



Pascal Verbekan © Michiel Hendryckx

Scholar-Practitioner Q + A . . .

An Interview with Pascal Verbeke

Isabelle Meuret
 Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

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On several occasions I have been asked by our community of literary journalism scholars about the specificities of the Belgian branch and which household names featured prominently in our national pantheon. The question always left me perplexed, if not flummoxed, because in our Belgian academic world we often look upon the Anglo-American, and increasingly French, heritage for inspiration, both at education and research levels. In a tiny country straddled between two main cultures—Flemish-speaking in the north, French-speaking in the south¹—and with a capital city that is a true Tower of Babel, a home for many Eurocrats and expatriates—identifying a homegrown literary journalistic tradition and commendable writers proved more complicated than expected. I was at a loss for names—until I came across Pascal Verbeke’s reportages.

His dedication to collect voices unjustly unheard, to bear witness to events we are unaware of, and to share heart-breaking testimonies from both survivors and dreamers, is inspirational. Verbeke tells stories of a country through its unsung heroes, be they Flemish, Walloons, or *Brusseleirs*.² His reportages are imbued with human substance. They are enlightening chapters on the history of Belgium nobody ever bothered to teach us, albeit vital to the understanding of who we are as a nation, with Brussels as its epicenter, the heart of the European project that is currently given a rough ride. Not only does Europe fear the seismic fallout from an impending Brexit, the United Nations Global Compact for Migration has also prompted a planetary com-

motion. And Belgium is not immune to the rise in populism and nationalism, which adds to its own political aggravations.

Pascal Verbeke was born in Ghent in 1965. He studied *germaanse filologie* (Germanic Philology, i.e., Dutch and English linguistics and literature) at Universiteit Gent, and later became a journalist. He has written and been part of the editorial teams of some of the greatest national papers publishing in Dutch, such as *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *Humo*, and has also worked as a documentary filmmaker for the two national public channels, VRT (Vlaamse Radio-en Televisieomroeporganisatie) and rtbf (Radio Télévision Belge Francophone). He has been a freelance writer for several years and was a member of the jury of the *Stichting Verhalende Journalistiek* (Foundation for Narrative Journalism) in the Netherlands. Today he devotes most of his time to nonfiction and benefits from the official status of *nonfictie schrijver* (nonfiction writer), a unique initiative of the *Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren* (Flemish Fund for Literature), which promotes literature in Dutch both at home and abroad.

Verbeke has penned several books, often shortlisted for prizes in nonfiction literature. While his first book also exists in French, the others do not exist in translation—a regrettable omission—which is why I take a few lines to present his work. Indeed, Verbeke deals with subjects that are of particular interest to an international audience. Albeit rooted in Belgium, his stories have a much wider appeal. All of them are the result of long hours spent crossing the country, in search of the lived experiences of common people. His first book, *Arm Wallonië: Een Reis door Het Beloofde Land* (Poor Wallonia: A Journey through the Promised Land), published in 2007, documents the massive Flemish exodus to French-speaking Wallonia in the early twentieth century.³ The contrast between the then-poverty-stricken northern part of the country and the rich south interrogates the clichés that are dying so hard in a country where the economic situation has been radically upended.

Walking in the footsteps of his predecessors, be they anonymous witnesses or well-known figures, has become Verbeke's signature. *Tranzyt Antwerpen: Reis in het Spoor van De Red Star Line* (Transit Antwerp: A Journey Following the Red Star Line),⁴ published in 2013, started with the memoirs of Benjamin Kopp, a Jewish adolescent who migrated to the United States in 1911 from his village of Nowe Miasto nad Pilica in Poland. The author reflects on the brave journey of one young man to reveal the story of millions of people en route to America aboard the Red Star Line ships. This testimony is Verbeke's conduit to documenting the migration of Jews from Eastern Europe, some of whom never made it to the New World. In *Grand Central Belge: Voetreis door Een Verdwijnend Land* (Grand Central Belge: Walking through a Disappearing Country), first published in 2012,⁵ the author crosses Belgium,

a land of promise and industrial power that ranked second only to Britain before the 1960s. Verbeken collects testimonies from the witnesses of Belgium's past glory and current decline.

