FOR THE LONGEST TIME it was nothing more than a name to me. My parents had moved to the village in question at a point in time when I no longer went to see them. From time to time, while traveling abroad, I would send them a postcard, all that remained of an effort to sustain a connection that for my part I wished as tenuous as possible. While writing their address, I might briefly wonder what the place where they now lived was like, but my curiosity went no further than that. On those rare occasions when I spoke to my mother on the telephone—perhaps once or twice every few months, perhaps less—she would ask me, “When are you coming to visit?” I would give a vague answer, mentioning how busy I was, promising to come soon. But I had no intention of doing so. I had left my family behind and had no desire to return to it.

So it was only quite recently that I came to know Muizon. It was pretty much as I had expected: a typical instance of a certain kind of “rurbanization,” one of those semi-urban spaces built out in the middle of the fields, where it is difficult to tell if it is still part of the countryside or if, with the passage of time, it has become something like a suburb. At the beginning of the 1950s, I have since learned, it had no more than 50 inhabitants. They were clustered together around a church, parts of which dated to
the twelfth century, having survived the devastation due to the endless stream of wars that has washed over the northeast of France, a region with, in Claude Simon’s words, “a particular status,” where names of towns and villages seem synonymous with “battles” or “armed camps” or “muffled cannon fire” or “vast cemeteries.”¹ These days more than two thousand people live in Muizon, between, on the one side, the Route du Champagne, which begins quite close by to wind its way through vine-covered hillsides, and, on the other, a grim-looking industrial zone, part of the outskirts of Reims, which is about a fifteen or twenty minute car ride away. New streets have been laid down, lined with identical houses, built in groups of two. Most of these are public housing; their tenants are far from rich. My parents lived there for twenty years without me ever making up my mind to go see them. I finally found myself in this municipality—I’m not sure exactly how to refer to a place like this—and inside my parents’ small house only after my father had left it, my mother having found him a place in a nursing facility for Alzheimer’s patients, where he would reside until his death. She had put off the inevitable moment as long as possible, until finally, worn out and frightened (one day he had grabbed a kitchen knife and attacked her), she gave in to what had become increasingly obvious: she had no other options. It was only once he was no longer in the house that it became possible for me to undertake this return voyage, or maybe I should say, to begin the process of returning, something I had never been able to make up my mind to do before. It was a rediscovery of that “region of myself,” as Genet would have said, from which I had worked so hard to escape: a social space I had kept at a distance, a mental space in opposition to which I had constructed the person I had become,
and yet which remained an essential part of my being. So I returned to see my mother and this turned out to be the beginning of a reconciliation with her. Or, to be more precise, it began a process of reconciliation with myself, with an entire part of myself that I had refused, rejected, denied.

My mother spoke with me at great length during the several visits I made in the course of the next few months. She spoke of herself, of her childhood, her adolescence, her life as a married woman... She also spoke to me about my father, how they met, what their relationship was like, of the different periods in their lives, the harshness of the jobs they had worked in. She had so much to tell me that her words tumbled out rapidly in an endless stream. She seemed intent on making up for lost time, erasing in one swoop all the sadness represented for her by those many conversations between us that had never happened. I would listen, seated across from her, drinking my coffee, attentive when she was talking about herself, much less so when she got caught up in describing the doings of her grandchildren, my nephews, whom I had never met, and in whom I wasn’t much interested. Between the two of us a relationship was being reestablished. Something in me was being repaired. I could also see how difficult the distance I had kept had been for her to deal with. I understood that she had suffered from it. How had it been for me, the person responsible for it? Had I not also suffered, but in a different way, one delineated in the Freudian vision of “melancholy,” associated with an unavoidable mourning of the various possibilities one sets aside, the various identifications one rejects? Such possibilities and such identifications remain in the self as one of its constitutive elements. Whatever you have uprooted yourself from or been uprooted from still endures as an integral
part of who or what you are. Perhaps a sociological vocabulary would do a better job than a psychoanalytic one of describing what the metaphors of mourning and of melancholy allows one to evoke in terms that are simple, but also misleading and inadequate: how the traces of what you were as a child, the manner in which you were socialized, persist even when the conditions in which you live as an adult have changed, even when you have worked so hard to keep that past at a distance. And so, when you return to the environment from which you came—which you left behind—you are somehow turning back upon yourself, returning to yourself, rediscovering an earlier self that has been both preserved and denied. Suddenly, in circumstances like these, there rises to the surface of your consciousness everything from which you imagined you had freed yourself and yet which you cannot not recognize as part of the structure of your personality—specifically the discomfort that results from belonging to two different worlds, worlds so far separated from each other that they seem irreconcilable, and yet which coexist in everything that you are. This is a melancholy related to a “split habitus,” to invoke Bourdieu’s wonderful, powerful concept. Strangely enough, it is precisely at the moment in which you try to get past this diffuse and hidden kind of malaise, to get over it, or when you try at least to allay it a bit, that it pushes even more strongly to the fore, and that the melancholy associated with it redoubles its force. The feelings involved have always been there, a fact that you discover or rediscover at this key moment; they were lurking deep inside, doing their work, working on you. Is it ever possible to overcome this malaise, to assuage this melancholy?
When I telephoned my mother a little after midnight on December 31 that year to wish her a happy new year, she announced: “The nursing home just called me. Your father died an hour ago.” I didn’t love him. I never had. I had known that he only had months, and then days, to live, and yet I had made no effort to see him one last time. What would have been the point, really, since he wouldn’t have recognized me? It had, in any case, been years since either of us had really recognized the other. The gap that had begun to separate us when I was a teenager had only grown wider with the passage of time, to the point where we were basically strangers. There was nothing between us, nothing that held us together. At least that is what I believed, or struggled to believe; it had been my idea that one could live one’s life separate from one’s family, reinventing oneself and turning one’s back on the past and the people in it.

At the time, it seemed to me that for my mother his death was a kind of liberation. My father had been sinking more and more deeply day by day into a state of physical and mental decay, and it could only get worse. It was an inexorable process. There was no chance of a cure. He alternated between periods of dementia during which he fought with his nurses, and long periods of torpor, doubtless due in part to the drugs he was given when he became agitated. During these subdued periods he would not speak or walk or eat. In any case, he remembered nothing and no one. His sisters found it enormously difficult to visit him (two of them were too frightened to return after their first visit), as did my three brothers. As for my mother, who had to drive twenty kilometers to the nursing home, her devotion astonished me. It was astonishing because I knew that her feelings for him were—and, for as long as I can remember had always
been—made up of a mixture of hatred and disgust. I am not exaggerating: hatred and disgust. Yet for her, this was a duty. It was her own image of herself that was at stake. “I can’t just leave him there all alone,” she would repeat each time I asked her why she made a point of visiting the nursing home every day, even after he no longer knew who she was. She had put up on the door of his room a photograph of the two of them together and pointed it out to him regularly. “Do you know who that is?” He would reply, “It’s the lady who takes care of me.”

