LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

# An Antwerp Palimpsest

Guy Vaes

Translated from the French by Philip Mosley and Lieve Van de Walle

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'The multiple labyrinth left by my footprints'
(Jorge Luis Borges)

This is the text of a man who is keen on walking, of a man who has guarded, from adolescence to old age, a particular sense of space. Here, all is a challenge to perception that mere commentary can only restrict. I was born innumerable times on the bank of a river that flows between these lines; and I have felt realism crumble in the spool of those streets whose angles threaten the line of my footsteps.

I view Antwerp as content and the light enveloping it as its container. Both of these, content and container, have spatial qualities. The city depends on the visible, which in turn renders each section of the expanse readable. The light, putting aside its shades and flashes, returns to transparency that which draws it close to the invisible—to the ungraspable. A pinch of what contains something of this invisible within the urban territory, and that territory will see its degree of peculiarity increase, just as, by the addition of a dab of black, the house painter augments the brilliance of white.

So, by enriching the visible with this jot of the invisible, we will sense, like a challenge, the presence of an urban indescribable, the ultimate aim of my sauntering. Great conjuror of words, allergic to the definition that over rationalizes, the indescribable likes us to sense its proximity—only to slip away again. All the same: in every place dear to me it remains my sole concern. I will therefore hunt it down with metaphors, allusions, and empty spaces, since it is in those it stores its very best.

If I refer to some streets and squares in French, it is because these names have long since been ingrained in the francophones of the city. I haven't given any translations for less familiar names, unless their proximity, not to mention the rhythm of the sentence, demands it (something that is fairly subjective). Upon entering the Zurenborg district, I have translated every single name. The reason for this decision will be revealed later in the text.

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Every city can contain other cities. At least it can indicate their presence.

Having been molded by the urban imbroglios of Robert Louis Stevenson, that brother of Scheherazade, and by Gustave Doré's meticulous nightmares, I happened to recognize certain aspects of London during a bus ride one day through the outskirts of Antwerp. And at that time, near the harbor, I even identified an Edinburgh 'close' in a carriage-gate left ajar. Yet at that time I hadn't set foot in the United Kingdom. These imprints of other native cities in Antwerp, during my lifetime, have always puzzled me. Edinburgh—an introverted and aggressive city carved from rock—revealed itself one winter afternoon (1947 or 1948?) in the opening of a carriage-gate with gigantic panels. It permitted a view of an off-putting courtyard, the remains of a cul-de-sac, where barrels, barrows, and handcarts were stored. It was in the Lange Koepoortstraat, between the old Bourse and the Zirkstraat. As for the arched passage diving beneath the Boucherie, with its rather brutal overtone due to echoing voices, it announced, with immense modesty, the Cowgate along which I didn't make my way until 1959.

Very recently, in 1991, in the architectural chaos of Huy, I wandered through an alley that seemed to be a brick by brick 'quotation' of Edinburgh. It thus happens that a place, because of its resemblances, confirms our roots elsewhere and allows us to measure our exile. This phenomenon isn't exceptional in its own right, but it offers, for my part, a corollary that most will recognize. Osmosis arises between reality, literature, and iconography, a phantom identity, a visitation that lasts only a second beyond the initial surprise. The critical mind, quickly regaining its hold, considers every image of Edinburgh as a projection of the Elsewhere, an immature desire, a reference—you linger over a text or a photograph—to that which hasn't yet come but will surely have to. Romantic feelings are not, or barely, involved here, especially since the experience of the Elsewhere, which usually passes in a flash, isn't contrived—it couldn't be without sinking into artifice. It is a phenomenon sparked by the unforeseen and, apart from being amenable to description, it is absolutely useless. I will not dwell on the origin of the affinities connecting me with faraway cities. It would mean entering the domain of hypotheses in which one generally may only drown.

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The sources of the Nile, the grinning gods of the Aztec pyramids, Mongolia's undulating moonscape, would we have discovered them, if we had not spent days on end in attics, schools of exploration for us as children back then? The attics of the Boucherie and of Rubens's house rank among the most mysterious in the city. When I climbed to them in 1960, their imaginative power struck me as explosive. Resembling the hull of a galleon turned on its head (the wells above, the mast below), these reserves or depots placed on several levels, in a half-lit forest, contained a heap of armor and crucifixes, statues of saints, and other objects hard to identify at first sight. Like Orpheus in a chilled hell, you ventured into an Alexander Trauner set for a film by Jean Cocteau.

