

## The Measure of Our Exile

On the City Essays of Guy Vaes

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Guy Vaes (b. 1927) was a Belgian author whose magic realist fiction also drew on modernist psychological investigations and ideas of alienation. Vaes, who made his name with *October Long Sunday* (1956), returned to writing novels later in his career between 1983 and 2002. An accomplished photographer, he was also a film critic for the Brussels magazine *Spécial*, and his collected reviews were published in 2007.

His death aged eighty-five in his native city of Antwerp in February 2012 marked a broader passing, that of the francophone Flemish author. Along with Paul Willems, who died in 1997, Vaes was the last major resident representative of this curious and anachronistic line. As it gradually faded, it wove a val-edictory narrative of a kind that haunts present-day Belgium. In the last half-century, while francophone Brussels and Walloon authors forged new cultural identities from their changing status as imminent citizens of independent Belgian regions, the francophone Flemings grew increasingly isolated in a thrusting Dutch-speaking region that benefited from further language laws in the 1960s and from constitutional reforms in the following two decades. Unlike other francophone Flemish writers who opted for exile from their native region, Willems and Vaes remained to face the gradual withering away of their cultural and institutional support in the wake of Flemish resurgence.

In its constant play of doubles, dreams and apparitions, Willems's work, especially his plays, repeatedly expresses the fractured identity of the francophone Fleming. Writing in 1978, Willems confessed to being troubled by the task of setting a play in the port of Antwerp: 'I see my characters, I hear them speak: they speak Flemish. It's therefore impossible for a Flemish francophone author to write "live" about a specific place located in Flanders'.

### A dedicated flâneur

Vaes shared this sense of dispossession and loss, but chose not to associate it openly with Flanders. In *October Long Sunday*, set in an unidentified Antwerp, Laurent Carteras, the inheritor of a country estate, finds himself unrecognized by those around him and so assumes the identity of a gardener on the property

that his cousin has acquired by default. His second novel, *The Other Side* (1983), is set in London in the torrid August of 1934. A young Fleming, Bruno, becomes the confidant of Broderick, an older friend gravely injured while vacationing on the Isle of Skye and who, like Lazarus in Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, has 'come from the dead/Come back to tell you all' before 'dying' for a second time. Broderick's revelations of 'the other side' turn Bruno's life upside down; he is *dépaysé* in more ways than one. And London is a perfect location, as its indecipherable vastness sets the disorientating mood of the novel.

In this way, Vaes consistently dislocated his identification with Antwerp as well as with Paris or Amsterdam, the traditional magnets for French- or Dutch-language Belgian authors respectively. Influenced greatly by British literature, Vaes's greatest affinities were for cities in the British Isles: Dublin, Edinburgh, and above all London, which he describes as an 'Eldorado for the enthusiast of unlimited epiphanies and of strangeness'. His various essays on Edinburgh and London reveal the twin paradoxes of an intimate vastness and a strange familiarity; the title of his major essay on the English capital (1963), paraphrased from Jorge Luis Borges, is *London, or the Broken Labyrinth*. 'I love labyrinths', he writes, 'and London is a maze that only gives itself up to the attentive walker'. His essay on *The Cemeteries of London* (1978) reinforces this passion by serving as the introduction to an eponymous book of his own photographs. Wandering in wonder, and invoking a range of literary and art works, Vaes offers an aesthetic and historical meditation on the distinctive atmosphere and special character of these remarkable Victorian burial grounds.

A dedicated *flâneur*, in a tradition running from Baudelaire through modernism to the 'drifting' of the Situationists and beyond, Vaes moved through cities on foot, always on his own terms, and with a boundless enthusiasm for their quirkier, less evident sides. In the essay *Poetics of Cities* (1997), based on his own experiences of London and Singapore (having written an essay on the latter at the end of the 1970s), and of others writing about London, he investigates how language may unlock the secrets and essence of cities perceived by imaginative minds. All of his city essays thus demonstrate the subtle art of a psychogeographer, one whose refined sensibility, ever open to unusual detail, combines 'attentive' walking with aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual insights in a quest for the meaning of places and of our often complex relation to them.



Guy Vaes (1927-2012)  
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Guy Vaes

Vieil Anvers  
(Old Antwerp), ca. 1965  
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Guy Vaes



### Born twice

In the Edinburgh essay, *The City of Interrupted Time* (1990, its title borrowed from Henri Michaux), he claims of the English and Scottish capitals, and the Irish one to a lesser extent, that he is of them rather than of elsewhere, other cities being mere passing fancies of strictly localized interest. His sense of his own dual identity further emerges in his assertion that he was born twice: once in Antwerp in 1927 and again in London on his first visit in 1958. Writing to critic Jacques De Decker in 1983, Vaes acknowledges that 'being a franco-phone writer living in Antwerp doesn't trouble me at all. On the contrary, I've always enjoyed living in a city whose language, fully familiar to me, did not belong to me at all. I felt more at ease in London, I had more room to move'. As Vaes walked through Edinburgh and London, he discovered a profound sense of identification with them, giving rise to a feeling that he belonged not only to his native land, region, and city, and to francophone literature, but to an inter-cultural continuum. This discovery permitted him to resolve certain aspects of the problem of identity he experienced as a minority writer in a Dutch-speaking region. For Vaes, Belgium is 'a kaleidoscope that offers fragments of reality but whose totality resides elsewhere'.