Two or three years earlier, the news of my father’s condition had provoked in me a huge attack of anxiety. Not really so much for him—it was too late and, in any case, I felt very little towards him, not even compassion. Rather, selfishly, I was worried about myself. Was this a hereditary condition? Would it soon be my turn? I set myself to reciting all the poems or scenes from classical tragedy that I had learned by heart to see if I still knew them: “Songe, songe, Céphise, à cette nuit cruelle qui fut pour tout un peuple une nuit éternelle…”;² “Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches/ Et puis voici mon cœur…”;³ “L’espace à soi pareil, qu’il s’accroisse ou se nie/Roule dans cet ennui…”⁴ No sooner would I forget a line than I would tell myself, “It’s started.” I have yet to rid myself of this obsession. As soon as my memory stumbles over a name or a date or a telephone number, I become uneasy. I see warning signs everywhere: I seek them out and I fear them in equal measure. There is a way in which my daily life is now haunted by Alzheimer’s—a ghost arriving from the past in order to frighten me by showing me what is still to come. In this way, my father remains present in my existence. It
seems a strange way indeed for someone who has died to survive within the brain—the very place in which the threat is located—of one of his sons. Lacan writes remarkably in one of his *Seminars* of this door that opens onto anxiety for children, or at least for sons, at the moment of their father’s death, for then the son finds himself on the front lines facing death alone. Alzheimer’s adds a more ordinary, day-to-day kind of fear to this ontological anxiety: you are always on the lookout for symptoms, ready to turn them into a diagnosis.

Yet my life is not only haunted by the future; there are also the ghosts of my own past, ghosts which leapt into view immediately upon the death of the person who incarnated everything I wanted to run away from, everything I wanted to break with. My father certainly constituted for me a kind of negative social model, a reference point against which I had performed all the work I undertook as I struggled to create myself. In the days that followed his death, I set to thinking about my childhood, about my adolescence, about all the reasons that had led me to hate the man who had just died and whose end, along with the unexpected emotions it provoked in me, woke in my memory so many different images I had believed forgotten. (Or perhaps I had known on some level that I hadn’t forgotten them, even if I had made an effort, a quite conscious one, to repress them.) Some people might remark that this is something that happens during any period of mourning. It might even be said to be a universal feature of mourning, an essential characteristic of it, especially when it is parents who are being mourned. Even if that is the case, I had a strange way of experiencing it: a kind of mourning in which the urge to understand something about the person who had passed away and something about
the person—myself—who has survived predominates over any sadness. Other losses, earlier ones, had affected me more deeply and caused me much deeper distress—the loss of friends, of people I had made the choice to be involved with, people whose sudden disappearance ripped something from the fabric of my daily life. Unlike these relationships I had chosen, whose strength and stability came from the fact that the parties involved ardently desired to perpetuate them (a feature which explains the feeling of dejection that occurs when they are cut off), my relationship with my father seemed to me to be only a biological and a legal one: he had fathered me, and I bore his name, but other than that he didn’t much matter to me. Reading the notes in which Roland Barthes kept a daily record of the despair that enveloped him when his mother died, of the unbearable suffering that then transformed his life, I am struck by the degree to which the feelings that took hold of me when my father died differ from his despair and affliction. “I’m not mourning, I’m suffering,” he writes as a way of expressing his refusal of a psychoanalytic approach to understanding what happens after the death of a loved one. What was happening to me? Like Barthes, I could say that I was not “in mourning” (in the Freudian sense of working through something in a psychic temporality where the initial pain gradually lessens). But nor was I experiencing an indelible suffering on which time could have no effect. What, then, was going on? A state of confusion and disarray, perhaps, produced by something being called into question, something both personal and political, something about one’s social destiny, about the way society is divided into classes, about the role played by a number of different social determinants in the constitution of individual
subjectivities, something to do with individual psychologies, with the relations that exist between individuals.

I did not attend my father’s funeral. I had no desire to see my brothers again, having been out of touch with them for thirty years. All I knew of them was what I could see in the framed photographs found all around the house in Muizon. So I knew what they looked like, how they had changed physically over the years. But what would it have been like to meet them again in these particular circumstances? “How he has changed,” we would all have been thinking about each other, desperately seeking in our appearance today the signs of what we looked like a while back, a good while back, when we were brothers, when we were young. The day after the funeral, I went and spent the afternoon with my mother. We spent a few hours chatting, seated in the armchairs in her living room. She had brought out from a cupboard some boxes filled with photographs. There were pictures of me, of course, as a young boy and a teenager—and of my brothers. There it was in front of my eyes again (but wasn’t it in fact still inscribed in my mind and in my flesh?), that working class environment I had grown up in, the incredible poverty that is palpable in the appearance of all the houses in the background, in the interiors, in the clothes everyone is wearing, in the very bodies themselves. It is always startling to see to what an extent bodies in photographs from the past (and perhaps this is even more the case than for bodies we see in action or in situation in front of us) appear before our eyes as social bodies, bodies of a certain class. It can be equally startling to remark to what extent a photograph, a “souvenir,” by returning an individual—in this
case, me—to his or her familial past, ties that person to his or her social past. The private sphere in even its most intimate manifestations, when it resurfaces in old snapshots, can still serve to reinscribe us in the very particular social location from which we came, in places marked by class, in a topography in which that which you might take as belonging to the most fundamentally personal kinds of relations nonetheless plants you firmly in a collective history, a collective geography. (It is as if tracing any individual genealogy were somehow inseparable from uncovering a social archaeology, a social topology that is there in each of us, one of our most fundamental truths, even if not one of the ones we are most aware of.)
There was a question that had begun to trouble me a bit earlier, once I had taken the first steps on this return journey to Reims. I would manage to formulate it still more clearly and more precisely in the days that followed the afternoon of the day after my father's funeral, the one I spent with my mother going through old photographs: "Why, when I have written so much about processes of domination, have I never written about forms of domination based on class?" Or, "Why, when I have paid so much attention to the role played by feelings of shame in processes of subjection and subjectivation, have I written so little about forms of shame having to do with class?" Finally, it came to seem necessary to me to pose the question in these terms: "Why, when I have had such an intense experience of forms of shame related to class, shame in relation to the milieu in which I grew up, why, when once I had arrived in Paris and started meeting people from such different class backgrounds I would often find myself lying to them about my class origins, or feeling embarrassed when admitting my background in front of them, why had it never occurred to me to take up this problem in a book or an article?" Let me put it this way: it turned out to be much easier for me to write about shame linked to sexuality than about shame linked to class. It seemed that the idea of studying
the constitution of subordinated subjectivities, and, simultaneously, the establishment of a complicated relationship between remaining silent about oneself and making an "avowal" of who one is, had become these days valorized and valorizing, that it was even strongly encouraged in the contemporary political context—when it was sexuality that was in question. Yet the same kind of project was extremely difficult, and received no support from prevailing categories of social discourse, when it was a question of working-class social origins. I wanted to understand why this would be the case. Fleeing to the big city, to the capital, in order to be able to live out one's homosexuality is such a classic trajectory, quite common for young gay men. The chapter that I wrote on this phenomenon in Insult and the Making of the Gay Self can be read—as, in fact, the whole first section of that book can be—as an autobiography recast as historical and theoretical analysis, or, if you prefer, as a historical and theoretical analysis that is grounded in personal experience. But the "autobiography" in question was a partial one. A different historical and theoretical analysis would also have been possible beginning with a similarly reflexive look at the path I had followed. This is because the decision at the age of twenty to leave the town in which I was born and where I spent my adolescence in order to go live in Paris also represented part of a progressive change in my social milieu. On thinking the matter through, it doesn't seem exaggerated to assert that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might call a class closet. I mean by this that I took on the constraints imposed by a different kind of dissimulation; I took on a different kind of dissociative personality or double consciousness.
(with the same kinds of mechanisms familiar from the sexual closet: various subterfuges to cover one’s tracks, a very small set of friends who know the truth but keep it secret, the taking up of different registers of discourse in different situations and with different interlocutors, a constant self-surveillance as regards one’s gestures, one’s intonation, manners of speech, so that nothing untoward slips out, so that one never betrays oneself, and so on).