The gables of Rubens's house, which I explored gropingly, held the remains of a plaster Mount Olympus. A muddled collection of dusty goddesses and war heroes, of pale masks and Renaissance consoles outlined Jung's archetypes. A collective unconscious unfolded beneath a dark ridge-piece and some firmly joined beams. My eye, adjusting to the darkness, enumerated classic fantasies and untied knots of meanings. Antwerp, outdoing H.G. Wells's time-travel machine, suddenly sent me back to beginnings. Echoes reached me from Plato's cave . . . .

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In the late fifties, between the Gare du Sud, which was to be condemned before long, the rue Colonel Silvertop and the Quai Ledeganck, where the braces of motorways presently imitate the tendrils of a vine, there was a stretch of disinherited land, a wasteland nurturing our imagination. Its sterility was its wealth; its expanse supported its emptiness. The stall of a *frites* vendor looked like a checkpoint. We weren't anywhere near a border, were we? Street lamps, parsimoniously sited, resembling sprigs of willow at the end of which a firefly blinked, stretched out in a zigzag pattern toward a river pulled by tugs. Nothing marked out the walker's route. Freedom of movement and the proximity of altitude joined forces to disorientate you. There the only path was the one left by your own footprints, and, like your prints, it came to a sudden end or branched out at your whim. A dull appearance and the majesty of the space were in perfect harmony. At nightfall, when the terrain stretched its limits toward the stars at the lower end of the firmament, you thought you were seeing one of the locations for Vittorio de Sica's *Miracle in Milan* [Miracle à Milan]. The sky, free of metaphysical understanding, brushed the mounds and garbage heaps with its tide of shade. Neorealism and magic realism intertwined as in Vasco Pratolini's *Tale of Two Poor Lovers* [Chronique des pauvres amants]. Here you found yourself among evening primroses and greasy wrappings, at the confluence of two literary movements.

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For several decades the Avenue Britannique and the Avenue d'Italie took turns in undergoing an eclipse. As soon as the first one went down, the second one came up, and vice versa. A mass of witnesses, drawn like me to the Pentecost Fair, will confirm this. When the lights of the merry-go-rounds dragged the first one out of its coma, the second one sank into limbo. Then it was decided to reopen both avenues to traffic. The showmen were forced to use the lifeless rectangle formed by the quai Flamand and the quai Wallon. How extravagant those varying attractions with horses and cracking whips were! Carousels and stalls either lengthen our sense of duration or shorten it. To age, not in a patrician mansion like Christopher Plantin's, but on the slopes of a roller coaster! Ah! What a way to end your life, both intense and lazy! In the Haunted Castle, a jolting car swallows me up in the fears that subdue every child. I emerge disappointed (though not without having noted an acceleration of time) but seduced nonetheless by the prospect of enhancing this outing later, in a fictional scene.

Gazing at a carousel with wooden horses has a calming effect on me. These mounts whose trot—as regular as a metronome—depicts the movement of waves, end up numbing me. Struck by lethargy, I look around for violent remedies. Anything that goes round and round fascinates me: the caterpillar, fast as a hare; the little row-boats, circling an axis with flashing bulbs; the centrifuge, the spinning force of which presses you into the wall, and so on. These therapies relieve you of your identity. But this churning comes to an end when the speed becomes barbaric, and you return both feet to the now rolling ground. Then, after these minute 'adventures,' you go back to normal time just as you go back home—there to grow old without anything going on.

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From 1970 until 1985 the night was absolutely indispensable to me. Not to mention the silence that has its source high above us and imparts a hint of intoxication. I am telling you all this to anchor my two- to three-hour itinerary in the vastness of the one and the peace of the other. It takes me through parks and gardens: den Brandt, the Rossignols, Elsdonck, Edegem . . . During the slice of eternity in those captive years, I slaved in Brussels. Hassled by the sociocultural tasks of a magazine by day, I needed, upon my return from the capital, to eliminate the metastasis of information (spots before my eyes crowding my inner vision) in order to try, at nightfall, to renew my ties with what was left of myself.

