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Of Babel, Books, Libraries and other Ghosts:  
Foreign Books in the U.S. Marketplace

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# INTRODUCTION

Introducing *To Be Translated or Not To Be*, an essential survey on the diffusion of international literature in the English bookmarket published by PEN foundation, Esther Allen<sup>1</sup> insists on the cultural drawbacks which hide behind linguistic impermeability: the English-speaking publishing marketplace is a *huge* one, but its size and power do not prevent a sterile cultural isolation.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they strengthen it. This happens even in a historically multicultural democracy as the American one. As Horace Engdhal<sup>3</sup> pointed out in an interview with Associated Press in 2007, the U.S. seem to be “too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining.”<sup>4</sup> The negative outcome of being a “too isolated, too insular culture” is that, as Simona Skrabec<sup>5</sup> states in *To Be Translated or Not To Be*’s conclusion, “the internal values of an impermeable culture create the illusion of being absolute values” (Allen and Skrabec, 119). It is 2015 and from a cultural point of view — self-evidently I will limit my opinion within literature’s borders — it is not even desirable to talk about *absolute* values. The one and only absolute value which must be discussed is *diversity*, and biblio-diversity is threatened in a situation where World Literature runs the risk of being a synonym for *English* Literature. In fact every national literature is rooted on its idiosyncrasies and *motifs*; the mere idea of Italian, Spanish, French writers lost in the process of thinking how to write an “American” novel is rather appalling.

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Allen is a writer and translator who teaches at Baruch College (CUNY). She co-founded the PEN World Voices Festival in 2005, and guided the work of the PEN/Heim Translation Fund.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Engdhal is a Swedish literary historian and critic. He has been a member of the Swedish Academy since 1997. He was the permanent secretary of the Academy from 1999 to 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Goldenberg, Suzanne. “No Nobel prizes for American writers: they’re too parochial”, *The Guardian*, 2 October 2008. Web.

<sup>5</sup> Skrabec is a Slovene translator, literary critic and essayist.

Another possible negative trend could be the flattening of any national literature in a clumsy cliché elaborated by hasty critics. This adulterated perception of foreign literatures create that unpleasant phenomenon which Chad Post<sup>6</sup> names “One Country One Author”. *Is* Russian literature wholly embodied by Tolstoj and Dostoevskij? *Is* Italian literature wholly embodied by Levi and Calvino? Claiming that American literature is wholly embodied by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen would sound inaccurate, to say the least. This is often the case though: if newspapers define, for example, *Shadow of the Wind* as the “Great Barcelona Novel” they will foster what Post calls the “publishers-are-sheep” problem: “publishers love imitations more than their audience does. [...] Readers like similarities, not necessarily repetitions. Publishers like sure things” (Post, Loc. 1337). This sort of literary cloning is everything but useful in terms of *diversity*.

This thesis is divided into three main chapters. Chapter 1 firstly aims at providing the reader with an accurate mapping of the present situation in terms of international literature’s diffusion in the United States. At first I will provide an overview of the (in)famous 3% figure (1. 1). Then I will explore the socio-cultural (1. 2) and economic (1. 3) factors behind this scarcity. Chapter 2 deals with who (and how and why) cares for foreign literature in the United States and what strategies they must deal with. I will focus on discoverability (2. 1), grants (2. 2) and the e-book market (2. 3). Then I will include an interview with one of the most influential activists as far as international literature is concerned, namely Chad Post. Literature in translation, in the U.S., is nothing but a small niche fostered by small publishing houses such as no profit, indie and university presses: I will list them in Chapter 2. 5, along with dedicated magazines, organizations and awards. Chapter 3 presents a case-study: one of the most astonishing literary sensations of the last decade, namely Roberto Bolaño's posthumous success in the Anglosphere (I will obviously focus on the North American reception). This last section aims to explain *why* Bolaño’s books conquered both the American audience and critics. The last

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<sup>6</sup> The director of Open Letter Books, creator of *The Three Percent* website and podcast.

subchapter (3. 4) shows how predicting such a widespread success is more difficult than it seems.

# 1. THESE DAYS

## 1.1 The Three Percent Problem (Problem)

The lack of trust-worthy data about the percentage of translated books per year in the U.S. may lead to an acute sense of *academic* frustration. Regarding this issue, Sarah Pollack — assistant Professor at College of Staten Island, City University of New York — states:

In compiling their statistics, each source (publishing industry, non profit organizations, and university programs focused on translation) deals differently with certain relevant variables: how to define fiction and literature; how to categorize translations; whether or not to include retranslations, reprints, and anthologies; and how often to compile data.<sup>7</sup>

This was 2009. Nowadays — thanks to the relentless effort made by Chad W. Post and his Translation Database — things look slightly better. Post's *Three Percent* website is a *necessary* starting point of any systematic analysis, even though Post himself had initially some doubts about his enterprise. In a *Three Percent* dawn-era entry he says that when he was in Iowa for a International Writing Program celebration, Eliot Weinberger<sup>8</sup> told him that he should change the name of his website, "since the 3% included any book with an ISBN"<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, this subchapter will suggest that Post was right to persevere by naming his website after that figure.

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<sup>7</sup> Pollack, Sarah. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detective* in the United States", *Comparative Literature* 61 no. 3 (2009). Duke University Press Durham, NC. Pp. 353-4.

<sup>8</sup> Renowned essayist, poet, political commentator, translator and editor.

<sup>9</sup> Post, Chad. "Esther Allen at the Frankfurt Book Fair". *Three Percent a resource for international literature at the University of Rochester*. 19 October 2007. Web.

In “Tomorrow’s E-Utopia?” — a paper written for the Iceland Literary Festival in 2009 — Post argues that “according to a number of studies from the past half-dozen years, approximately 3% of all books published in the U.S. have been translated into English” (Post, Loc. 4251). However, the 3% is not a recent figure. Larry Venuti claims indeed that since the 1950s, the percentage of translated works published in the United States has been between the 2% and the 4% of all books published on annual basis — with a 6-7% peak during the 1960s (Venuti, 12). This increase lead Eliot Weinberger to formulate his assumption, namely that American readership curiosity raise during periods of national broad dissatisfaction (see Chapter 1. 2).

In the last chapter of *To Be Translated or Not To Be*, Simona Skrabec shares her bitterness about a certain degree of statistical disinformation as for international literature’s diffusion in English speaking countries in general: “Another measure of self-sufficiency is that English speaking countries don’t keep reliable statistics on the number of books translated to English.” (Allen and Skrabec, 119) Incidentally: Skrabec does not mention her source (a quick research demonstrates that this information is provided by Bowker<sup>10</sup>). Then she adds: “In 2004 in the United States, there were 14,400 new translations of books into English, of which only 874 were literary texts. This is considered to be approximately 3% of all books on the shelves” (Allen and Skrabec, 120). Curiously enough, Skrabec herself presents incorrect data: an accurate fact-checking leads to even more dismal figures. In October 2005, Bowker<sup>11</sup>, stated that among 375,000 new books published in English (therefore not exclusively *in the United States*, also in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK etc) in 2004, 14,400 were new translations — more or less<sup>12</sup> the 3% of all books published. Of *these* 14,400 books, 4,982 were published in the American book-market. This data includes both literature and nonfiction: literature in

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<sup>10</sup> The database where publishing statistics and bibliographical data are recorded; Bowker also assigns ISBNs to all books.

<sup>11</sup> A suggestive hint of how translation is considered in the U.S: Bowker eliminated “translation” as a filing category in 2000.

<sup>12</sup> 3,84%.

translation titles are — only — 874. To sum up, in 2004 AD in the United States of America, 874 literature in translation titles were published, which is the 34.6% percent of the new translations published in 2004 in the U.S.: 874 titles means the 0,43% percent of the amount of books published in English in 2004. Low figures indeed — a slight but steady increase, at least, since 1999. According to NEA — the National Endowment for the Arts — there were 12,828 translated works published in 1999: 297<sup>13</sup>, namely the 2.3%, were literary works in translation. So the two main references as for the 3% statistic show different outcomes indeed.

It is clearer now to which extent this figure is not *that* accurate. As Chad Post states in “The Myth of the ‘Three Percent Problem’”, “There is no single agency responsible for creating this number, and no office providing periodic updates.” (Rodel et al., 38). However, when the “supreme” authority of the 3% figure suspects that

one of the main reasons the three percent statistic got so much traction with the general public is that it just *felt right*. Most reviews in major book review sections are of books from American and British authors. There are only a handful of stores in the country with “International Literature” sections. (Rodel et al, 39)

his viewpoint must be considered. Despite the recent media coverage increase, any percentage increase is still far to be reached. According to Post — or, more precisely, according to his Three Percent Translation Database — the quota of original literary translations published in the U.S. has raised from 360 (2008) to 517 (2013); it must be reminded though, that the total number of books published has raised too (from circa 289,000 to circa 300,000). Self-evidently, both the terms increased, thus leaving their ratio almost untouched.

Beyond all these observations, the 3% symbolizes American publishing scarce appetite for international literature. It must be considered as an input — a permanent incentive to improve the present day situation. This is a struggle which

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<sup>13</sup> This sum includes several new translation of classic works: although retranslations are vitally important literary-wise, they definitely inflate even this figure. If you do not write in English and you are *alive* scarce is the chance to be published in the U.S.

Post and other *translactivists*<sup>14</sup> are already fighting on a daily basis. Around this percentage a heterogeneous group of professionals keen on international literature promotion has blossomed: literary associations/organizations, printed/online magazines, translators, independent/university/non-profit presses. The first positive outcomes — excluding the relative utility of sheer percentages — are already visible:

I guess my greater point is that we don't live in 1994 anymore. All these works of international literature are available to all readers throughout the United States [...] Focusing on the three percent statistic—or whatever it might *actually* be—reinforces the belief that it's *difficult* to find literature in translation, which is a blatant lie. (Rodel et al., 41)

## 1.2 Socio-cultural Factors

### 1. 2. 1 The “Insularity” Prejudice

North American culture's alleged narrowness is a longstanding debate argument. As regards international literature in/and/versus the United States of America I will center the discussion especially on the last fifteen years. The reason why I will do so is that, from an economic and cultural point of view, the U.S. are still going through a post 9/11 situation<sup>15</sup>; Eliot Weinberger for example, in a speech entitled “Anonymous Sources” — given at the “Lost & Found” conference on translation Iowa City, 13 October 2001 (!) — claims that 9/11 has intensified the American curiosity towards the rest of the world:

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> I am aware of the severe reduction inherent in this sentence. It is self-evident that this topic is still *in fieri*: Weinberger too wrote one of the post 9/11 milestones, namely *What Happened Here: Bush Chronicles*, a collection of essays which gravitates around Bush's administration and — overall — the 9/11 aftermath.

I live in New York, not so far from Ground Zero, and I can't help but say that in the still immediate aftermath and its proliferating events and emotions, it strikes me as legitimate to wonder why one would want to talk about translation at all. Perhaps the only point of convergence is to note that our government lacks, among so many other things, an awareness that all translators must have: the understanding that specific words carry very different meanings and associations in different languages and cultures.<sup>16</sup>

Weinberger then argues that translation flourishes whenever *literati* sense that their language and/or society needs liberating. “One of the great spurs to translation is a cultural inferiority complex or a national self-loathing.”<sup>17</sup> In order to root post 9/11 intellectual’s indignation over President Bush’s foreign and domestic policies in a historical *humus*, Weinberger refers to two main flowerings of translation. The first took place in the First World War period, thanks to expatriates who aimed to fill the cultural gap between the U.S. and Europe. The second was the outcome of a stark anti-Americanism among American intellectual — its boom occurred in the Sixties<sup>18</sup>. Translation became one of the tools of the civil rights movement counterculture: foreign poetry, as exotic religions, the Native American myth and the search for hallucinatory states were petals of the same flower — namely, counterculture. By the early Seventies this approach has been mainly erased — according to Weinberger — by creative writing schools and their parochial attitude. The critic identifies a new breed of *literati* characterized by a mild form of nationalism and

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<sup>16</sup> <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/91st/vol1-num1/anonymous-sources> No other info available.

This viewpoint did spread in the mainstream discourse: Susan Harris, editorial director of *Words Without Borders*, states: “In the US, we know so much of the world through a political prism. Our interest is in publishing work from parts of the world that aren’t well-known.” Like countries from the “Axis of Evil,” as the Bush administration categorized them.” (Saskia Vogel, “Yawn No More: Americans and the Market for Foreign Fiction”. *Publishing Perspectives*, 11 June 2014. Web.)

<sup>17</sup> Weinberger, Eliot. *Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation*, presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program, on November 9, 2000. P. 2.

<sup>18</sup> This opinion is endorsed by Jill Schoolman — founder of Archipelago Books — too:

In the 40's and 50's, Helen and Kurt Wolff stirred up quite a bit of excitement around the world with Pantheon Books. New Directions, Knopf and Grove stirred up more. Many large houses and university presses kept the doors to international writing open into the 1970's. Now [2003] the doors are virtually shut.

(Kinzer, Stephen. “America Yawns at Foreign Fiction”. *The New York Times*, 26 July 2003. Web.)

consequent isolationism. It is rather paradoxical that such a multicultural age as the last two decades of the twentieth century has been nefarious as far international literature is concerned. "The original multiculturalist critique of the Eurocentrism of the canon and so forth did not lead [...] to a new internationalism, where Wordsworth would be read alongside Wang Wei, the Greek anthology next to Vidyakara's Treasury"<sup>19</sup>. On the contrary, it led into a sort of post-modern nationalist idea of literature, where Chinese-American and Latinos writers are published and taught, while Chinese and Mexican writers (e.g.) are almost ignored.

"America Yawns at Foreign Fiction"<sup>20</sup> is a notorious article appeared only two years after 9/11 on *The New York Times*' Books section. It is notorious indeed<sup>21</sup>, being regarded as a sort of *summa* of all the most recurrent preconceptions towards international literature's prevailing in the American cultural system<sup>22</sup>. Two — rather specious — examples:

"A lot of foreign literature doesn't work in the American context because it's less action-oriented than what we're used to, more philosophical and reflective," said Laurie Brown, senior vice president for marketing and sales at Harcourt Trade Publishers. "As with foreign films, literature in translation often has a different pace, a different style, and it can take some getting used to. The reader needs to see subtleties and get into the mood or frame of mind to step into a different place."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Weinberger, Eliot. *Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation*, presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program, on November 9, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Kinzer, Stephen. "America Yawns at Foreign Fiction". *The New York Times*, 26 July 2003. Web.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, Kinzer's title almost created a genre. On February 2015 Chad Post published "Yawning vs. Not Reading: Americans and Translations a Decade Apart" on his Three Percent website; in 2014 *Publisher Perspectives* published "Yawn No More: Americans and the Market for Foreign Fiction", a — rather wobbly — article about the recent increase of international literature within American publishing.

<sup>22</sup> I think this approach towards the article — propelled by Post and Allen too — is rather reductive, though. The article presents these prejudices indeed, but it also points out several sharable opinions, as: "[T]he concentration of ownership in the book industry, which is dominated by a few conglomerates [...] has produced an intensifying fixation on profit. As publishers focus on blockbusters, they steadily lose interest in little-known authors from other countries." (Kinzer, Stephen. "America Yawns at Foreign Fiction". *The New York Times*, 26 July 2003. Web)

<sup>23</sup> Kinzer, Stephen. "America Yawns at Foreign Fiction". *The New York Times*, 26 July 2003. Web.

And:

We have always been sort of monosyllabic in terms of languages, and that extends into ignorance or wariness of other cultures," said William Strachan, executive editor of Hyperion Press. "People look at a work in translation and quite often think, 'These themes don't speak to me, these situations don't speak to me.' And the hard fact is that given the reality of the world, we simply don't have to be concerned about Laos, but people there might well want to be or have to be concerned about America."<sup>24</sup>

Yet again, it seems to be a matter of American cultural insularity. As soon as Horace Engdhal's aforementioned opinion about US literature ("too isolated, too insular") was exposed by Associated Press, annoyed reactions boomed. In a noted article by *The Guardian*, "No Nobel prizes for American writers: they're too parochial", Engdhal's viewpoint is discussed — it is torn into pieces, actually — by no less than David Remnick (editor at the *New Yorker*) and Harold Augenbraum (executive director of the National Book Foundation). The former said that someone who happens to be "the permanent secretary of an academy that pretends to wisdom but has historically overlooked Proust, Joyce and Nabokov [...] would spare us the categorical lectures"<sup>25</sup>. The latter, who ironically proposes Engdahl a reading list, claims that:

Engdhal's comment makes me think that [he] has read little American literature outside the mainstream and has a narrow view of what constitutes literature in this age. [...] In the first place, one way the United States has embraced the concept of world culture is through immigration.<sup>26</sup>

However, Engdahl did try to play down this quarrel by pointing out that he did not state that there are no deserving American writers. In his reply though, published at

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Goldenberg, Suzanne. "No Nobel prizes for American writers: they're too parochial", *The Guardian*, 2 October 2008. Web.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

*La Croix*<sup>27</sup>, he eventually reiterates that American literature — and criticism and teaching — is lost in a sort of cultural fun house. Nothing more than a cultural system which endlessly and recklessly tends to mirror itself. What *deus ex machina* could break this spell according to Engdhal though? Translation, of course.

Chad W. Post firmly believes in this dream: he fights — on a daily basis — for the increase of international literature sales in the U.S. by boosting American readership's curiosity towards non-English speaking world. Beyond being the man behind of *The Three Percent* website<sup>28</sup> — and the *Three Percent* podcast too — he is the director of Open Letter, the University of Rochester-based international-literature-only publisher, which I will touch on later (see Chapter 2). Post replied — not excluding a certain degree of *esterofilia* — to Remnick and Augerbraum's rants in a *The Three Percent* entry indeed<sup>29</sup>. He structured his reply in a nine-points list, of which I will focus on — in my opinion — the most important ones:

- “I’d much rather find the book that’s influenced more by its countries own traditions, which will inevitably have been shaped by other literatures including works from America yet retain something unique and different.”

Once again, it is a matter of enhancing literary diversity. Post often refers to foreign publishing people trying to pitch him a book written by the “Lituanian Safran Foer” or the “Danish DeLillo” and so on. Regarding this issue, Riky Stock<sup>30</sup>, who is undoubtedly keen on spreading international literature in the global book-market, shares a quite controversial opinion:

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<sup>27</sup> Audrerie, Sabine. “Horace Engdahl : « Un prix Nobel doit porter la force de l’universel »“. *La Croix*, 6 October 2014. Web.

<sup>28</sup> In the post 9/11 era the counterculture mentioned by Weinberger is definitely on the Internet.

<sup>29</sup> Post, Chad. “Boom Goes the Dynamite!”. *Three Percent a resource for international literature at the University of Rochester*. 1 October 2008. Web.

<sup>30</sup> Stock is the director of the German Book Office, a center which function is promoting German literature by establishing networks (with journalists, publishers, critics, academics etc.) in a given Host country.

