

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Poetics of Cities

Guy Vaes

Translated from the French by Philip Mosley

For a city to speak to us, it so happens that first of all it must offer itself from a distance. That is the case at least of places whose name and a pinch of images—photographs or descriptions, allusions to its subject—have summoned us. That is how novelty works. It obsesses or surprises before infiltrating our defenses; it nonplusses before authorizing some kind of abandon. That it administers, right from the start, a strong dose of troubling seductiveness on that first contact, the certainty, coming so to speak from beyond us, of having sensed, not Eden or a middle-class settlement, but a place *finally real*, with its weight of threats, of combined charms, of inconveniences and adventurous opportunities, of all that there is left no doubt. What is outside our door creates in the mind an enormous double. And isn't it the gap that separates me from it, blurs its features a little, that suddenly draws me close to the unknown on the pavement across the street?

In fact, and this is my deep conviction, for a city to be called 'real,' it must exert a nostalgia without indulgence, stimulate a hunger that demands no aura for it to grow, open up in our moods those 'air holes' that plunge us into a sheol of dullness. However opulent or debased it presents itself, the reality of the place yet to be seen, or that we never stop discovering in the course of repeated visits, must be related to that of the narrow bay, haunted by the drizzle, where two or three stones are rotting, and which are madly dreamed of by those northern mercenaries gathered beneath the banner of Hamilcar in Flaubert's *Salammbô*. The forming of what I call the native place, and of which the civil state doesn't make mention, is achieved against our will. Quite a few things we love, right up to the taste for beautiful illusions, may be assaulted there. It's the whole vast unknown fringe of ourselves, on which some familiar elements stand out, that cuts in on our island of lucidity.

As for the stones of which Flaubert speaks, I would gladly bring them close to what the bricks of London represent to me. Ocher, flecked with purple, damasked with smudges of dirty gold or rubbed by a seaweed green, the bricks of London throw the walls of Shad Thames into the assault on the sky, cover the Georgian 'cocoon' of Hampstead and Canonbury with ivy, shrink from the sight of barbarous cubes—caverns

or redoubts?—in Camden and on Seven Sisters Road. Something that always astonishes me is that certain walls of Bruges and Damme recall them.

Finally setting one's foot there, the formerly faraway city—if its diversity abounds in peculiarities, evidence of an imaginary with ramifications—puts aside for us new *distances*, unforeseeable *elsewheres*. Our successive visits will enlarge it without flushing out all the secrets of its paradoxical unity. London is a case in point. Gradually, in the course of a tenth or twelfth visit, we will realize what instability threatens. No city is made to last: the major part of the urban infrastructure must be renewed like a wardrobe. Then it will open out. Henceforth there will be two cities, that of yesterday and that of today. Both of them built on piles and stressing an ever more poignant fragility. Our ageing as more or less punctual visitors cannot match the development of sites. The lapses in time, due to our absences, affect the liaison between the phases of that development. Whence an uneasiness that runs contrary to our never sated hunger. And what if that which the city still holds back had been debased without our knowing it? If only we had the gaze of a god who registers all and everywhere! Only the gift of ubiquity would thwart the passage of time. It would guard the city and ourselves from those jolting transitions, and, in what concerns us egotistically, from that inner imbalance that comes from what a part of the future has taken from us. Do we notice the blemishes in the loved one who accompanies our days? It's rather as how Julien Green must have felt, taking refuge in the United States during World War Two, and rediscovering a Paris that his exile had moved forward in relation to the Paris that palpitates in the volumes of his diary entitled *The Easy Years* [Les Années faciles] and *Last Fine Days* [Derniers beaux jours]. Over there, in Virginia and New York, he endlessly recreated his native city, recharging, enriching, sublimating all the imaginary that radiates from its constellation of squares and monuments, for such is the privilege of a great, very great city: it escapes our clutches, inscribes itself only partially in our memory, allows entire districts to lose themselves in oblivion or veil themselves in sfumato. There one would spend the clearest part of life, one might dream it anew, as if it were another place, a continent whose peninsula we inhabit. A shopkeeper in Saint-Mande may feel himself as far from his cousin living in Levallois-Perret as if she were at the far end of the world; a secondhand dealer in Turnham Green may imagine that the edges of Epping Forest ruffle the limits of the Kingdom. One walks in Bruges and Antwerp; one travels in London and Buenos Aires. That's why Dickens, Charles Lamb, Dr. Sam Johnson, Arthur Machen, and so many other residents of the British megalopolis never ceased to rediscover it with the eye of a stranger. Even Dickens, who nonetheless lived on the spur of the moment (as is the case of all the great creators), had to see the reminiscences of the past and the promises of the future alternating there.