It was more of a march than a walk, really—a march in this leafy Patagonia, born of darkness, so well made as to drive a cartographer to despair, and during which you only encountered the odd individual holding his dog on a leash. The march changed into an assault course. For this course was impossible to escape; and in my imagination, which assails me twenty-four/seven, the course became a mine field rather than a retreat. All the more so for my having chosen the isolation of parks suited to attacks coming from within. It was hard to avoid, this failure! Did my fears and fantasies, my awareness of the irrecoverable, of work dismantling weeks and months, damage my bathing in the twilight and the moonlight? It would be naïve to believe this walk was risk-free. The wanderer might be a Gilgamesh crossing hells, a phoenix resurrected and dying at every single moment, sometimes disgusted by his condition, sometimes moved by the sight of a rosebush. These rambles during which the mind is spinning with activity emphatically testify that this madness is the amniotic fluid in which we permanently bathe. Only fatigue subdues this process, or rather those phases of sudden relief when one is visited by inspiration, by the *lust zu fabulieren*.

Hence my need, during those rambles between the Avenue Jan van Rijswijck where I live and the centre of Edegem, to outline mentally two essays (never in writing): one on the ambiguity of the characters in Stevenson, the other on the harassment by the intolerable in Hofmannsthal. I have dreamt up part of *The Other Side* while wandering through Elsdonck, alongside Hof ter Linden, and then dropping down to Vieux-Dieu with a keen ear for the gentle sounds of summer in the trees. I can also remember seeing the introduction to my nearly finished novel *The Usurper* being enacted like a film on a screen of foliage. This happened one evening in autumn, when I was standing at the edge

of the den Brandt park. You don't think my leafing through an album on Watteau the night before might have had anything to do with it, do you? In a wooded area two adolescents, dressed in oriental outfits, wearing feathered turbans, were chasing a harlequin, his silhouette whitened by moonshine, and he at his wit's end like a butterfly about to be stuck with a pin. I then guessed what the outcome would be of this round-up, and, a moment later, the end of my future novel came to me. A similar experience lies at the root of my novels *October Long Sunday* [Octobre long dimanche] and *The Other Side* [L'Envers].

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I am not easily moved by my childhood. I find it more distressing than pleasant. My reflex is simply to ignore it. Besides, I have always considered those sentimental returns as signs of decline. When I do travel back to that time (some moments are still worth preserving), it is because I am pulled back by three or four faces that will always remain young, or by echoing bits of conversations, or by the image of this or that privileged place left intact by the passage of time.

I am twenty years old; I am walking the streets; I am losing myself in a suburb where the night, denser here than elsewhere, will reverse the cardinal points. But, once downstream on the Scheldt River in the vigorous March light, I levitate. I am absorbed, I am invested with an inexpressible certainty. The space, priding itself on its most natural base, is pregnant with possibilities. And you don't need legible signs to see them. You simply experience that presence wherein the immediate future inheres. There are several thresholds, one after the other; crossing them triggers lucid euphoria. This privilege belongs to young men. Indeed, its seeds are present in all their perceptions, in all their gestures (even the most impetuous), and in all their gazes irrespective of direction.

Past the Nautical College, towards the Noordkasteel restaurant, there is a grassy slope where a path stands out like a fray in the fold of a piece of fabric. We, the path and I, escort a river on its Sunday vocation. I turn my back on the panorama of Antwerp—ashen as it is in the volatile silver of the 1947 winter—and gaze in the direction of the far-off estuary. Beyond this landscape stretched out in front of me, the open space is already sensed and the altitude vibrates like the ringing of a gong. Nevertheless, the river preserves its rustic character. It will become a harbor by a stroke of good luck and without its indifference being disturbed. Here, no warehouse signed by Piranese, no tavern with partitions auburn as rum, no cemeteries for sleeping captains as in London where, from Bermondsey to Greenwich, the open space is dismissed and the indisciplined skies of the Thames River are reined in. They had to do that much to bring the altitude within reach, to unfasten the belt of rooftops. What is always present on this path, blacktopped now, on this morning of May 1992, is a kind of solitude, but one that keeps its eyes and ears peeled. The path will become the axis around which light is snorted, and as soon as it weakens, the north will send its windy mobs.