The increased interest in German literature can also be explained by the change in writing. The year 1989 marked the end of East German literature, but the political upheavals marked a turning point for West German literature as well. [...] Before this new kind of renaissance in German literature, German publishers remember their attempts to sell rights to their authors' work in other countries as a "humiliating experience." German writing was viewed at that time as academic, serious, and indigestible. The new German novel, according to the New York Times, it is "less weighty, more exportable."<sup>31</sup>

The mere notion of a catchy, pop german novel built following American publishing prerogatives may sound disturbing even to the most open-minded *literati*. On the other hand, the opposite phenomenon of boosting the assumed qualities of a given book is quite inconvenient too. Readers run the risk of being offered with a formulaic idea of, say, Catalan literature. For example, Zafon's *The Shadow of the Wind* has curiously been considered the "great Barcelona novel"<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, the negative outcome of this procedure will be the consequent collective rush towards other Spanish novelists who seem to be nothing more than Zafon's copycat.

- "In America success equals big money."

Good sales are really *seldom* caused by literary milestones, though. American big publishers are obviously focused on profitable (= huge sales) titles. Post instead advocates a book-market driven by sustainable business models based on feasible sales. If you happen to be an *aficionado* of *The Three Percent* website this is nothing new. In this quote, Post embodies the small-presses *credo* which persevere against the outdated and moribund business model embraced by conglomerates. As I will discuss later (see Chapter 1.3), conglomerates' business model strives for a double-digit growth in such a business as publishing, where commodities' value is extremely ephemeral and "Zero growth is the new 'We're doing it great!'"<sup>33</sup> (Post,

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<sup>31</sup> Allen, Esther and Skrabec, Simona. "To Be Translated or Not to Be", PEN/IRL Report on the International Situation of Literary Translation". Institut Ramon, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> By Scott Moyers in 2007 (Post, Loc. 604) — Moyers is now (spring 2015) Vice President and Publisher of Penguin Press.

<sup>33</sup> This — serious — joke describes, as I will further examine in the next subchapter, small presses' situation.

Loc. 1656). Whether it is good news or not, literature in translation in the U.S. is often considered as “high literature” — since the books which have the chance to be published are more or less the best titles available outside the North American borders. Problem: if people prefer to read entertainment, how small publishers can feed their curiosity? This issue will be thoroughly analyzed — also — in Chapter 2.

- “Immigration literature does add to our culture, but it’s not a 1:1 equivalent to literature in translation.”

This issue is considered by Weinberger too. Weinberger thinks that — to put it in a nutshell — to care for, say, Latinos (and therefore *American*) writers is different than actively sustaining literary inputs generated around the world. As Esther Allen<sup>34</sup> says in “Yawn No More: Americans and the Market for Foreign Fiction”, even though Americans feel “very cosmopolitan” because of their ethnic restaurants and multilingual cab drivers and multicultural *ethos*, “at the end of the day, it breaks down to different ways of being American.”<sup>35</sup> Multi-ethnicity is definitely a great achievement: the international circulation of literary traditions is something else, though. Even if the American society is a — more or less — successful melting pot, the U.S. literary culture still needs to step further. Eleven years before Allen’s stigma, also Jill Schoolman pointed out that “the publishing community is partly responsible for nurturing this ethnocentric literary culture drifting further and further away from the rest of the world.”<sup>36</sup>

The idea of American cultural insularity seems to have trickled down on international literature’s diffusion in the U.S. by following the path of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, the people who should water North American culture and take

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<sup>34</sup> Author of the *Translationista* blog and famous translator. Allen is another notable *translactivist* whose role will be widely discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>35</sup> Vogel, Saskia. “Yawn No More: Americans and the Market for Foreign Fiction”. *Publishing Perspectives*, 11 June 2014. Web.

<sup>36</sup> Kinzer, Stephen. “America Yawns at Foreign Fiction”. *The New York Times*, 26 July 2003. Web.

care of its multi-directed growth are the same who define the U.S. as “isolated” and “provincial”. Erroll McDonald — editor at Pantheon — for example, defines his national culture as “breathtakingly provincial” (Post, Loc. 1740) According to McDonald this provinciality leads to the confinement of international literature in the stores and media and, consequently, low sales figures. And if sales stay low, as I have already pointed out, Pantheon must react and rearrange its production to more “profitable” titles. The question here is rather simple to sum up: if people who produce books consider their readership as lazy, narrow-minded and “provincial” this endless cycle will not bring nothing good, both for the people and the industry. In order to stop this loop, those publishers which are *genuinely* and *actively* interested in boosting international literature sales must increase American readers’ awareness of the quality of this exotic product. If people were subjected to the same advertising tsunami for *2666* as they are for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, people might have bought it as well. *Maybe*. This cannot but remain an hypothetical scenario because, as I will discuss in the last chapter of my thesis, publishing as a business is *peculiarly* intertwined with uncertainty.

At a panel discussion organized by PEN American Center to address issues of translation and globalization and moderated by Steve Wasserman — former editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Roberto Calasso<sup>37</sup> denounced the consequences of such cultural indifference to international literature. He brought the example of the unquestionable impact Thomas Bernhard had on writers from all over the world — English-speaking writers included. Nevertheless, Calasso pointed out, many of Bernhard’s titles are still not available in English. This example can be extended to many other cases where American publishing system just arrived *late* (see Russian literature).

However, American apparently irreparable cultural insularity is just one of the four main recurrent prejudices I was able to track research-wise. Having provided the reader with a range of examples of where the “insularity” prejudice may lead, I will briefly discuss the three prejudices left.

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<sup>37</sup> Fine author and director of Adelphi Edizioni, the majority of whose list consists of translations.

## 1. 2. 2 Of Career, Betrayal and Alienation: three more prejudices

Firstly, as far academic career is concerned, translations are considered an obstacle rather than a string-pulling activity. Here is a brief case-study: Barbara S. Harshav. Harshav is the president of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) and a fine translator too: she translates works from the French, German, Hebrew, and Yiddish; S.Y. Agnon, Nobel laureate in 1966, is one of the authors she has worked with. She even holds a workshop on translation at Yale University. That being sad, when asked by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about translation reputation in the academy, Harshav claimed that translation is “not regarded as a serious academic enterprise”<sup>38</sup>; she added that this situation is “one of those crazy things where it's a tremendously important profession that isn't recognized either monetarily or in prestige”<sup>39</sup>. As for this issue, several might be the case-studies. I do not assume Howard is right, when she suggests this issue may be linked to the “fluidity paradox” described by Venuti (= fluidity of successful translations is curiously counter-productive because it conceals translators’ presence). It is rather an issue of mere academic reputation: writing seems to be considered *better* than translating, period. Allen even denounces that “It actively works against you, which is amazing if you consider that for 3,000 years translation has been at the heart of literary scholarship.”<sup>40</sup> However, according to the University of Texas at Dallas, the reputation of the translator’s job has significantly increased over the last few years. Here are the key passages of “Translation and Academy”<sup>41</sup>, a sort of manifesto delivered by the University of Texas:

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<sup>38</sup> Howard, Jennifer. “Translators Struggle to Prove Their Academic Bona Fides”. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 January 2010. Web.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Howard, Jennifer. “Translators Struggle to Prove Their Academic Bona Fides”. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 January 2010. Web.

<sup>41</sup> [http://translation.utdallas.edu/essays/scholar\\_essay1.html](http://translation.utdallas.edu/essays/scholar_essay1.html) No further info available.

- “A translation of a literary work that aspires to adequacy represents the fruition of one of the most challenging enterprises of rigorous literary inquiry.”
- “Translation brings together all the critical skills of the scholar and all the creative skills of the writer. Therefore, translation ought to be accorded the same status as other publications in determining rank, tenure and salary in universities. Translation is the product of informed scholarly research, critical interpretation and creative reconstruction.”
- “As a scholarly activity translation integrates the multiple aspects of cultural, historical, anthropological and aesthetic developments and the methodologies of the art and craft of translation should be considered a revitalizing force in the field of literary interpretation and scholarship in the humanities.”

This essay aspires to raise a certain degree of academic awareness about the importance of being a translator. The list of virtuous universities undoubtedly include the University of Texas (Dallas), the University of Rochester and the University of Illinois. The Dallas-based university is a successful hub for translation studies, both for theoretical and practical aspects. The University of Rochester (New York) and the University of Illinois can be proud of their affiliated international literature publishing houses: Open Letter and Dalkey Archive. These universities do not consider translation as something useless in order to get tenure and promotion. To conclude this paragraph: thanks to some enlightened departments which promote and *publish* translated books, reversing this trend seems more and more possible.

Secondly, “one can never mention the word ‘translation’ without some wit bringing up — as though for the first time — that tedious Italian pun *traduttore traditore*.”<sup>42</sup> Weinberger’s debunking of the *tradurre/tradire* paradigm is surely well-accepted by translation studies’ people. The fallacy which lies behind this equivalence is quite self-evident. It is quite obvious that the translated text and its source can *not* be identical: though this “transformation” does not betray the

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<sup>42</sup> Weinberger, Eliot. *Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation*, presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program, on November 9, 2000. P. 6.

original text, rather it extends the source's *raison d'être*. No reading of a text is the same as another. As Weinberger argues discussing about poems, the text does not survive without translation: "The poem must move from reader to reader, reading to reading, in perpetual transformation. The poem dies when it has no place to go."<sup>43</sup> The text dies when it is considered untouchable. A translated text is a creative outsource made by the combination of the author *and* the translator effort. This condition should not reduce its value: rather, it should boost it. Nevertheless, translated works continue to be scanned according to a platonic ideal of accurate equivalences and can be dismissed on the basis of a single word — often by members of foreign language departments<sup>44</sup>. Weinberger jokingly mentions the "translation police",

They are the ones who write - to take an actual example - that a certain immensely prolific translator from the German "simply does not know German" because somewhere in the vastness of *Buddenbrooks*, he had translated a "chesterfield" as a "greatcoat." Such examples [...] are more the rule than the exception.<sup>45</sup>

No one dare to claim that, say, Roth does not know how to write in English because of a weak passage. Roberto Calasso has described contemporary U.S. culture as a "lethal mixture of provincialism and imperialism"<sup>46</sup> and such an attitude on the part of book reviewers can serve as an excellent example of what he means. According to Daniel Green<sup>47</sup>, e. g., Wyatt Mason<sup>48</sup> can not truly praise a given passage of Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* because "it is possible the translator has actually

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> To some extent, my bachelor thesis on a Daniil Charms' short story translation makes no exception.

<sup>45</sup> Weinberger, Eliot. *Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation*, presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program, on November 9, 2000. P. 7.

<sup>46</sup> At a panel discussion organized by PEN American Center to address issues of translation and globalization and moderated by Steve Wasserman.

<sup>47</sup> Green is a literary critic and fiction writer. He has a Ph.D focusing on postwar American fiction and an M.A. in creative writing.

<sup>48</sup> Mason is a journalist, essayist, critic and translator: he often contributes to *Harper's*.

improved it in its transformation into English, or made it worse, or in some other way failed to adequately render the original”<sup>49</sup> and so on. Is Green stating that having achieved an English version of a *noteworthy* Russian novel is less important than focusing on intrinsic communicative flaws? If so, not only Green reduces Robert Chandler’s translation skills<sup>50</sup>, but he also commits an excessive generalization of writing’s stylistic features<sup>51</sup>. This is exactly the way people working in the industry diminish international literature importance — thus discouraging possible brand new *aficionados*. The American publishing and cultural systems should overcome their diffidence towards literature in translation. An effective image provided by an American-based magazine is the asymptote: target text will never touch the axis traced by the source one. On the other hand, by proceeding in the right direction, these two lines can be separated just by some microscopic distance.

Thirdly, translated works are often considered as completely de-contextualized books. Due to their geographical/cultural/political *otherness* these books need to be read, assimilated and decrypted by cultural “gatekeepers” in order to be introduced to their audience. This extra work is rarely done, though. As Post states, it is definitely less risky “to review a young American author who has been appearing in lit mags and anthologies, who has been talked about by other editors and reviewers, and who may have even shown up at a number of literary events and gatherings.” (Post, Loc. 1428) The umpteenth Great American Novel is way more catchy in terms of media coverage than an obscure Serbian novel. Whether they are about the Great American Novel or not, also Daniel Soar — editor at *London Review of Books* — admits the scarcity of international literature reviews proposed by the

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<sup>49</sup> Green, Daniel. “Lost in Translation”. *The Reading Experience*, 26 August 2008. Web.

<sup>50</sup> Chandler in person replied on Green’s comments section by saying “A statement like this makes depressing reading for a translator like myself.”  
(Green, Daniel. “Lost in Translation”. *The Reading Experience*, 26 August 2008. Web.)

<sup>51</sup> As Chris Andrews — Bolaño’s main translator as regards English-speaking readership, alongside with Natasha Wimmer — will explain later in the interview we had, certainly there are more translatable authors than others (Bolaño is one of the former, by the way).

London-based magazine<sup>52</sup>. When asked about the reasons behind this scarcity, Soar includes the lack of context for translated books; sometimes it is like these titles slowly appear out of a dense fog. A brief case-study: the U.S. reception of Danilo Kiš' *Mansarda*. This example is proposed in an article by Michael Orthofer<sup>53</sup> — founder and managing editor at *Literary Saloon*, a literary website founded in March 1999 — in order to display how small publishers sometimes tend to sabotage their best intentions.

We were thrilled to come across a translation of Danilo Kiš' first novel, but *Mansarda* could be a case study in how not to publish a book in translation. [...] The basic problems are: how will interested readers ever learn about the existence of this book - and how will they be able to get their hands on it? The book seems to have been released ... well, as if printing and binding it were all there was to it.<sup>54</sup>

Orthofer then explains how 1) Serbian Classics Press online catalogue-page have not been updated in years 2) Serbian Classics Press does not promote its book on social media and alike, even though Kiš' is potentially a college-kids authors and 3) Serbian Classics Press has not listed *Mansarda* at any of the English-language Amazons. That said, if one tries to imagine how a given reader should react once she/he — somehow — stumble upon a de-contextualized presentation of *Mansarda*, one can easily figure it out. I do not think the reader will run at her/his wallet.

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<sup>52</sup> Post, Chad. "As If It's Not Hard Enough Selling Translations", *Three Percent a resource for international literature at the University of Rochester*, 7 July 2008. Web.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.complete-review.com/saloon/archive/200807a.htm#fr1> No data aivalable. *The Complete Review*. Web.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

## 1. 3 Economic Factors

“On a very simple level, it’s all about money.  
Or money and perceived audiences and the long tail concept.”

(Chad W. Post)

Over the last decade a series of events have radically transformed the North American publishing system. The so-called Global Financial Crisis (1.3.1) and digital revolution — Amazon’s increasing market dominance overall (1.3.2) are the main players behind this disruption. How is international literature affected by these factors? (1.3.3)

### 1. 3. 1 A broke business?

The Global Financial Crisis hit the industry showing no mercy indeed. *In primis*, it killed advertising budget. This means fewer ads and fewer ads mean less market penetration (and magazines which rely on advertising revenue suffer, to say the least). If books’ review coverage on newspapers shrink, people are less encouraged to buy them; if books’ sales stay low, distribution and publishing *behemoths* merge; if big publishers merge<sup>55</sup>, employment and bibliodiversity are threatened.

I hope that it’s become clear that if we continue down the path we’re currently on (increased readership for ebooks [...], accelerated price wars for print books, more corporate consolidation in response to duplicated overhead costs, shareholder pressure to achieve 15% profit margins, a globalized book market in which America sells its wares everywhere [...], advances that are totally insane for totally crappy [sic] books [...]) I believe that corporate publishing will continue to downsize for years to come in order to get out from under their top-heavy operating costs, and the American literary world will continue - thanks to market pressures and MBA grads - to shift from books as cultural item to books as commercial product. (Post, Loc. 3991)

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<sup>55</sup> In 2013, Penguin and Random House merging created the largest publishing house world-wide: “This new company is not just bigger than each of the other four publishers that with it make up the Big Five; it’s almost as big as the other four combined.” (Gessen, Keith. “The War of the Words”. *Vanity Fair*, December 2014. Web.)

From an exquisite elitist point of view, so-called “high literature” readers have already entered an apocalyptic age where they are bombarded with book-shaped commodities. Some publishing people (= small presses & co.) consider the blockbuster model as its boldest knight.

In the beginning of her “Blockbuster or Bust” at *The Wall Street Journal*, Anita Elberse defends this business model by claiming that big publishers should make “outsized investments to acquire and market a small number of titles with strong hit potential, and bank on their sales to make up for middling performance in the rest of their catalogs”<sup>56</sup>. Anyway, blockbuster model’s opponents — quite reasonably — argue that this idea of publishing is nothing but culturally nefarious. Elberse herself specifies that “with such high stakes and money tied up in a few big projects in the pipeline, the need to score big with a next project becomes more pressing, and the process repeats itself.”<sup>57</sup> Self-evidently, the downfall of this strategy is spiral-shaped. The Big 5<sup>58</sup> publishers seem to be trapped in a loop of ever-increasing bets on the umpteenth, most marketable NEXT BIG THING. This cycle can not be interrupted: the conglomerate who does not run the risk will be replaced by another one. As I will show later though, thanks to the long-tail concept this model is seriously menaced by e-commerce. This idea of publishing is steered by nothing but a short-term payoff mentality: I will display later how — even — Amazon.com have preferred a long-term strategy as far as books are concerned<sup>59</sup>.

Although *literati* fittingly *trust* the importance of Literature and think that Culture = Capital, big publishers — being for-profit companies — rather think that Books = Capital.

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<sup>56</sup> Elberse, Anita. “Blockbuster or Bust – Why struggling publishers will keep placing outrageous bids on new books”. *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2009. Web.

<sup>57</sup> Elberse, Anita. “Blockbuster or Bust – Why struggling publishers will keep placing outrageous bids on new books”. *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2009. Web.

<sup>58</sup> Penguin Random House, Harper Collins, MacMillan, Simon Schuster, Hachette.

<sup>59</sup> Despite a perverse sell-at-loss strategy. Later, the last *Harry Potter* case will clarify this footnote.

### 1. 3. 2 Deathly Bezos

It is not good trying to discuss the American publishing system — or *any* publishing system indeed — by ignoring the elephant in the room, namely Amazon. Amazon.com, Inc. is an e-commerce Seattle-based company founded by Jeff Bezos in 1994 and launched from his garage in 1995. It is the largest Internet-based retailer in the United States. Amazon started to diversifying its offer in the second half of the Nineties: in addition to books, Amazon began to provide its clients with Compact Discs, DVDs, Blu-rays, MP3 download and streaming, software, hardware, video-games, toys, furniture, apparel, food, *animals* and so on. Amazon has separate retail websites for United States, United Kingdom & Ireland, France, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Australia, Brazil, Japan, China, India and Mexico<sup>60</sup>. Amazon also produces, so far, devices such as Amazon Kindle e-readers, Amazon Fire, Amazon Fire TV and Amazon Fire Phone. I will discuss the innovation tsunami caused by Kindle in chapter 1.3.3.

In a world *ante* Amazon, publishers had the most power. In order to pay all the middlemen who used to hold up the production chain, publishers could *create* the product, fix the price and then — to put it almost too much simplistic — orient what people wanted. In the industry it is widely acknowledged that, if compared to present-day ones, the Nineties' sale-forces budgets were nothing but mind-blowing. Although selling books has never been easy, traditional publishers were able to move in their comfort zone, exploiting Bezos' company as a precious information database: Amazon metadata became an integral part of traditional book-market. Then, strong with its endless supply and insane offers, Amazon Kindle came.