Duistere Wegen: Reis naar Vincent Van Gogh in De Borinage (Dark Ways: A Journey to Vincent Van Gogh in the Borinage) is Verbeken's 2015 book⁶ that takes the form of a travelogue through the region, beautifully illustrated with sketches by the painter himself, as well as postcards and documents of the period. Verbeken writes about the life and times of Van Gogh, who ended up in the poor region of the Borinage. The darkness of this coal-mining territory is reflected in the artist's work and is featured prominently in the text. The narrative is a *tour de force*, which provides rich historical substance to understand a devastated region too often despised and ignored. As for *Brutopia: De Dromen van Brussel* (Brutopia: The Dreams of Brussels),⁷ the journalist's latest book is an invitation to discover the ambivalent and cosmopolitan European capital through its cultural, historical, and human patrimony.

Verbeken's narratives strike a sensitive—and sensible—chord. He looks at the few droplets that reveal the ocean. His micro-stories,⁸ the products of time well spent with sources, relentlessly walking the roads of the country, reflect a bigger picture and fill the cracks of grander narratives that ignore the plight of the disaffected and downtrodden. To help us navigate these turbulent waters, he generously offered his time to discuss his inspirations, epiphanies, tools, and techniques, his past and present projects, and his indefatigable wanderlust. The conversation was typically *à la belge*—multilingual—yet mostly in French, in which the author is highly proficient, with occasional questions, comments, and references in Dutch and English. The interview, transcribed in English, is complemented with additional notes from previous research and suggestions from the author himself.⁹

This moment of grace took place on March 13, 2019, at Monk Café in Brussels.

Isabelle Meuret: Literary journalism has often been labeled as an American genre. As a well-established Belgian journalist, what or who are your main influences? Has your writing been molded by the New Journalism and its stable of exceptional writers?

Pascal Verbeken: There has always been a particular distrust of the New Journalism in schools, but most people are clueless about what it really means. Tom Wolfe and his like were perceived as narcissistic dandies indulging in some sort of inchoate, non-rigorous journalism, with the author taking precedence over the text. Sure, Hunter S. Thompson and his guns, shooting at his typing machine,

that was part of the pizzazz, the glamour. But these guys were excellent writers.

Meuret: Thompson was indeed an outstanding political journalist.

Verbeken: Sure. Think of *Hell's Angels* [1967], for instance. That type of journalism was of great interest to me also due to its connection to music. One of Thompson's buddies was Warren Zevon, a fascinating American storyteller. My influences are not only writers and journalists, but significantly also musicians. Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown" [1995],¹⁰ for example, is a song about an industrial town in Ohio, exactly as Seraing,¹¹ a central location in *Arm Wallonië*. "Youngstown" had itself been inspired by Dale Maharidge, this famous reporter, whose books I devoured, in particular *Journey to Nowhere* [1985] on hobos, and *Homeland* [2004], about a fast-changing America.¹² Stories told by ordinary people had a tremendous impact on me. Dale Maharidge has also written *And Their Children After Them* [1989], a sequel to James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.¹³ Maharidge returned to the very places visited by Agee and Evans back in the thirties to see what had changed. All this was an incredible revelation to me: It all started with "Youngstown" on my preferred album—*The Ghost of Tom Joad*—which itself hails from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. You see, this journalistic genre does not come out of the blue, it does not rest upon the ego of some self-infatuated New Journalists. The genre is rooted in the societal substratum. At least that is clearly the case in the United States.

Meuret: What about European roots? Is there such a tradition of literary journalism in Europe?

Verbeken: The roots in Europe are to be found in literary works, fiction novels from the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. *Germinal* [1885] by Émile Zola, or *Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933] by George Orwell,¹⁴ one of my favorite books, to which we can add travel writing by Gustave Flaubert. So, I wouldn't say that the genre was invented by the Americans.

Meuret: In *Transyt Antwerpia*, you make numerous references to Ryszard Kapuściński and Joseph Roth, notably at critical moments, after your visits of Treblinka, Auschwitz, and the Warsaw ghetto.