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Edegem, end of May. All you need to do is go back up the Avenue Leopold III (just a street, really), take the bend bathed in greenery that half opens to your left, advance a few steps in what looks like a fire-break in a forest, and you will see unfolding itself the London of Hampstead Heath. The villas, of which you can catch a glimpse in between low shrubs and massive rhododendrons, are surrounded by lawns and resemble small islands separated from us by the green water of a pond. But these brick incubators, where intimacy perfects itself, and which appear illuminated from the inside by fireflies, have yet to undergo a Georgian-style cure. As for the stretch of fire-break, this elitist tunnel full of whispers, a muff of balmy verdure, brings to mind one of Constable's sketches. Past this British threshold, you come out into an open space, the immense sky above, and then you head back down. On the left-hand side, as a sort of consolation, you see a field of weeds that have gone wild, dedicated to Monet, and undulating like a magic carpet from *A Thousand and One Nights* about to take off.

Thus, the Elsewhere has taken root in this tiny area. You wonder whether the sharpness of our vision of the Elsewhere—by analogy with those contraptions, the reduction in size of which goes hand in hand with greater precision—isn't dependent on the decreasing support it gets. Take, for example, Joachim Patenir's *The Ecstasy of Mary-Magdalene* [L'Extase de sainte Marie-Magdeleine] on display in the Kunsthaus in Zurich. This painting would fit in a briefcase. Fortress, towns, cities, woods, as well as large stretches of water and mountain ensure that the horizon spreads out to create a rich line of sight. They bestow on the viewer the sharp vision of a sparrow hawk. Astounded by the abundance of these vistas and their marvelous exploration, your vision brushes the frame of the panorama it scans, and all of a sudden feels reined in by its inherent myopia. Sometimes the paint brush merely suggests and the viewer is obliged to imagine as well as to gaze. These two faculties then become inseparable and form a tense unity. Aren't we on the verge of glimpsing the Eldorado of Poe's poem, watermarked in it? One thing is certain: people enjoy flirting with what offers resistance or fades into remoteness. We drown in immense detail. And in the vein of clarity that separates the horizon from the mountains by way of a scroll of froth-colored clouds, the inaccessible restates its challenge.

The Elsewhere will still have allowed us to explore its earthly edges.

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The sinister alerts the senses, the lugubrious depresses them. Is there life between awakening and lying prostrate? Are these two extremes compatible at all? The rue De Marbaix, ending under the viaduct of the Porte du Schijn, paradoxically unites both these qualities, inherent in tales of terror and popular novels (the first one getting a preferential treatment, though). High, stern facades dating from the beginning of the twentieth century are characteristic of this street. Some are stripped of paint, others soaked in bile. A spot of fog settles there and you'd think you see warehouses in the style of villas. Like the grain silos in the harbor, they are solid as a rock and insensible of passers-by. I have to admit, though, that some facades have recently been well restored—the odd one with its orangey arched windows has been painted pollen yellow.

Converted into a pedestrian precinct, the street can pride itself on its scenic quality. You slow down there to imitate the toing and froing of an art gallery visitor, and your eye searches for the best angles to appreciate your surroundings. You contemplate the facades as if they were titles on the spine of books in a library. And those dusty, thick spines, a little grainy from wear, have titles smelling of ill-disguised violence and promising secrets. And, just as you find book bindings bearing vignettes or ex-libris plates, so there are facades in this street decorated with little paintings of cherubs' heads, stone gargoyles spouting wrought-iron lianas, mosaic friezes with a floral motif, and even a balcony supported by miniature columns, superbly dramatized by its stained surface. During winter the bleak light and malignant sadness give the facades an ashen look. It is as if you venture between the plates of an enormous press. You fear being crushed like a Caesar's chariot.