When, after writing a number of books dealing with the history of ideas (including my two books on Foucault), I began the project of writing about subjection, it was on my gay past that I chose to draw. I chose to reflect on the workings of subordination and “abjection” (how a person is “abjected” by the surrounding world) experienced by those of us who contravene the laws of sexual normality, thereby leaving aside everything in me, in my own existence, that could—and should—have led me to turn my gaze on relations of class, to class domination, to the processes of subjectivation linked to class affiliation and to the subordination of the working classes. Of course it’s not as if I totally neglected these questions in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, or in *Une morale du minoritaire* [A minoritarian morality] or in *Hérésies*. My ambition in these books was larger than the specific framework of the analyses found in them. I wanted to sketch out an anthropology of shame and from it to build up a theory of domination and of resistance, of subjection and subjectivation. Surely that is why, in *Une morale du minoritaire*, I kept juxtaposing the theoretical elaborations of Genêt, Jouhandeau, and several other writers who deal with sexual subordination with the thinking of Bourdieu on class subordination or of Fanon, Baldwin, and Chamoiseau on racial and colonial subordination.

Yet it remains the case that these dimensions are only dealt with
in the course of my demonstration as other parameters that contribute to an effort to understand what the fact of belonging to a sexual minority represents and carries along with it. I call on approaches produced in other contexts; I make an effort to extend the range of my analyses; but these other approaches remain a bit secondary. They are supplements—sometimes offering support, sometimes suggesting ways of extending my analysis. As I pointed out in the preface to *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, I wanted to transpose the notion of a class *habitus* developed by Pierre Bourdieu to the question of sexual *habitus*: do the forms of incorporation of the structures of the sexual order produce sexual *habitus* in the same way that the forms of incorporation of the structures of the social order produce class *habitus*? And even though any attempt to develop a response to a problem like this one must obviously confront the question of the articulation between sexual *habitus* and class *habitus*, my book was devoted to sexual subjectivation and not social or class subjectivation.

When I returned to Reims, I was confronted by the following question, a tenacious one I had not acknowledged (at least I had not really acknowledged it in my written work, or in my life): in taking as my point of theoretical departure—by which I mean establishing a framework for thinking about myself, my past, and my present—the seemingly obvious idea that the complete break I had made with my family was due to my homosexuality, to my father's deeply rooted homophobia, to the homophobia rampant in the milieu in which I was living (and doubtless all this was absolutely true), had I not at the same time offered
myself noble and incontestable reasons for avoiding the thought that this was just as much a break with the class background I came from?

In the course of my life, following the typical path of a young gay man who moves to the city, builds up new social networks, and learns what it means to be gay by discovering the gay world that already exists, inventing himself as gay on the basis of that discovery, I had also followed another path, a class-based one: this is the itinerary of those who are frequently labeled “class traitors.” And surely a “traitor” or a “renegade” is what I was, one whose only concern, a more or less permanent and more or less conscious one, was to put as much distance as possible between himself and his class of origin, to escape from the social surroundings of his childhood and his adolescence.8

Of course I retained a political solidarity with the world of my early years, to the extent that I never came to share the values of the dominant class. I always felt awkward or incensed when hearing people around me talking scornfully or flippantly about working class people and their habits and ways of life. After all, that's where I came from. I would also experience an immediate hatred on encountering the hostility that well-to-do, well-established people would express towards strikes, political activism, protests, and forms of popular resistance. Certain class reflexes persist despite all our efforts to separate ourselves from our social origins, even those efforts aimed at personal transformation. And on those occasions in my daily life, rare but not non-existent,
in which I gave way to hasty and disdainful opinions that characterize a view of the world and other people that we might as well call class racism, my reactions nonetheless more often than not resembled those of Paul Nizan’s character, Antoine Bloyé. A portrait of Nizan’s father, Bloyé is a former worker who has become bourgeois, and he still feels hurt by the derogatory remarks about the working class that he hears made by those people around him who now constitute his social milieu. It feels as if he were being targeted along with the milieu to which he used to belong: “How could he share their opinions without completely betraying his own childhood?” Every time I would “betray” my own childhood, by sharing in deprecatory opinions, inevitably a nagging bad conscience would make itself felt, if not sooner, then later.

And yet, an enormous distance seemed to separate me now from the universe I had once belonged to, a universe that I had devoted so much energy—the energy of despair—to breaking with. I have to admit that however much I felt close to and in solidarity with working class struggles, however loyal I remained to those political and emotional values that are stirred in me whenever I watch a documentary about the great strikes of 1936 or 1968, still, deep inside myself I experienced a rejection of working class life as I knew it. The “organized” working class, or the working class perceived as organizable, and thereby idealized, even rendered heroic, is different from the individuals from whom it is made up, or who potentially make it up. And it became more and more unpleasant for me to find myself in the company of those who were—or those who are—members of this class. In my early days in Paris, when I still visited my
parents, who were still living in the same public housing project in Reims where I had spent my adolescence (it was only many years later that they would move from there to Muizon), or when I had lunch with them on Sundays at my grandmother’s, who lived in Paris and whom they would sometimes visit, I felt a nebulous and indescribable discomfort in the face of their ways of speaking and being, so different from those that characterized the circles in which I was now moving; or when faced with the subjects that preoccupied them, so different from my own preoccupations; or when faced with the deep, obsessive racism that flowed freely, no matter what we were talking about, and left me without any way of understanding why or how any and every subject of conversation brought us back to that. These meetings became more and more of a burden the more I went on changing into someone new. When I read the books that Annie Ernaux devotes to her parents and to the “class divide” that separates her from them, I recognized in them precisely what I was going through at this time. She provides an amazing description of the uneasiness or distress a person feels upon returning to her or his parents’ house after not only moving out, but also after leaving behind both the family and the world to which she or he nonetheless continues to belong—the disconcerting experience of being both at home and in a foreign country.10

To be perfectly honest, in my case this kind of return became nearly impossible after a very few years.

Two different paths, then. Each imbricated in the other. Two interdependent trajectories for my reinvention of myself, one
having to do with the sexual order, the other with the social order. And yet, when it came to writing, it was the first that I decided to analyze, the one having to do with sexual oppression, not the second which had to do with class domination. Perhaps in the theoretical gesture made by my writing I only increased the existential betrayal I was committing. For it was only one kind of personal implication of the writing subject in what is written that I took on, not the other. Indeed, one ended up excluding the other. My choice was not only a way of defining myself, of constructing my subjectivity in the present moment, it was also a choice about my past, a choice regarding the child and the teenager I had been: a gay child, a gay teenager, and not the son of a worker. And yet …
“WHO’S THAT?” I asked my mother. “But that’s your father!” she replied. “Don’t you recognize him? It’s because you hadn’t seen him in such a long time.” She was exactly right. I hadn’t even recognized my father in a photo taken shortly before he died. Much thinner, hunched over, his gaze unfocussed, he had aged tremendously, and it took me a few minutes to make the connection between the image of this enfeebled body and the man I had known, the man who shouted at the slightest provocation, stupid and violent, the man who had inspired so much contempt in me. Suddenly I felt at sea, being confronted with the understanding that in the months, or perhaps even the years, that preceded his death, he had ceased being the person I had hated, and had instead become this pathetic figure, once a domestic tyrant, but now in decline, harmless and weak, beaten down by age and illness.