Twenty-five years ago (1962) I wrote a text on London; eight years ago (1979) one on Singapore. The publisher Jacques Antoine collected them under the title *My Cities* [Mes villes]. Before addressing the way in which I envisaged those places—the first, object of a long unfulfilled wish, the second suddenly offered by the circumstances of my professional life—I'd like to expand on the various ways in which an author may approach a city, appropriate it, subject it to an outline, made up in few cases from its history (unless it is the opposite), and unwittingly express the avatars of said history, be

they architectural, urbanistic, social, or individual. In short, I'd like you to join me in seeing how the city, a collective creation made over daily, becomes that film in which we are at once protagonist and viewer.

In the book he devotes to London, and which appeared in 1933, Paul Morand approaches the city as a learned connoisseur, with selective antennas, but also as taster of aristocratic and bourgeois peculiarities. Consular official in the capital from before World War One, he has the all-round eye of a great reporter. He savors like so many vintage wines the past of Westminster, Belgravia, and the West End, and the stories that make up their present. He practices the overview, but an overview that excludes imprecision; for detail, he has the sharp eye of an entomologist; that which he pins on the cutting edge of a point resembles the sheathed sword of the cane that accompanies him in the alleys of the East End; that which he pins has the brightness and fine grain of a metaphor. Historical erudition, immediate assimilation of a surrounding, sensoriality of skin's surface go hand in hand here. The extent of the angle of vision is that of a long-term resident, not of a tourist more or less familiar with the maze of cast iron and stucco. The instantaneity of perception doesn't come, as in the case of the newly disembarked visitor, deprived of roots and address book, from astonishment at the never before seen, but from the demands of a wine-taster who savors a vintage, takes in an aroma, marks a distinction—and finds the image that pulls together his impressions. In him, there is an older brother of Truman Capote.

He welcomes us into his *London* like the master of a house who displays, from cellar to attic, the treasures of a truly living museum, with no trace of a speck of dust. This is not a London in the process of forming, breaking loose suddenly from the ground like a piece of rock during an earthquake. It's always, despite brief incursions into outskirts fallen prey to gigantism, a traditional, classical London, and of which the gaze of the interested party furnishes the only accessory. If knowledge of it nonetheless retains the fervor of the lived, it's that the contact of the fleshy word has revived it; but that lived experience, aspired to throughout by the text, by the concern to *hit the spot* (to the point where some have thought Morand too superficial), rejects the wavy line of whatever, bit by bit or violently, reveals itself. Morand does not wish to open himself up, or to open up the city in the groping or the inspired wandering that lie beneath the totally subjective vision of a place. Elitist initiate, he suppresses the degrees of initiation.

Henri Thomas takes a different view. The author of *The London Night* [La Nuit de Londres] has neither the manner nor the financial means of a diplomat. He worked for a long time at the BBC, and nothing stops us from thinking that Paul Souvraut, the narrator of the tale, translator in an agency, who wanders the damp pavement nightly in search of its truth, is his mouthpiece. His approach is not that of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* [Paysan de Paris] but rather that of Poe's *Man of the Crowd*. Here, no gallery of caryatids and hoardings as unconscious symbols of the kind that drove the surrealists wild. The narrator shows that opaque vastness of a universe made up of millions of closed doors. His itinerary is that of a deep-sea diver. Seeker of signs, a leaf stuck to a grille in Harrington Gardens disturbs him as much as we may be by a hanging bird we find in *Cosmos* by Witold Gombrowicz. And as the tides obey the moon, Souvraut wonders what exterior secret orders the slow turning of the crowd, what 'black hole'

yawns in the metaphysical center of the city. If the confession of Thomas is miserly in descriptions, it's that the city has passed into his heart and soul. Whence that mediumistic presence of a Westminster reduced to masses of frozen silence and to the unforeseeable or programmed behavior of its human 'visions.'