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From the Porte du Schijn to the Chaussée de Turnhout, a run-down, patched up area, a string of winding streets runs alongside the viaduct of the ring road. There are as many breaks in its curve as there are atmospheric curiosities in it. These little frequented streets—Touwstraat, Guldensporenstraat, Engelselei—provide a frame to the slowness of an endless provincial Sunday. The occasional car cannot modify their rhythm. The little, one-storey houses in the Touwstraat come straight out of the doodlings of a child and are doing their best to look like 'real' houses. Being anonymous, these houses manage to blend into the background and to the advantage of their sameness whose flow is splendidly gilded on a late afternoon in April. It is a street taking a stroll, and you are its escort. Where the Touwstraat becomes the Guldensporenstraat, it is interrupted by the far end of the Kortrijkstraat. It is like a stump cut off even more so by the slope of the railway that fringes the horizon with garbage. Little gardens of gnomes attach themselves to its edge. The vegetable plots fight a rearguard action. The crossing of these two streets creates the illusion of an intersection, which, as I walk past, reinforces the desolation of the place. It is as though the space releases an irrepressible yawn, as though it dreams of leveling itself and yielding to total emptiness.

Augmenting the number of its floors in order to lord it over the passers-by, enriching itself here and there with brackets, skylights, and wrought iron raised in pronounced relief, the Guldensporenstraat sanctifies the Sunday foot traffic, the semi-stagnation of a time ready to be taken. Its sorry palette is composed of a pinch of olive green, a mop grey, and some speckled saffron (having forgotten its refined uses). Coming to the Statielei, the street renounces here and there its extra storeys, but soon regrets this decision. It is like a child showing signs of imbalance after walking on the tips of its toes to look like a grown-up. A number of its side streets deserve a closer look. Consider the Bijlstraat. Its perspective scans the vertical lines of the narrow windows; zooming in on the street with a photographic lens would give you the same effect.

Here the North African and Antwerp dialects mix guttural and aqueous sounds.

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Despite its unsuitable qualification 'lei' (avenue), the Engelselei, revealed to me by the photographer Filip Tas, presents itself as a fracture—sorry, what am I saying?—a fissure in the metropolitan area, a fissure indicated by a sprig of blossoming rusticity. On one side, you see the masonry of a viaduct with arched walls covered in couch-grass and shrubs; on the other side, blind windows reinforcing the wanderer's isolation. This is the kind of quarantined, distant relative of what's left of ancient Rotherhithe Street close to the river in London. Jack the Ripper held office there.

No, this is not even a street (at least the part close to the Statielei), it is a passage at most, a kind of connection, or even a dry lock, a stupefied place between two busy sites. You experience a temporary stasis similar to the immobilization of turbulent waters in a sluice, and it places the passer-by in parenthesis. But no sooner does darkness descend, especially on drizzly summer evenings, than the Engelselei carries you away from Antwerp. You then enter a dimension, attached to which are the powerfully vague terrain, the outskirts that strike urban planners with impotence, and the overgrown path that circles the old fortresses guarded only by rats and valerian—in short, all that breaks the mold and sends history back to its manuals.

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Picture the rectilinear labyrinth referenced by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story *Death and the Compass* [La Mort et la boussole]. Imagine yourself bending its line to make the two ends meet. If this line offers resistance, if it is warped due to your clumsiness, you risk ending up with an unequal circle, and perhaps even an extremely wobbly oval, as if stumps of branches have grown into it. This is how the maze presents itself in the fortresses surrounding the city, inscribed among their slopes and moats. This thread of dirt road thus runs through what is neither garden, nor park, but rather a plot of open countryside. And this coarse path—infinitely long because of the double line of trees, one bordering the moat, the other climbing the slope--becomes the floor of a corridor shaded by leaves in summer. You go further and further down this lane as if you were an embryonic thought in the convolutions of a brain. For the wanderer resembles a thought looking for itself, doesn't he? Or rather, to paraphrase Heidegger, an indecisive thought groping around at random and letting itself wander off. The real thoughts are yet to come—just as the wanderer comes into his own after numerous excursions.

As for the buildings belonging to the fort (apart from those in Wommelgem), they are not easily accessible by the public. They blend in with the humus and vegetation covering them. Can you imagine a better retreat for a gnostic sect? Or, for a mental exercise the weapons of which would be offensive? These places, where time repents, ought to be the perfect shelter for a spiritual arsenal, a cyclotron in which the mental product delivers its ultimate resources.

