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Living in Belgium has taught me one thing: it is virtually impossible to explain my native country to outsiders. This is probably true of most countries and communities. Let me try and give you a crash course.

1. Contrary to persistent rumours chocolate, beer and mussels are not omnipresent in Belgium. Novels and poems in which no chocolate is eaten nor any beer is drunk, do find publishers and readers.
2. Belgian literature does not exist. Some Belgian nationals speak Dutch, others speak French, and yet others speak German. Those are the official languages. We also have Turkish, Moroccan, Central African, Yiddish communities, and so on. To simplify matters, let's say that people in the north speak Dutch—they are the Flemish and they live in Flanders. To confuse matters, some people insist the Flemish do not speak Dutch but Flemish. Dutch, they say, is spoken in the Netherlands. Should the literature written by Flemish people be studied as a separate entity? Or should it be seen as an integral part of Dutch literature? Nobody knows the answer to those questions. In other words, maybe Flemish literature doesn't exist either.
3. You could say that the Flemish are torn between provincialism (or nationalism, though that's not quite the same thing) and internationalism. The provincial says: nowhere on earth can the quality of life compete with ours. We have the best housing, cafés, restaurants, social security and health care system. This is the land of milk and honey. A provincial writer writes exclusively for a Flemish public. He or she may well use expressions and idioms that will sound unfamiliar or even be incomprehensible to a Dutch audience in the Netherlands. The provincial doesn't care. He or she lives unburdened by hang-ups. Often he or she is a writer of crime fiction. This is a little-known but peculiar characteristic of Flemish people: they love crime fiction. It would be a mistake to conclude that the provincial reader only reads local books. He or she reads whatever takes his or her fancy, be it in Dutch or translation. A high number of books in any bookshop in Flanders are translated from English, French, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, whatever.

The internationally-oriented Flemish look down on local culture. They wouldn't be seen dead reading a book by a Flemish person, unless the author has spent a suitable amount of time at Harvard or Yale, or has been hailed as the new literary genius by *The New York* or *London Review of Books*. They seldom if ever read crime fiction and they seldom if ever write, since their standards are so very very high. Or more likely: they fill numerous exercise books but keep them hidden from view for fear of being considered provincial. Preferably they read books in the original version.

Most writers try to avoid being either provincial or international. This kind of polarization is simply not interesting or productive. However—and this is the second peculiar thing about Flanders—if they want to be taken seriously they have to look for a publisher in the Netherlands, preferably Amsterdam. This is certainly the case for writers of fiction and poetry. If e.g. a volume of poetry is published in Flanders, it almost certainly means that no Dutch publisher would

have it. A lot of Flemish writers publish a first book in Flanders and then—if the book is well-received—move on and up to Amsterdam. It is in many ways a regrettable situation, for which in my view the local publishers are entirely to blame.

The local publishers specialize in the inevitable crime fiction and in nonfiction that addresses local issues. They increasingly publish books by people who have made a name for themselves in politics or the media, for the simple reason that these books will sell, regardless of their contents or style. This state of affairs can be fairly depressing for a "real" author. Being famous in Flanders means nothing in terms of the world, but local fame opens many local doors, including those of a local publishing house.

4. I sometimes gloomily predict that soon writers will outnumber readers, and that readers rather than writers will be entitled to a grant or a subsidy. At present a number of writers in Flanders are state-sponsored. They get a grant or an allowance for pursuing their careers. That is definitely one of the advantages of paying a lot to the taxman. Some of it gets back to you. Obviously you have to convince the board of your merits and credits. This may be an uphill struggle. The system was first introduced in the Netherlands and later copied in Flanders. Dutch writers can apply for grants from Flanders and vice versa.