Verbeken: At the time of *Transyt Antwerpia*, I was only discovering Roth. Besides being a novelist, he was an incredibly talented journalist. In my own work, the literary element is limited. What I am doing is first of all *reportage*, or *récit du réel* (literature of the real), which I prefer to the term *literature*. The latter immediately conjures up the imagination or some aesthetic effort to produce ornamental or affected effects, which I definitely resist. This is why I avoid the use of *literary* journalism, although of course style, composition, selection matter. The license to create in the nonfiction writing I'm doing now is indeed impossible in traditional or mainstream journalism. For instance, *Arm*

Wallonië starts with a letter addressed to Auguste de Winne,¹⁵ another journalist, who wrote in 1902, in whose footsteps I walked and worked. Similarly, *Brutopia* begins with angel Saint Michael, a statue adorning the top of the *Hôtel de Ville* (town hall) in Brussels, addressing the reader and then returning in the conclusive chapter. Such imaginative techniques, I admit, are literary.

Meuret: Can you elaborate on your tools and techniques? What can you tell us about your writing process?

Verbeken: *Transyt Antwerpia* differs from my other books because it was commissioned by the Red Star Line Museum.¹⁶ They had a coffee table book with the story of the museum, but they wanted a volume that would tell the stories of some two million refugees from Eastern Europe that transited through Antwerp with the hope to start a new life in the United States or Canada. I had access to some existing migrant stories and chose that of Benjamin Kopp, a young sixteen- or seventeen-year-old man, who left his village near Warsaw, Poland, and embarked on this long adventure to Antwerp, and then America.¹⁷ So I did Benjamin Kopp's journey again, through Europe, and took notes of the changes in all the places and villages he crossed. His past story is intertwined with and mirrored in the present. This journey took us—me and Hermann Selleslags, the photographer¹⁸—to Auschwitz, where the Red Star Line had a travel agency, believe it or not. The Red Star Line had agencies everywhere. Decades later, the trains that went from Auschwitz to Belgium took the opposite direction, this time from the so-called Kazerne Dossin (Dossin barracks) in Mechelen,¹⁹ to the death camps.

Meuret: It is such a well-researched story, substantiated with copious facts and detailed figures about deportation and executions. The documentation in *Transyt Antwerpia* is impressive: maps, photographs, official documents, register pages, illustrations. Paradoxically, visualizing the dry, factual data—the names on the passenger lists, leaving Antwerp or arriving at Ellis Island—makes the story all the more moving. And the sketches and posters drawn by artists at the time, as well as the photos by Herman Selleslags, are not merely aesthetic—they also bear witness to this tragic chapter in history. How do you organize your research, before traveling and writing?

Verbeken: It's a mixed approach. I do some prior research and also visit archives when I travel. In Warsaw I visited a Jewish records office. What struck me the most is that this whole Jewish story was an absolute taboo in the village where Benjamin Kopp was originally from, because the Jews who did not leave the village were stranded in a ghetto in 1942 and then all deported to Treblinka. On our visit to the village, we were alone. It was snowing. We took a taxi at the station in Treblinka, about eighty kilometers from Warsaw. Everything was closed in the camp. Nobody was there. No one.

Meuret: *Transyt Antwerpia* sheds light on devastatingly dark moments, which you document thoroughly, starting from only one human destiny but with a view to reveal the magnitude of the tragedy. It is the harrowing story of one young adolescent leaving his village in Poland, escaping a doomed future. At the same time, it is a universal narrative, the story of extermination.

Verbeken: Right, but there are always limitations to a story. My own journey had to come to an end, in Antwerp, and not, ideally, in New York, where obviously Benjamin Kopp still had a niece.

Meuret: On a very different account, *Arm Wallonië* also features the lives of ordinary people and the tragic moments they went through. Why was this chapter of Belgian history, with starving Flemish workers migrating to French-speaking Wallonia, . . . silenced for so long?

Verbeken: That story was an eye-opener for me too. When the documentary was shown on television,²⁰ the reactions were always the same: How come we did not know about this? My explanation is that every village has its secrets.