One of the interesting thing about Amazon in its early years was the number of bad ideas it had. It was a bad idea to sell heavy home-improvement equipment on the Amazon site and charge a pittance for shipping [...] When Amazon started meeting with publishers about the Kindle, its future e-book reader, in 2006, the device may

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<sup>60</sup> May 2015.

well have seemed to them like just another goofy Amazon idea. E-readers had been tried, and had failed.<sup>61</sup>

In the United States, revenue from e-books sales is now about 3,000,000,000 dollars per year<sup>62</sup>. By now, in 2015, the world is consumer-centric and publishing makes no exception. “As if they are run by diligent M. B. A. students, both companies [Amazon and Google] are trying to give the customers what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. This is scary to Big Publishers.” (Post, Loc. 3763) The business model which used to rule — at least — the second half of the twentieth century book-market is now under heavy attack. Although it has always been a supply-side game where rules are written by publishers, readers have been provided with a funnier one now: Amazon offers them a more demand-side game, one where they *feel* independent and smart. Its strategy is both paternalistic (*we* know what is best for you) and egalitarianist (*you* know what is best). It is both a top-down *and* bottom-up leviathan. James Marcus — former senior editor at Amazon — says that, according to Bezos, “the customer is almost theological. [...] Any sacrifice is suitable for the customer.”<sup>63</sup> Tim Appelo — former entertainment editor — adds that “he only wants to serve, to make you happy.”<sup>64</sup> Of course there is a whole bibliography about the paradox of creating a serendipitous experience for customers while mapping all their “movements” online: whether it is ethical or not, Amazon’s intuition is seriously reshaping the traditional way of printing and selling books.

Focusing on distribution is necessary to further explain Amazon’s disruptive action. More than liquid assets and number of employees, distribution is the main difference between a small publisher and a big one. Big publishers have their own (very expensive) sales force and storehouses. They are unavoidable in order to

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<sup>61</sup> Keith Gessen, “The War of the Words”. *Vanity Fair*, December 2014. Web.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> George Packer, “Cheap Words Amazon is good for customers. But is it good for books?”. *The New Yorker*, 17 February 2014. Web.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

ensure the largest market penetration possible — that is, pulling readers into the stores with wise advertising campaigns and pushing books in front of their eyes. Big publishers sell to several sort of channels, including independent bookshops, bookstore chains, Amazon, Costco, libraries and so on. Each of them are offered with a different discount, usually in the range of 45-50% (Post, Loc. 696). Unlike — for example — Germany and France, the U.S. do not rely on a fixed book price policy<sup>65</sup>, since it would be considered quite a “socialist” idea: market should *not* be regulated. Nevertheless, in order to save indie bookshops and small presses, a fixed book price policy could be more than useful — it could foster bibliodiversity. It is likely that bookshops owners still remember the day when *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* came out. Amazon sold 2.500.000 copies<sup>66</sup> and did *not* break-even on sales: such extreme were the discounts set by Amazon that Bezos’ company did not earn a dollar — it lost money instead. It was a market penetration “masterpiece”.

Stores can discount books however they’d like, which has resulted in a fiercely competitive market where *amazon.com* undercuts brick-and-mortar stores etc. Although Amazon claims that they survive on a “long tail” model most stores operate on the same principle as the big publishers: you make your money by selling a ton of copies of a few select titles (the reason why one percentage point discount can lead to enormous profits). (Post, Loc. 708)

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<sup>65</sup> The fixed book price policy is an agreement between publishers and retailers that sets a (more or less) fixed price for each title sold in a given market.

<sup>66</sup> This is Joe Nocera on the *New York Times*:

By my calculation, Amazon, with its 49 percent discount, \$5 gift certificate and free shipping, is losing more than \$10 a book. [...] Harry Potter generated tens of thousands of new customers for Amazon. The company now has their e-mail addresses and can market to them — something it does exceedingly well. Secondly, Amazon is trying to condition people to buy books online instead of shopping in bookstores. A heavily discounted Harry Potter furthers that goal. Third, Amazon says that people bought lots of other things when they preordered; indeed, in its second-quarter conference call this week, the company attributed about 1 percent of its revenue to Harry Potter customers’ buying other merchandise.

(Nocera, Joe. “‘Harry’ and the Strange Logic of Book Discounters”. *The New York Times*. 28 July 2007. Web.)

Due to its aggressive marketing strategies and economic power indeed, Amazon is able to 1) challenge the “old school” publishing sales tactics by playing the blockbuster game and 2) obtain “safe” sales thanks to the *long tail* model.

In order to understand what we talk about when we talk about the long tail we must step back and familiarize with the Pareto Principle. This rule states that, for X events, circa the 80% of the effects come from the 20% of the causes. At first it was observed by connecting the Italian population to its wealth. In fact this law is named after an Italian economist called Vilfredo Pareto, who — in his “Cours d'économie politique”, 1896 — claimed that roughly the 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. There had to be something good in that observation, since the 1992 United Nations Development Program Report — a report which focused on the distributive disparity of global income — contains a chart which shows the so-called 'champagne glass' effect. The chart<sup>67</sup> displays that the richest are the 20% of the global population and control the 82.7% of the global income. Interestingly enough, it is now widely observed that this principle could be applied to several natural phenomena as the sizes of sand particles, the numbers of species per genus, the areas burn in forest fires, the values of oil reserves in oil fields etcetera<sup>68</sup>. Even more abstract fields are involved; according to Paula Rooney, Microsoft realized that the 80% of crashes in a given system were caused by the top 20% of the most reported bugs<sup>69</sup>. Or: the 80% of health care resources is exploited by the 20% of American patients<sup>70</sup>. In business though, there is no scientific data available about Pareto's reliability. Despite a now-dead “Pinnacle Management” webpage which says,

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<sup>67</sup> United Nations Development Program (1992), 1992 Human Development Report, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>68</sup> Reed, William J. et al., “The Double Pareto-Lognormal Distribution – A New Parametric Model for Size Distributions”. *Communications in Statistics – Theory and Methods* 33 (8): 1733–1753. 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Rooney, Paula, “Microsoft's CEO: 80–20 Rule Applies To Bugs, Not Just Features”, *ChannelWeb*. 3 October 2002. Web.

<sup>70</sup> Woodcock, Kathryn. *Safety Evaluation Techniques*. Toronto, ON: Ryerson University. 2010. p. 86.

It's well known [sic] by Project Managers that 20 percent of work (usually the first 10 percent and the last 10 percent) consume 80 percent of the time and resources. [...] You know 20 percent of your inventory on hand occupies 80 percent of your warehouse space. Similarly, 80 percent of your inventory line items (Stock Keeping Units or SKUs) come from 20 percent of your vendors. At the same time, it's likely [sic] that 80 percent of your revenues will be the result of sales made by 20 percent of your sales staff. And 20 percent of your workers will cause 80 percent of your problems, while another 20 percent of your personnel will deliver 80 percent of your entire production. The formula appears to work in both directions.<sup>71</sup>

there is *no* objective data which demonstrates all these proportions. Self-evidently, Pareto's Principle is often misused indeed. Business-wise, the wisest approach should be consider its "rule of thumb" application by keeping in mind that 80:20 is the standard ratio because 1) it was the first to be observed and commented and 2) it is the most *recurring* ratio. It is just a primary interpretazione of the Pareto theory and not a golden rule written on marble slates. Curiously enough, I will show later how this ratio is respected by the distribution of international literature titles in the US (chapter 1.3.3) and authors' probability of success (see Chapter 3).

Anyway, Bezos' long tail have demolished this rule. Why boosting profit margins by betting on bestsellers when you can sell one copy of *whatever* to *whoever*? The 80:20 rule wants to be applied where there is limited resource. For example: a bookshop keeps only a given number of titles (say ten thousands) and can not wreck its walls in order to offer an higher number (say one hundred thousands). Thus, the owner — taking for granted that she/he is not into the business just for the sake of wasting money — *must* keep an eye open on what people read: I am not suggesting that bookshops should sell only legal thrillers, *whodunit* and Harmony's. Whatever the target, including highbrow elitiste poetry clubs and avant-garde design bookstores, if one would like to maximize her/his sales one should give shelf-priority to "trendy" titles. The Internet offers *infinite* space and easy browsing instead:

There's only one way you can have unlimited shelf space: if that shelf space costs nothing. The near-zero —marginal costs of digital distribution (that is, the additional

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<sup>71</sup> [http://www.pinnacle.com/Articles/Pareto\\_Principle/pareto\\_principle.html](http://www.pinnacle.com/Articles/Pareto_Principle/pareto_principle.html)

cost of sending out another copy beyond the fixed costs of the required hardware with which to do it) allow us to be indiscriminate in what we use it for no gatekeepers are required to decide if something deserves global reach or not. (Anderson, *Free*, 8)

So far, the need for gatekeepers can not be ignored: as I will discuss in Chapter 1.3.4., things are rapidly changing, though.

### 1. 3. 3 Economic Censorship

Books fall into several categories: “Literature” is only one of them. There are gardening books, cookbooks, books about cars or trees or carp-fishing, books about cats or dogs or ducks — and so on. More academically, when I talk about international literature I am talking about — label-wise — *literary fiction and non-fiction* (see Poetry). Literary fiction and non-fiction, though, is slightly more than a fringe on the margin of the huge and complicate machine that produces a massive quantity of the aforementioned book-shaped commodities. On the edge of that fringe, literary translation is to be regarded as the narrowest one.

Because of the intertwined socio-cultural reasons exposed in Chapter 1.2, selling literature in translation in the U.S. is not easy. From a mere commercial point of view then, a big publisher is obliged to invest on books pushed by an attractive national subsidy or bestsellers. The former are not — euphemistically — always synonyms for quality, since they can be sponsored by their country for whatever the reason. The latter bring us back to the blockbuster trap. National best-sellers can *not* guarantee for the literary quality a given country can express. Such literary “miracles” as the ones occurred with W.G. Sebald or Roberto Bolaño’s reception in the English-speaking world constitute bright exceptions — or appropriate case-studies — rather than standards. In fact, as I have already said, this attitude encourages foreign writers to flatten their prose on lousy cultural clichés. What is quite striking is that editors themselves do not gloss over this approach. This is Giulia Bernabè, Foreign Rights Agent at Andrew Nurnberg Associates:

In general, apart from the great Italian classics, what British publishers are looking for in an Italian work of fiction is a sense of *italianità*, or Italian-ness, which might at times

even seem a little bit stereotypical and correspond to the preconceived ideas they already possess about Italy. It's also important that it should be comprehensible even to those who don't live in Italy, and that any references to real life not be too obscure – what someone born and raised in Italy might take for granted isn't necessarily so familiar to someone who lives in Great Britain. It's also vitally important that it have a commercial appeal that can be leveraged to market the title to sales channels and to readers.<sup>72</sup>

This translation-do-not-sell attitude triggers a consequent lack of investment on reviews and marketing: big publishers do not invest money on it because they assume *there is no money on it*: Esther Allen defines it as “economic censorship”<sup>73</sup>. Remember Pareto? In 2008, of the 340 literary translations published, the 80% was published by small presses (independent, non-profit or university presses). The — back then — Big 6 houses (Hachette, MacMillan, Penguin, Harper Collins, Random House and Simon Schuster) released only the 20%<sup>74</sup> of books in translation, which is a trend confirmed by the last decade figure (see Appendix). However, there is actually a big publisher that thinks international literature can be profitable: what is most surprising, its name is Amazon. This is how AmazonCrossing, the international literature spin-off made in Seattle, introduces itself:

Exciting new books are being written and published around the world every day, yet only a handful are translated for English-speaking audiences to enjoy. At Amazon.com, we're fortunate to have customers who have introduced us to outstanding works from other countries and cultures, and we want to share these books with our English-speaking customers. With this in mind, we're proud to announce AmazonCrossing, which will introduce readers to emerging and established authors from around the world with translations of foreign language books, making award-winning and bestselling books accessible to many readers for the first time.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> “Giulia Bernabè: Uno sguardo da Londra”. *Booksinitaly - L'editoria italiana nel mondo*, 15 December 2014. Web.

<sup>73</sup> Allen, Esther and Skrabec, Simona. “To Be Translated or Not to Be, PEN/IRL Report on the International Situation of Literary Translation”. Institut Ramon, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> The 80% vs. 20% figure curiously follows the Pareto Principle. I will thoroughly examine this law in the next subchapter.

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=1000653901>

As Amazon broke the Pareto Principle as far as traditional distribution is concerned, it did so with international literature sales too: AmazonCrossing, during a few years time span, has simply pulverized its competitors. As I will display in the Appendix, in 2014, AmazonCrossing published more translated titles that *any* other U.S. house. Curiously enough, on the top 10 list of the most prolific literature in translation publishers, Archipelago — the house which won more Best Translated Book Awards in the industry — does not even appear. According to Allen, having a headquarter in New York City is not the only difference between the Seattle-based company and its competitors:

[M]any of [AmazonCrossing] translation contracts are assigned via an online bidding system that encourages translators hungry for work to underbid one another. I'm thinking that's not the best way to produce a quality product. But once you start using words like "product" to discuss things like books [...], notions of quality may not figure as anything more than as a variable for calculating the ratio between cost-of-production and units-sold. Sure, books can get published that way, but are these books anyone who actually loves books will want to read?<sup>76</sup>

The need for gatekeepers can not be ignored because in a best-case scenario where readers can choose among a bigger-than-ever supply of cultural products, abundance may turn into an obstacle indeed. Despite the increasing ghettoization of literary criticism, still, the five-stars ratings offered by Goodreads<sup>77</sup> are not the main authorities speaking of "high" literature. These ratings are undoubtedly *really* useful to improve Amazon market penetration — e.g., customers who bought *The Goldfinch* also bought \*another endless novel title\* — but they do not tell anything to readers who want to engage with books which "can upend some beliefs, ways of thinking, assumptions" (Post, 5015). This kind of audience still seems to be influenced by traditional publishing *modus operandi* and word-of-mouth logic. In fact, traditional publishing has demonstrated capable of preserving something

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<sup>76</sup> Bernofsky, Susan. "An Across The Board Pay Cut For Penguin Random House's Translators in Spain". *Translationista - Dispatches from the World of Literary Translation*, 9 March 2015. Web.

<sup>77</sup> Amazon paid circa \$150,000,000 for Goodreads.  
(Kara Swisher. "Actually, Amazon Paid About \$150 Million for Goodreads". *Allthingsd*, 29 March 2013. Web.)

Amazon can not show off — namely, big-name authors. In order to fill this gap, Amazon Publishing — founded in 2009 — hired Larry Kirshbaum<sup>78</sup> in 2011, hoping that Kirshbaum would attract top authors quality-wise — and profit-wise overall. Kirshbaum failed. Or, rather, first-rate writers demonstrated their loyalty to their gatekeepers. Amazon Publishing, at least until this thesis is being written, is still labelled as a commercial fiction publishing.

However, so far, this paradox used to create a sort of healthy balance. That is, speaking of international literature, some publishers prefer to invest on profitable sales (see the Big 5 and Amazon), while some other (see Chapter 2) prefer to work exclusively on the quality of their books and print a minor quantity of titles. However: what if one of the most powerful companies in the world manages to assemble a high quality list?

It is too early to understand whether this question will remain unanswered or not. On March 2015, for example, AmazonCrossing published *Nowhere to Be Found*, a novel by Bae Suah — a Korean writer who also translated Sebald and Kafka. 108 pages, \$5.69/\$10.99. The reason why this news is worth-sharing is that Suah's novel could be one of the first works to be warmly welcomed by the “highbrow” critics, although its cover contains the Amazon logo. This situation can change how publishing people look at Bezos' literary supply. Whether this book helped stretching AmazonCrossing audience or not, it will be clearer in the next couple of years. One thing for sure, Goodreads is already providing favorable reactions<sup>79</sup>.

Speaking of which: postponing a more direct, 2.0 relationship with the North American readership has been/will always be an unforgivable mistake committed by traditional publishers. Keith Gessen — journalist, novelist, and co-editor of *n+1* — is definitely right when he highlights, in his “The War of the Words”, the big 5 sheer inadequacy regarding social media and essential marketing tools as Goodreads: “Publishers weren't very good at creating tech start-ups, but luckily Goodreads had

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<sup>78</sup> A veteran of the publishing business, former CEO at Warner Bros.

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/24961511-nowhere-to-be-found>

already done it. Maybe the digital future wouldn't be quite as scary as all that. Then, in March 2013 [...] Goodreads was bought by Amazon.”<sup>80</sup> Anyway, as I have already alluded, not everyone thinks that Amazon/Goodreads algorithm can compete with real life word-to-mouth. Post often claims that there is no serendipity on amazon.com. Thanks to the unique combination of a post-modern cultural fragmentation<sup>81</sup> and the digital revolution boosted by the long-tail concept, small presses with really specific publishing interests (say, Mediterranean noir or Scandinavian thrillers, rather than a formless editorial pudding) have now the chance to constantly interact with their readership. “For years, publishers have stuck to the viewpoint that market research, that identifying readers and fans is basically impossible [...] constantly reassuring themselves that there is no branding in the book business at the publisher level” (Post, Loc. 1135); nowadays, that excuse is nothing but nonsense. As Post goes on,

with social networking sites, and other Web 2.0 technologies, this actually is possible, and other industries are capitalizing on reaching their audience while book publishers fret about pirating ebooks and the death of newspaper book sections. [...] by knowing your audience (for real), there's a better chance that book culture could evolve into something that satisfies the desires of both groups. (*ibid.*)

He then claims that there is a detachment between publishing people and their audience: the CEO of a big publishing house has no idea who is buying her/his books — the chain of information is too long. Building a strong relationship between these two poles is vital for the business, especially for under-represented international literature. Small publishers are based - and that is legit - on a top-down dynamic: *we select, edit and print what is good for you*. Now, and in the next decade at least, only the presses that will manage to shake up this paternalistic approach and include in their strategy a bottom-up mindset will succeed. In other words, *we select, edit and print what is good for you - because you helped us to figure out our strategy*. So, publishers must learn from Amazon's exploit by

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<sup>80</sup> Gessen, Keith. “The War of the Words”. *Vanity Fair*, December 2014. Web.

<sup>81</sup> Although Chris Anderson — quite reasonably — argues that such thing as “cultural fragmentation” is always existed and the Internet has simply shown how it could be exploited.

enhancing the relationship with their audience. This situation obviously involves authors too: *de facto* they are already encouraged to familiarize with social media (Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr etcetera) in order to build their audience. Fittingly, it must be reminded that

You can tell pretty quickly whether someone is a natural at something like Twitter or not. If you feel you can deliver [on Twitter] with encouragement and help, that's great, but if not I don't think you need to be on it. I don't think it's good to say to an author: 'You have to be on Twitter.'<sup>82</sup>

Writing iconic books must be considered more important than obsessive tweeting.

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<sup>82</sup> Shaffi, Sarah. "Publishers stress authenticity is key to social media success". *The BookSeller*. 18 May 2015. Web.

## 2. TRANSLACTIVISM

Aim of this chapter is to talk about who is *actually* trying to spread international literature in the United States. In order to do so, I will provide the reader with a detailed list of translactivists (see Chapter 2.5). Through the first three subchapters though, I will deal with the main issues translactivists must face nowadays: from discoverability (see 2.1) to subsidization (2.2) and e-book marketing (2.3). Then, I will include a state-of-the-art interview with Chad Post (2.4).