This approach is less subjective than we might think. So strongly interiorized is the London of Henri Thomas that it is akin, in its nocturnal emptiness, in the roundabout wandering of the narrator, to that described in his memoirs by Arthur Machen, author of *The Great God Pan*, which was translated [into French] by Paul-Jean Toulet. We don't know if it is the desolateness of those streets as steep as reefs that releases the character, or if it is the desolateness of the character that projects them onto the screen of his mind. We rediscover the trace of that cooled down hell in many pages of Dickens, and also in certain etchings by Gustave Doré illustrating Blanchard Jerrold's *London*. In my view, his historicity is as evident as that in Paul Morand's account. This vision, which is not at all that which Paris, Berlin, Rome, or New York may suggest, has been shared by thousands of visitors left to fend for themselves in those prison quarries of brick and bolted gates. It's not at all because it avoids the critical analysis of the historian that this view has no tangible character. It is London alone that authorizes this type of approach, in a way dictates it. Should we wish, from this viewpoint, I'd even say from this tuff, to 'raise the tone' (as we say of pictorial language), to amplify the potential of his imaginary, we are led into the chaotic Babylon of Verlaine, into the police procedurals of Conan Doyle and, closer to us [in Belgium], into the Gehenna of the fog and soot of Jean Ray, with his dens of craftsmen and refinishers, his ghouls dressed up as rentiers, his stranglers in the pay of an occult brotherhood. Quite a few pages in Thomas and Machen point to a cauldron of fantasies and unbridled mythologies. We won't be amazed then that Adrienne Monnier, occasional visitor, sees in London 'the presence of an invisible world.' That world, which gives rise, like rye grass, to cemeteries of dark romanticism in the heart of the City and along Commercial Road, finds its origin in the suburbs, in that human cramming, that loss of millions of creatures to the margins of history. That world today, tending to corrode that which encloses it, no longer shows the colors of the traditional fantastic; it imposes those of racial uprising, whose echoes cannon off the cast-iron pillars of Brixton Viaduct. But that banner, for the present-day writer, may conceal another, that of the apocalypse where social evidence and lyrical anticipation come together.

How different is the approach introduced, in prose as well as in lines of fifteen-syllable verse, by Jacques Réda, the poet of *Ruins of Paris* [Ruines de Paris] and *Beyond the Walls* [Hors les murs]. Réda is among the two or three best French writers today. Barely has this compulsive walker taken a step than the city assails him from all sides, like the sea does to a ship; and even if the city observes the flat calmness of suburbs (and the suburb dominates Réda's texts), an endless motion transforms the poet into an acoustic enclosure, one that is under attack as if from a swarm of bumble bees or an undertow of metaphors. Place is first and foremost coastal space for Réda. The open sea is present, no longer maritime but urban. A hint of barricades suddenly lifted forced Réda to take stock, in each line, of the dynamic of his surroundings. It wouldn't astonish us if a cloud, like a distracted passer-by, came to jostle him. The Place de la Concorde shares the privilege of altitude with the steep slopes of Courbevoie. What suggests to Réda the spirit

of a vast perspective, beneath the stinging winter sky, is in no way arbitrary: 'Even with no wind a gently rising breath of air makes itself felt there.' The restlessness of the air, if not its spite-free moods, the avatars of a powerfully material light, sets off thousands of conflicts within the streets, there where, with most writers, nothing happens that does not come from mankind. As long as the antennas that spike our mind are as numerous as those of the sea urchin, the outskirts become as difficult to cross as an Amazonian river: 'And I recross the Marne irritated by a downpour, the sky black all over, other roads turning off beneath other cargoes of passing clouds that weigh so heavily in every direction that a molten furnace cracks open and spills out on a line with the hills.' Léon-Paul Fargue, pedestrian of Paris, is followed by Réda, the inveterate traveler over indistinct land. What he practices, whether in the 'underwater mass of vegetation where the rue Bobillot floats and settles,' whether in the nearness of that 'half-ruined former factory in brick [. . .], but of a squat and slightly cabalistic layout, like a Frankish citadel in the Levant,' it's a deep-sea navigation. The unexpected, that word he particularly likes, presides over the minutest change of angle. He sanctions the uninterrupted coming into being of the landscape. Each step introduces a threshold where the elderberry bush, an equine butchery, and an 'algebraic tangle of rails and catenary' have the presence and the weight of famous monuments flying by at high speed. Such is also the city. . . .

But enough of that. It may perhaps seem pretentious to you that I now come to *my* approach to London and Singapore. I feel I have neither the talent nor the experience of those I have presented to you. Let's say I would like, and this will be my only excuse, to propose this approach to you as being, above all, that of a man who didn't know he would write a text on London—and even less so on Singapore. A man who has his double in Vienna, Paris, Rome, Manchester, or St. Petersburg. Julio Cortazar discussed that man with me one evening, twenty-six years earlier, when my wife and I were invited to dinner by his translator, Laure Guille-Bataillon. That man lived in Buenos Aires and had never left his city. He nursed an absolute passion for Paris and perhaps that was the reason why he had never dared to go there. He knew every district of it and, frequently, in the course of his conversations with Cortazar, he stopped off, so to speak, at some bookstore or restaurant. He talked to his companion, already familiar with the capital, of its seasonal perspectives, of the surprises that you can expect if agreeing to wander at will in the Marais and well beyond. No fluttering of that great organism seemed to escape him.