The interrelated strategies of walking and writing demonstrated in Vaes's essays may be productively read in light of some of Michel de Certeau's ideas in 'Walking in the City', one chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). De Certeau's urban walker employs a 'rhetoric' that undermines the 'legible order of planners' in its 'turns and detours'. In this rhetoric, 'the art of "turning" phrases finds an equivalent in the art of composing a path'. This equivalence works as easily in reverse: the twists and turns of a path correspond to the art of composing a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph. In the process, Vaes understands with a mixture of joy and apprehension what de Certeau calls the 'disquieting familiarity' of the city, and from these revelations springs the textual expression of a 'poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning'.

We may see that Vaes was deeply attached to Antwerp but resisted an easy identification with it and especially with all standard accounts of it. How then may we see the perception of his native city in *An Antwerp Palimpsest*? This essay was first published in magazine form as part of a collectively written 'new synthesis of Antwerp' for a civic celebration in 1993. Maintaining his practice of a dislocated and (in the best sense of the word) eccentric identity, he explores the ambivalent idea of a presence in yet an absence from his own birthplace. The essay leads the reader on a typically idiosyncratic series of perambulations through areas of greater Antwerp that the tourist might completely ignore. Through the eyes of an unorthodox walker, Vaes discovers a city that, in de Certeau's words, 'is left prey to contradictory movements that counter-balance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power'. He reads against the grain of the city's geography, history, and architecture. For instance, he describes walking out of Antwerp along the Engelselei at nightfall on a drizzly summer evening. The space he finds himself entering seems to exist in another dimension, 'attached to which are the powerfully vague terrain, the outskirts that strike urban planners impotent, and the overgrown path that circles the old fortresses guarded only by rats and valerian—in short, all that breaks the mould and sends history back to its manuals'.

### Every city can contain other cities

Another section, on Rue de Marbaix, a street marked by 'high, stern facades dating from the beginning of the twentieth century', exemplifies Vaes's eye for detail, his association of ideas, and his insistence on unhurried appreciation of a place: '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



Schrijnwerkersstraat,  
Antwerp, ca. 1960  
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Royal Museum of Fine Arts,  
Antwerp, ca. 1960  
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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'.

These often ordinary streets and districts reveal to Vaes a personal vision of the city that has little or nothing to do with its official status as the centre of contemporary Flemish cultural, economic, and political power. Instead, it has everything to do with the veiled presence of a different reality and with a set of peculiar affinities to other cities. Believing that 'every city can contain other cities' or 'at least ... indicate their presence', he tells how as a young man in Antwerp he had sensed certain aspects of London and Edinburgh before ever visiting those cities. 'It thus happens', he continues, 'that a place, because of its resemblances, confirms our roots elsewhere and allows us to measure our exile. [...] Osmosis arises between reality, literature, and iconography, a phantom identity, a visitation that lasts only a second beyond the initial surprise. [...] It is a phenomenon sparked by the unforeseen'.

## No traces of the past, no signs of the future

Since a palimpsest is a manuscript on which more than one text has been written with the earlier writing incompletely erased, Vaes duly overlays conventional or formulaic accounts of Antwerp with his own original itinerary and thereby reinforces his eccentric identification with his native city. Though marked by episodes of anxiety and doubt, his physical and then textual traces bear witness to a heightened response to Antwerp comparable to his transcendent experiences of Edinburgh and London. That this response somewhat ironically privileges undifferentiated, hidden, and forgotten places only serves to intensify the enigma of this reality. It is the reality of what Michel Foucault calls 'heterotopias, those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others'.

At the end of his essay, he finds himself veering off the beaten track in a non-descript, elevated open area called *Little Switzerland*, within the village of Mortsel, where 'like an ascetic gives up his Self in the contemplation of emptiness, Antwerp has renounced itself'. Here is no officially recognized part of the city, no district defined by public image or by developmental vision. Vaes explains that 'Little Switzerland' bears 'no traces ... of the past, no signs of the future. Of the present, you only see what unrestrained nature renews'. But we are still in metropolitan Antwerp, and Vaes persuades us eloquently that his experience here, as in other parts of the city where he chooses to walk, or as in other cities, is available to anyone in the right frame of body and mind.

### Extracts from An Antwerp Palimpsest

*By Guy Vaes*

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

Having been moulded 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 harbour, 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.

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 one side, discreet as a wink, a small notice board announces the



Promenoir le long de l'Escaut (Promenade walk along the Scheldt), ca. 1960

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Docks Escaut, ca. 1960  
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border of Little Switzerland (Klein Zwitserland). Seven or eight steps ahead 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 passing 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. Any suspicious noises? A deafening clamour 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, harbour, 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. All that remains is my stream of consciousness.

In this Switzerland the gold of forgetfulness needs no banks. ■

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

Translated by Philip Mosley