### 2. 1 Discoverability & Bibliodiversity

Mike Shatzkin is a digital publishing guru — although he has been actively involved in publishing since 1962<sup>83</sup>. When Shatzkin speaks, people in the industry do listen. In a recent post on his personal website — March the 2nd, 2015 — he stated that “The publishers creating new management positions with the word ‘audience’ in the title would seem to be very much on the right track.”<sup>84</sup> As for publishing industry, *discoverability* is the new Big Thing indeed.

Discoverability, when applied to the publishing system, is the ability of a given title to be found. Talking about discoverability is shifting the responsibility from

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<sup>83</sup> This is how Shatzkin presents himself on his webpage:

Aside from his author credentials, he has been an editor, a production manager, a sales director, and has sold rights in many venues, including for Hollywood development. His early experience, including a stint as sales and marketing director for a distributor, was with lots of small publishers. Since he was engaged for several years by John Wiley starting in the mid-1980s, Mike has worked primarily with the world’s largest houses as clients or on behalf of clients.

(<http://www.idealogue.com/about-us/about-mike-shatzkin/>)

<sup>84</sup> Shatzkin, Mike. “Better book marketing in the future depends a bit on unlearning the best practices of the past”, *The Idea Logical Company*, 2 March 2015. Web.

readers to publishers: in fact readers do not have any troubles about “discovering” new books *per se*.<sup>85</sup> Andrew Rhomberg<sup>86</sup> proposes “five shades of discovery”<sup>87</sup>:

- Serendipitous Discovery: when discovery is made randomly, just like browsing a library shelf.
- Social Discovery: or word-of-mouth discovery, when books are recommended by friends (“in real life” and/or on Goodreads, Twitter, Facebook etcetera).
- Distributed Discovery: or multi-source discovery, since reading about the same book can happen on different sources as blogs, footnotes, webzines and so on.
- Data-driven Discovery: when discovery is entrusted to algorithms (Amazon’s one is still quite blunt, but subtler personalization systems will be sorted out).
- Incentivized Discovery: or the promotion/bargain/free-sample driven discovery, the kind of hybrid marketing strategies which were not feasible in the past.

But how can publishers make discover that *precise* title? Metadata is the answer. Metadata is the fuel of discoverability. It is, to put it in a nutshell, information about information: anything that can make a product more discoverable. Consequently, in the publishing world, metadata is “information about books”: the most basic example of metadata could be the title of a book. This is nothing new: Dewey’s Decimal Classification (since 1885) is nothing but a systematic cataloguing based on bibliographic metadata. Over the last twenty years though, there have been radical changes in this field. E-commerce and e-books are upgrading the idea of metadata.

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<sup>85</sup> “There is always plenty to read, and while we love those moments where we discover that magical new read that we hadn’t been looking for, we are amply entertained by what we find or stumble upon or are recommended by friends.”

(Andrew Rhomberg. “Discoverability, Not Discovery, Is Publishing’s Next Big Challenge”. *Digital Book World*, 6 January 2014. Web.)

<sup>86</sup> Andrew is the founder of Jellybooks Ltd., an online project which aims to make discover “hidden gems beyond the best seller and most popular lists.”

<sup>87</sup> Rhomberg, Andrew. “Five Shades of Book Discovery”. *Digital Book World*, 4 March 2013. Web.

People use search engines — Google overall — for *anything* they need, books included. Once the internet and mobile devices were fast enough, purchasing options were basically limitless and books (without the “e-”) experienced massive sales increase. Search engines are still the first stop for the majority of the consumers. E-books, though, have brought the metadata game to the next level:

As the market migrates from print to digital, metadata becomes an even more critical issue. Without metadata, ebooks are invisible. Because they are not present in our physical world, there is absolutely no chance that readers will bump into them serendipitously the way readers bump into print books—typically, by seeing other people reading them or catching sight of them on a bookstore table.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike books, e-books can be “opened” in order to extract the embedded metadata directly from the file. The metadata is part of the product, rather than something else. It can be extracted by unzipping the .epub<sup>89</sup> via a zip utility tool, for example: it is not rocket science. Usually .epubs present: “Subject (and BISAC code) / Language / Date of publication / Time this version was created / Description / Title / Author / e-ISBN”<sup>90</sup>.

Once metadata is extracted, it can be used by publishers as they need too. As I have already explained through chapter 1. 3. 2, due to the long tail consumers must not be considered as a single unit anymore. This new, digital readership is an ocean where a myriad of different creatures swim: metadata can help publishers by suggesting several specific baits. Over the next years, the ability to embrace this extreme ductility will be a key factor in digital publishing. Grasping and exploiting a certain range of descriptions embedded in e-books will be more than necessary in a book market where books are mainly found in the Internet.

For what concerns international literature discoverability in the U.S., I think Carter strikes a nerve: metadata is surely important but,

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<sup>88</sup> <http://book.pressbooks.com/chapter/metadata-laura-dawson>

<sup>89</sup> .epub is a free and open e-book standard formulated by the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF).

<sup>90</sup> Maher, Michael. “Book Metadata and Discoverability”. Scribenet, 1 October 2014. Web.

‘Community’ is, of course, the key word here. [...] It is no accident that one of Amazon’s first forays into publishing, launched in May 2010, was Amazon Crossing, the translation imprint that used customer feedback and ‘other data from Amazon sites around the world to identify exceptional books deserving a wider, global audience.’ Amazon had identified an extremely strong and under-served community: readers with an interest in books from other countries.<sup>91</sup>

I have shown in Chapter 2 how Amazon, for now, is considered nothing but a commercial publisher. *De facto*, such genres as, say, whodunit or DIY manuals find an ideal ecosystem in Amazon Publishing. Whodunit — for example — can rely on low prices; the popularity of this genre also triggers the creation of strong online communities. Literary fiction readership is different: it is more difficult to market this kind of books: “I couldn’t see Kindle readers flocking to download, say, a translation from Chinese just because it was free or priced at 1p; it would be much harder to achieve the visibility.”<sup>92</sup> Anyway, due to the Internet “revolution”, marketing is becoming increasingly intertwined with editorial branding — social media, overall, help small publishers to promote their editorial vision and engage new readers. Any book can be marketed; any publisher can strengthen its identity. Publishing “good” books is not enough anymore<sup>93</sup>, since good books — as bad ones — may disappear in this ocean of information. “Those books need to create a world to which readers want to belong. To specialize or not to specialize is one of the questions.”<sup>94</sup> These are precious days for international literature publishers, due to the opportunity of building fruitful interactions with their readers. Strong brands create active communities, active communities create buzz, buzz create sales. In terms of bibliodiversity<sup>95</sup>, this turns to be terrific.

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<sup>91</sup> Carter, Rebecca. “New Ways of Publishing Translations”. Publishing Perspectives, 15 January 2015. Web.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> See the case-study of the release of *Mansarda* by Kis — Chapter 1. 2.

<sup>94</sup> Carter, Rebecca. “New Ways of Publishing Translations”. Publishing Perspectives, 15 January 2015. Web.

<sup>95</sup> And in terms of small, enthusiastic, international literature publishers.

According to the International Alliance of the Independent Publishers<sup>96</sup>, “Bibliodiversity is cultural diversity applied to the world of books”<sup>97</sup>. The mere *quantity* propelled by the big publishers is not enough to foster bibliodiversity. Bibliodiversity is not only measurable with numbers; it is also affected by the *quality* of what publishers print. Of course, distribution is the main difference between the big 5 and the small presses (See Chapter 1. 3. 2). However, Chad W. Post fittingly points out that small publishers (independent and university presses) have something conglomerates can only dream of: *freedom*. To put it less emphatically, small houses can be proud of a certain degree of editorial independence: they operate on another scale, one where there is not the same pressure to reach record sales goals.

They have a narrower crew, a shorter list and, consequently their advances, marketing budgets and expectations are milder: “As a result, overall sales levels tend to be lower at an indie press... except when it come to literature in translation.” (Post, Loc. 781). The reasonable amount of operating expenses leads new publishers to start up with feasible business models “premised on sales in the 2000-5000 range” (Post, Loc. 1749), instead of recurring to the so-called blockbuster trap I have introduced in Chapter 1. 2. 2. However, there is always somebody ready to squirt some ink in the already opaque literature-in-translation sea, by claiming that what people most want to read — in translation — are other people’s best-selling literature. Well, this is rather untrue. As Post extensively argues in *The Tree Percent Problem*, small presses are publishing ten times the translated

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<sup>96</sup> In order to define the Alliance I will quote its own “International Declaration Of Independent Publishers 2014, To Promote And Strengthen Bibliodiversity Together”:

The International Alliance of independent publishers is a non-profit association created in 2002. As a solidarity network, organized in 6 linguistic networks (English-speaking, Arabic-speaking, French-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Portuguese-speaking, and Farsi-speaking), the Alliance represents more than 400 publishing houses in the world. The Alliance organizes international conferences and carries out advocacy work to foster independence. It also offers support to international publishing projects, which may take the form of assistance with translation or co-publishing. It develops an on-line resources center dedicated to issues of international independent publishing (and particularly to digital publishing through the Digital Lab).

<sup>97</sup> source: “International Declaration Of Independent Publishers 2014, To Promote And Strengthen Bibliodiversity Together.”

books that conglomerates are, and “these books frequently were not best-sellers in their original language” (Post, Loc. 579). And this is good for bibliodiversity. However, do these publishers *really* survive thanks to the “2K-5K range”?

## 2. 2 Money

“In the main, translation publishing is subsidized publishing.”

(Van Lanen)

*Translactivists*’ fortitude must be pointed out. These publishers are running the risk of printing books which are often — mistakenly — considered as “‘serious,’ ‘European,’ ‘difficult,’ ‘dry,’ etc.” (Post, Loc. 5044). This is actual research and must be acknowledged. Fortunately, independent — or just small — publishers can receive grants and donations. Defining what exactly is an independent publisher is not as easy as it seems. This is how The International Alliance of Independent Publishers defines an “independent” publisher:

one who is not in receipt of funds or support, financial or in-kind, from institutions such as political parties, religious organizations or universities, that in return have rights to make decisions on publishing. This definition does not prevent publishers from receiving grants, but their publishing program should be one that is not decided by the granting authority.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, indie publishers decide their editorial policy autonomously: they are not the megaphones for political parties, religions or companies. As I will show soon, this is one more field where Amazon is changing the rules of the game: once again, its disruptive strategy triggers ethical questions.

Traditionally, U.S. government entities such as NEA (the National Endowment for the Arts) and the New York State Council on the Arts have supported a multitude of artists and organizations. There are also foreign governments which subsidize rights payments and — more rarely — contribute to printing bills. These grants are

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<sup>98</sup> Source: “International Declaration Of Independent Publishers 2014, To Promote And Strengthen Bibliodiversity Together.”

nothing but necessary. According to Post though, protecting the nonprofit literary organizations in the U.S. is difficult because most of the people involved in literature work for profits. In the vast majority of the other arts disciplines, “99% of the people involved work for nonprofits. They value the nonprofit ideal and are committed to fundraising and the concept of donation-supported arts organizations.” (Post, Loc. 3588) Fortunately, the government demonstrates that Culture = Civilization and arts should be preserved from business pressures. “But books? I suspect that 95% of the people working in the industry are working for Bertelsmann or its equivalent.” (*Ibid.*). Moreover, arts are always in the first place as far as spending reviews are concerned. In 2011 Post denounced that “NYSCA is facing at least a 10% cut in funding, and Obama has recommended a 17% reduction in funding for the NEA.”<sup>99</sup> Anyway, there is a Seattle-based company that does not have any liquidity troubles.

Funding indeed is the umpteenth publishing aspect which can not be discussed by excluding Amazon. One just needs following this path: [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) Homepage > Amazon in the Community > Supporting the Writing Community in order to discover how many<sup>100</sup> no-profit publishers (and writing centers, literature awards, education programs and art festivals etcetera) are sustained by Amazon. According to the webpage header,

A love of reading and a profound appreciation for the people who create great books is part of our DNA at Amazon.com. Amazon.com offers grants for nonprofit author and publisher groups that share our obsession with fostering the creation, discussion, and publication of books.<sup>101</sup>

The help provided to literature in translation by Amazon is quite astonishing. The aforementioned list includes Archipelago Books, the Best Translated Book Awards, The Center for the Art of Translation, Open Letter, PEN American Center and Words

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<sup>99</sup> Post, Chad. “The Troubles of Advocating for Literary Publishing [Yes, Things Are That Bad]”. The Three Percent, 18 May 2011. Web.

<sup>100</sup> At May 2015 they are 51 (!), including 10 “previous recipients”.

<sup>101</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/b/ref=surl\\_authgive/?node=13786431](http://www.amazon.com/b/ref=surl_authgive/?node=13786431)

Without Borders<sup>102</sup>. This may seem strange in countries like Italy, where literary patronage is just a memory and *literati* often feel some sort of political pressure in their creative activity: receiving money from a commercial/publishing behemoth would be considered *treason* or something like that. What is striking, despite the American lobby-culture, is that someone feels the same embarrassment overseas. Denis Johnson (Melville House) decided to quit The Best Translated Book Award (organized by Open Letter) because of the Amazon “dirty” money involved. Furthermore, when *salon.com* tried to contact several nonprofits involved with the fundings, many of them declined to reply.

The PEN American Center refused to comment; Poets & Writers stopped responding to calls; a whole host of organizations (Archipelago, Lambda Literary, 826seattle, ArtandWriting.org, the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, Cooper Canyon Press, and the Kenyon Review, to name a few) never replied at all.<sup>103</sup>

Someone talked wittily about “the iceberg just rescued the Titanic”<sup>104</sup>. Actually, in an age when independent publishing lives day-by-day, it is rather ironic that this precious life support is provided by the same company which brought indie publishing to its knees. As for editorial policies, Jeffrey Lependorf — executive director at The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses — claims that “Amazon has put no restrictions on how grantees might or should speak about Amazon, and they have done tremendous due diligence in making their excellent funding decisions.”<sup>105</sup>

Whether it is fair or not, Amazon is making some friends in the book world by giving what they need on a daily basis: real money. These 20-25K dollars are accepted but not shown off — even though such sharp statements as “Like liberal Democrats taking Wall Street campaign contributions, the nonprofits don’t advertise

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<sup>102</sup> I will provide more details about these names in the last subchapter.

<sup>103</sup> Drumming, Neil. “Amazon’s last defenders? Literary nonprofits wrestle with ethics of taking Amazon grants”, *Salon*. 28 May 2014. Web.

<sup>104</sup> Leonard, Andrew. “The Iceberg Just Rescued the Titanic”. *Salon*. 6 August 2013. Web.

<sup>105</sup> Drumming, Neil. “Amazon’s last defenders? Literary nonprofits wrestle with ethics of taking Amazon grants”, *Salon*. 28 May 2014. Web.

the grants.”<sup>106</sup> are not completely true. For example, Archipelago signals that Amazon is among its donors. Curiously enough though, this is not “easy” information to get; what is note-worthy is that Amazon needs to highlight its grantees way more than viceversa.

## 2. 3 Digital Reality

From the bibliodiversity angle, I have shown how the U.S. book market is not marching on the right path — at least, as far as conglomerates are concerned. This seems to be a declining trend. Nevertheless, like any other technological developments that re-define how we used to perceive a given cultural field, e-books produce as many creative inputs and businesses as they destroy. Speaking of which, how literature in translation publishers are dealing with the e-book revolution? Before introducing the Frisch & Co. case study, I must provide the reader with a brief *excursus* about the e-book market.

As Keith Gessen sums up in “War of the words”, the Kindle was not “a revolutionary concept (it was merely ‘the iPod for books’) nor a revolutionary technology (Sony had already used e-ink in several readers) nor a particularly attractive item (with its thick plastic body [...] it resembled nothing so much as an early-80s PC).”<sup>107</sup> Anyway, by committing its diffusion to Amazon humongous marketing resources, Besos became the father of the e-book revolution. At December 2014, Amazon controls about two-thirds of the electronic book market.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Packer, George. “Cheap Words Amazon is good for customers. But is it good for books?”. *The New Yorker*, 17 February 2014. Web.

<sup>107</sup> Gessen, Keith. “The War of the Words”. *Vanity Fair*, December 2014. Web.

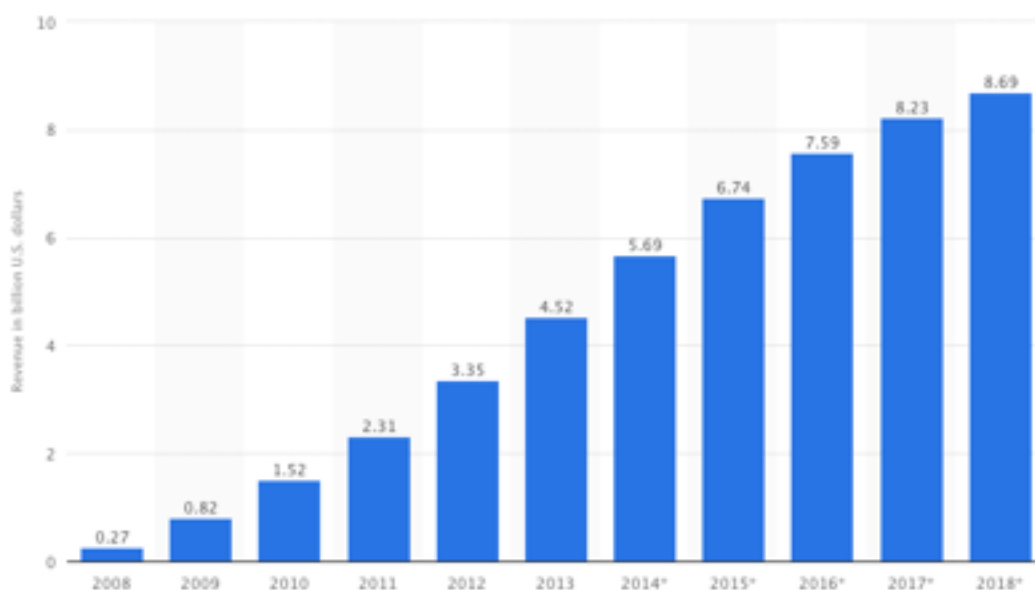
<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

Here comes some data-history: according to Statista<sup>109</sup> in the last seven years revenues from e-book sales have radically increased. As the graph shows, in 2013 the total e-book sales revenue is 2008's one per *seventeen* times. That is, revenues skyrocketed from \$ 274 million to \$ 4.52 billion circa. Speaking of unit sales, sales increased from 10.03 million e-books sold in 2008 to 457.09 million units in 2012. Apparently, until 2012 at least, supply and demand have been going hand in hand:

#### Revenue from e-book sales in the United States from 2008 to 2018 (in billion U.S. dollars)

The timeline presents data on e-book sales revenue generated in the United States from 2008 to 2013 as well as a forecast until 2018. PwC expects the revenue will grow from 2.31 billion in 2011 to 8.69 billion in 2018.