When I reread James Baldwin’s beautiful text on the death of his father, one remark in particular struck me. Baldwin recounts that he put off a visit to the man he knew was very ill as long as he possibly could. Then he notes: “I had told my mother I did not want to see him because I hated him. But this was not true. It
was only that I had hated him and I wanted to hold on to this hatred. I did not want to look on him as a ruin: it was not a ruin I had hated.

Even more striking to me was the explanation he offers: “I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.”

Pain, or rather, in my case—since the extinguishing of the hatred I had felt did not give rise to any pain in me—an urgent obligation to figure something out about myself, a pressing desire to track backwards in time in order to understand the reasons why it had been so difficult for me to engage in even the smallest of exchanges with this man, a man who, when it comes right down to it, I had barely even known. When I really think about it, I have to admit to myself that I know next to nothing about my father. What did he think about? Or about the world he lived in? About himself? About other people? How did he see things? The circumstance of his own life? In particular, how did he see our own relationship as it became more and more difficult, more and more distant, and finally non-existent? I had a moment of stupefaction not too long ago when I learned that when he saw me on television one day, he broke down into tears, overcome by emotion. He was overwhelmed by the realization that one of his sons had achieved what seemed to him a nearly unimaginable degree of social success. And he was ready the next day, this man who had always been so homophobic, to brave the looks of his neighbors and anyone else in his village; he was even ready, should it be necessary, to defend what seemed to him to be his honor and the honor of his family. I had been speaking on television that night about my book, *Insult and the Making of the*
Gay Self; and, concerned that such an appearance might provoke sarcastic remarks and comments, he declared to my mother: “If there’s any smartass who says anything to me about it, I’ll smash his face in.”

I never had a conversation with him, never! He wasn’t capable of it (at least with me, and me with him). It’s too late to spend time lamenting this. But there are plenty of questions I would now like to ask him, if only because it would help me write this book. Here again, I could only be astonished to discover these sentences in Baldwin’s account: “When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had.” Then, describing his father’s past—his father had belonged to the first generation of free black men, his father’s mother having been born in the time of slavery—, he adds: “He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life.”

Under such circumstances, it seems nearly impossible for Baldwin not to have reproached himself now and then for having abandoned his family, for having betrayed his own kind. His mother never understood why he left, why he went to live so far away, first to Greenwich Village so he could be a part of the literary circles there, and then to France. Would it have been possible for him to stay? Obviously not. He had to leave, to leave Harlem behind, to leave behind his father’s narrow-mindedness, his sanctimonious hostility towards culture and literature, the suffocating atmosphere of the family home. How else could he become a writer, how else live openly his homosexuality (and take up in his work the double question of what it means to be black and to be gay)? Yet still the moment came where the necessity of a “going back”
made itself felt, even if it was after the death of his father (in reality his stepfather, but still, the person who raised him from the earliest years of his childhood). The text that he writes to pay homage to this man might therefore be interpreted as his means of accomplishing, or at least of beginning, this mental "return," the effort to understand who this person actually was, a man he had so detested and so wanted to get away from. Perhaps too, beginning this process of historical and political deliberation would allow him one day to reclaim his own past on an emotional level, to get to a place where he could not only understand, but also accept himself. It's easy enough to see why, obsessed as he was by this question, he would insist so strongly in an interview that "to avoid the journey back is to avoid the Self, to avoid 'life'."¹³

As had been the case for Baldwin with his father, so I began to realize that everything my father had been, which is to say everything I held against him, all the reasons I had detested him, had been shaped by the violence of the social world. My father had been proud to belong to the working class. Later on, he was proud to have risen, however modestly, above that condition. Yet his condition had been the cause of any number of humiliations and had set "bleak boundaries" to his life. It had planted a kind of madness in him that he never overcame and that made him nearly incapable of sustaining relationships with other people.

Like Baldwin in his quite different context, I am certain that my father bore within him the weight of a crushing history that could not help but produce serious psychic damage in those who lived through it. My father's life, his personality, his subjectivity had been doubly marked and determined by a place and by a
time whose particular hardships and constraints continually played off each other in a way that only made them proliferate. Here is the key to his being: where and when he was born, the timespan and the region of social space in which it was decided what his place in the world would be, his apprenticeship of the world, his relationship to the world. The near-madness of my father and the impaired relational abilities that resulted from it had, in the final analysis, nothing psychological about them, if by psychological we mean a link to some kind of individual character trait. They were the effect of the precisely situated being-in-the-world that was his.

Just like Baldwin’s mother, my mother said to me: “He worked long hours so you’d have enough to eat.” Then she went on to speak to me about him, leaving aside her own grievances: “Don’t judge him too harshly. His life wasn’t an easy one.” He was born in 1929, the oldest child in what was to become a large family. His mother had twelve children. It can be hard today to imagine how many women were destined to become slaves to motherhood. Twelve children! Two of them were stillborn (or else died very young). Another, who was born on the open road during the evacuation of the city in 1940, while German planes were ruthlessly attacking the columns of refugees, was mentally disabled, perhaps because it hadn’t been possible to cut the umbilical cord normally, or perhaps because he was injured when my grandmother threw herself and him into the ditch to protect him from the machine gun fire, or perhaps simply because he didn’t receive the kind of care that is required immediately after birth. Who knows which of these different stories
retained in the family memory is the right one. My grandmother kept him with her throughout her life. I always heard that it was for the sake of the social security subsidy, because that subsidy was crucial to the economic survival of the family. When I was young, my brother and I were terrified of him. He drooled, only expressed himself in strange rumblings, and would stretch out his arms towards us, perhaps seeking a bit of affection, or perhaps offering some. Yet he never received any in response; we would shrink away, when we weren’t screaming or actively pushing him away. In retrospect, I am mortified by our behavior, and yet we were only children at the time, and he was a grown-up whom others called “abnormal.”

As I mentioned, my father’s family had been obliged to leave the city during the war, taking part in what was called the “exodus.” They ended up far from home, on a farm near Mimizan, a small town in the Landes. Having spent several months there, they came back to Reims as soon as the armistice was signed. The north of France was occupied by the German army. (I was born long after the end of the war, and still the only word used in my family to talk about Germans was “les Boches,” for whom there was a fierce and seemingly inextinguishable hatred. It wasn’t at all uncommon, well into the 1970s and beyond, to end a meal by proclaiming: “One more that the Boches won’t get their hands on!” I have to confess that I have myself used the expression more than once.)

In 1940, my father was 11 years old, and every day until he was 14 or 15, during the entire period of the Occupation, he would have to go out to neighboring villages to find food for his family—in wind, rain or snow, no matter what the weather. He would sometimes have to cover as much as 20 kilometers on his
bicycle in the freezing cold typical of the Champagne region’s severe winter, to find potatoes or some other foodstuff. He was in charge of nearly everything at home.