Two or three years later, in a St-Germain bistro, a friend of Pierre de Lesure introduced me to a thin, dark gentleman with a muffled voice. It was François Cali, to whom we owe, among others, the text and the selection of photographs of those two art books published by Arthaud: *Greek Order* [L'Ordre grec] and *The Greatest Adventure in the World: Citeaux* [La plus grande Aventure du monde]. At the time, and perhaps even now, these books had no equivalent, both in the intelligence of the photography and in the refinement of the text, and also in the choice of captions, a choice guided by an infallible poetic instinct. A little later, François Cali was to publish a book on Bruges. I don't know how we arrived at speaking of how one may invest a city in imagination, perceive its particularity, feel the ambiance appropriate to this or that district. Cali acknowledged that he had written his text on Greece before going there, exercising, in order to do it, his

power of divination on the most diverse of materials. When he finally made his trip, far from having to do a complete rewrite, he found he needed only to make some alterations and additions. Some of his closest friends, who had been going to Greece for many years, even thought his first version to be the more authentic one.

In truth, I didn't dream of London in any way like Cali did of Greece. He wanted to write a text on his subject; as for me, I was hoping to get to London, but on condition that I would stay there for a long time. It's possible there was an unconscious literary project, the prospect of using unpublished resources; only that, even after my second stay in London, nothing came of it. At the time, I had published *October Long Sunday* [Octobre long dimanche] and started *Zeno's Arrow* [La Flèche de Zénon] but without too much hope of bringing that essay home. In effect, I saw myself sooner or later (and rather—oh, yes!—sooner than later), forced to give up writing, as the need to shore up my social situation became pressing. The future proved me more or less correct. Since childhood the thought of entering a profession (for I had no call to make money) had seemed an atomizing constraint to me. Work or the lack of money seeming to me both like a kind of stifling, my life could only lead to a dismal disaster; reading the utopians—Fourier, Cabet, and company—strengthened my conviction: to modify the conditions of work was to find further compromises with the devil. I began gently to wish, so as to loosen the vice, that the constancy of my aversion might move Providence; that It, finally, would grant me that kind of sinecure of which the beneficiary appears necessarily as the most suspect of individuals. Thus, if my London reverie included, in any way, an embryonic creative approach, it could very well collapse from being an undernourished fantasy having been distanced from its true source for so long. It was not that at all. My wait ended in 1959, my wife having persuaded me to put an end to my procrastination.

Like every irrational phenomenon, the origin of my passion escapes me. I will simply say this: London is a predisposition of my character. An aspiration to coincide more fully with myself; myself—storytelling factory, crucible of senses represented by each of my looks, occupation to weave networks of analogies, laboratory where memory becomes all or filter, and goodness knows what else—myself, year in, year out, turning over in my mind that flux of images of a milieu suited to my desires; a milieu coming, I imagine, from a few thin germs taken, here and there, from the screen or from a book, even from a comic strip when I was still a child. Those germs had necessarily to harbor a fictive concentrate, without which I would not have reacted. I had to fill myself with it, as we fill ourselves with an eloquent silhouette, seen two or three times, and invent 'novels' about it, 'novels' whose contours and shadings will create a 'manner,' one that will influence later inventions.

The passage into adolescence, the shock of a hundred different revelations, and later the fall into adulthood were the only things that could have killed off those germs, have shaken up what they had established between the conscious and the unconscious (the topography of the birthplace). To protect it against such assaults, I had to give a solid base to that fictionality, render it credible, nourish it with real details—or those experienced as such. That base, so to speak, was given to me by the feeling that education, hierarchies, and the division of London into innumerable districts had to turn the individual over to his own devices. I felt him at once protected (but in a leveling way)

yet too isolated—unless he was stunned and wildly disorientated by the urban undertow—and constrained to come up with survival strategies, to frequent only unbelievably well-marked ways. To that clockwork programming, but by which rambles the man of the crowd so dear to Poe, reply the excess or the monomania of the eccentric, usually a loner, but of whom the type would be infinitely less common. Far from throwing tradition out of the window, the eccentric would be a surgeon of it, indeed a hyperbolic expression of it. On the fictive level, the anonymity of the one valorizes the renown of the other (if not his *relief*). However, between the manias and frustrations of the man of the crowd, and the deranged individualism of the man who forges his own law and style, how can we not suspect some equivalence, some conforming points? In the end, literature and fact having privileged the eccentric to the point of making him a gross English archetype, we have doubtless lost from sight that which separates him from the maniac, a person without breadth, destined to swell the incalculable number of men of the crowd.