Show more ▾



Source: © Statista 2015

<sup>109</sup> “Statista Inc. is one of the leading statistics companies on the internet. With a team of over 80 statisticians, database experts, analysts, and editors, Statista provides users with an innovative and intuitive tool for researching quantitative data, statistics and related information.” To name a few strategic and media partners: the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4 A's), Mashable.com, Business Insider, and Forbes. (Source: <http://www.statista.com/aboutus/>)

That being said, Statista's projections for the next five years must not be considered as an oracular prophecy, since it is now widely debated how e-book sales are experiencing a flattening. Basically, the thing about e-books is that since the AAP<sup>110</sup> does not provide its sales reports to the public, incontrovertible data about (e-)books sales are impossible to come by. Nothing suggests that the situation will be different in 2018, both for this graph and AAP's data secrecy.

However, Statista also shares some interesting information about readers' habits:

Despite the rise in e-book popularity, hard copy books were still the preferred choice for readers in 2014. Based on a survey, 46 percent of all respondents claimed to read only hard copy books, while only 6 percent of all respondents read only e-books. A total of 47 percent of all respondents read from both hard copy books and e-books<sup>111</sup>.

Unlike some publishers, the North American readership still acknowledges that if one looks for (content, translation and layout) *quality* one must *pay* for it. As Anderson points out in his *Free*,

The big difference between books and music is that for most people, the superior version is still the one based on atoms, not bits. For all their cost disadvantages, dead trees smeared into sheets still have excellent battery life, screen resolution, and portability, to say nothing about looking lovely on shelves. (Anderson, *Free*, 129)

"Free" is a label which makes the die-hard reader suspicious, rather than raise her/his attention. This criterion moves towards digital book market too. Anderson leads this business model to its extreme consequences indeed:

Abundant information wants to be free. Scarce information wants to be expensive. In this case we're using the marginal cost construction of —abundant and —scarce: Information that can be replicated and distributed at low marginal cost wants to be free; information with high marginal costs wants to be expensive. So you can read a copy of this book online (abundant, commodity information) for free, but if you want

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<sup>110</sup> The Association of American Publisher, namely the trade association which provides advocacy and communications on behalf of the industry.

<sup>111</sup> Interestingly enough, "The most common age for e-book readers in 2014 was between the ages of 18-29, making up 37 percent of all e-book readers."  
(<http://www.statista.com/statistics/190800/ebook-sales-revenue-forecast-for-the-us-market/>)  
This means that a paradigm is shifting: the readers of the future will be probably e-book readers and this business is in their hands.

me to fly to your city and prepare a custom talk on free as it applies to your business, I'll be happy to, but you're going to have to pay me for my (scarce) time. (Anderson, *Free*, 80)

Amazon's strategy regarding e-books is not *that* different: for example, in order to expand this research I had to purchase books which follow both definitions; both "abundant information" books such as bestsellers (e.g. *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* by the same Chris Anderson) or copyright-free classics, and "scarce information" books, namely more niche titles as *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*. My credit card demonstrates that the latter are more expensive than the former<sup>112</sup>.

Sometimes *free* is good though: free samples seem to be effective, for example. Traditional publishing is based on a mouth-to-mouth dynamics, therefore the more your product is discussed the more your sales will grow. As Tim O' Reilly — the founder of O'Reilly Media and creator of "open source" and "Web 2.0." notions — puts it, the enemy of the author is not piracy, but obscurity. Sometimes the most effective market penetration strategy can be a gift. I will consider one of the *many* cases — present-day music industry present a countless amount of them: Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* release. In 2008, at the dawn of the e-commerce revolution, Gaiman decided to promote his novel as a digital download for four weeks. For free. Despite several qualms about this idea of transaction — which can be quickly summed up in two major points: 1) the free copy would demolish "real-life" sales in bookstores and 2) one month is a short span of time in order to create audience's awareness — "[n]ot only did *American Gods* become a best seller, but sales of all of Gaiman's books in independent bookstores rose by 40 percent over the period the one title was available for free." (Anderson, *Free*, 158) I am talking about "free" because cutting down additional expenses could be the future solution for the small, independent publishing system — international literature publishers included. At least, this is what Frisch & Co. suggests.

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<sup>112</sup> At the start of June 2015, one can purchase *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* Kindle version for € 8,49, while *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe* costs € 16,74.

Frisch & Co. Electronic Books is a Berlin-based e-book company founded in 2012 by E. J. Van Lanen. It aims to publish contemporary international literature in English translation. First of all, instead of depending on a multifaceted range of intermediaries<sup>113</sup> by polling them periodically and reading tons of their pitches etcetera, Van Lanen started a partnership with well-established publishers of several countries around the world. Some examples: Suhrkamp Verlag (Germany), Editorial Anagrama (Spain), Edizioni Nottetempo (Italy), Companhia das Letras (Brazil), Atlas Contact (Netherlands).

What I eventually decided to do was to collect a group of these kinds of publishers in different countries and partner with them. Each year, we'll choose a few books from their respective lists to publish in English. Rather than treating their tips as a small subset of the larger group of tips I was receiving, I now think of these publishers as a variety of literary scout, or as publishers who, as a part of their normal publishing process, also throw off a kind of literary scouting product.<sup>114</sup>

Thanks to the Internet, by bypassing a lot of middlemen and relying on infinite shelf-space, publishers are now able to reach their readers more directly and offer them a wide range of titles. What it is not *obvious* is that selling *every* title is not easy. I have already discussed the importance of discoverability and metadata, though.

Secondly, it must be stressed that e-books have demolished *distribution* and *printing* costs: distribution is provided by e-commerce (no storage and shipping, no more returns) and printing cost is zero. This means that the initial cost assumed by Frisch & Co. is definitely lower and acquiring the rights for “foreign” books becomes way less risky. “Therefore, there is less need for them to receive a higher royalty rate to offset their initial outlays. Since the translation publisher can take a lower royalty, there is less of a need for the original publisher to ask for a large advance”<sup>115</sup>; the original publishers can be satisfied with a lower advance because he expects a

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<sup>113</sup> There are the institutional ones, the cultural ones, literary agents, magazine and newspapers and so on.

<sup>114</sup> Van Lanen, E. J. “Why I Publish Ebooks, Or The Future Of Literary Translation”. *Frisch & Co. News*, 20 May 2013. Web.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

higher royalty. Besides, the positive outcomes of this partnership do trickle down on original publishers too. Every year a certain number of their titles is translated into English; thus, these publishers appeal new authors and uplift their foreign right sales. Since e-books can be purchased on the Internet, publishers do not have to split the rights into several countries: once the publisher can reach its readership online, there is no more need of building a broad network of media contacts in those countries. “If publishers could form longer-term partnerships, ones that extended to multiple books, perhaps a less adversarial relationship could emerge.”<sup>116</sup> Van Lanen then spread this attitude towards translators.

In fact what is most interesting about Van Lanen’s idea of publishing business is the radical re-arrangement of the relationship between *publishers* and *translators*. Van Lanen introduces his idea by beginning with a couple of paradoxes: firstly, the opportunity of relying on subsidies have allowed translator rates to stay even, if still too low, “while simultaneously preventing translators from [...] the royalties and ensuring that there are a limited number of translation opportunities available.”<sup>117</sup> Secondly, “translator’s ‘high’ advance plays a role in making publishing these books [literature in translation], without support, financially difficult.”<sup>118</sup> Obviously Van Lanen here is not underrating the essential role played by translators within the publishing industry. He is simply pointing out that because of this issue many presses are “afraid” of publishing literature in translation:

Translation publishers are willing to pay an advance to translators if they can make sure that they would receive most of the profits, assuming there are any, later. And small publishers can continue, for the most part, to offer these advances because they have access to funding.<sup>119</sup>

Van Lanen is trying to reconsider subsidies: quite reasonably, he speaks as if subsidies ended tomorrow. He aims to transform them in something useful — not

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

necessary. The thing is, Van Lanen believes in a more equilibrate relationship between translators and publishers; more precisely, he aims to balance the risk between these two parts. Compromise is the key here. Publishers must be ready to propose higher royalties, while translators must be ready to waive standard advances. To put it in a nutshell, they must be ready to run a bigger risk. They will succeed or fail together, having decided together on which titles “bet” their money.

In my opinion, Van Lanen’s strategy works with young translators who are making the first moves in the publishing industry. They will be more ready to find an economic compromise in order to build their portfolio. It is likely that well-known or expert translators will continue to prefer good-ol’ advances. Speaking of the “old school” system, if a translator gets a given amount of money and the book she/he has translated sells two hundred copies, his salary will not change whatsoever. On the other hand, if the book she/he has translated becomes a best-seller, she/he will simply witness the success of her/his work and remain with the same amount of money. It is understood that this scenario is way more rare.

Now I will briefly digress about translators’ fees. Translation cost is among the reasons why a given publisher must think twice before investing on non-Anglophone literature. Translating is hard and takes time: time is money. Despite the usual secrecy of publishing, Chad Post and Tom Roberge are doing an amazing job with their podcast, often revealing some interesting “insider” information. Translation fees included. In “Translators, Rates, Money, and Unions”, namely the 91st episode of the Three Percent podcast, Post and Roberge host Alex Zucker — PEN Translation Committee co-chair and Czech translator — who shares with them and their audience his professional feel. So, how much is for translation?

Zucker says that the PEN America Translation Committee — which, as I will display later, provides essential resources for translators, publishers, critics and *translactivists* in general — introduced a model contract<sup>120</sup> on its website. This model contract can be read at [pen.org/model-contract](https://pen.org/model-contract): by presenting twelve

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<sup>120</sup> This contract is a project that originated back in 1981.

accurate clauses it manages to regulate several issues. For example, as for payment and copyright:

4. The Translator shall receive an advance of [X dollars] for the translation, payable as follows: The Translator shall receive [ X dollars] upon signature of this contract by both parties, and the remainder due shall be paid upon delivery of the completed translation.

9. Publisher agrees to register the Translation of the Work in the Translator's name and the Translator grants to Publisher for the full term of copyright and all renewals and extensions thereof the sole and exclusive right to reproduce, publish, and sell the translation in whole or in part throughout the world.<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, on PEN website there is also a set of FAQs including ““I’ve been asked by a publisher to do a translation. What sort of compensation should I ask for?”<sup>122</sup> Zucker says that the average rate reported by PEN members — to be a member one must have translated at least one book — is 13.5 cents a word. In order to better understand how a translator makes a living, Post proposes Zucker a concrete example — they finally agree to discuss the translation of an 80,000 words novel.

So, according to Zucker, “if I’m getting 15 cents a word and the novel’s 80,000 words, then I’m getting \$12,000, right? [...] 80,000 words is definitely going to take me at least six months.”<sup>123</sup> 80,000 words are between 250 and 300 pages. When Post asks Zucker how long does that usually take him doing it, he replies: “80,000 words is definitely going to take me at least six months. [...] Well, I’m talking about more or less a full-time.”<sup>124</sup> We are talking about a “more or less” full-time job which produces a \$2,000 salary. Sure, this is not a unpleasant sum — although, as Zucker then reminds his listeners, translating-the-book is not the only task demanded. There is editing too, at first with the editor; then with the copy editor; then with the

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<sup>121</sup> <http://www.pen.org/model-contract-literary-translations>

<sup>122</sup> <http://www.pen.org/conversation/transcript-three-percent-podcast-no-91-%E2%80%9Ctranslators-rates-money-and-unions%E2%80%9D>

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

proofreader. This extra-work is not included in his fee, although he is “one of the top Czech translators” in the U.S., according to his interviewers.

Going back to Frisch & Co., publishing e-books is not bed of roses, though. For example, it is true that you can publish e-books with reasonable expenses — being rights/translation/discovery costs partially absorbed by royalties — but editing costs are still there. In addition, mark-up is pretty low: “a portion of \$3 per book is not a big number”, therefore Frisch & Co. can not *grow*, expand and go big. Then, there is no well-established fieldwork about e-book marketing. It is an explorative situation, as I have hinted in Chapter 2.1. In the pre-digital era there were solid marketing methods like sending physical review copies and waiting for newspapers reviews, for example. Moreover, e-books demographics is not as clear as it may appear and finding *your* reader is not easy, since she/he is already bombarded with tons of titles on a daily basis. And last but not least, if the e-book market eventually keeps on growing — although it is already a concrete menace — bookshops will continue their decline. This would not be good for e-books neither, because the most important factor in publishing is the so-called *buzz* and booksellers have “always” been key *influencers*. Of course, this does not mean that the Internet will not be able to fully replace their function: apparently (and fortunately?) though, booksellers still seem more trustworthy than algorithms.

Despite all these difficulties, in order to conclude with a glimpse of hope, what is important to Van Lanen is

that ebooks will allow me to continue publishing literature in translation [...] Dedicating my publisher to ebook-only publishing has allowed me to create a structure that distributes both risk and success more equitably. And this is a model that any number of smaller and start-up publishers could take up.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> <http://frischand.co/34/why-i-publish-ebooks-or-the-future-of-literary-translation>

## 2. 4 An Interview With Chad Post

**One (of the many) things I have learnt by reading *The 3% Problem* is: to increase sales, you must increase your connection with readers. How do you think publishers should increase their interaction with readers? Publishing, as a business, seems to be exceptionally word-of-mouth (there is a funny italian word for it: *passaparola*) conditioned.**

**How are things going for Open Letter? How does Open Letter foster readers' curiosity towards international literature?**

I think part of this is accomplished simply by opening your press up to communication with readers. It can be via twitter or other social media, or, hopefully, in person at things like Book Con or even author events. It's almost more about openness to communicating with readers than anything else. Traditionally, publishers have kept readers as far away as possible, treating them as clients or customers, and only dealing with the major intermediaries (book review critics and booksellers). For a small press like Open Letter, we need to have loyal readers who talk us up and are willing to give our books a try. I think Three Percent is our greatest asset in this, and I think it's going OK? I'm a bad judge of this, because until we win a bunch of awards and have a book sell 10,000 copies, I'm always going to feel like we're letting our authors down.

**This is more curiosity rather than academic analysis: since awards are so important — I am also talking about money — do you think they always manage to reach some sort of objectivity and merit?**

To some degree. In the spring class that I teach, I have the students read eight contemporary translations and then debate which one deserves to win their class prize for "Best Translation." They have to come to a consensus and explain all the motivations going into their choice. This is wonderful for teaching because we can

get into social issues—underrepresented genders and languages—the task of the translator, how you judge a book when you’re reading it in translation, whether an award should be for the book that will be discussed 100 years from now or if it should go to a book that people will love and enjoy, etc., etc. It’s really illuminating, and makes me wonder about the discussions behind closed doors for all sorts of other awards . . .

**Is "economic censorship" towards works in translation caused by American audience's lack of interest towards international lit or viceversa? (Some publishers “justify” their choices accusing their readers’ provinciality. Others say this is nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy fostered by the conglomerates.)**

I’m on the side of self-fulfilling prophecy. The big publishers can (and do) sell tons of copies of the translations they do . . . when they choose to invest in those translations. *The Harry Quebert Affair* is an interesting example. Penguin paid a million dollars for this, so they put a lot of marketing power behind it. According to media reports it was a “failure” (didn’t make the best-seller list), but I know from BookScan that it sold more than 20,000 units. It was maybe the only translation to sell that many copies last year. If readers truly were so provincial that they ignore international lit, that wouldn’t have happened. And this was a book that was panned by the critics. Marketing power makes all the difference, I guess. (If we had done this exact same book, we would’ve sold 800 copies and considered it a quasi-failure. Which is why I have a hard time putting all the blame for the lack of sales on readers. There are other power structures at work here.)

**I am sorry, what do you mean with “other power structures”?**

There’s a lot that could be unpacked there, but basically I mean money and attention. A big press like Penguin Random House has so many advantages in getting their book displayed in stores, reviewed in major outlets, discussed in various forums. They can literally “make” a book if they want to by spending a lot of money

and using their influence and size to ensure that a book is referenced in enough places and displayed in enough outlets to sell. I guess what I mean is that the book is never enough; there are other things that impact its sales that certain organizations have more control of than others.

**The vast majority of literature in translation is provided by the small presses (indie, nonprofit, university). How do you think these small-presses can enlarge their readership?**

That's the million dollar question. Perseverance is a key. How many years did it take Archipelago before the Knausgaard windfall? A dozen or more. They stuck around, built a reputation, found an audience. Not focusing exclusively on editorial can help as well. All of us small presses like to tout our literary taste, which is totally great and wonderful, but it doesn't help if that's at the expense of actually trying to engage with readers.

**By the way, are you keeping up with the whole discoverability/metadata thing? If so, how? I guess e-book retailers are more concerned with that.**

Sort of . . . I think "discoverability" is fun to think about (in one of my class sessions we look at all the GoodReads and BookLamp sites out there and discuss the idea of trying to "recommend the perfect book to the perfect reader at the perfect time" and how that works in an online, social media world), but I don't think that readers have any discoverability problems and that existing solutions (in the form of various websites and algorithms) are sort of ineffective.

**Anyway, the (in)famous 3% problem seems to be no more *that* serious: at least, this is what numbers suggest (see Post's Translation Database): do you think this increase is going to persist? If so, why?**

It will always be 3%, mostly because of how percentages work. More translations are coming out every year, but more books are being published every year as well. I don't think that's going to change in any radical way. Maybe one year it will be 4%! But what does that really matter, you know? Like, instead of trying to change this percentage point by percentage point, let's accept the situation and work at getting people to read and enjoy the books that *do* make it into English. Isn't that the real point anyway?

**Amazon Publishing is considered a commercial publisher. AmazonCrossing though — besides being extremely prolific — is timidly trying to raise the bar. In a recent episode of your podcast you discussed about *Nowhere to be Found* by Bae Suah, a book which could convince both critics and audience. What do you think will happen if AmazonCrossing finally manages to mix high *quality* and *quantity*?**

I don't know that they need to or want to. Gaby Page-Fort, an editor there, has great taste in literature, but she's also really good at identifying those books that aren't crap, but aren't written by Nobel candidates—the books that vast numbers of readers actually *want* to read. Literature has a lot of goals—real or implied—but one of them is to be a form of entertainment. I can't fault AmazonCrossing for going all in on finding those genre and mainstream books that a huge swath of readers get excited about. And Amazon does know how to market to these people in ways most publishers don't . . .

**As far as Amazon and money are concerned: I wonder what would happen if Italian small publishers made an agreement with Amazon. I mean, I would do that *immediately* for my magazine, since in our country you simply will not find someone ready to give some money to small independent projects. Being patronizing a delicate issue here though, it would be a complete mess and some people would get *really* mad about that. The point is: you — and other people — are “exploiting” Amazon's money in order to create something**

**extremely beautiful and necessary. Is there somebody who still spends his time by annoying you about the whole question?**

It does come up every once in a while, but I think most people are fine with the situation. (Even independent booksellers serving on the BTBA jury totally understand the situation and support us giving this money to translators and authors.) Back when it was announced, Dennis Loy Johnson of Melville House had a strong reaction and I assume he's still opposed, but I haven't talked to him in ages. Love some of the books they're publishing though.

## 2. 5 A Few Names

### 2. 5. 1 Publishers

In order to create this list, I chose to include those publishers which 1) have published three or more translated titles in 2014<sup>126</sup> and 2) are also based outside the U.S. borders, because — in my opinion — they boost international literature in the U.S. as well. Nevertheless, I will use the *italic* to differentiate them from those based in the United States.