Meuret: The book is also a way to rediscover areas that are totally disregarded today, like the Borinage, a poor region in the Hainaut province of Belgium.

Verbeken: *Arm Wallonië*, and also *Grand Central Belge*, have deeply altered my perception of Belgium. The added value of reportage or nonfiction is precisely this: storytelling—*récit du réel*—makes it possible to show the ambiguities of a reality and to have access to the humanness of such realities. This is what I call an eye-opener. I'm thinking of this ninety-eight-year-old woman, Clarine Trossaert, probably deceased today, who arrived in 1918 with her parents from Scheldewindeke (a village in Flanders) in Marchienne-au-Pont, near Charleroi. For the first time in her life she had seen electric lighting. That was such a change from the poor village where she came from in Flanders. All her life she worked in industry. In her old age, while staying at a residential home, she saw on television that her home village had become the richest commune in the country. It was such a shock, as her new surroundings, where she had migrated, had gone through a completely different evolution and had notoriously one of the highest unemployment rates. This anecdote shows that everything changes so fast, in just one life, without people having any power to impact their realities. Such massive changes totally escape ordinary people. Politicians are speaking above common people; they are so far from the realities experienced in difficult milieus. It is too easy to blame ordinary people. In politics there is this myth that you can change society, but reality is a whirlwind and the real capacity of people to alter their environment is limited. In this café, we are now talking, but next week we may be in a different reality. We realize that Europe is going down a danger-

ous slope, but we do not know where it will end. At some point in the past we thought that thanks to social security, the welfare state, everything was safe, and would be safe forever.

Meuret: Your books are timely: They make us think about the consequences of migration.

Verbeken: Yes, they show the similarities and also the differences. Migration has always existed, but the social security is certainly a major difference. Getting back to my influences, beyond the literary sphere, I would certainly mention Alan Lomax. He crossed the United States to record old songs, like an anthropologist. His *American Recordings* constitute an enormous archive of blues music.²¹ This is a major influence: The old miners in their eighties or nineties whose voices I was collecting in the tradition of oral history were also the last witnesses of a certain reality. *Grand Central Belge* is a reservoir of incredible stories, and few people see the value of these stories.

Meuret: The final lines in *Transyt Antwerpia* read as follows: “Het bestaat. Het is verteld. Het is opgeschreven.” (“It exists. It is told. It is written.”) It reads like a promise held—a job accomplished. You are collecting an invaluable patrimony.

Verbeken: I was biking the other day and drove past the oldest oak tree in Liernu, Belgium. It is supported by a complex scaffolding. We are making all these efforts for this tree, but not for those who are wasting away in old people’s homes. In many of these places no one comes to visit them.

Meuret: You were also a member of a jury for nonfiction writing in the Netherlands [*Stichting Verhalende Journalistiek*]. Can you tell us more about nonfiction writing in Dutch, this time in the Netherlands?

Verbeken: I was a jury member until last year—I did it for three years, not just for writing, but also in radio, television. There is a difference between the Netherlands and Flanders. The “true” narrative reportages (with sketches, scenes, etc.) do not really exist, or are rare, in Flanders. In the Netherlands, Chris de Stoop or Lieve Joris are major authors.²² Joris lives in the Netherlands, but she is the *grande dame* of Flemish nonfiction. Sure, Flemish papers *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* certainly feature longform reportages, but you won’t find innovative narrative techniques, as in the Netherlands, where nonfiction prevails and is connected to the Anglo-American tradition. Reporters used to crisscross the country on foot for magazines such as *Vrij Nederland* in the ’90s and ’80s. In the heyday of such journalism in Flanders, of so-called *feuilletonists* (serial writers) in the ’50s and ’60s, Gaston Durnez [born 1928] followed Flemish workers in Wallonia. He published thirteen *grands reportages* on a daily basis in 1954. This would be unthinkable today.

Meuret: You write longform narratives in reaction to Twitter and fast news?