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Between the tram depot and the buildings of the I.G.A.O. (gasworks), the heavily polished 'corridor' of the rue Kruger launches itself like an arrow. This street has disclaimed neither ruler nor protractor. On the contrary, it ostentatiously confirms that they were used. Its ancestor is to be found in Bruges, where it is called Hemelrijk (Kingdom of Heaven). The high, rough walls combine servitude with disconcerting plasticity. Beyond the lamp posts we can see the dome of the English convent. There is something about this place, perhaps those bricks colored with the ochers of November infuse it with a certain spirit. My hand enjoys brushing along these pocked surfaces where the redemptive action of time exerts itself. Here, the old city, eaten away by a plague of hotels, finds relief.

There is nothing like rue Kruger. You get the impression it is a lesson in perspective for novices, something fallen from a technical draughtsman's shelves. The street, of a degenerated descent and made from a base material, takes us back to its ancestor in Bruges. What it has succeeded in salvaging, though, is a singularity, the attraction of which I cannot possibly contest: to be a street without houses whose rigorous trajectory and walls without traces aspire to abstraction. It reminds us of the geometrical surfaces on which Fritz Lang's 'M' appears, a shadow on his cheeks.

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Like those flowers that await nightfall to spread their scents, the rue Saint-Hubert and the avenue Cardinal Mercier only divulge their essence at dusk. Only then is a suggestive, though rather monotonous, 'sample' unveiled. How striking they are, these traditional living-rooms visible through the bright windows of the rue Saint-Hubert! Do you think the inhabitants maintain the same easy rhythm as those of the turn-of-the-century establishment? And see those decorative elements raising the same weighty and stylized claw! Lamps owing their growth to a watering-can, with their wrought-iron scroll work and fringes of silk tassels. Orphaned pillars, chased from their temples and palaces of yore, as displaced as those Russian aristocrats transformed into Parisian cab drivers. Dressers and sideboards, the dictatorial size and molding on the doors of which betray a cabinet maker with more than a traditional commission. That plethora of knickknacks invading like Colorado beetles. The lighting of a cottage perturbed by a television screen showing the current affairs of the future. The future: a time which acts decisively outside that living-room, in the street where the ethnographer in me lingers and is changed by the fine evenings.

Close to the rue de Mérode, a yellowish-brown and grainy garden wall, which looks as if it is self-made (shells and bricks equally invoke this impression), is covered with shards of broken bottles. It reminds me of that wall with gigantic glass teeth, specially designed for the owner of a villa, which I had photographed back in 1959 near Holland Street in London. The photo made an artist friend of mine, an older man living a simple existence two steps away from the warehouses in the south of the city, sigh with pleasure: 'If I had a garden,' he said, 'I too would surround it with walls, and I would keep the pleasure of covering them with shards all to myself.' I must have given him a surprised

look (hypocritically surprised, of course) since he added: 'There is more to life than literature, or painting for that matter, Guy, old fellow.'

Avenue Cardinal Mercier. I contemplate a blind wall, ready to attack the darkness, and admire the fact that it is so upright that it almost reaches the sky. Its British alter ego with similar brickwork is to be found in the Caledonian Road or in Bethnal Green. In fact, it is a side façade at a sharp corner with the avenue Le Grelle. The neon light of a lamp post permits a detailed look at the base of the wall but it obscures the top part, due to its reflector that sits on it like a hood. In contrast with what we see further up, it looks like headland—a cliff denser than the night, and this makes me believe that I am venturing into an area where once a river reigned.

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Through the lace curtains of the Exter, a delightfully old-fashioned bar-restaurant, you can see a dance floor in the garden, illuminated in summer by fairy lights hanging beneath the trees. This view reminds one of a rustic part of London—not unlike the 'impressions' left by Sisley's airy technique. The little houses with their oriel windows in the Unitaslaan, the bushes and leaves in the Boekenberg park that swell like waves about to break, allude to Golders Green or Ealing Broadway. We owe the discovery of suburbia to the Impressionist painters. There the self-styled houses, toll gates, and timid railway lines maintained a rather exceptional something-or-other that is paradoxically revealed and that is not on offer in the open countryside where this phenomenon is banal. You got something out of it, it was like a gift doled out by one or another Highness on one of her visits to the most wretched of her subjects. In fact, it is not so much the evanescence that strikes you in the works of Monet and Sisley, but the emotion procured by what is almost in ruins. Isn't this truly the liveliness of death (a popular Sicilian expression) of which Gesualdo Bufalino speaks? What this expression refers to is the abrupt recovery from an illness, the unexpected return of health, followed by sudden death.