I told myself that a terrifying solitude must weigh on those existences (later, I ran across, it's true, quite a few Londoners who appeared to delight in that state). I thought again of that duke who had two hotels built opposite each other in Belgravia. The objects, the paintings, and the furniture of the one were identical to those of the other. It was the same with the servants, the duke's touts having also found their doubles. On being questioned on the reasons for this fantasy, the duke replied 'To confound me.' That said, his days followed a perfect order. Thus, excepting those who lead a more tumultuous pace of life, we could say that type of eccentric ultimately joins the man of the crowd in his clock-punching activity.

If I thought of the high-flying eccentric—the dandy George Brummel, close friend of King George, or William Beckford, author of *Vathek*, whose fortune matched that of the Court—it was in order to touch on one of the most extreme temptations to the isolated individual; to replace history, the grand sweep of history, with our own. But, in order to get there, it goes without saying that it would first be necessary for that history to be a very personalized link in an uninterrupted chain of other 'private' histories going back to the dawn of time. The peculiarity of that chain could have thrown a sizeable shadow over the other history—the grand, official one. If Brummel could boast of having influenced the behavior of a king, and, by that fact, of having even stolen a place, however modest, in the grand sweep of history, he never let on about his need to deny the course of events in favor of his own existence. On the other hand, how revealing will be Beckford's words as he was about to go to Paris during the rumblings of the Revolution! He intended to spend 'the season' there, go to the theater, to the best spots, and see some of his friends. He ordered his secretaries to plan his trip. They warned him of the danger in which he would put himself. Didn't he know that the people had just revolted? The phlegmatic Beckford replied that it was French business not his, and that he would therefore go to Paris. The 'nightmare of history,' from which Joyce wished to awaken, was for Beckford the equivalent of a domestic quarrel, among neighbors; it was a private affair, an embarrassment that concerned only the interested parties. In fact, one detected even in 1950, among many English, a prolonging of that attitude. The history of the kingdom was enough for them; they were at home, in the company of their kings,

princes, brigands, and traitors; and wasn't it, in fact, because of that insularity, to which we closed our ears, that I would necessarily be amazed by how everything in London seemed to me already subtly *transposed*? Yes, from my first stay, it was clear to me. The city benefited from that turn of the screw that shows the silhouette of the inhabitant, rendered caricatural, strange or moving; a turn that raises the tone and enhances the sense of all that appeals to you. Over there, I told myself before having crossed the Channel, must still be active that which is at the origin of Dickens's metaphorical style, and of the edgy intimism, tinted with strangeness, enclosed by Amazonian spaces, characterizing the wanderings of Charles Lamb. I sensed too, helped by texts and iconography, the fussy and multicolored mannerism of the architecture, of that heaven knows what of things thrown together and bearing the stamp of the property owner rather than of the architect. The gaze of the walker had to find there, as on the plates of canapés doing the rounds of a cocktail party, a hundred pretexts for making up stories; and pretexts less constraining for the fact that one could not take the given architecture seriously. And how not to sense, on certain of those facades of fissured stucco, with their incongruous additions, an aggressively pathological whiff? Another phrase of Adrienne Monnier came back to me—that the streets of London suggest the pages of a novel.

I, a creature of walking, was drawn beyond reason to the extent of the suburbs, those endless tiny cracks that swallow up the map of London. Didn't that expanse have to multiply what Jacques Réda calls the 'end of world' look? I wasn't disappointed: the outskirts, with their exclusive islets, amplified the side of literature in the raw with what encircled those islets, primordial chaos looking to be *used*. Writer and photographer find themselves ready to get down to business here.

What stoked my passion for London, when London still hung in limbo, was having not opted for the United States. It must be said that part of the world, from before the war, in cinema, comic strips, music, and literary text, had exercised a persistent seductiveness to those of my generation. A few of us schoolboys attended—and the event still shines in my memory—Duke Ellington's 1939 concert in Antwerp. I had, during the long drawn-out evenings of the Occupation, taken to reading American novelists. After the war, the modern jazz wave swept over Europe, at the same time as the 'classics' began to be re-released. Harlem—its dancehalls more vibrant than a ship's turbines, its bands with brasses glowing like the Hudson—affixed its nocturnal seal to our mythologies. In imagination, the physiognomy of New York seemed more accessible to me than that of London; and already, in magazines and on the screen, a substantial iconography took shape.

