Two Criminal Records photographs have turned up. In one of them I am sixteen or seventeen years old. I am wearing, under a jacket of the Assistance Publique, a torn sweater. My face is an oval, very pure; my nose is smashed, flattened by a punch in some forgotten fight. The look on my face is blasé, sad and warm, very serious. My hair was thick and unruly. Seeing myself at that age, I expressed my feelings almost aloud:

“Poor little fellow, you’ve suffered.”

I was speaking kindly of another Jean who was not myself. I suffered at the time from an ugliness I no longer find on my childhood face. Nevertheless, crass insolence—I was brazen—launched me forth into life with ease. If I was anxious, it was not apparent at first. But at twilight, when I was weary, my head would sink, and I would feel my gaze lingering on the world and merging with it or else turning inward and disappearing; I think it knew my utter solitude. When I was a farm-hand, when I was a soldier, when I was at the orphanage, despite the friendship and, occasionally, the affection of my masters, I was alone, rigorously so. Prison offered me the first consolation, the first peace, the first friendly confusion: I experienced them in the realm of foulness. Much solitude had forced me to become my own companion. Envisaging the external world, its indefiniteness, its confusion, which is even more perfect at night, I set it up as a divinity of which I was not only the cherished pretext, an object of great care and caution, chosen and led in masterly fashion, though through painful and exhausting ordeals, to the verge of despair, but also the sole object of all this labor. And little by little, through a kind of operation which I can not quite describe, without modifying the dimensions of my body, and perhaps because it was easier to contain so precious a reason for such glory, it was within me that I established this divinity—origin and disposition of myself. I swallowed it. I dedicated to it songs of my own invention. At night I would whistle. The melody was a religious one. It was slow. Its rhythm was somewhat heavy. I thought that I was thereby entering into communication with God: which is what happened, God being only the hope and fervor contained in my song. Along the streets, with my hands in my pockets, my head drooping or held high, looking at houses or trees, I would whistle my clumsy hymns, not joyous, but not sad either: sober. I discovered that hope is merely the expression one gives to it. Likewise, protection. Never would I have whistled to a light rhythm. I recognized the religious themes: they create Venus, Mercury, or the Virgin.

In the second photo I am thirty years old. My face has hardened. The jaws are accentuated. The mouth is bitter and mean. I look like a hoodlum in spite of my eyes, which have remained gentle. Their gentleness is almost indiscernible because of the fixity of gaze imposed upon me by the official photographer. By means of these two pictures I can see the violence with which I was filled at the time: from the age of sixteen to thirty. In children’s hells, in prisons, in bars, it was not heroic adventure that I sought; I pursued my identification with the handsomest and most unfortunate criminals. I wanted to be the young prostitute who accompanies her lover to Siberia or the one who survives him, not in order to avenge him, but in order to mourn him and magnify his memory.
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