They had moved into a fairly large house—I’m not sure if this was during the war or just after—in the middle of a housing complex built in the 1920s for large working class families. It was the kind of house that had been thought up by a group of Catholic industrialists who, at the outset of the twentieth century, set out to improve the housing conditions of their workers. Reims was a city divided in two by a conspicuous class barrier. On one side of the divide was the upper middle class, and on the other the impoverished workers. The philanthropic societies of the former worried about the poor living conditions of the latter, and about the harmful consequences arising from them. Worries about a declining birthrate had produced a remarkable change in attitudes towards large families: if, up until the end of the nineteenth century, they had been considered by reformers and demographers to be one of the causes of disorder and of juvenile delinquency, at the beginning of the twentieth century, they became an essential bastion of defense against the depopulation that was threatening to weaken a nation confronted by foreign enemies. If these large families had once been stigmatized and combatted by the supporters of Mathusianism, now the dominant discourse—on both the left and the right—was bent on encouraging them, valorizing them, and therefore also supporting them. Propaganda in support of a rising birthrate now went hand in hand with urban renewal projects so that these new pillars of the revived nation could have decent living spaces. It was hoped that such spaces would make it possible to ward off dangers that had often been emphasized by bourgeois reformers,
dangers associated with a working class childhood in which poor living conditions meant that children spent too much time on the streets: an anarchic proliferation of rough boys and immoral girls.15

Inspired by these new political and patriotic points of view, philanthropists from the Champagne region founded an organization whose function was to build affordable housing. It was called the “Foyer rémois” [Habitations of Reims], and its charge was to construct housing projects offering living quarters that were spacious, clean, and healthy, intended for families with more than four children, with three bedrooms—one for the parents, one for the boys, and one for the girls. They didn’t have a bathroom, but they did have running water. (The inhabitants washed themselves one at a time at the kitchen sink.) A concern with physical cleanliness was, of course, only one aspect of these city planning programs. Moral hygiene was another primary consideration. The idea was, by encouraging a high birthrate and family values, to wean workers away from bars and the alcoholism they facilitated. Political concerns were also not absent. The bourgeoisie imagined it might in this way put a check on socialist and union propaganda that it worried might flourish in working class meeting places outside the home, just as, in the 1930s, it hoped by the same means to shield the workers from communist influences. Domestic happiness, at least the way the bourgeois philanthropists imagined it for poor people, was meant to keep these workers invested in their home life and to divert them from the temptations of political resistance and its forms of organization and action. In 1914 the war interrupted the implementation of all these programs. After the four apocalyptic years that swept over northeast France, especially the
region around Reims, everything had to be rebuilt. (Photographs taken in 1918 of what was called at the time the “martyred city” are terrifying: as far as the eye can see, there are only fragments of walls left standing amidst piles of rubble. It is as if some malicious god had gone out of his way to wipe this area off the map, an area saturated with history, sparing only the Cathedral and the Saint-Remi Basilica. And even they were severely damaged by the deluge of fire and iron that rained down on them.) Thanks to American aid, city planners and architects built up a new city from the ruins, and around the perimeter of that city they laid out the famous “garden cities,” housing tracts in the “regionalist style” (although, if I’m not mistaken, the style was in fact Alsatian). Some of the houses were single family dwellings, some were duplexes or town houses. All of them had a yard, and all were built along wide streets with interspersed green spaces.16

My grandparents moved into one of these housing projects either during or shortly after World War II. When I was a child, towards the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, the spaces dreamed up and then realized by the philanthropists had deteriorated quite a bit. The Foyer rémois “garden city” in which my grandparents and their youngest children still lived had been poorly maintained, and was utterly rundown, eaten away at by the very poverty it had been devoted to housing, a poverty that was everywhere visible. It was an extremely unhealthy environment, and in fact incubated many different social pathologies. In purely statistical terms, a drift into delinquency was one of the prime options open to young people from the neighborhood. This of course remains the case today in those similarly appointed spaces of urban and social segregation—the historical durability of these phenomena is striking. One of my father’s brothers

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became a thief, went to prison, and was banned from Reims; we would catch glimpses of him from time to time, sneaking in at nightfall to see his parents or to ask his brothers and sisters for money. He had long been absent from my life and from my memory when I learned from my mother that he had become a street person, and had in fact died in the street. As a young man he had been a sailor. (He did his required military service in the navy, and had then enlisted permanently before being discharged because of his conduct—fights, thefts, and the like.) It was his face, in profile, from a photograph of him in uniform that my grandparents had on the buffet in their dining room, that came to my mind when I first read Querelle. In general, petty or serious crimes were the rule in the neighborhood, as if they constituted some kind of obstinate popular resistance to the laws imposed by a state that was perceived on a daily basis to be an instrument wielded by a class enemy, an enemy whose power was visible any and everywhere, all the time.

In accordance with the initial desires of the Catholic bourgeoisie and with what it considered to be the “moral values” it wished to inculcate in the popular classes, the birth rate was a healthy one. It wasn’t unusual for families in the houses close to that of my grandparents to have 14 or 15 children, or even 21, my mother claims, even though I have a hard time believing this could have been possible. Yet the Communist Party also thrived. Actual membership was reasonably common, at least among the men. As for the women, while sharing their husbands’ opinions, they nonetheless stayed away from organized political activities and “cell meetings.” But official membership wasn’t even necessary for a
certain feeling of political belonging to spread and perpetuate itself. The feeling was spontaneously and tightly tied up with the social situation of the people involved. People spoke easily about the “Party.” My grandfather, my father and his brothers—and also on my mother’s side, her step father and her half-brother—commonly went as a group to attend the public meetings organized by national party leaders at regular intervals. Everyone voted for the Communist candidate at every election, ranting about the false left that the socialists represented—their compromises, their betrayals. But then, in the runoff, they would grudgingly cast their vote for the socialist when they had to, in the name of realism or the “republican discipline” no one dared go against. (Yet in these years, Communist candidates were often in the strongest position, so this kind of situation only rarely presented itself.) The words “the Left” really meant something important. People wanted to defend their own interests, to make their voices heard, and the way to achieve that—aside from strikes or protests—was to delegate, to hand oneself over to the “representatives of the working class” and to political leaders whose decisions were thus implicitly accepted and whose discourses you learned and repeated. You became a political subject by putting yourself into the hands of the party spokespersons, through whom the workers, the “working class,” came to exist as an organized group, as a class that was aware of itself as such. One’s way of thinking about oneself, the values one espoused, the attitudes one adopted were all to a large extent shaped by the conception of the world that the “Party” helped to inculcate in people’s minds and to diffuse throughout the social body. To vote was to participate in an important moment of collective self-affirmation, a moment that affirmed your political significance as
well. So on election nights, when the results came in, people would explode with anger upon learning that the right had won yet again and would rail against the “scabs” who had voted for the Gaullists, and thereby voted against themselves.