Only that London secreted a more insidious, more muffled charm; the capital only spoke to a few, and to persuade me it was enough to discover all around me the words written on it. And I had no choice but to recognize it, with fragile promises, with signs referring to a misty entirety. What's more, hadn't the Blitz leveled a pre-war city, a delightfully outdated microcosm? One could think then that London, as opposed to New York, was a matter of myth. Thus, it was on this myth that I continued to bet.

I wasn't to regret it. The city, a collection of books pouring out actors and decors, lavished on me, right from my arrival, its discourse of images, full of incident, and mingling every genre. A Pinteresque dialogue, caught on the upper deck of a bus, was

followed by a quickfire novel—that of a man, encountered in Burlington Arcade, the two sides of whose face seemed identical, giving him the look of a mannequin and adding something terrifying to his handsomeness; then by the aggressive disorder of Nunhead Cemetery, where fully grown trees overturned the graves, where the liveliness of a *mundane* gothic novel and the presence of the inexpressible opened up a metaphysical parenthesis. This fictive prodigality almost made novel-writing superfluous, all the while feeding a desire to see their entirety—the entirety of quickfire novels that London was full of—collected in an anthology. If one wanted to take up that project, while realizing its impossibility, it was necessary to get a move on. Consuming itself was part of the nature of the city, like the snake that bites its own tail. Disposed to fashions and to permanent auto-destruction, London was abolishing itself beneath my already dismayed gaze and recreating itself like the bore of the ocean. It was the right time to capture one of its moments, to preserve a fragment of it. And why not at the start of the 1960s? It's what I felt obliged to do, so strong was my feeling of having a debt to repay.

Now I must touch on the manner of approach that directly influenced my explorations of London and Singapore. It's to do with photography. I began it in 1957, the pressure exerted by breadwinning distancing me from writing. Unable to devote unexpected and broken up leisure time to it, I thus gave myself, without too many illusions, the feeling of that little bit of leisure by sharpening another form of looking. A look that opened some gaps in my surroundings and forced me to rediscover an Antwerp whose narrowness exasperated me.

I don't claim that photography is an art. No more than painting, literature, cinema, sculpture, or drawing. The idea of art comes in when there is success, or a very real promise of it. Thus we happen to overhear the remark: 'This painting, as imperfect as it is, nonetheless has some qualities. Wait, see.' The difficulty then lies in defining those qualities and, indirectly, what makes for art. To launch into that kind of project would call for several seminars, you would agree; they, no doubt, would only culminate in awkward assertions. Art, at least its definition, sends me back once again to [Joseph] Joubert's words: 'Those things one knows without thinking of them.' Of course, one can't stop there, it would be too facile; and, besides, how precise is that which we believe we know?

The body of elements involved in art and their simultaneous interaction distance us endlessly from succinct, unambiguous terms. There is the style (whose characteristics, taken in isolation, do not refer to the wholeness of the work; that's to say, in any analysis there are moments that I would happily identify as wavering, unless it is a matter of value judgments, where we are obliged to trust the critic). There is the intensity, the type of urgency, or felicity that lends the right tone to the whole, and the work of the nuance. There is the structure of the work, which directs the cohesion of the plans, defines their clarity, controls or releases the dynamic of the parts. There is that which precisely does not let itself be marked out or rationalized: that *aura* (produced by a play of values and by all that in the execution stands against a virtuosity belonging in a circus), an *aura* to which we are all sensitive to a certain degree. There is a natural adaptation (which is not the style but may contain its germ); an adaptation that can also verge on mannerism, if not lapse into it rashly. There are even audacious changes, intentional ones, and which may

flatten out the resources of the subject, of the entirety that detail may reflect. There are finally such violent transmutations that they force us into an emotional or intellectual involvement, which always renders suspect a clinical approach (however necessary) to the work.

In short, there is that which makes the artistic object autonomous, hides it from our view, from the dismembering undertaken by analysis (which, it goes without saying, does not wish *a priori* to break up its object). It is, I believe, in that *aura*, that 'far off' of which Walter Benjamin speaks, and which is not the fruit of romantic illusion (without which one would recognize the genius of Titian, Nerval or Mozart); it is in that *aura*, vanishing as soon as one tries to pin it down, that the secret of, if not the best of, art is concealed. It is an *aura* that tends to break the idea of limit, even though there we touch exactly the extreme limit.

