in tolerance, that poor stigma of the age. Poetry is capable of establishing definitive moral truths. You should hate liberty with all your force.

The truth is scandalous. But without it, nothing has any worth. An honest and naive vision of the world is already a masterpiece. Compared with this prerequisite, originality matters little. Do not preoccupy yourself with it. In any event, a certain originality will necessarily emerge from the sum of your defects. Of that with which you are concerned, simply say the truth; simply say the truth, neither more nor less.

You cannot love the truth and the world. But you have already chosen. The problem now is to adhere to this choice. I urge you to keep up your courage. Not that you have the least cause for hope. On the contrary, know that you will be very alone. Most people come to terms with life, or else they die. You are living suicides.

As you approach the truth, your solitude will increase. The edifice is splendid, but deserted. You are walking through empty halls, which send back to you the echo of your footsteps. The atmosphere is limpid and invariable; the objects seem turned to statues. At times you begin to weep, so cruel is the clarity of your vision. You would love to turn back, into the fog of ignorance, but ultimately you know that it is already too late.

Continue. Have no fear. The worst is already past. To be sure, life will tear you apart again, but, from your point of view, you do not really have that much more to do with life. Remember this: fundamentally, you are already dead. You are now face to face with eternity.

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