How easy it has become to deplore the communist influence over various (but not all) populist milieus from the 1950s through the 1970s. It is worth remembering the meaning that influence had for all those people whom it is now all the more easy to criticize since it is so unlikely they could make themselves heard in a public forum. (Are they ever offered a chance to speak? What means of their own do they have to do so?) To be communist had next to nothing to do with a desire to establish a government resembling the one found in the U.S.S.R. “Foreign” policy, in any case, seemed a distant concern, as is often the case amid the popular classes—and even more so for women than for men. It was a given that one took the Soviet side against American imperialism, but the topic almost never came up. And even though the military enforcement operations that the Red Army carried out against friendly nations were disconcerting, we preferred not to talk about them: In 1968, as the radio covered the tragic events unfolding in Prague after the Soviet intervention, I asked my parents “What is going on?” and found myself sharply rebuked by my mother: “What do you care? It’s none of your business.” Surely this was because in fact she had no answer to give me, and was as perplexed as was I, a mere 15 year old. In fact, the reasons people adhered to communist values were linked to more immediate and more concrete preoccupations. When in his *Abécédaire*, Gilles Deleuze puts forward the idea that “being on the left” means “first of all being aware of the world,” “being aware of what’s on
the horizon” (by which he means considering that the most urgent problems are those of the third world, which are closer to us than the problems of our own neighborhood), whereas “not being on the left” would, in contrary fashion, mean being focused on the street where one lives, on the country one inhabits, the definition he offers is diametrically opposed to the one incarnated by my parents.\(^{17}\) In working class environments, a leftist politics meant first and foremost a very pragmatic rejection of the experience of one’s own daily life. It was a form of protest, and not a political project inspired by a global perspective. You considered what was right around you, not what was far off, either in time or in space. Even if people were always saying things like, “what we need is a good revolution,” these pat expressions were linked to the hardships of daily life and to the intolerable nature of the injustices around them rather than to any perspective involving the establishment of a different political system. Given that everything that happened seemed to have been decided by some hidden power (“that was no accident”), invoking the “revolution”—without any idea of where or when or how it might break out—seemed one’s only recourse (it was one myth against another) in the fight against the powers of evil—the Right, the rich, the bigwigs—who inflicted so much hardship on the lives of the poor, of “people like us.”

My family divided the world into two camps, those who were “for the workers” and those who were “against the workers,” or, in slightly different words, those who “defended the workers” and those who “did nothing for the workers.” How many times did I hear sentences that encapsulated this political attitude and the choices that resulted from it! On one side there was “us” and those who were “with us”; on the other side was “them.”\(^{18}\)
Nowadays who fulfills the role played by the “Party”? To whom can exploited and powerless people turn in order to feel that they are supported or that their point of view is expressed? To whom can they refer, who can they lean on, in order to provide themselves with a political existence and a cultural identity? Or in order to feel proud of themselves because they have been legitimized and because this legitimation has come from a powerful source? A source that, in the simplest terms, takes into account who they are, how they live, what they think about, what they want?

When my father watched the news, the remarks he made revealed a visceral allergic reaction to both the right and the extreme right. During the presidential campaign of 1965 and then during and after May 1968 he would lose his temper simply upon hearing the voice of Tixier-Vignancour, a figure who seemed a caricature of the old French extreme right. When Tixier-Vignancour denounced “the red flag of Communism” that people were waving in the streets of Paris, my father fulminated: “the red flag is the flag of the workers!” A bit later he would feel himself attacked and offended by the way Giscard d’Estaing, through the medium of the television, would manage to inflict on all French households his grand bourgeois manner, his affected gestures, his grotesque manner of speaking. My father would also direct his insults at the journalists who hosted political programs, and would be overjoyed when someone he considered a spokesperson for his own thoughts and feelings (this or that Stalinist apparatchik with a worker’s accent) would manage to break the rules of the television program in a way no one would
dare do today, given how nearly total the obedience of most political figures and intellectuals has become to the powers of the media. To break the rules meant to speak about the real problems affecting workers instead of responding to the typically political questions to which the discussion was supposed to be limited. To break the rules meant to do justice to all those whose voices are never heard under these kinds of circumstances, to those whose very existence is systematically excluded from the landscape of legitimate politics.
I REMEMBER THE YARD behind my grandparents' house. It wasn't very big, and was separated by a fence on both sides from the identical yards of their neighbors. At the far end, there was a hut (and this was the case for most of the houses in the neighborhood) where my grandmother raised rabbits. We would feed them grass and carrots until finally they would end up on our plates on a Sunday or a holiday. My grandmother could neither read nor write. She would ask people to read to her or to write official letters for her, and would offer vague apologies for her deficiency: "I don't know my letters," she would say, in a tone that suggested neither anger nor rebelliousness, but rather a submission to reality, a kind of resignation that characterized all of her gestures and all of the words she spoke and that perhaps enabled her to endure her situation, to accept it as an inevitability. My grandfather was a cabinetmaker; he worked in a furniture factory. To make ends meet, he would build furniture at home for the neighbors. He received lots of orders from near and far, in fact, and literally worked himself to death in order to feed his family, never taking a day off. I was still a child when he died at the age of 54 of throat cancer. (That was a plague that carried off many workers in those years, as all of them smoked an unimaginable number of cigarettes each day. Three of my father's brothers would die quite
young from the same cause, another having died even younger from alcoholism.) When I was a teenager, my grandmother was astonished by the fact that I didn’t smoke. “It’s healthier if a man smokes,” she would say to me, totally unaware of all the damage such a belief continued to inflict all around her. Of frail health herself, she would die ten or so years after her husband, doubtless from exhaustion: she was 62 years old when she died and was cleaning offices to earn her living. One winter’s night, after work, she slipped on a patch of ice on her way home to the miniscule two room apartment in a low income housing complex where she had ended up. She hit her head hard when she fell, and never recovered, dying a few days after the accident.

There is really no doubt that this “garden city” where my father lived before I was born, and that was one of the major scenes of my childhood (my brother and I spent a lot of time there, especially during vacations), was a place of social ostracism. It was a reservation for the poor, set off from the center of town and from the well-to-do neighborhoods. And yet, when I think back on it, I realize that it didn’t resemble what we nowadays refer to with the word “projects.” It was a horizontal living environment, not a vertical one: no apartment buildings, no towers, nothing of the architecture that would appear at the end of the 1950s and in a major way throughout the 1960s and 1970s. There thus remained something of a human character about this area on the fringes of the city. Even if the area had a bad reputation, even if it resembled a destitute ghetto, it wasn’t all that unpleasant to live in. Working class traditions, notably certain kinds of culture and solidarity, had managed to develop and perpetuate
themselves. It was thanks to one of these forms of culture, the Saturday night dance, that my parents met. My mother lived not far off, in a suburb closer to the city, with her mother and her mother’s partner. Both my mother and my father, like all of the working class youth at the time, enjoyed the diversion and the moment of happiness provided by popular neighborhood dances. Such dances have for the most part disappeared today, pretty much only still occurring on July 14 or the night before. Yet at the time in question they were for many the only “outing” of the week, an occasion for friends to meet up and for amorous and sexual encounters. Couples formed and dissolved. Sometimes they lasted. My mother had a crush on another fellow, but he wanted to sleep with her, and she didn’t. She was afraid of getting pregnant and having a baby with no father should the fellow prefer to break up rather than accepting an unsought role as father. She had no desire to have a baby who would be obliged to live through what she had had to live through, and what had caused her so much suffering. The fellow her heart had chosen left her for someone else. She met my father. She never loved him, but she told herself, “it’ll be him or someone just like him.” She wanted some independence, and marriage was the only way to obtain it, since one only became a legal adult at age 21. In any case, they had to wait until my father reached that age. My paternal grandmother didn’t want him to leave home, since she wanted him to “chip in his pay” as long as she could make him. As soon as it was possible, he married my mother. She was 20 years old.