Verbeken: Not deliberately. It is just the rhythm I prefer. Some literary journalists may like to write in a “higher genre,” but I also appreciate short articles that are straight to the point. And that is rare today. What irritates me the most in journalism today is the mix of genres: opinions, or moral lessons, which you find in articles that are supposedly informative. I don’t get it. It is very much the case in the French-speaking press in Belgium, and much more in Belgium, paradoxically, than in the Netherlands, a Calvinist country. The Dutch would find moralizing in the newspapers not appropriate at all, not even serious. I don’t want to give lessons; I like to present an ambiguous reality. Talking to extremists or Islamists is a non-issue: If you write on reality, you need to talk to everyone.

Meuret: Your books are the results of long conversations, interviews.

Verbeken: Yes. The life lived by ordinary people. The problem of the current press is that opinion pages, both in Flanders and in the French-speaking part of Belgium, are written by academics and journalists. Universities, the media, are a subculture. To describe the changing reality in Cureghem or Sint-Joost,²³ citizens are the real experts. Newspapers and magazines make too few efforts on that account. When you see what happens in Europe today, there is this malaise, from Stockholm to Athens, where people do not feel they are being heard. It goes well beyond the *gilets jaunes*.²⁴ A large proportion of the characters in my books are common people, but it’s no dogma, because my books also feature people like Philippe van Parijs, an intelligent Belgian thinker and academic. Still, in the media, there is a glaring omission of testimonies by ordinary people.

Meuret: Local stories are also missing in the current press.

Verbeken: You’re absolutely right. They are too expensive. News articles about cities, towns, are increasingly the products of media circles. When I worked for *Humo*, as part of the editorial team, and until 2010, I was conducting interviews with politicians and ministers. I lost so much time, for three or four years. I regret that period of political interviewing that did not teach nor bring me anything. Increasingly interviews are made in advance. Most of the contents is pre-packaged. Politicians have a script, prepared by spin doctors and communicators who have their catchy sentences at the ready. Their sound bites hit the headlines. They know the content of the interviews before you do. As a journalist, I felt I was just a copywriter. That’s the reality of interviews in Belgian papers today.

Meuret: Hence the kind of narrative journalism you are doing now. Is “Charles Baudelaire à Bruxelles: Une Capitale de Singes” (“Charles Baudelaire in Brussels: A Capital of Monkeys”) published in *Wilfried*, a foretaste of *Brutopia*?²⁵

Verbeken: Yes. At the time I was writing that chapter on Baudelaire.

Meuret: You write that “Baudelaire was the spiritual father of *flânerie*. Wandering in the city with no aim, nor direction; observing from a distance; recording modern, kaleidoscopic urban life; breathing with your heels, as Chinese wisdom has it.”²⁶ Are you such a *flâneur*?

Verbeken: I don’t see myself as a *flâneur*, which evokes the image of a dandy pacing up and down the *grands boulevards*. I am a *promeneur* (stroller). When you walk you see the right scale of things; there is a slowness in wanderlust. That’s also a subgenre in nonfiction. I recommend the remarkable *Wanderlust*, by Rebecca Solnit.²⁷

Meuret: *Brutopia* is divided into ten chapters. Each chapter is devoted to one utopia?

Verbeken: Ten chapters, each devoted to a utopia invented in Brussels. Karl Marx wrote his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* here. Communism is a utopia. The *Quartier Nord* (northern district) was an architectural utopia. The *Forêt de Soignes* (Soignes Forest) was a magnet for all kinds of utopists, including a community of libertarian anarchists, called *l’Expérience* (The Experiment). Today Stokkel is a neighborhood of embassies, big villas, gated communities. Somehow it is also a community of anarchists, people who don’t pay taxes, avoid taxation altogether. At the time, libertarians wanted to establish a new society. *Expo 1958* (Brussels World Fair), the creation of the social security, these were other utopias. The red years, with their garden cities, *maisons du peuple* (people’s houses).²⁸

Meuret: The *Maison du Peuple* in Brussels, a jewel of Art Nouveau designed by Victor Horta, was destroyed in 1965.