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The stream of motor vehicles having disappeared, the Meir resembles a river bed run dry due to an oceanic crack. It deserves exploring with the innocent curiosity of a diver, recycled as an onlooker.[1] The right moment: midnight is approaching. Partially cleaned, the tall facades with wide window-panes, no longer fronted by a sidewalk, reign over (a sea bed? Well, as a matter of fact . . . a second glance already imposes another image) a film set which the extras from a large production are about to leave. Strolling on bare ground between these steep neoclassical and rococo surprises, in which the neon light carves the reliefs and holds back the black of engraved wood, is like diving in shallow water, you make the same sinuous movements and follow the same rhythm. You zigzag, stop (what is new to the eye in the site results from destruction), move to the left, and to the right. You question yourself. Hadn't I just been examining a caryatid next to that pillared balcony? You tell yourself that the colonnaded facade of the city's Assembly Rooms could have come straight from the curve of Regent Street . . .

All this reminds me of an old recurring dream, one I have worked into *The Other Side*. I ventured into a destroyed Antwerp, only encountering a few inhabitants, small groups of shivering people who were equally bewildered. This was the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, wasn't it? No, a celestial object must have struck us. Perhaps a fragment of our moon inexplicably broken off. There should only be a few survivors. Despite severe organizational problems, time would be spent to lay the foundations of what could become new traditions. Everything would show signs of a return to the occult, to a quest for the Chosen One, to a collective eroticism. Saturnalia of not too excessive a nature would be organized in the gaping nave of the Cathedral of Our Lady. People would submit themselves to initiation rites amid the charred trunks of a park. Sitting in small groups of five or six, they would discuss calmly and at length the signs in the cracked wall—and the nature of their relation to the patterns in the sky. One night at dusk I happened to find shelter in the rooms of the Beaux-Arts Museum. The tempestuous floods of the Scheldt had left greenish, grimy traces on the paneling, an apocalyptic waterline. The paintings on the ground floor had been carried away to sea by the retreating water, like offerings presented to the gods. *The Oyster-Eater* [Mangeuse d'huîtres] by Ensor washed ashore on the English coast, didn't it? If the painting of the Virgin Mary by Fouquet had been displayed on the ground floor, one could have imagined her lying on her back, lulled by the becalmed waters, smiling up at a finally recovered heaven.

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A half-moon, the straight line of which would be the avenue Plantin-Moretus. In the arc, namely the rue de l'Orient and the rue du Grand Chien, we find the most exquisite parts of Zurenborg, an area lacking the pomposity of the avenue Cogels-Osy. The pivot of this gem of a kingdom, the Place de l'Aurore is a flat star; several of its beams have a zodiacal destination: rue du Taureau, rue du Cancer, rue du Bélier (Aries) . . . These signs refer to heaven, a territory where these streets, excessively enlarged, could show the way to the blissful. They are streets crossed in the middle by other streets. So, hovering above them like a bird—reading a map gives you a similar experience—you imagine that you can distinguish something that reminds you of a window cracked by a bullet fired from a revolver.

If I had emigrated in those days, if Antwerp, its sparse images, was what remained of my *remembered childhood,* I would consider this half-moon as a city in itself, a miniature city, its unpleasant aspects included, of course, a kind of Madurodam over which you have to lean, for you cannot enter it.

What a treat for the keen eye! A corner tower, white like a pastry chef's rolling pin, drinks in the day by a window with a tympanum. A round bay window, so that he who contemplates the outside gets absorbed by a paradox: what is inscribed in the window has the infinite as a limit. A tiled Gothic-Venetian façade, the reflection of which in the polluted water of a canal is reproduced in one of my art books. And for the ever snacking bulimic: adorable turrets you can eat with a single bite; pinnacles, the ornaments

of which would suffice to decorate a totally neglected garden; little towers of barley-sugar and macaroons that bring to mind ivory cameos . . .