At the time, my father had already been working—at the lowest rung on the ladder—for quite a while. He hadn’t even reached
the age of fourteen (school ended in June, and he began working right away, and only turned fourteen three months later) when he found himself in the surroundings that would be his for the rest of his life, chasing the only horizon that was open to him: the factory. It was waiting for him; he was waiting for it. It was also waiting for his brothers and sisters, who would all follow in his footsteps. And it waited, and still waits, for those who were born and are born into families with the same social identity as his. Social determinism had a grip on him from the day he was born. There was no escape for him from that to which he had been promised by all the laws, all the mechanisms, of what there is no other word for than “reproduction.”

My father’s education thus went no further than middle school. No one would have imagined it could have been otherwise, neither his parents nor himself. In his world, you went to school until the age of fourteen, because that was required, and you left school at age 14, because it was no longer required. That’s the way things were. To drop out of school was certainly no scandal. Quite the contrary. I remember how indignant everyone in my family was when school was made mandatory until age 16. “What’s the point in making kids stay in school if they don’t want to, if they’d rather be working?” was what people repeated, never stopping to wonder about how a like or a dislike for school might be distributed differentially across society. Selection within the educational system often happens by a process of self-elimination, and that self-elimination is treated as if it were freely chosen: extended studies are for other kinds of people, for “people of means,” and it just happens that those people turn out to be the ones who like going to school. The field of possibilities—and even the field of possibilities that it is
possible to imagine, to say nothing of the field of possibilities that can actually be realized—is tightly circumscribed by one’s class position. It was as if the barrier between social worlds was utterly impermeable. The boundaries that divide these worlds help define within each of them radically different ways of perceiving what it is possible to be or to become, of perceiving what it is possible to aspire to or not. People know that things are different elsewhere, but that elsewhere seems part of a far off and inaccessible universe. So much so that people feel neither excluded from nor deprived of all sorts of things because they have no access to what, in those far off social realms, constitutes a self-evident norm. It’s in the order of things, and there’s nothing more to be said about it. No one thinks about how the order of things actually works, because to do so would require being able to see oneself from a different point of view, have a bird’s eye view on one’s own life and the lives of other people. Only if you actually manage to move from one side of the border to the other, as happened in my case, can you get out from under the implacable logic of all those things that go without saying in order to perceive the terrible injustice of this unequal distribution of prospects and possibilities. And things haven’t changed all that much: the age for leaving school has shifted, but the social barrier between classes remains the same. That is why any sociology or any philosophy that begins by placing at the center of its project the “point of view of the actors” and the “meaning they give to their actions” runs the risk of simply reproducing a shorthand version of the mystified relation that social agents maintain with their own practices and desires, and consequently does nothing more than serve to perpetuate the world as it currently stands—an ideology of justification (for the
established order). Only an epistemological break with the way in which individuals spontaneously think about themselves renders possible the description of the mechanisms by which the social order reproduces itself. The entire system needs to be apprehended, including the manner in which dominated people ratify their domination through the choice they make to drop out of school, thereby making the choice they had been intended to make. A theory’s power and interest lie precisely in the fact that it doesn’t consider it as sufficient simply to record the words that “actors” say about their “actions,” but that rather, it sets as a goal to allow both individuals and groups to see and to think differently about what they are and what they do, and then, perhaps, to change what they do and what they are. It is a matter of breaking with incorporated categories of perception and established frameworks of meaning, and thereby with the social inertia of which these categories and frameworks are the vectors; after such a break, the goal is to produce a new way of looking at the world and thereby to open up new political perspectives.

For social destinies are sketched out incredibly early! Things have been arranged ahead of time. Verdicts have been handed down before it’s even possible to be aware of it. Our sentences are burned into the skin of our shoulder with a red hot iron at the moment of our birth, and the places allocated to us have been defined and delimited by what has come before us: the past of the family and the surroundings into which we are born. My father wasn’t even given the chance to earn a general education certificate, the one that represented, for working-class children,
the crowning achievement of their education. Children of the bourgeoisie were on a different track. At the age of eleven, they started high school, whereas working class children and children from farming families were restricted to elementary and middle schools until age fourteen, when their education ended. There was to be no confusion between those to whom one was to mete out the rudiments of the practical education (reading, writing, and arithmetic) that was needed to cope with daily life and sufficient for carrying out manual labor, and those, coming from more privileged classes, who had a right to become "cultured," to be given access to a culture that was "disinterested," access to "culture" pure and simple. And of course it was feared that such culture could only exercise a corrupting influence on workers were they to be exposed to it.¹⁹ The certificate in question involved the acquisition of basic functional forms of knowledge (with a few other elements thrown in from the “history of France”—a few dates of the main events in the national mythology, and from “Geography”—a list of the different administrative divisions of France and their capital cities). It was an important credential for those for whom it was intended, and in those circles it was a point of pride to have obtained it. Only half of those who took the required exam actually passed it. And there were many people, such as my father, who, having more or less abandoned school even before the legal age for doing so, didn’t make it that far. Most of what my father learned, he learned on his own, later, by taking night classes after finishing work for the day. His hope was to be able to climb up several rungs on the social ladder. For a while he dreamed of becoming an industrial draftsman. He soon woke up to a cold reality. Perhaps he didn’t have the necessary educational background. Above all, it must
have been difficult to concentrate after working a full day at the factory. He was forced to abandon his studies along with his illusions. For a long time he saved a few large sheets of squared paper, covered in charts and sketches—course assignments?—that he would sometimes take out of their folder and look over, or show to us, before returning them to the bottom of the drawer where he kept his broken dreams. Not only did he remain a worker, but he had to be one twice over: when I was very young he began his day very early in the morning and worked in a factory until the early afternoon. Then at the end of the afternoon he went to a different factory to work a few more hours to add to his salary. My mother helped as much as she could, wearing herself out cleaning houses and doing laundry. (Washing machines didn’t yet exist, or were extremely rare, and doing other people’s laundry was a way of earning a bit of money to add to the household income.) It was only when my father was caught in a long period of unemployment in 1970 that my mother herself would go to work in a factory, but she kept on working there even after my father found work again. (I now understand that she took on factory work so that I could finish high school—take the baccalaureate exam—and go to college. It was something I never thought of at the time, or else I repressed it as deeply as I could, even in the face of my mother bringing up the possibility that I might do the responsible thing and start earning my keep and helping the family—a possibility, if truth be told, that she mentioned quite frequently.) My father kept trotting out the notion that “a factory is no place for a woman,” but to no avail. Whatever the damage done to his masculine sense of honor by not being able to provide for his household on his own, he had no choice but to resign himself to the fact that
my mother became a “worker,” taking on all the pejorative connotations that attached to the idea of a woman who worked in a factory: loose women whose speech was crude, who maybe slept around—in short, tarts. This bourgeois image of the working class woman who worked outside the home and alongside men was also widely shared by working class men who didn’t like to give up control over their spouses or partners for several hours each day, and who were terrified by the abhorrent image of the liberated woman. Annie Ernaux writes of her mother, who took up employment in a factory when she was quite young, that she insisted on being considered one of the “factory girls, but nonetheless respectable.” Yet the simple fact that she worked alongside men “meant that she would never be seen as a ‘decent young girl,’ which was what she had always longed to be.”20 The situation was the same for older women: the kind of work they did sufficed to give them all a bad reputation, whether or not they took advantage of the sexual freedom imputed to them. The result was that my father would frequently go sit in a café near the factory at the time my mother got off work so that he would know if my mother secretly stopped in upon leaving work, and be able to catch her by surprise if she did. But she didn’t—neither that café nor any other. She headed home to make dinner after having done the shopping. Like all working women, she had a second job waiting for her at home.