Please ignore the oversimplicity of this approach. I would insist further, which moreover will not be enough, that we move toward another subject of the lecture. A return to photography! In the study he made of that discipline, Benjamin insists—and I refer here to an excerpt from the fine essay by Gaston Fernandez Carrera: *Photography, Nothingness* [La Photographie, le néant]—on the division of the real by what has become an industry, a tourist and domestic 'must': photography. No question of *aura* this time. It's the fragment, normally reduced to mere information or to a so-called artistic effect, that represses the whole. And in the name of what? Of the appropriation of a supposed moment. From a need to increase the closeness, which here sinks into illusion. Photography, like the sight of Bauhaus edifices, effects a reduction of reality, degrades it into a purely *optical effect*. By way of that, according to Gilles Deleuze (also cited by Carrera), no identity is possible. We enter the age of the simulacrum. 'We see only what we see,' adds Carrera. In other words, photography allows us no longer to see. It takes part in the evacuation of a reality to which unconsciously we no longer wish to cling.

That seems absolutely right to me in general. If we share the view that the twentieth century ends in inhumanity, as would be plain to see in the excess (artistically speaking) of the fragment unattached to some kind of wholeness, in the flat-out loss of the *aura*, in malignant vulgarity, in methodical genocide, and in the hypertechnology that makes of mankind a consumed consumer.

There is, however, I believe, another form, another use of photography. And, as modest as are its claims, they do not at all dismiss the wholeness of the *aura*. It goes without saying that I speak not as a professional but as an amateur photographer. Also as an admirer of Bill Brandt, Tony Ray-Jones, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. For I maintain that there is, in these three photographers, a partial *aura*, born of the conjunction of place, moment, and circumstance—and, of course, subjectivity. That this partial *aura* cannot bear comparison with that shining forth from Egyptian frescoes, a painting by Uccello or Giovanni Bellini, or a Byzantine icon, is blatant, the intervention of the photographer being too restricted by the means at his disposal. His discipline, in fact, prevents tonal saturation, firmness of tint, decisive retouching of a painting, as well as so many resources that virtually devalue the work of the dark room; as for color photography, it's usually plywood. Nor can this discipline claim the kind of skillful allocation, the juxtaposed or hazy limpidity, of watercolor, a genre taken to the limit by

Cézanne. Yet, if I look at some portrait at dusk, or some view of Halifax during the Great Depression of the 1930s, both fruits of Bill Brandt's sensibility, I tell myself that they transmit a very slow, almost meditative approach (the complete opposite of a reproduction) to that which is a little more than a fragment of reality. More precisely, they communicate a reality that would be Brandt's vision. And I tell myself that if those images, which also contain information (but indirectly), have thrilled me and continue to do so after so many years, it is that they have not been stripped of interiority. I tell myself finally that they have replaced an external reality, a reality that they *seem* to have caught in a tenth of a second, if not during a very short pose, all that could not have been so focused *without* Bill Brandt's look. It pleases me too that photography doesn't have the occasionally aggressive, if not too categorical, materiality of the painting; that it be an allusion to 'something else' which, if need be, we can rub between our fingers.

The use of the camera, the fact of going back to the subject (a week or six months later) so as to seize the moment when the light will have nurtured it, has made me attend to those aspects that ordinarily we neglect on account of their banality, their fascinating ugliness. That is to say, sensitized to those aspects I could very well survey London or Singapore without my Leica. I hatched moreover a healthy mistrust in that respect, the pale imitation of true creative activity. Then again, if I wanted to maintain a rounded view of places, it wasn't a question of interrupting, carried away as I was by the momentum of a walk or a bus ride, the flow of the urban flux by the gesture of framing some detail or other. On the contrary, my Leica in hand served to stimulate my awareness; it prompted me to take quicker note of the peculiarity of a porch, the rhythm of the foreground (contrary to Paris, Rome, or Florence, London is all in the foreground and perspective runs counter to its genius). This promptness was important to me, nothing ensuring the frequency or the length of my visits. And, it so happened that, Leica slung over my shoulder, I returned in some season and at some exact time to Chiswick Park, or even to provincial Canonbury, hoping there to see appearing that which otherwise was disappearing or folding in on itself; likewise, in my thoughts I enjoyed going back to those same places, to twirl around their magic that was impervious to words, hoping this time to set off the spark that would reveal them to me. Fixing the subject in chemical emulsion was a *confirmation* to me. One of having found, not quite the perfect angle of view (although that occasionally was right), but the *unlocking* of the subject. Its full emergence, its completion in my mind, is what set loose the textual potential. Right away I took a bunch of notes, as one fires off shots on spotting the game-bird.

