

ÉMILE VERHAEREN

*Tentacular  
Cities*

Translated by Jacob Siefring



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## THE SOUL OF THE CITY

The roofs look as though lost, and  
The bell-towers and gables all molten,  
When by these red, sooty mornings  
The gas in the signals flickers.

A bend in the ungodly viaduct  
Sits athwart the drab and uniform docks;  
A massive train shudders off, hassled.

In the distance, behind a wall,  
A steamer's foghorn lows.

And by the drab and uniform docks,  
And along the bridges and streets,  
Jostling each other in the crush of the crowd  
Upon screens of crude brumes,  
Shadows upon shadows.

A gas of sulphur and naphtha is diffused,  
A smeared and monstrous sun sprawls out;  
The mind suddenly takes alarm  
At the impossible and the bizarre;

Crime or virtue, does it yet see  
What stirs in these environs,  
Where, before it, in the squares,  
Rises up out of the mist  
A golden headstone, or a wan palace,  
For what giant, unimagined dream?

O the centuries upon centuries upon this city,  
Great with the embers of its past,  
Ever glowing—and traversed,  
As now, by ghosts!  
O the centuries upon centuries upon it,  
With their immense, criminal life  
Beating—for how long now?—  
Every dwelling and every stone  
With mad desires and bloodthirsty rages!

A few huts first, and some priests.  
Refuge for all, the church and its windows  
Letting the safe light of dogma come streaming in,  
With its naivety for gloomy brains.  
Many-gated dungeons, massive palaces, barbaric cloisters;  
Popes' crosses lie there for the taking;  
Monks, abbots, barons, serfs, and villains;  
Orphreyed miters, silver helmets, linen vestments;  
The struggle of instincts, far from the struggles of the soul  
Between neighbors, for the vain pride of an oriflamme;

Hatreds handed down like scepters, and monarchs ruined  
By their counterfeit coin fanning out their fleurs-de-lys,  
Carving the block of their justice with strokes of the sword,  
Installing it and imposing it: crude and abrupt.

Then, slow to emerge, the outline of the city:  
Forces one would wish to stake in law;  
Nails of the people, and jawbones of kings;  
Snouts nervous in the shadows, and a subterranean barking  
At who knows what ideal buried in the heavens;  
Alarm bells ringing, in the evening, rages untold;  
Texts of deliverance and of salvation, upright  
In the abominable atmosphere wherein revolt seethes;  
Books whose pages, suddenly intelligible,  
Burn with truth, as formerly the Bibles;  
Divine and bright men, like gold monuments  
From which events flow forth armed and strong;  
Volitions clean and new, fresh awarenesses  
And mad hope, in every brain,  
Despite the scaffolds, despite the structure fires  
And the bloody heads, at the end of clenched fists.

The city's a thousand years old,  
The city so deep, so cruel;  
And endlessly, spite of the onslaught of days,  
And the people eyeing its heavy pride,  
It resists the world's usury.

What an ocean, its hearts! what a storm, its nerves!  
What knots of will tied tight in its mystery!  
Victorious, it absorbs the earth;  
Vanquished, it is the woe of the universe:  
Always in its triumph or its defeats  
Giant it appears, and its cry pierces, and its name gleams,  
And the brightness of its surfaces in the night  
Travels far, reaching planets!

O the centuries upon centuries upon it!

Its soul, by these haggard morns,  
Circulates in every atom  
Heavy with vapor and sparse mist;  
Its enormous, vague soul, as well as the great domes  
That blur away in the fog;  
Its soul, straying, in each and every shadow  
That crosses its somber districts,  
With fresh ardor at the end of their thoughts;  
Its dreadful, convulsing soul:  
Its soul, where the past and the curt present  
Adumbrate our future still awry.

O this world of fever and indefatigable increase  
Kicked, with burdened, panting lungs,  
Towards who can say what alarming ends?  
World yet subject unto golden laws,

Mild laws, of which it is heedless still,  
But which, one day, will needs must be exhumed,  
One by one, from the depths of the brumes.  
World today stubborn, tragic and pale  
Which puts its life and soul into the effort  
It expends, from day to night,  
Hour upon hour, toward the infinite.