Verbeken: Exactly, this precisely symbolizes the demise of a utopia. The chapter thesis is that socialism, which started developing in the second part of the century, stopped there, with the demolition of its own temple. Total nonsense. Nobody was under pressure, it was self-inflicted. So, yes, *Brutopia* presents ten utopias related to Brussels, including, of course, the European Union.

Meuret: Is *Brutopia* an attempt at rehabilitating Brussels?

Verbeken: Brussels is a city with enormous potential, and the utopias are evidence thereof. *Brutopia* is not anti-Brussels, but the book asks an implicit question: How come Brussels, a city that lived for so long at the forefront of cultural life in the nineteenth century, is now lagging behind, compared to Amsterdam, for instance. When you arrive by train from *Amsterdam Centraal* (the main station) to Brussels and get off at the North Station at night, you are in the Third World. The surroundings are totally derelict. The implicit question foregrounded in *Brutopia* is somehow a throwback to Antoine Wiertz’s *Bruxelles Capitale, Paris Province* (1840)²⁹: We are the capital city, but Brussels has lost it. Now the distinctive feature of utopias is precisely that they

are bound to die the moment they should be materializing. The social security is a good example. It is taken for granted today, and few people are aware of how hard it has been fought for.

Meuret: What are you working on now? What is your next project?

Verbeken: I've just started this project on Sabena³⁰ (for Canvas), a series of five documentaries to be completed in 2020, for the airline company's anniversary in 2021. It's a collective project, initiated by Margot Vanderstraeten for Diplodocus, a production company.³¹ The project is essentially oral history: We are talking with former pilots of Sabena. The story of the company is the mirror of Belgium. Congo is naturally very important in it, as well as sex cases, and how women were treated. Sabena is also a style, that of *la Belgique de papa*.³² For long, and until the 1970s, the company only had first-class travelers. I still have ideas for books, but I need time to read pieces by other journalists and learn more from their techniques. In Dutch, there exists an equivalent to Robert Boynton's *The New New Journalists*. In *Meer dan de feiten* [2007, 2019], edited by Han Ceelen and Jeroen Van Bergeijk, Dutch and Flemish writers talk about their works.³³ I'm now reading Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* [2005]. I'm also a fan of Dave Eggers and Svetlana Alexievich. In *Brutopia* my reportages are fairly simple. An analogy with music would be "three-chord songs." What I have not written yet is a more personal story. It's something I have in mind, to write about my grandparents' district in Ghent, and how much it has changed. In just seven years it has become a Bulgarian district. Through a personal point of entry—my office is in the street where my grandfather, a postman, used to live—I want to tell that story of a changing district. I'll see what I can discover from there. Maybe the main reason behind Brexit was the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in the European Union. It was estimated that 15,000 people per year would come. As a matter of fact, 1.5 million left for the U.K., above all to poor northern cities in England, the hotbeds of Brexit. There has been a dramatic change in populations in just a few years.

Meuret: Getting to know a Flemish writer is important. When can we read your books in English?

Verbeken: The London book fair is taking place right now [March 12–14, 2019]. *De Bezige Bij*, my publisher, is well represented, and they have a strong network overseas. They showcase writers such as David Van Reybrouck, Stefan Hertmans. I think the future will be specialized websites. PCs and tablets will become marginal. Only smartphones will survive, which will have an effect on longform and how youth may access the genre. In the Netherlands, *de Correspondent*, the equivalent of the French *Mediapart*, whose business model is based on membership with no advertising, is a huge success. They

have more than 50,000 members and are now starting their venture in New York. They publish instructive articles by journalists such as Arjen van Veelen or Rutger Bregman, who caused quite a stir at Davos when he addressed taxation and the fact that no one was confronting this contentious topic head on. His talk went viral on the web.

Meuret: Longform or creative writing is not taught at schools or universities over here.