Let me be clear about this. I notice that Zurenborg gets much smaller when I haven't seen it for a while. At least in my memory it does. The images I have of this place are the size of a postcard, of those reddish daguerreotypes into which, against a fading background, the contours of the monuments are engraved, their details so precise that their fragility is emphasized. To me the facades that border this half-moon have the size of those knickknacks for sale in tourist shops: inns and castles, arches and gabled houses straight from the oven of a ceramicist-confectioner. Will the phenomenon end there?

Alpha. Omega. From the original atom that contained the universe to the final point at which the selfsame universe, firmly miniaturized, will end (under the effect of a spiritualization that tends to abolish matter), there is the plan of a built-up area: Zurenborg. An area so dense yet so small that it could precede any other place—planet, continent, capital—toward that oblivion to which boredom, lack of adventure, stumbling memory, and the renouncing of earthly forms will have contributed.

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As London has its Little Venice, which is situated by the Regent's Canal in Paddington, so Antwerp has its Little Switzerland. Its access within the village of Mortsel seems to want to avoid the gaze of non-initiates. The advantage of this *helvetic* plot—due to the steep slope, the roofs of villas, and the walls of warehouses hiding it, you could easily miss it—is that you get a worker airing his dog instead of a parvenu of the jet set, a wild cat instead of a star bogged down by her cellulite and her revenue, a mother with a stroller instead of a gambler, and a little boy hacking a ball instead of a vacationing diplomat. Normally, you do not suffocate here, as human presence is kept to a bare minimum. It limits itself to a small-scale representation.

Let us take the entrance at the end of the Osylei, past the playground. It combines what is visible with what is hidden. In an area set back, a narrow footpath, barely visible at first sight, broaches what you hardly dare call 'the heights'. On the side, discreet as a wink, a small notice board announces the border of Little Switzerland (*Klein Zwitserland*). Seven or eight steps and the horizon is within reach on this high, wide, and solitary ramp of a former railway track. Between the swelling of luxurious weeds, bushes, poppies, and fragrant thistles (it is June), you will see a path, if you can call it that, venturing upward. Is this what they call a *veldt* in South Africa? Where the path turns, you can look down to another rustic railway line and see the railcar from Turnhout to Mechelen pass by. Our path follows this bend to the right and runs through the domain of the adjacent yet invisible Château de Cantecroy. A gaggle of geese protects it. Suspicious noises? A deafening clamor suddenly arises. In the middle of Little Switzerland, there is a green hollow, quite open, a kind of valley with bushes, toward which hints of footpaths descend. The ground, without any doubt ancient sediment from the Scheldt, is still covered with broken shells. People have even dug up sharks' teeth here. Due to a lack of alpine pasture, you discover slopes full of motley cats and hares instead of rams and cows. Finally, in an area only slightly lower, a path overlooked by the very long wall of a

warehouse and completely overgrown by bushes heads for the corner of the Krijgsbaan and the Amadeus Stockmanslei. There, it coughs up the wanderer.

Like an ascetic gives up his Self in the contemplation of emptiness, Antwerp has renounced itself. Ah! The luxury of no longer being houses, harbor, cathedral, and museums; of having said goodbye even to the collective nonchalance of its parks! Thanks be given to the indistinct lands of which Little Switzerland is the queen. No traces therefore of the past, no signs of the future. Of the present, you only see what unrestrained nature renews. It is quite possible that Antwerp is yet to be born . . . Unless we are reaching the end of its history here. The only remainder is my stream of consciousness.

In this Switzerland the gold of forgetfulness requires no banks.

## Notes

[1] At the time when I wrote this text, the Pont du Meir and the rue Leys were undergoing extensive reconstruction. While vehicular traffic was forbidden there (it's true that it would not have been able to move through), the pedestrian, given over to a different take on the place, had the imagination stimulated by looking (Guy Vaes).

## Bibliographical note

From 'Un Palimpseste anversois,' first published in *Colophon* (Antwerp, 1993); definitive version in André Sempoux, *Guy Vaes: l'effroi et l'extase*. Avin (B), 2006: Editions Luce Wilquin.