**AmazonCrossing** is part of Amazon Publishing, namely Amazon.com's publishing unit launched in 2009. AmazonCrossing publishes international literature.

**Dalkey Archive** was founded in Chicago in 1984. It is a publisher of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism in Illinois in the United States, Dublin, and London, specializing in the publication or republication of lesser known, often avant-garde works.

**Seagull Books** is a small independent publishing house founded in Kolkata (Calcutta, India) in 1982 by Naveen Kishore, a theater practitioner. Since then it has expanded its interests — translations of word literature included.

**Europa Editions** was founded in 2005 by Sandro Ferri and Sandra Ozzola Ferri, who are also the owners and publishers of the Italian press, Edizioni E/O.

**Gallic Books** was founded by francophiles and former Random House colleagues Jane Aitken and Pilar Webb, with the aim of making the best French writing available to English-speaking readers.

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<sup>126</sup> Source: the Translation Database.

**Other Press** is New York based. Other Press publishes novels, short stories, poetry, and essays from America and around the world that represent literature at its best. Other Press nonfiction embraces history, current events, popular culture or memoir—explore how psychic, cultural, historical, and literary shifts.

**New Directions** is an independent book publishing company. It was founded in 1936 by James Laughlin, then a twenty-two-year-old Harvard sophomore who issued the first of the New Directions anthologies. New Directions publishes about 30 books annually.

**Atria** is part of Simon & Schuster. Atria is known for particular expertise in the areas of women's fiction, mystery/thriller, African-American fiction, memoir, popular culture, health and diet, cooking, popular science, psychology, self-help, and spirituality.

**Farrar, Straus and Giroux** (FSG) is an American book publishing company, founded in 1946 by Roger W. Straus, Jr. and John C. Farrar. Known primarily as Farrar, Straus in its first decade of existence, the company was renamed several times, including Farrar, Straus and Young and Farrar, Straus and Cudahy before gaining its current name in 1964, after hiring Robert Giroux from rival Harcourt, Brace.

**Archipelago** is a not-for-profit press devoted to publishing excellent translations of classic and contemporary world literature. In its first decade, Archipelago have brought out over ninety books from more than twenty-five languages.

**K A Nitz** is said to be based in “Wellington”, but no further info is provided. Honestly, its webpage is mysterious to say the least. K A Nitz focuses on “publishing translations of neglected European writers”.

**Minotaur** is an imprint of St. Martin Press (part of MacMillan, London) which prints mystery, suspense, and thrillers titles.

**Open Letter** is the University of Rochester's nonprofit, literary translation press. It publishes ten titles in translation each year and runs an online literary website called Three Percent. Open Letter searches for works that will become the classics of tomorrow.

**Knopf** is New York-based. It was founded by Alfred A. Knopf Sr. in 1915. It was acquired by Random House (now Penguin Random House) in 1960.

**Penguin** is a British publisher. It was founded in 1935 by Sir Allen Lane and V. K. Krishna Menon (Indian secretary of UK), and Allen's brothers, Richard and John, though Allen was the dominant figure in the company. Penguin Books is now an imprint of the worldwide Penguin Random House, an emerging conglomerate which was formed in 2013 by the merger of the two publishers. It is one of the largest English-language publishers, formerly known as the "Big 6", now known as the "Big Five".

**Restless Books** is based in New York City. Restless (founded in 2013) is committed to bringing out the best of international literature — fiction, journalism, memoirs, poetry, travel writing, illustrated books, and more.

**Hispabooks** is a Madrid-based publishing house specializing in contemporary Spanish fiction in English-language translation. It was founded in 2011 by Ana Pérez Galván and Gregorio Doval.

**Melville House** is an independent publisher located in Brooklyn, New York. It was founded in 2001 by sculptor Valerie Merians and fiction writer/journalist Dennis Johnson.

**New York Review Books** (NYRB) is the publishing house of The New York Review of Books. Its imprints are New York Review Books Classics, New York Review Books Collections, The New York Review Children's Collection and NYRB Lit.

**Yale University Press** is a university press associated with Yale University. It was founded in 1908 by George Parmly Day, and became an official department of Yale University in 1961, but remains financially and operationally autonomous.

**Zephyr Press** was founded in 1980 by Ed Hogan and two other editors from the Boston-based magazine, *Aspect*. It publishes literature from around the world, and seeks to foster understanding of other languages and literary traditions through the twin arts of poetry and literary translation.

***The American University in Cairo Press*** was founded in 1960. It is the leading English-language publishing house in the Middle East: its goals and purposes reflect and support the mission of The American University in Cairo in education, research, and cultural exchange, through professional publishing programs and international book selling services.

**Two Lines Press**, established in 2012, is an expansion of the TWO LINES anthology series, which was founded in 1994 to make international literature more accessible to English-speaking audiences and champion the unsung work of translators. Two Lines Press specializes in exceptional new writing and classics that have not previously been translated into English.

***And Other Stories*** is an independent British book publisher founded in 2009, notable for being the first UK publisher of literary fiction to make direct, advance subscriptions a major part of its business model as well as for its use of foreign language reading groups to choose the books that it publishes. The company operates from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

**Bloomsbury Publishing plc** is an independent, worldwide publishing house of fiction and non-fiction with its headquarters in the London Borough of Camden, and publishing offices in London, Oxford, New York, Sydney, and Delhi.

**Le French** translates exclusively from French. It publishes mysteries, thrillers, and short stories to new readers across the English-speaking world.

**Quercus Publishing Plc** is an independent publishing house, based in London. It was founded in 2004 by Mark Smith and Wayne Davies. Quercus is known for its lists in crime, its MacLehose Press imprint, its literary fiction titles and its Jo Fletcher Books imprint, which publishes science fiction, fantasy and horror.

**Syracuse University Press** is committed to serving scholars and scholarship, promoting diverse cultural and intellectual expression and preserving the history, literature, and culture of its region.

**Bloomsbury Qatar** is a Doha-based Qatar. It publishes fiction and non-fiction titles for adults and for children in addition to educational books for schools, academic books for universities and researchers, and information and reference titles.

**HarperCollins Publishers LLC** is one of the world's largest publishing companies and, alongside Hachette, Holtzbrinck/Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster, is part of the "Big Five" English-language publishing companies. Headquartered in New York City, the company is a subsidiary of News Corp.

**Houghton Mifflin Harcourt** is Boston-based educational and trade publisher. It publishes textbooks, instructional technology materials, assessments, reference works, and fiction and non-fiction for both young readers and adults.

**MacLehose Press** is devoted to the translation of literature and crime fiction into English, and to the publication of a very few outstanding writers in English.

**Frisch & Co. Electronic Books** is a Berlin-based ebook company founded in 2012. It focuses on publishing contemporary literature in English-language translation. In partnership with prestigious publishers from around the world, Frisch & Co. seeks to bring innovative and original writing into English for a worldwide audience.

**Glagoslav Publications** mission is to offer works that are uniquely Slavic in nature and facilitate a dialogue between East and West. It publishes contemporary fiction and non-fiction by authors from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to the English and Dutch readership.

**Haus Publishing** is a London-based press founded in 2002 by Barbara Schwepcke. It publishes biography, history and fiction. The North-American distribution is provided by University of Chicago Press.

**New Vessel Press** was founded in New York City in 2012 by Ross Ufberg and Michael Z. Wise. New Vessel is an independent publishing house specializing in the translation of foreign literature into English, both in print and digital.

**Pegasus** — according to its webpage, “Pegasus Elliot Mackenzie have been publishing high quality books from exciting authors for more than 15 years. [...] Our authors come from all around the globe and this diversity is reflected in the variety of titles on our lists.” That being said, I specify that I must include Pegasus just for research-sake, being Pegasus a vanity press<sup>127</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> More info here: <http://www.theindependentpublishingmagazine.com/2011/11/pegasus-elliott-mackenzie-reviewed.html>.

**Pushkin Press** was founded in 1997, and publishes novels, essays, memoirs, children's books—everything from timeless classics to the urgent and contemporary.

**Random House** is the largest general-interest trade book publisher in the world. It is part of Penguin Random House, which is owned by German media conglomerate Bertelsmann and global education and publishing company Pearson PLC. It is one of the largest English-language publishers, formerly known as the "Big 6", now known as the "Big Five".

**Seven Stories Press** was founded in 1995 in New York City. While most widely known for its books on politics, human rights, and social and economic justice, Seven Stories continues to champion literature, with a list encompassing both innovative debut novels and National Book Award–winning poetry collections, as well as prose and poetry translations from the French, Spanish, German, Swedish, Italian, Greek, Polish, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian, and Arabic.

**Talonbooks** was first established as a poetry magazine with an editorial collective based at Magee High School in Vancouver in 1963, which moved to UBC in 1965. By 1967, the magazine had published so many young writers, Talon decided to become a book publisher for its authors.

**Vintage Books** is a publishing imprint established in 1954 by Alfred A. Knopf. The company was purchased by Random House publishing in April 1960, and is currently a subdivision of Random House. In 1990, Vintage UK was set up in the United Kingdom.

**White Pine Press** is a non-profit literary publisher, established in 1973, which publishes poetry, fiction, essays, and literature in translation from around the world. White Pine Press has published Nobel Prize laureates William Golding, Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramon Jimenez, and Gabriela Mistral.

## 2. 5. 2 Magazines

**A Public Space** is an independent nonprofit magazine of literature and culture.

It collaborates with Graywolf Press, one of the literary translation publishers in the country, on A Public Space Books. A Public Space is also the publisher and partner of Monkey Business International, the in-translation offspring of the Tokyo-based magazine Monkey Business, which was founded in 2008 by Motoyuki Shibata.

**Absinthe: A Journal of World Literature in Translation** publishes foreign literature in English translation, with a particular focus on previously untranslated contemporary fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction by living authors. The magazine has its home in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan and is edited by graduate students in the Department, as well as by occasional guest editors.

**Asymptote** is an exciting new international journal dedicated to literary translation and bringing together in one place the best in contemporary writing. It is interested in encounters between languages and the consequences of these encounters. Though a translation may never fully replicate the original in effect (thus our name, “asymptote”: the dotted line on a graph that a mathematical function may tend towards but never reach), it is in itself an act of creation.

**Aufgabe** is Litmus Press’ annual journal of poetry, poetics and translation Litmus Press is a program of Ether Sea Projects, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit literature and arts organization. Dedicated to supporting innovative, cross-genre writing, Litmus Press publishes the work of translators, poets, and other writers, and organizes public events in their support.

**Banipal** magazine showcases contemporary Arab authors in English translation, from wherever they are writing and publishing. An independent magazine, founded 17 years ago, in 1998, by Margaret Obank and Iraqi author Samuel

Shimon, *Banipal*'s three issues a year present both established and emerging Arab writers through poems, short stories or excerpts of novels. The magazine features interviews with authors, publishers and translators, book reviews and photo-reports of literary events.

**Bookforum** was founded in 1994; the print magazine is published five times a year and the website is updated daily. "I love Bookforum, because it gives me intelligent long reviews, and, most importantly, of a range of books not covered in other journals or magazines. Sometimes I think that Bookforum, in its gently subversive way, is America's real Book Review." —James Wood.

**The Brooklyn Rail** was founded in October 2000. It is currently published monthly with a print circulation of 20,000 and an international online monthly readership of over 500,000; the *Brooklyn Rail* is committed to providing an independent forum for arts, culture, and politics throughout New York City and beyond.

**Cerise Press**, an international online journal based in the United States and France, was founded in 2009 by Sally Molini, Karen Rigby, and Fiona Sze-Lorrain with an aim to build cross-cultural bridges by featuring artists and writers in English and translations. The journal served as a gathering force where imagination, insight, and conversation express the evolving and shifting forms of human experience.

**Chtenia Journal** includes mainly Russian fiction in English translation, yet there is also poetry, non-fiction and photography. Each issue is centered on a chosen theme, and is published in a convenient and durable paperback book format.

**The Massachusetts Review** was founded in 1959 by a group of professors from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst College, Mount Holyoke, and Smith. The Massachusetts Review is a 200-page quarterly of fiction, poetry, essays, and the visual arts by both emerging talents and established authors, including

Pulitzer and Nobel prizewinners, special issues have covered women's rights, civil rights, and Caribbean, Canadian, and Latin American literatures.

**n+1** is a print and digital magazine of literature, culture, and politics published three times a year. *n+1* also post new online only work several times each week and publish books expanding on the interests of the magazine.

**Sampsonia Way** is an online magazine sponsored by City of Asylum/Pittsburgh celebrating literary free expression and supporting persecuted writers worldwide. Sampsonia Way is produced for City of Asylum/Pittsburgh by Silvia Duarte under a grant from the Queequeg Foundation.

**Short Fiction in Theory and Practice** is an interdisciplinary journal celebrating the current resurgence in short-story writing and research. Looking at short fiction from a practice-based perspective, it explores the poetics of short-story writing, adaptation, translation and the place of the short story in global culture.

**PEN America: A Journal for Writers and Readers** publishes fiction, poetry, memoir, and conversations. It champions international authors and invites them to contribute to provocative forums

**[sic]** is a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation focuses on theoretical, empirical and artistic research in the fields of culture, literature and literary translation. [sic] thus welcomes the submission of works that focus on various theoretical or empirical problems within the fields listed above, as well as original translations.

**World Literature Today** is the University of Oklahoma's bimonthly magazine of international literature and culture. It aims to serve the international, state, and university communities by achieving excellence as a literary publication, a sponsor of literary prizes, and a cultural center for students.

**The Literary Review** is an American literary magazine founded in 1957. The quarterly magazine is published internationally by Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey. In addition to the publication of short stories, poems, and essays, The Literary Review prides itself on publishing English translations of contemporary fiction from various countries around the world, often dedicating an entire issue to a single language (e.g. Japanese translations).

**The complete review** is a literary website founded in March 1999. It is best known for reviews of novels in English translation, in particular drawing attention to otherwise neglected contemporary works from around the world, but there are also reviews of classics, non-fiction, drama and poetry.

**Times Literary Supplement** is the only literary weekly – in fact the only journal – to offer comprehensive coverage not just of the latest and most important publications, in every subject, in several languages – but also current theatre, opera, exhibitions and film. TLS — on the front page from 1969 — is published in London by News UK, a subsidiary of News Corp.

### 2. 5. 3 Organizations

**ALTA** is a non-profit, independent arts membership association that provides resources, community, support, advocacy, and professional affiliation to its members: individual translators, academic institutions, presses, and others working in literary translation. It was co-founded by Rainer Schulte and A.Leslie Willson in 1978 at the University of Texas at Dallas, where it made its home until 2013 — ALTA is currently an independently run non-profit arts association located in Bloomington, IN and San Francisco, CA. Its mission is to support the work of literary translators, advance the art of literary translation, serve translators, and the students, teachers, publishers, and readers of literature in translation.

**The Bridge** is the first independent reading and discussion series in New York City devoted to literary translation. Founded in 2011 by editor Sal Robinson and translator Bill Martin, and associated with partners such as McNally Jackson Books, the Center for Fiction, and other engaged cultural institutions in New York City, the series aims to promote public awareness about the art of translation by serving as a regular venue for readings, by both well-established and emerging translators and authors, and for discussions on a range of translation-related issues.

**The Center for the Art of Translation** broadens cultural understanding through international literature and translation, with programs in publishing, teaching, and public events. The Center aims to make global voices and great literature accessible to readers and communities through our three programs: Two Lines Press, publishing international literature in translation; the Poetry Inside Out education program; and Two Voices, an event series spotlighting international writers and translators. The Center promotes translation and world writing as a vital bridge not just between languages, but between people. The Center was incorporated in 2000 to serve a diverse community of globally minded individuals--readers, translators, teachers, and students in the U.S. and worldwide--and to build an audience for international literature.

**PEN American Center** has been working to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to make it possible for everyone to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others. Together with our colleagues in the international PEN community, we have been bringing down barriers to free expression and reaching across borders to celebrate, through writing, our common humanity.

PEN American Center promotes international literature diffusion via two major assets<sup>128</sup>: **The PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature** showcases the work of writers from around the world in a cross-cultural celebration of the

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<sup>128</sup> PEN also promotes various Literary Awards (PEN confers over \$150,000 to writers in several fields) and other programs as The Free Expression Program, The Prison Writing Program, The Children's/YA Book Authors Committee, The PEN Writers' Fund.

written word (the Festival has involved such names as Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, Orhan Pamuk, Umberto Eco, Ian McEwan, and Mario Vargas Llosa). **The Translation Committee** advocates for literary translators, working to foster a wider understanding of their art and offering professional resources and support for translators, publishers, critics, and others with an interest in international literature.

**The Vermont Studio Center** was founded in 1984. Its location aims to foster creativity through community, collaboration, and quiet reflection supported by the unspoiled beauty of the northern Green Mountains. Over the last 30 years, VSC has grown to become the largest international artists' and writers' residency program in the United States. Its mission is to provide studio residencies in an inclusive, international community, honoring creative work as the communication of spirit through form.

**The Emerging Literary Translators' Network in America** provides support for beginning and early-career literary translators. It is based in the United States and is primarily concerned with issues specific to translators in this country, but it welcomes members from around the world. ELTNA offers an online forum where members can ask questions, seek advice, and share news, events, resources, and contacts with each other, with the aim of spreading knowledge and furthering our careers. ELTNA will be organizing events, including online webinars and literary salons, and occasional in-person events spread across the US. Eventually, ELTNA also plan to host mentorships that will pair a budding translator with an experienced industry professional.

**Words without Borders** was founded in 2003. It promotes cultural understanding through the translation, publication, and promotion of the finest contemporary international literature (its list includes Le Clézio, Hertha Müller, Sebald and many others). Words without Borders seek to connect international writers to the general public, to students and educators, and to print and other media and to serve as a

primary online location for a global literary conversation. They have published more than 2,000 pieces from 126 countries and 105 languages. In 2014, Words without Borders launched an education program that provides educators with resources and content to more readily incorporate contemporary international literature into their classes.

## 2. 5. 4 Awards

Here is the list of the main awards aimed to promote international literature in the U.S.:

**The Man Booker International Prize** — a hefty (£60,000) prize for a body of work. By the way, this year the prize has been peculiarly translation-friendly: the 80% of the finalists were writers of languages other than English. “What’s more, if a foreign-language writer wins the prize, s/he is invited to select one of her/his translators to receive a supplementary £15,000 award.”

**The National Translation Award** — an annual prize given by the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) to an exceptional translation of a book-length work published in the preceding calendar year. As of 2010 the prize is worth \$5,000. The award is usually given to translations of previously untranslated contemporary works or first-time translations of older works, but important re-translations have also been honored.

**The Best Translated Book Award** — an award launched by the weblog Three Percent in 2007, it aims to throw some light to the best works in translation (distinguishing Fiction and Poetry) published in the American book-market during the previous year. 2015’s edition was definitely inclined towards bibliodiversity: “Not only were there more eligible titles than ever, they came from more diverse sources. From different nations and languages, but also from different publishers around the world.”

### 3. A CASE STUDY: ROBERTO BOLAÑO IN THE UNITED STATES

#### 3. 1 New Directions

Before providing the reader with chronological information about Bolaño's progressive international diffusion, I will present a really brief introduction of Latin American literature diffusion in the United States.