O the centuries upon centuries upon this city!

The old dream is dead and a new one forming.  
'Tis fuming in thought and in sweat  
Of arms, proud of handiwork, of foreheads, proud of shine,  
And the city hears it rising up from the throats  
Of those who carry it inside them  
And want to shout and sob it to the skies.

And from all directions, the people are setting out for it,  
Some from the market towns, some from the fields,  
Always the same, distantly drawn hither;  
And the eternal roads are the witnesses  
To these marches cross time,  
That pulse steady as their pounding blood,  
And fan their fires, continually.

The dream! higher still than the poisonous fumes  
It releases round it, toward the horizon;  
Even in fear or boredom,  
It is there, presiding, nights,  
Like unto these bushes  
Of golden stars and black crowns,  
That light up of an evening, evocative.

And what matter the pains and the insane hours,  
And the vats of vice wherein the city ferments,  
If, some day, from within the fogs and veils,  
There bursts forth a new Christ, sculpted in light,  
Who raises up humanity  
And baptizes it in the fire of new stars.

## THE CATHEDRALS

Deep in the sacerdotal heart,  
Under a frame of candles that congeal,  
— Gold, silver, diamond, crystal —  
Heavy with centuries and prestige,  
At vespers, when evenings  
Long prayers enjoin, they take  
Upon themselves the monstresances,  
On which the locked gazes meditate.

With fire's flames, they keep safe  
For the universal amnesty  
The white kiss of the last God,  
Earth-fallen in a host.

Like a palace of black gems, the church  
With its tarnished shrines of silver  
Quelling the sobs of the tarnished metal  
By the clear rise of its columns, exults,  
And dresses apexward with its arced beams  
And voussoirs the cult's everlastingness.

## THE FACTORIES

Regarding each other out the split eyes of their windows  
And mirrored in water of pitch and saltpeter  
Along a narrow canal, pulling one's bar to infinity.  
Face to face along the quays to infinity,  
All across the heavy faubourgs  
And the misery in rags of those faubourgs,  
Snore night and day the ovens and the factories.

Granite rectangles, brick cubes,  
And their black walls stretching for miles,  
Immensely, through the suburbs;  
And on their roofs, in the fog, sharpened  
Irons and lightning rods,  
The chimneys.  
And the uniform hangars that smoke;  
And the inner courtyards, where men, torsos  
And arms bared to the sun, stir lightning bolts  
And ardent tridents, pitches and tars;  
And soot and coal and death;  
And souls and bodies one twists  
In basements more deafening than Avernì;  
And lines, always the same lines of lanterns  
Leading the way from the slaughterhouse sewer

## THE STOCK EXCHANGE

The enormous street and its quadrangular houses  
Delimit the crowd, hold it in check, with their granite  
Eyed with windows and porches, where gleams the  
Adieu, in the windowpanes, of aureoline evenings.

Like a torso of stone and metal,  
With heart pounding, in squalid  
Mystery panting, in the half-light,  
Gold's own monument is smoldering.

All round it, the black banks  
Raise up heavy pediments supported  
By arms of cast-iron Herculi, whose large weary muscles  
Seem to be raising coffers in victory.

The intersection where it erects its battle  
Sucks the fever and the tumult  
From every enthusiasm towards its occult magnet  
The intersection, its squares, its high walls  
And its numberless knots of gas,  
Setting packs of shadows astir and  
Glimmers agleam, upon the sidewalks.

## THE SPRAWL

Not far from the port, at night, when the flight  
Of the vertiginous towers and palaces settles down  
Into shadow—and ember eyes are smoldering,  
The dark district like an animal sets aglow  
Its ancient decor of vice and gold.

Light o' loves, slack wrapped meat,  
Call out from the low doorways,  
Hailing the men who pass;  
Behind them, in red corridors  
Fires are burning, a curtain is pulled  
And raised, showing forth  
Flesh, mad and bare, in the mirrors.