Verbeken: We can certainly teach creative writing, and I regret I never attended such courses. Teachers in schools of journalism are rarely reporters; guests are invited for talks or conferences. There is some aversion towards the nonfiction genre in the academy. Investigative journalism is now the new fad, with investigations to unmask the powers that be. Unfortunately, narrative journalism has a false image, fashioned by people who are clueless, who do not know what they are talking about. Literary journalists do not necessarily write in an ornamental style or with overdone pathos. The American tradition simply rests on good writing. I had an opportunity two weeks ago to teach a class to sociology students at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). It was part of a project in which students must cross the city, observe, and describe what they see, work in an organization. The border between journalism and sociology was tenuous in the 1930s, for instance, with the Mass Observation Movement in the U.K. Humphrey Jennings, Humphrey Spender, among others, documented life in Bolton, a small industrial town, using sociological tools, including photography. To me, this discovery of the genre also came with music. Back in the 1980s I bought the album *Love Not Money* by Everything but the Girl. The jacket of the disc was a photo by Humphrey Spender: Two kids peeing on an industrial site—such a revealing picture. Literature, music, photography—everything is connected. All this got me into writing.

Isabelle Meuret is associate professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. Her research interests are comparative literature and literary journalism. She has published several articles in Literary Journalism Studies and was the guest editor of its special issue devoted to reportage in the French language (Vol. 8, No. 2, Fall 2016).



Notes

¹ Belgium's official languages are Dutch, French, and German, as the country has a little German-speaking enclave in the East of the country, a heritage of the Second World War. Dutch is mostly spoken in the northern part (Flanders) and French in the southern part (Wallonia). Most residents of Brussels, the capital city, are French speaking, even though it is located in Flanders. English is also a *lingua franca* in Brussels due to the presence of many European institutions and international organizations. Note also that Dutch, the official language in the Netherlands, is the generic term used for the language spoken in Flanders, although Flemish (or Flemish Dutch) is used to refer to the variation spoken and written in Belgium. Besides this official Dutch language, there exist a number of regional dialects.

² A *Brusseleir* is an original resident of Brussels. The term is in *Brusseleer*, a patois typical of the Marolles, a popular district in central Brussels. It is a mix of Flemish and French.

³ Verbeken, *Arm Wallonië*. The French version, translated by Anne-Laure Vignaux as *La Terre Promise (Flamands en Wallonie)*, was published by Le Castor Astral in 2010.

⁴ Verbeken and Selleslaghs, *Tranzyt Antwerpia*.

⁵ Verbeken, *Grand Central Belge*, first published in 2012.

⁶ Verbeken, *Duistere Wegen*.

⁷ *Brutopia: De Dromen van Brussel* [Brutopia: the dreams of Brussels]. The book, like most of the others by Verbeken, is published by De Bezige Bij, one of the main publishers of Flemish and Dutch authors (<https://www.debezigebij.nl/over-ons/over-de-bezige-bij/>).

⁸ I am using the term "micro-story" in the tradition of the Italian historiographic movement *microstoria*, popularized by its two leading figures, Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. See, for instance, Ginzburg, "Microhistory, Two or Three Things That I Know about It," 10–35; and Levi, "On Microhistory," 93–113. It is equivalent to the German *Alltagsgeschichten* and English *History from Below*, i.e., stories about the common people, not prominent figures. See Krantz, *History from Below*; Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life*; Lüdtke, "Alltagsgeschichte—ein Bericht von unterwegs," 278–95.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from this interview are mine.

¹⁰ "Youngstown" is a song by Bruce Springsteen, featured on the 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. See Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad."

¹¹ Seraing is a small industrial town near Liège, in the eastern part of French-speaking Belgium, which was well known for its steel factories (first owned by Cockerill, later by Mittal, a.o.). Its dramatic decline is partly due to the closure of its blast furnaces. The town's past glory stands in sharp contrast to its economic hardship today.

¹² Dale Maharidge (born 1956) is a professor at Columbia University, where he teaches The Narrative Journalism of Social Fault Lines. Maharidge has also worked as a journalist for a number of newspapers and magazines, including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Sacramento Bee*, *Rolling Stone*, *George Magazine*, the

Nation, *Mother Jones*, and the *New York Times*. Maharidge is the author of *Journey to Nowhere* (1985), *And Their Children After Them* (1989), and *Homeland* (2004). For a complete bibliography, see Maharidge, Professor of Journalism.