It would only be much later that my father would manage to rise up a few rungs in the social hierarchy, at least in the hierarchy at the factory, moving up from the category of an unskilled worker to that of a skilled worker, and finally to that of supervisor. He
was no longer a worker, but rather supervised them. Or, more precisely, he was the head of a team. He took a very simple kind of pride in this new status, which provided him with an improved sense of self-worth. Of course, I found all of this laughable at the time, but then I was the person who, many years later, would still blush with shame when, applying for this or that official document, I would be obliged to provide a copy of my birth certificate listing the first professions of my father (unskilled worker) and my mother (cleaning lady)—the same person who hadn’t been able to understand why my parents had been so eager to improve their situation, even in a way that while miniscule to my eyes, was obviously extremely significant to theirs.

As I was saying, my father worked in a factory from the age of 14 to that of 56, when he was given “early retirement,” whether he wanted it or not, and in the same year as my mother (at age 55), both of them spit out by the system that had exploited them so shamelessly. He found himself at loose ends with too much time on his hands, whereas she was happy to leave a workplace where the work was so exhausting—to a degree unimaginable to anyone who hasn’t experienced it—and where the noise, the heat, and the daily repetition of the same mechanical movements slowly wore away at the health of even the most resilient organisms. They were tired, worn out. My mother hadn’t contributed to social security for long enough (her work cleaning houses had always been off the books), which meant that her retirement payments were correspondingly lower, and so their income dropped notably when they retired. They rearranged
their life as best they could. For example, they traveled more often—a weekend in London, a week in Spain or Turkey—thanks to the workers' organization of the factory where my father had worked. It's not that they loved each other any more than they had in the past. They had simply found a *modus vivendi*; they were used to each other; and they both knew that only the death of one or the other of them would separate them.

My father was handy at many things, and proud to be so, just as he was proud of manual labor in general. It was in these kinds of activities that he flourished, and he spent all his free time on them. He knew what fine work was, and he appreciated it. When I was in one of the last two years of high school, he turned an old table into a desk for me. He installed cabinets, and fixed whatever needed fixing in the apartment. I, on the other hand, was all thumbs. Perhaps willfully so (for after all couldn't I have chosen to learn something from him?) given how invested I was in not resembling him, in becoming something socially different from what he was. Later I would discover that certain intellectual types could also be quite handy, and that it was in fact possible to be bookish—to read books and to write them—while still enjoying practical tasks and manual kinds of work. Discovering this would leave me utterly perplexed. It was as if my whole personality was called into question by the destabilization of what I had perceived and experienced as a fundamental, a defining opposition (but obviously only defining in my particular case). With sports it was the same thing. Learning that many of my friends watched sports on television was deeply disturbing to me, causing a principle whose solidity had imposed itself powerfully upon me to dissolve
before my eyes. For me, in order to define myself as an intellectual, as part of my very desire to be an intellectual, I had felt required to experience as intolerable nights spent watching soccer matches on television. The culture of sports, sports as one’s only interest (for men, since for women it was mostly popular news items), these were aspects of reality that I had been intent on deprecating, on disdaining out of a sense of superiority. It took me quite a while to break down all these dividing walls that had been necessary for me to become who I had become, to reintegrate into my mental and existential universe all these dimensions that I had shut out.

When I was a child, my parents got around on a moped. They carried us, my brother and I, on kids’ seats attached behind them. That arrangement could prove to be dangerous. One day, while my father was negotiating a curve, the bike slipped on some gravel and my brother’s leg was broken. In 1963, they got their driver’s licenses and bought a used car. (I can be seen at the age of 12 or 13 leaning against the hood of that black Simca Aronde in a number of photographs my mother gave me.) My mother passed the driver’s exam before my father. For my father, the idea of sitting in the passenger seat and being driven around by his wife was so degrading that he preferred driving without a license for a while in order to avoid any such ignominious situation. He would literally go crazy, and turn quite nasty, when my mother would voice her concern and express her intention to take what he considered to be his place. Then, after a while, things sorted themselves out: it would always be he who drove. (Even when he had had too much to drink he wouldn’t let her
drive.) On Sundays, once we had a car, we would go on picnics to forests or fields outside the town. It was never a question of taking a summer vacation. We didn’t have the money. Our trips only extended as far as a day’s visit to a nearby town: Nancy, Laon, or Charleville, for example. We even crossed the border into Belgium to visit a town called Bouillon. (We learned to associate this name with Godefroy de Bouillon and his adventures in the Crusades; but since then I have come more willingly to associate it with Cilea’s opera, Adriana Lecouvreur, and with the terrible and imposing character from that opera, the Princess de Bouillon.) We toured the chateau and bought chocolate and souvenirs, but went no farther. It wasn’t until much later that I would get to know Brussels. Once we even went to Verdun, and I remember a gloomy and frightening visit to the Douaumont Ossuary, where the remains of the soldiers who died in battle there during the first World War are gathered. That visit gave me nightmares for a long time. We also sometimes went to Paris to visit my maternal grandmother. Parisian traffic jams would send my father into astounding fits of rage. He would stamp his feet, utter streams of obscenities and cries of anger, without anyone really understanding why he was working himself up into such a state. The result of this would be endless arguments with my mother, who had little patience for what she referred to as his “cinéma,” his crazy song and dance. The same things happened every time he drove. If he took the wrong road, or missed a turn, he would start screaming as if the world were about to end. But most frequently of all, when the weather was good, we would drive along the banks of the Marne, in champagne country, and spend hours engaged in my father’s favorite relaxing pastime: fishing. At these moments it was as if
he became a different man, and there was a bond that passed between him and his children: he taught us all the gestures and techniques we needed, he gave us advice, and we would spend the day commenting on what happened or what didn’t. “They’re really biting today,” or “Not even a nibble.” And we would speculate as to why, blaming the heat or the rain, the earliness or lateness of the season, and so on. Sometimes we would meet up with my aunts and uncles and their children. In the evening we’d eat the fish we had caught. My mother would clean them, dip them in flour, and fry them up. It was a royal feast for us. But with the passage of time, I came to find all this pointless and silly. I wanted to spend my time reading, not to waste it with a fishing rod in hand watching a piece of cork bob up and down on the surface of the water. Soon I hated all the cultural aspects of this activity, all the forms of sociability associated with it: the music playing from the transistor radios, the meaningless chit chat with the people you’d meet, the strict division of labor between men (who fished) and the women (who knitted and read photo romances, or took care of the kids and the cooking). I stopped going with my parents on these outings. To invent myself, I had first of all to disassociate myself from all of that.