The port is near. To the left, at road's end,  
The tangle of masts and spars obstructs  
A huge swath of sky;  
To the right, a swarming heap of misshapen alleyways  
Falls away from the city—and obscure mobs there  
Hasten along to their destinies of decay.

'Tis only lust's flaccid, monstrous sprawl,  
Erected forever ago, there where the  
City borders the sea.

## About the Author

Émile Verhaeren was born in 1855, at Sint-Amands in the Antwerp region of Belgium. His father, Henri Verhaeren, had worked in Brussels in the wool trade, and his mother, Adelaïde De Bock, had a textile shop in Sint-Amands. Verhaeren grew up speaking French at home and Flemish at school and in town. After completing high school, he studied law at the Catholic University of Louvain, where he contributed to the student review. In 1883, he published his first collection, *Les Flamandes*, inspired in part by the Flemish painting of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. At this time he also became active as an art critic, serving in an editorial and critical role at the review *L'Art moderne* from 1883–1899. Verhaeren's early development as a poet can notably be seen in *Les Soirs*, *Les Débâcles*, and *Les Flambeaux noirs* (1887–1891), a trilogy of poetry collections that appear to be the expression of a spiritual crisis Verhaeren underwent at this time. In 1889 Verhaeren met his future wife, Marthe Massin (1860–1931), and the two were married in Brussels in August 1891.

The 1890s saw the growth of Verhaeren's reputation as a poet and several other important changes. His trilogy of works engaging with social themes, consisting of *Les Campagnes hallucinées*, *Les Villes tentaculaires*, and *Les Aubes*

(1893–1898), dates from this period. In 1898, Verhaeren relocated to Paris, by which time his books were published by the Paris publishing house Mercure de France, allowing a greater distribution and discovery of his work across Europe. The next decade-and-a-half saw the publication of many more poetry collections, including *Les Forces tumultueuses*, *La Multiple Splendeur*, *Les Rythmes souverains* (1902–1910), as well as works of art criticism on such painters as James Ensor, Rembrandt, and Rubens, and also a series of works amounting to a poetic homage to his native Flanders regrouped under the title *Toute la Flandre*.

During these years and leading up to the First World War, Verhaeren's reputation as a thinker, poet, and critic was secure, and he enjoyed a rare degree of fame and celebrity across Europe. His work was translated into Russian (1906), English (various works, 1910s), Japanese (1920), and German (1910, 1912, 1921, 1922).

The outbreak of the First World War had a significant impact on Verhaeren's activities. His cosmopolitan vision of Europe and his favorable view of Germany was fundamentally altered by the conflict. He resided for a time in Great Britain before returning to France. He published a work of political commentary and a volume of poetry that deal explicitly with the war (respectively, *La Belgique sanglante* (1915) and *Les Ailes rouges de la guerre* (1916)). His life was unexpectedly cut short in an accident while boarding a train after delivering a lecture to Belgian exiles in Rouen.

His remains were first buried in the military cemetery at Adenkirke, but it was not until 1927 that they were relocated to a memorial tomb on the shore of the Scheldt River in Sint-Amands. In 1955, a museum dedicated to his life, work, and legacy was opened in the same town, and has remained open ever since.

Critics have variously described Verhaeren as a poet of realist tendencies, a post-Romantic poet, or a Symbolist, although it is the Symbolist designation that has become most accepted and that is perhaps most appropriate. His work appears to be notably indebted to the poetic style and approach of the French poets Paul Verlaine and Victor Hugo. He was a friend and correspondent to countless of the better-known literary and artistic figures of his day, including Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Symons, Auguste Rodin, Paul Verlaine, Georges Rodenbach, Maurice Maeterlinck, F. T. Marinetti, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Stefan Zweig. Zweig even wrote a biography of Verhaeren that was translated into English by Jethro Bithell in 1914, and translated some of his work. Verhaeren's legacy and influence are palpable in the work and commentaries left by various twentieth century poets, including Marinetti, Paul Valéry, Carl Sandburg, Emanuel Carnevali, and Jacques Brel.