¹³ Maharidge, with photos by Michael Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*; Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

¹⁴ *Germinal* (1885) by Émile Zola is a naturalistic novel documenting the harsh working and living conditions of miners in nineteenth century northern France. George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) is a novel documenting poverty, as experienced by the author himself.

¹⁵ Auguste de Winne (1861–1935) was a French-speaking writer, journalist, and politician, who wrote about the deep poverty of Flanders and the dire living conditions of its people at the turn of the twentieth century. He was a member of the *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (Belgian Worker's Party).

¹⁶ The Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp documents the story of millions of European migrants that transited through Antwerp, *en route* to the New World. The steamers carried people to the United States from 1873 to 1934 (<https://www.redstarline.be/en/page/red-star-line-museum-nutshell>).

¹⁷ Beware of the spoiler: Benjamin Kopp did sail to the United States. After arriving at Ellis Island, he quickly left for Paterson, New Jersey, where he reunited with his brother Simcha. See Verbeke, *Tranzyt Antwerpia*, 274.

¹⁸ Herman Selleslagers is a Flemish photographer born in 1938. He has worked for magazines such as *Humo*, *Knack*, *Vrij Nederland*, and *Die Zeit*.

¹⁹ Kazernes Dossin is a museum and memorial in Mechelen, Belgium. It commemorates the lives of 25,844 people, Holocaust victims, who were deported during the Second World War (<https://www.kazernesdossin.eu/EN/>).

²⁰ In addition to the book, a documentary was made for both Canvas and RTBF, two Belgian channels.

²¹ Alan Lomax was a musicologist and ethnologist, who compiled an impressive audio archive of rural music, traveling through the United States. See Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, and Gorney, "How Alan Lomax Changed the Way We Hear American Music."

²² Chris de Stoop (born 1958) is an award-winning Dutch fiction and nonfiction writer, translated in a dozen languages (<http://www.chrisdestoop.be/>). Lieve Joris is a Belgian author, writing in Dutch, also translated in several languages. She came to prominence with such books as *Back to the Congo* (1992); *Terug naar Congo*, (1987), *The Gates of Damascus* (1996); *De poorten van Damascus* (1993); *The Rebel's Hour* (2008); and *Het uur van de rebellen* (2006).

²³ Cureghem and Sint-Joost are, respectively, a district and a commune of Brussels.

²⁴ The so-called *gilets jaunes* or "yellow vests" are a popular movement of protest that started in France in October 2018. The triggering factor was taxation on fuel, but their claims cover many other aspects, including the democratic process of consultation in France.

²⁵ See Verbeke, "Charles Baudelaire à Bruxelles," published in *Wilfried*,

52–59. *Wilfried* is a Belgian quarterly magazine of long-form or narrative journalism, essentially devoted to politics. Pascal Verbeken is a regular contributor. I take advantage of this note to thank François Brabant, *Wilfried*'s founding father and editor-in-chief, for having brought Pascal Verbeken's work to my attention.

²⁶ Verbeken, 58 (my translation).

²⁷ Solnit, *Wanderlust*.

²⁸ So-called *maisons du peuple*, literally “common people's houses,” were meeting places for the working classes. They were recreational but also political hubs, where people were imagining and developing their class conscience and activities. They were particularly popular until the 1970s.

²⁹ Antoine-Joseph Wiertz (1806–1865) was a Belgian visionary artist (painter, sculptor, writer). *Bruxelles Capitale, Paris Province* is a pamphlet he wrote in 1840.

³⁰ Sabena stands for *Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne* (Belgian Corporation for Air Navigation Services). Created in 1923, it failed financially in 2001 and was later replaced by SN Brussels Airlines.

³¹ Margot Vanderstraeten is also an excellent nonfiction writer. Her personal memoir, *Mazzel tov*, the story of her time as a private tutor in an Orthodox Jewish family, was a huge success. Translated into many languages, it sold 50,000 copies. See Vanderstraeten, *Mazzel tov*.

³² *La Belgique de papa*, literally “daddy's Belgium,” is a pejorative expression to refer to old-school, elitist, outdated Belgium.

³³ Ceelen and Van Bergeijk, *Meer dan de feiten*.

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