Latin American literature began to spread in the U.S. in the 1930's. As Sarah Pollack points out, "since these early years, the decision to translate certain works and not others has corresponded to various historical, ideological, political, and economic factors as well as literary ones."<sup>129</sup> and I would add — "as it always happens". According to Pollack, the first translated titles were slightly more than cultural cliché reinforcements of Southern underdeveloped rurality and exotic *otherness*. Namely, regionalist works like *Martin Fierro*, *Marcela: A Mexican Love Story*, *Shadows in the Pampa etc.* Then, two different governmental policies aimed to boost North American interest towards their neighbours. Firstly, there was Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy in the Forties. The Knopfs — practically — led this rather quantity-driven campaign. In the Sixties and Seventies though, a more precise agenda emerged. In fact, in order to counteract the cultural outcomes of the Cuban revolution, the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR) was created. The CIAR "programmatically selected Latin American novels, subsidized their translation, found U.S. publishers, mobilized New York reviewers and critics, and produced its own magazine, *Review*."<sup>130</sup> Latin America boomed. Pollack reasonably proposes two main currents: to put it in a nutshell, one was more interested in re-

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<sup>129</sup> Pollack, Sarah. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States". *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3. 2009.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

defining the existing “linguistic, narratological and metaphysical assumptions”<sup>131</sup> (see Borges, Cortazar, Cabrera Infante etc.), the other aimed at building a sort of Latin America’s mythical foundation according to high-modernist techniques (see Garcia Marquez, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa etc.). Although both currents present high literary standards, the latter was definitely more successful among North American readers. Because of their superior readability, these books have shaped for decades the stamp of the Latin American *alma*. The most representative example is easy to choose: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This book (1970) was the first to be sponsored by the CIAR. For almost forty years, any South American literary effort has been implicitly compared to magical realism and its gospel, that is Marquez’s masterpiece. Angel Rama<sup>132</sup> — here quoted and translated by Pollack — suggests that from an economic point of view,

fixed within the consumer market, a value tends to remain inalterable for a fairly long period of time (depending on the society’s structure) and to absorb a maximum number of buyers, in detriment to those possible new ones. A series of tested failures or the violent emergence of an extraordinary novelty is necessary to displace it.<sup>133</sup>

Thirty-seven years after the magical realism boom, that novelty came.

Before spreading in the United States, Bolañomania was already widely distributed in the Spanish-speaking world. It all began in its capital of letters, Barcelona. After being published by small presses<sup>134</sup>, *La literatura nazi en America* was edited by Seix Barral in 1996: subsequently, thanks to Jorge Herralde’s flair,

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Rama was a well-known Uruguayan academic and literary critic.

<sup>133</sup> Rama, Angel. “El boom en perspectiva.” *La novela latinoamericana 1920-1980*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1982. 235-93. In Sarah Pollack. “Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* in the United States”. *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3. 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Small presses such as Fundacion colegio del Rey, Ayuntamiento de Toledo and Sociedad Guipuzcoana. (Herralde, 44-45).

Anagrama became Bolaño's main publisher<sup>135</sup>. Being these publishers — Seix Barral and Anagrama — active in Latin American book-market too, these books' widespread diffusion was due to come. 1998 is the turning point: thanks to the publication of *Los Detectives Salvajes*, Bolaño won both the Herralde and the Romulo Gallegos prizes, two of the most prestigious Spanish awards for a not published novel. Once *Los Detectives Salvajes* achieved this international recognition, his author was engaged in ten non-Spanish-speaking countries for his works: U.S. excluded.

When he was still alive, Bolaño's only works in English were short-stories published in *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, *Tin House* and *Bomb*. Then Bolaño died in 2003, the same year of his first English publication, *By Night in Chile*. Fortunately, by having interviewed Euan Cameron — an experienced consultant editor and translator, who, in a nutshell, brought Bolaño's books in English — I can provide the reader with an accurate picture of Bolaño's big-bang in the Anglophone hemisphere. In 2001 Cameron happened to be working for Harvill; one day he stumbled into Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile*. He was deeply impressed by its mournful, heartfelt tone and by its boldness (since the novel presents only two long paragraphs). Then, after having read *Los Detectives Salvajes*, he understood Bolaño was an author he could not ignore. The problem was: what to publish first? Due to its size, starting with the *Detectives* was considered too risky and expensive. Harvill therefore decided to acquire *Nocturno de Chile* and *Estrella Distante*, namely two shorter novels — both of them set in Chile — hoping to build a reputation for Bolaño.

Although Bielsa, by quoting an enthusiast review by Ben Richards in *The Guardian*<sup>136</sup>, seems to imply a favorable reception in the U.K., Chris Andrews — the first to translate Bolaño in English and a key figure as far as this research is concerned — claims that

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<sup>135</sup> In *Para Bolaño*, Herralde writes that he decided to sign Bolaño after having read the manuscript of *Estrella Distante*. Herralde and Bolaño became also close friends until the writer's death.

<sup>136</sup> Richards, Ben. "The underside of the dump". *The Guardian*. 22 February, 2003. Web.

When the first couple of English translations, *By Night in Chile* and *Distant Star*, came out in England, they weren't published in America straight away. Those books didn't go very well at all — they didn't sell very well — although they got good reviews; there wasn't much interest.<sup>137</sup>

Nevertheless, Harvill's long-term strategy began to pay off — paradoxically — in the U.S. thanks to *Last Evenings on the Earth*. In fact in 2003 Harvill sold the U.S. rights to New Directions<sup>138</sup> that, after having published *By Night in Chile* and *Distant Star*, insisted on publishing this collection of short-stories selected from *Putas Asesinas* and *Llamadas Telefónicas*.

Being acquired by Random House in 2004 though, Harvill editorial offer had to be pruned; due to this reason — and due to the first Bolaño's low sales — Random House decided to postpone the hypothetical purchase of *The Savage Detectives*. It was not a smart move, since after two years of waiting Anagrama lost patience and sold the *The Savage Detectives* and 2666 English rights to Farrar Straus Giroux<sup>139</sup> in the U.S. Barbara Epler — New Directions — talks about this turning point in an interview with the *New Yorker*:

By the spring of 2006, Bolaño's rights were represented by Agencia Literaria Carmen Balcells, and I was asking and asking them about the offer we'd made for *The Savage Detectives* and getting no reply. My heart sank when they e-mailed to say, "We're coming to New York and want to take you out to dinner." I knew they must be shopping "The Savage Detectives." I went to supper, and considerably (by our standards) improved my offer. Finally one of the Balcells ladies put her hand on my arm and said, "The Estate wants a larger house for the big books." I was about to cry, and they knew we'd done everything we could for the author here, so they offered, if we were willing to take all the "small" books on, that we could. So we took everything we could get, everything that at that point we knew existed.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Heyward, Will. "Chris Andrews by Will Heyward". *Bomb Magazine*. 13 June, 2012. Web.

<sup>138</sup> New Directions's backlist is crowded with Latin American writers, including Cesar Aira, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar and Octavio Paz.

<sup>139</sup> As I have already shown in Chapter 2, Farrar Straus Giroux is part of the Macmillan group, one of the largest international publishing houses in the world.

<sup>140</sup> Davidson, Willing. "This Week in Fiction: The True Bolaño". *The New Yorker*, 13 January 2012.

In other words, a sum of thirteen books<sup>141</sup>. Then Farrar, Straus and Giroux — sustained by its economic power (see strong financial backing and massive distribution) — boosted Bolano's literary fame in the United States of America.

In terms of *The Savage Detectives*' sales, I must mention Amazon again. In May 2007, Amazon chose *The Savage Detectives* for its "Significant Seven" list, thus boosting the novel's sales. Quoting the *New York Times*, Pollack points out that Amazon was responsible for more than the 50% of all copies sold. Undoubtedly, critical acclaim was another ingredient of the Detectives' success. In order to close a parenthesis I opened at the beginning of this chapter, I will quote Ilan Stavans<sup>142</sup>: "Not since Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, turns 40 this year, [...] has a Latin American redrawn the map of world literature so emphatically as Roberto Bolaño". Obviously, there have been negative reviews too. Not everyone jumped on the band-wagon: Richard Eder claimed that the novel temporarily stops in the long middle section<sup>143</sup>, James Wood said that his favorite Bolaño remains *By Night in Chile*<sup>144</sup> and Alfred Hickling defined the passionate arguments of a Mexican post-avangarde crew as a "supremely indigestible account of [...] squabbles"<sup>145</sup>.

Anyway, in 2008, *The Savage Detectives* was included in *The New York Times*' list of "10 Best Books of 2007". The following year, 2666 repeated its performance. 2666's reviews though were almost unanimously enthusiastic (and this is an euphemism). Jonathan Lethem, for example, defined 2666 as "a landmark in what's possible for the novel as a form in our increasingly, and terrifyingly, post-national

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<sup>141</sup> At 2015.

<sup>142</sup> An *extremely* prolific Mexican-American essayist, translator, literary and cultural critic. He is also the publisher of Restless Books.

<sup>143</sup> Eder, Richard. "A Line Divides Art and Life. Erase It at Your Own Risk". *The New York Times*. 12 April 2007. Web.

<sup>144</sup> Wood, James. "The Visceral Realist". *The New York Times*. 15 April 2007. Web.

<sup>145</sup> Hickling, Alfred. "Off the Road". *The Guardian*. 19 July 2008. Web.

world”<sup>146</sup> Did the American readership agree with the critics? It would appear so: “according to its publisher Jonathan Galassi, the novel had sold over 100,000 copies by May 2009, only seven months after its publication”.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Lethem, Jonathan. “The Departed”. *The New York Times*. 12 November 2008. Web.

<sup>147</sup> Bielsa, Esperança. “Translation and the International Circulation of Literature. A Comparative Analysis of the Reception of Roberto Bolaño’s Work in Spanish and English”. *The Translator*: Volume 19, Number 2: 157-81. 2013. Web.

### 3. 2 Two Interviews

Before diving into the reasons *why* Bolano's case blasted the American publishing in the late 00's, I will present the reader two precious interviews. The first one — the shortest — is an interview with Euan Cameron. Cameron is nothing but the *key figure* in terms of Bolañomania in the Anglophone sphere. He is the first English-speaking editor who did bet on Bolano's books, by suggesting Christopher MacLehose — who was the president at Harvill press at that time — to buy *By Night in Chile* in 2001. Harvill sold the American rights to Barbara Epler — now president of New Directions. Epler then diffused *Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile* in the U. S.

The second interview involves Chris Andrews<sup>148</sup>, Bolano's first English translator.

According to *The Sidney Morning Herald*, "It could be argued that the Australian writer who has had the biggest effect on global literature in the 21st century is the relatively unknown but nevertheless excellent Sydney-based poet and translator Chris Andrews."<sup>149</sup> He has translated, so far, *The Secret of Evil*, *The Insufferable Gaucho*, *The Return*, *Monsieur Pain*, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, *Amulet*, *Distant Star*, *By Night in Chile*, *The Skating Rink*. His authority on Bolanian matter has been even amplified by his *Roberto Bolano's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*. *An Expanding Universe* is an organic collection of essay which focuses mainly on Bolano's stylistic features and recurrent themes. Its first chapter though — "The Anomalous Case of Roberto Bolaño" — deals with Bolano's reception in the United States. It has proved to be an essential tool research-wise. Last but not least, Bolaño even dedicated him *Police Rat*, a short story collected in *The Insufferable Gaucho*.

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<sup>148</sup> Andrews is an Australian translator (and poet). He is currently teaching at the University of Western Sydney.

<sup>149</sup> Day, Gregory. "The brilliance of Roberto Bolano unveiled by Andrews". *The Sidney Morning Herald*. 4 October 2014. Web.

### 3. 2. 1 An Interview With Euan Cameron

#### **How did you discover Bolaño's oeuvre?**

In 2001, I happened to be working for Harvill, then an independent house run by the inspirational CM, one of the few publishers to take foreign literature seriously in this country. One of my tasks was to read books submitted to us in Spanish.

Amid the piles on my desk, I happened one day upon Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile*, and was struck both by the melancholy, confessional tone of the dying priest's narrative, which reminded me of Camus's *La chute*, and by the sheer nerve of presenting an entire novel in just two immense paragraphs. Then I read *Los detectives salvajes*, which was a revelation. There was such originality, such daring in Bolaño's challenging, anarchic style. You couldn't help but be involved with his extraordinary characters, his marvelous cast of failed poets and writers, his dreamers, his disappointed lovers and literary detectives... The sheer force and versatility of his narrative, the juxtaposition of humour and nightmare, the unexplained crimes, the labyrinths, were both confrontational and thrilling. This was life as literature. It was a voice I felt one couldn't ignore...<sup>150</sup>

**According to Andrews, "Euan Cameron de Harvill me pidió diez páginas traducidas a título de prueba. Por alguna razón, el traductor no había podido hacer el trabajo y Harvill necesitaba un sustituto, y rápido, porque el libro ya estaba en el catálogo." Finally, you thought Andrews was the right choice. May I ask you why? Or, better perhaps, what were the features you were looking for?**

I don't think we had any particular translator in mind. Chris Andrews had been a reader for me at Harvill and it was obvious he had a very sound knowledge of

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<sup>150</sup> This is *not* Cameron's real answer: he suggested me reading a speech he made in 2009. This answer comes from that speech.

contemporary Latin American writing. He seemed the ideal choice to translate *By Night in Chile*.

**In her “Translation and the International Circulation of Literature - A Comparative Analysis of the Reception of Roberto Bolaño’s Work in Spanish and English”, Bielsa states that Bolaño’s “British reception can be situated within an intermediate position between the US and Europe. [...] British coverage is directly influenced by the US reception of Bolaño”. Do you agree? If so/not, why?**

This was not the case. The reverse was true, in fact, and we had published both *By Night in Chile* and *Distant Star* before the Americans were interested. (More of this in my article above.)

**Before *The Savage Detectives* and 2666 boom, Bolaño’s success in the English-speaking world has been triggered by a book which Bolaño — actually — did not write (*Last Evenings on Earth*). Can you explain this curiosity?**

No, the trigger was the simultaneous appearance of the articles/reviews in *New York Times* and the *TLS*. *Last Evenings on Earth* was of course written by Bolaño, even though that title was not used in Chile. It was the title we gave to our own selection of stories taken from *Llamadas telefónicas* and *Putas asesinas*. We did this by arrangement with Anagrama.

**Such a dual (critics/audience) success as Bolaño’s in the English-speaking world is an extremely rare phenomenon. Is it possible to “catch a lightning twice”? Chad Post says there is a “publishers-are-sheep” problem: “publishers love imitations more than their audience does. [...] Readers like similarities, not necessarily repetitions. Publishers like sure things”. Do you agree with**

**him? The jump-on-the-bandwagon phenomenon seems to produce pale copycats rather than original voices.**

As a former publisher I would broadly agree with this view.

**Thanks to the efforts made by an Australian translator arrived in London from Chile, Bolaño's books are available to all the English-speakers worldwide. I think this seems to be quite a good advertisement as for international literature' diffusion. Nevertheless, both British and American publishing systems are rather isolated. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this cultural insularity?**

First of all, it was Harvill's efforts, not solely Chris Andrews'. Secondly, it's not so much 'cultural insularity' as the fact that any British or US publisher tends to consider other English-language books (eg. Those from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India etc) before commissioning foreign translations.

**Is (this is how Esther Allen defines it) "economic censorship" towards works in translation caused by American audience's lack of interest towards international lit or viceversa? (Some publishers "justify" their choices accusing their readers' provinciality. Others say this is nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy fostered by the conglomerates.)**

The reasons given to the last question apply here. If you are, for example, a publisher in Denmark or Italy, you usually need to find 'foreign' books to fill your list every year. British and American publishers already have so much pressure on their lists from English-language books from around the world that it has to be a book of unusual quality that gets translated.

**Anyway, the (in)famous 3% problem seems to be no more that serious: at least, this is what numbers suggest (see Post's Translation Database): do you think this increase is going to persist? If so, why?**

I imagine it will continue for the reasons given above.

### 3. 2. 2 An Interview With Chris Andrews

**The first question is a sort of light warmup, before we dive into a mere translation/publishing issues sort of discussion — which is, despite its importance as far as this thesis is concerned, something different than talking about books for its own sake. So: what is your favorite Bolaño book (as a reader *and* as a translator, if they do not correspond)?**

I have *two* favourites: *Estrella distante* and *2666*.

**In your *An Expanding Universe* you thoroughly analyze Bolaño's *modus operandi* by focusing on the framework of his books. What strikes me the most is the depth you reach as far as *2666* is concerned. Curiously, you did not translate it — so you did not have the chance of practicing the translators' threefold reading you mention in the book. How did you manage to give such a detailed examination? Professional bias or "just" enthusiastic rereading?**

Just enthusiastic rereading. And I found that it was a classic in Calvino's sense: it kept yielding new discoveries. "The Part About the Crimes," in particular, is very cunningly constructed, but on a first reading it can seem chaotic.

**You came across *Los Detectives Salvajes* almost serendipitously in 2001. Did you realize you were reading something *big*, or did its American success in 2007 surprise you?**

Well, it was big already in Spain and Latin America, and for me it was a big, powerful impressive book, but I was surprised that it did so well in the US, partly because of the centrifugal structure of the middle part. I guess I thought that a lot of readers would just be bewildered by that, because the trails keep petering out, but apparently not, which is great!

**In fact one of the stylistic features you mention in *An Expanding Universe* is Bolaño's ability to — to put it in a nutshell — deflate narrative tension. This is not a creative-writing-class procedure indeed (although DFW's die-hard fans may not agree with that). Can this curiosity towards Bolano's prose style be labelled as literary exoticism? In this way, his success could be considered as a great point against who is still skeptical about literature in translation.**

Yes, I think there was a kind of healthy literary exoticism at work: an interest in other modes of story-telling, modes that grip the reader firmly while the narrative seems to drift. I don't have a panoramic knowledge of contemporary North American fiction, but I don't think there was anything out there quite like that.

**And this brings us to the first of your seven explanations: *Bolaño supplies a lack in North American fiction*. All the explanations you provide the reader with are *extremely* fitting. My feeling is that the American publishing/readership was waiting for The New Latin American Writer to fill the gap left by the Boom generation (Marquez etcetera). Do you agree? Too simplistic maybe?**

I agree: there was a gap. And it's interesting to speculate on why the McOndo writers (Volpi, Padilla, Fuguet) didn't fill it. Not exotic enough, not third-world enough, their fans might say. Not bold enough, not imaginative enough, not poetic enough, might reply the fans of Bolaño (including me). But as you say, the time was ripe.

**In 2010 you were asked by *The New Yorker* about the recent increase of works in translation in the U.S. and you replied that, despite the G.F.C., maybe “the very unusual case of Bolaño will have some kind of flow-on effect”. Five years have passed: did something happen?**

I think what has happened is that new small presses publishing translations have sprung up: I'm thinking of Deep Vellum, Two Lines Press, Open Letter, And Other Stories (in the UK), so I think there are more titles per year now, although many of these small-press books don't get much distribution. In the US, there is a network of literature-in-translation enthusiasts, and they follow these presses, as well as the older ones (New Directions, Dalkey Archive, FSG) with a fervour.