I recall being amazed by a seemingly ordinary photograph reproduced in a *Country Life* magazine album. Perfectly impersonal, it showed, wisely, in well-defined shades of grey, a small square in the Inns of Temple, one of the main judicial courts in the City. From those walls brushed by the dim autumn light, from that wooden bench and solitary tree, from those unevenly laid paving stones, and from a door decorated with copper emanated—how to put it? How to avoid a sentimental attachment?—that *aura* which made Adrienne Monnier write, on visiting London, that she had felt there more than anywhere else 'the presence of an invisible world.' Something had been granted to the anonymous *Country Life* photographer, like a striking verse may cross the mind of an

insignificant poet, yet never end up in a poem. This something concealed a 'far off,' a radiance that had no source in any of the objects reproduced on poor quality paper. I thought back to that small square, to that magnetic photograph on writing *London, or the Broken Labyrinth* [Londres, ou le labyrinthe brisé]; I tried to express what evaded formulation and which had nevertheless captured my attention. It goes without saying that the result was different. London hid itself in its evidence.

I've alluded many times to the suburb. Singapore, which however doesn't share the trace of them, has advantages in my view. Singapore and the suburb place themselves on the edge of that history that has enriched our cities with centers of art, monuments, and famous perspectives. The pollen of civilization has not fertilized them at all. To the scruffiness of waste land, to the craftsman's shop, and to the new quarter arrowed with television antennas, to the Teutonic looking factory beside a canal as flat as asphalt, to the square that Chinese lanterns festoon, replies, paradoxically, the decor of the financial capital of South East Asia. A decor that would put you in mind of a collage. All styles intermingle there: debased Chinese, damp-blistered Victorian, white-lacquered Regency, Bauhaus tower blocks, Art Deco and Portuguese, not to forget, similar to a bass continuo, the bricolage devoured by insatiable greenery. Nothing further from the suburb, it would seem, than that architectural jumble subjected to Dutch colonial cleanliness. Only, not being enough on their own (at least that's my feeling), both suburb and Singapore represent a textual base. Their true center of gravity is in writing. The ephemeral or the incomplete is their lot. The ephemeral in Singapore, contrary to that which threatens to ruin certain parts of London, stretches across the entire city, it's the life of an insect. Tomorrow, Singapore will be a Californian city on the shore of the China Sea.

It was a professional opportunity that took me there. The Lion City was no more than a name to me; no call coming from there had premobilized me; thus I was hurled into an old Joseph von Sternberg movie built around a spy story. The wholly epidemic seductiveness of Singapore flattered the immature in us. Its enticing yet slummy picturesque quality made of it a gadget. And that quality, for having nothing valuable (if not for the magnificent open space, the charm of its setting), let itself be manipulated shamelessly by the imagination and the senses. There we were exorcised from the formidable cultural weight of Western monuments. There I discovered a world arising from the moviegoing habit of my childhood and from the comic strip, from 1950s Hollywood melodramas and from festivals long past. What to make of hovels wrapped in roots, of rest homes whence filtered the jingling of shaken dice, of luxury hotels whence radiated the beauty of their Eurasian staff, if not the quickfire story, the sudden poem in prose? All of that was offered to you in bulk, like raw material to be made into something. In that half of the 1970s, the city, for a very short time (already you could hear the thudding of bulldozers there), balanced out the images of past and future in a mercantile euphoria. The transvestites, whose punctual gathering in Bugey Street at nightfall would soon be prohibited, raised the illusory nature of the city to a dreamlike level. Reflections of women, they had an easy confidence, and, from midnight to dawn, one was flooded with delightfully cheap novels. Rather than putting them to bed, they should have been embedded in a text.

If London, to be expressed, depends on our repeated return to it, Singapore, the next Atlantis, demanded an immediate rescue. On two visits I thus gorged myself on a maximum of impressions. My accelerated sense of time, similar to that of a dream, compressed my experiences there. Already, wandering near New Bridge Road, I was working out a text in my mind, calculating the 'riches' of some harbor enclave or of some unexpected encounter.

Why have I, beyond the spirit that carried me toward them, privileged certain cities (including Edinburgh and Dublin, which refuse prose but not verse)? Because they offered me, I think, the possibility of uniting novel, poetry, essay, and allusive autobiography. Because it pleased me there to imagine (enjoyable process, of course!) a summation of the whole world, one to which so many authors have aspired. Because there I could be nobody or everybody. Because, in identifying with the city, with its milling of individual times, I would grant myself a seeming eternity. Thus I would be that Adam who recovers Eden, sees that it resembles the cities he has loved and that all its gates are wide open.

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