One obvious effect of the Bolaño phenomenon has been the use of quotes from his criticism in jacket copy: his comments have been used to recommend César Aira, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Andrés Neuman, Carmen Boullosa and others. This has some odd effects, seen from a Latin American point of view. In New York it seems natural to put Aira and Bolaño together, because they are both published by New Directions; in Buenos Aires or Santiago, it's not so natural, and those two authors have quite different sets of readers (with some overlap, of course).

**I can understand that feeling; it is rather weird to come across an article about Italian literature where Calvino, Eco, Ferrante, Levi seem to bubble all in the same melting pot. Anyway, how do you think these small-presses can enlarge their readership?**

I'm not sure. I don't think they advertise much, either in magazines or on the web. They rely a lot on online reviews and word of mouth, whether face-to-face or via social media. The various prizes for translated books can give them a boost, too: the Best Translated Book Award; the PEN Translation Awards ... (by the way, an interesting source of information and gossip from the translation community in the US is the Three Per Cent podcast: do you know it? <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/?s=tag&t=three-percent-podcast>).

**It is likely that without Chad Post and his *Three Percent* this whole thesis would not have been possible; the podcast is still uncharted territory though. The first episode I listened to last evening was about how expensive is traditional advertise indeed (!). Small publishers seems to be “doomed” to**

**mouth-to-mouth business. This brings us to the conclusion of the first chapter of *An Expanding Universe* — maybe the most intriguing one: “Uncertainty”. Reading it was quite daunting — although my suspicions have been confirmed: selling books will never be exact science. *Uncertainty* demonstrates that you just need a “perfect storm” - which is hardly predictable by definition.**

I think that’s right: the French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger has done very convincing work in this area, and his results can be a bit daunting for writers and publishers. But what I wanted to say at the end of *An Expanding Universe* is that an important part of a book’s effect remains invisible and unmeasurable. One of my favorite poets is a New Zealander called Geoff Cochrane. In one of his poems he writes “I’m not even read in Sydney, let alone New York.” Well, I’m reading him in Sydney, but unless I write him a fan letter (which I may do some day), he’s not going to know that. The considerable effect that his writing has had on me is pretty much invisible, but it’s real. Maybe social media is changing this already. Maybe if I wasn’t a dinosaur, I’d be tweeting about Geoff Cochrane. But I quite like the idea that when you publish something, it sets off on a journey of its own, and you can’t follow it.

### 3. 3 A Two-fold Disruption

In terms of Bolaño's disruptive effect in the U.S., I will move from Chris Andrews' seven points because of their punctuality and brilliance. Nevertheless, having thoroughly deconstructed them by expanding or contracting some of the observations made by Andrews, I will propose two main reasons why Bolaño's books succeeded in the United States.

#### 3. 3. 1 A Rule Breaker Author

As Andrews argues in *An Expanding Universe*,

Bourdieu argues that artistic and intellectual fields contain a large but finite number of positions, defined by oppositions that go without saying. Every now and then, however, those oppositions are upset by a heretic who rejects both terms of what is taken to be an inescapable either/or alternative. (Andrews, Loc. 303)

As a matter of fact, Bolaño has continuously struggled for creating his *own* space amid the pre-configured settings he had to deal with. Both as poet and novelist, his *credo* is an autarchic/independent one. When he was in Mexico in the Seventies, he broke with both *poesía campesina* and Octavio Paz (and his followers') poetry. In fact, he and his close friend Mario Santiago<sup>151</sup> led the infrarealista movement — a sort of Mexican Dada which aimed to invent a new position in the national literary landscape. In a nutshell, they were passionate, erudite party spoilers. As a novelist, everything Bolaño wrote and said was aimed at detaching his figure from the paternalistic embrace of the Boom generation. His attitude was not only driven by unmediated rebellious inputs: he was perfectly aware that magical realism was dead and being linked to them would have been reductive to say the least<sup>152</sup>. As Andrews

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<sup>151</sup> While Bolaño is Arturo Belano in *The Savage Detectives*, Santiago is Ulises Lima.

<sup>152</sup> Clearly something happened between Bolaño and the Boom writers. The so-called McOndo generation tried to breakthrough during the Nineties but failed. The reasons behind this missed opportunity are finely displayed by Pollack's article (see *Bibliography*).

perfectly sums up, “his literary habits had been formed by the practice of dissent, and symbolic conflict was his element” (Andrews, Loc. 354).

According to Andrews, the strongest explanation of Bolaño’s success in the United States is his *exceptionality*<sup>153</sup> in terms of literary achievement. As far as my opinion is concerned though, I would say that this factor — provided that it is the most important one — can be applied not exclusively to the American readership (and critical apparatus). More precisely, Bolaño’s prose style can be judged as disruptive in the U.S. because of its rule-breaking attitude. As Lethem announced on the *The New York Times*, “Bolaño seems to make sport of violating nearly all of the foremost writing-school rules, against dream sequences, against mirrors as symbols, against barely disguised nods to his acquaintances, and so on”<sup>154</sup>. Also Barbara Epler commented this literary disruption on a similar tune, arguing that “We [the American readers] are tired of dull fiction and sick of trick ponies. One reason why he has loomed so large in the USA is his absolute polarity from every aspect of the boring creative writing world.” (Andrews, Loc. 695) So, both these authoritative voices consider Bolaño’s work as the antidote to the creative-writing-school author, a sort of professional novelist proposed by the American academic system. In Chris Andrews words,

Perhaps the indigenous stock of the United States is so abundantly supplied with highly professional fiction that Bolaño’s defiantly messy and inconclusive books have served, for some younger writers, not so much as models to imitate but as examples of sheer boldness, encouraging them to take new risks of their own. (Andrews, Loc. 692)

It is almost as American writers (and readers) were relieved by Bolaño’s “unprofessionalism”<sup>155</sup>, after years of “fiction that buys the rules and aims for high grades” (Andrews, Loc. 698) Discussing the importance of *The Savage Detectives*,

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<sup>153</sup> Bolaño brings together “poetic figuration and narrative tension, elegiac themes and energizing effect, literariness and distance from literature” (Andrews, Loc. 775).

<sup>154</sup> Lethem, Jonathan. “The Departed”. *The New York Times*. 12 November 2008. Web.

<sup>155</sup> Bolaño — especially in the last years — was utterly professional: here I am talking more about his prose style rather than his method.

Hallberg<sup>156</sup> argues that the American post-modern heritage seems to have produced an avant-garde which looks like “a painter stuck in a corner, surrounded by its own slow-drying handiwork. When an artist strikes out in search of the new, she dreams [...] of customs agents confiscating pallets of books deemed obscene.”<sup>157</sup> And yet, he asks the reader, “in a culture where dissonance and obscenity are the norm, how is the artist to provoke any reaction at all?”<sup>158</sup> Well, the American media coverage of Bolaño also tried to turn him into a consummate provocative rebel. Of course, he was not the calmest and mildest author around, but I will show soon how the U.S. literary world have presented Bolaño as some sort of rebellious, *maudit*, addicted author.

This mythical aura has been triggered by several biographical factors, such as his wandering youth, the years of sheer poverty, his imprisonment in Chile, his Infrarealist past, his sudden rise to fame and his gifted productivity. It must be specified though, how the Spanish-speaking world and the Anglophone one (I will obviously focus on the U.S.) built two different Bolaños. Actually, among Spanish-speaking *literati*, Bolaño has been identified more as the heroic writer who has always struggled despite literature’s — and, sadly, his own — gloomy destiny. On the one hand in fact, Spanish newspapers preferred to build a biographical narrative which reinforces Bolaño’s commitment as a reckless writer. *El Mundo*, *El Pais* and *La Vanguardia* focused on his total devotion to literature, his disdain for careerist writers and his poetic of marginality. On the other hand, at the dawn of his posthumous success, the North American media coverage began to describe the Chilean writer as some sort of drug-addicted beatnik. Apparently, it almost seems that Bolaño’s success in the U. S. needed a push by the “sex drug rock ’n’ roll”

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<sup>156</sup> Garth Risk Hallberg is contributing editor for *The Millions*. His stories and essays have appeared in several magazines, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *New York Magazine* and *Prairie Schooner*. His first novel, *City on Fire*, will be published by Knopf in Fall 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Risk Hallberg, Garth. “Why Bolaño Matters”. *The Millions*, 22, August 2007. Web.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

stereotype<sup>159</sup>; titles/headlines like “Meet the Kurt Cobain of Latin American literature”<sup>160</sup> make it clear enough. What is striking is that not just readers were attracted by this rather stereotypical narrative. Even the most lucid reviewers fell in this trap. Jonathan Lethem for example — once again, in the same brilliant article on *The New York Times*, claimed that literature, according to Bolaño, “could meaningfully articulate the low truths he knew as a rebel, exile, addict”<sup>161</sup>. Which is not completely untrue: the point is, Bolaño was not an “addict”.

The inception of this distorted label have to be probably imputed to Natasha Wimmer’s introduction to *The Savage Detectives* (paperback edition), since it is the only source mentioned on the matter by Daniel Zalewski in his article on *The New Yorker*<sup>162</sup>. Since then, this rumor spread into the American media coverage for/of 2666, “and though the *New York Times Book Review* may be the most recent example, references can be found in sources from *The Buffalo News* to *Time* to *The Texas Observer* [...] and *The Millions*.”<sup>163</sup> It is the same *The Millions* which provided a verosimile explanation for this unpleasant *qui pro quo*<sup>164</sup>. It is likely that Wimmer was mislead by *Playa*, Bolaño’s fictional autobiographical portrait of an addict included in *Entre Parenthesis*. This is the intro of the short story: “I gave up heroin and went home and began the methadone treatment administered at the outpatient clinic and I didn’t have much else to do except get up each morning and watch TV and try to sleep at night, but I couldn’t.” (Bolaño, *Between Parenthesis*, 337) After the publication of Lethem’s article about 2666 on the prestigious *New York Times*,

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<sup>159</sup> This does not mean I agree with Bolaño’s German translator, who said that “the U.S. is a country of drug-addicts, and smoking marihuana all night long seems very interesting”. (Esperança Bielsa. “Translation and the International Circulation of Literature. A Comparative Analysis of the Reception of Roberto Bolaño’s Work in Spanish and English”. *The Translator*: Volume 19, Number 2: 157-81. 2013. Web.)

<sup>160</sup> Crimmins, Daniel. “Roberto Bolaño - The Savage Detectives. Meet the Kurt Cobain of Latin American literature”. *Paste*, 19 April, 2007. Web.

<sup>161</sup> Lethem, Jonathan. “The Departed”. *The New York Times*. 12 November 2008. Web.

<sup>162</sup> Zalewski, Daniel. “Vagabonds”. *The New Yorker*. 26 March 2007, Web.

<sup>163</sup> Risk Hallberg, Garth. “Bolaño Not a Heroin Addict, Sources Say”. *The Millions*, 30 November, 2008. Web.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

this rumor was denied by Bolaño's widow — Carolina Lopez — and the writer's new agent Andrew Wylie in a letter published in the same newspaper. Here is the letter:

I was delighted to see Jonathan Lethem's review of "2666" (Nov. 9). However, one widely published but inaccurate detail seems to have made its way into the piece, and Roberto Bolaño's widow, Carolina López, and I would like to clarify that Roberto never suffered any form of addiction to drugs, including heroin. This longstanding misunderstanding seems to have been conjured from the coincidence of Roberto's illness and the subject matter of his story "The Beach." Though written in the first person, that story is truly a work of fiction.<sup>165</sup>

To sum up: even though — especially in the last years — Bolaño was addicted to herbal tea with honey and cigarettes, another image of the author spread in the United States. The image of a heroin addicted recovered thanks to literature and his lovely children: despite its falsity, it definitely worked.

Andrews fittingly proposes an evergreen question, that is: does the myth distract from the actual books? Undoubtedly, whether it is fair or not, the building of a myth can be used in order to draw a most intriguing personality. Bolaño's case does respect the script. After all, excluding that Bolaño himself could be amused by this short circuit would be wrong.

### 3. 3. 2 An American Author

"I think of him as a pan-American author, as an author of the western hemisphere"  
(Chris Andrews)

In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, Chris Andrews states that Bolaño "read very widely in Latin American literature generally, in North American literature (he was an admirer of Don DeLillo, for example), and in European literature."<sup>166</sup> Speaking of Don DeLillo admirers, Bolaño undoubtedly read David Foster Wallace too. In one of the short articles collected in *Between Parenthesis* — "All subjects

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<sup>165</sup> Wylie, Andrew. "Bolaño Studies". *The New York Times*. 5 December 2008. Web.

<sup>166</sup> Heyward, Will. "Chris Andrews by Will Heyward". *Bomb Magazine*. 13 June, 2012. Web.

with Fresan”, Bolaño jokes about the range of random topics he and his friend used to talk about, including “David Lynch and the prolixity of David Foster Wallace.” (Bolaño, *Between Parenthesis*, 186). Other United States-related topics they used to talk about there are “Philip K. Dick<sup>167</sup>, whom we both unreservedly admire. [...] The activities of some professors in the United States. [...] Chabon and Palahniuk, whom he likes and I don’t.” (*Ibid.*, 185-6) If one looks for American references in Bolaño’s articles she/he will find plenty of them. In *Between Parenthesis* he also writes about:

- Hunter S. Thompson’s *Hell Angels* and how Allen Ginsberg naively tried to to “ideologically redirect the cold-blooded gang” (*Ibid.*, 180);
- Short-stories writers: “read Chekhov and Raymond Carver. One of the two of them is the best short-story writer this century has produced.” (*Ibid.*, 450)
- Exile: “Melville, who was always leaving, didn’t experience [...] the chilliness of the word exile. Philip K. Dick knew better than anyone how to recognize the disturbances of exile. William Burroughs was the incarnation of every one of those disturbances.” (*Ibid.*, 68) There is more on Burroughs: “[he] was the affectless man, the shard of ice that never melts, the eye that never closes. [...] in Burroughs there’s no moral or ethical motive, only the description of a frozen abyss, the description of an endless process of corruption.” (*Ibid.*, 205)
- Ellroy’s autobiography: “The second and third parts, which describe Ellroy’s childhood and adolescence after his mother’s death, are the best things written in the literature of any language in the last thirty years.” (*Ibid.*, 290)
- Mark Twain<sup>168</sup>: “There’s a passage from the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that should be inscribed in golden letters on the wall of every bar (and school) in the

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<sup>167</sup> There is a whole article about Philip K. Dick. In “Philip K. Dick”, Bolaño compares Dick to several American writers — beware Bolaño’s famous provocations:

Dick is one of the ten best American writers of the twentieth century, which is saying a lot. [...] Dick is Thoreau plus the death of the American dream. [...] Dick is the one who, in *Ubik*, comes closest to capturing the human consciousness or fragments of consciousness in the context of their setting; the correspondence between the story he tells and its structure is more brilliant than similar experiments conducted by Pynchon or DeLillo. (*Ibid.*, 256)

<sup>168</sup> Bolaño wrote the introduction for a Spanish edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

world. This passage foreshadows half the complete works of Faulkner<sup>169</sup> and half the complete works of Hemingway, and it foreshadows especially what both of them, Faulkner and Hemingway, wanted to be”.

This illustrative list could go on for a few pages. I will just list the remaining names: Buster Keaton, Norman Mailer, Raymond Chandler, Woody Allen, Basquiat, Charles Bukowsky, Henry James, Coltrane, Daniel Day Lewis, River Pohlenix, Gus Van Sant, Keanu Reeves, Kurt Vonnegut, Walt Disney, Keith Haring, Elvis Presley, John Irving, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Bob Dylan, Edgar Allan Poe. Anyway, this is nothing so insightful: if you happen to be an omnivorous writer/intellectual at the beginning of the third millennium, American cultural influences are taken for granted.

Speaking of Bolaño's fiction, there are a couple of major characters who come from the United States. For example, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*<sup>170</sup> — a Pan-American book encyclopedia of fictional right wing writers — includes seven U.S. writers. *Nazi Literature in the Americas* though is not the only book where U.S. characters appear. Other relevant North American characters are located in Bolaño's two major works, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. The former presents Barbara Patterson, an American hippie involved in a relationship with a poet called Rafael Barrios; the latter presents Oscar Fate. He is the protagonist of *The Part of Fate*, one of the five parts which constitute *2666*. Fate is a U.S. reporter from New York who works for a magazine interested in African-American issues. Last but not least, there is Anne Moore, the protagonist of “Anne Moore's Life” — Bolaño's longest short story.

Furthermore: Cormac McCarthy's influence on Roberto Bolaño writing — especially during the very last years — could be an interesting input for an academic thesis. In a review Bolaño writes about *Blood Meridian*, he specifies how this novel is not just some sort of Western, but an “ultra-violent novel about life and death, with all kinds of underlying themes (nature as man's great enemy, the

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<sup>169</sup> A parallel can be traced also between Bolaño's idea of his own fiction as part of a single galaxy and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

<sup>170</sup> Interestingly enough, this was the first Bolaño translated in Italy and Germany.

absolute impossibility of redemption, life as inertia)” (*Ibid.*, 263). This description clearly recalls a certain nine-hundred pages novel of which everyone was talking about in New York, 2008. He goes on by saying:

*Blood Meridian* is also a novel about place, about the landscape of Texas and Chihuahua and Sonora; a kind of anti-pastoral novel in which the landscape looms in its leading role, imposingly — truly the new world, silent and paradigmatic and hideous, with room for everything except human beings. It could be said that the landscape of *Blood Meridian* is a landscape out of de Sade, a thirsty and indifferent landscape ruled by strange laws involving pain and anesthesia, the laws by which time often manifests itself. (*Ibid.*, 263).

I am digressing about McCarthy because there is an important feature that 2666 and *The Savage Detectives* share: setting. *De facto*, the North-Eastern corner of the State of Sonora is the geographic core of Bolaño’s narrative universe. It is where the savage detectives wander and 2666’s crimes are committed. The border between Ciudad Juarez — which Bolaño fictionalize in Santa Teresa — and El Paso is one of the most dangerous, paradoxical and cruel area of the Western world: the hundreds of young female bodies found every year outside the city borders demonstrates it better than any academic source<sup>171</sup>. This space between Mexico and the United States became a third nation — a sort of inland Bermuda Triangle where everything might disappear. Bolaño aims to represent both the geographic and ethical porosity of the phenomenon, rather than openly denouncing — say — the U.S. as double agent with the drug cartels etcetera. Both nations seem at ease from this situation of “controlled” chaos and the issue within the *maquiladoras*<sup>172</sup> system in Ciudad Juarez, as displayed by 2666 and Mexican crime news, seems to stay with no solution whatsoever. Anyway, discussing about this overwhelming, paradoxical<sup>173</sup>, systemically wicked situation is not the point of this thesis.

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<sup>171</sup> In addition, Chris Andrews does an *astounding* job in his *An Expanding Universe*, by showing how every fictional body found in 2666’s Part of Crimes mirrors a real victim.

<sup>172</sup> *Maquiladoras* are free trade zone manufacturing factories where, in order to attract foreign investment and compete with BRIC’s growth, labor is *extremely* cheap.

<sup>173</sup> Why paradoxical? Because, writing an almost insulting sum up, the U.S. consumers implicitly sustain the drug trade and *maquiladoras*’ *raison d’être*.

Bolaño's books though, struck a raw nerve. They deal with a social mayhem in which U.S. readers are implicitly involved. In an article with *The New York Review of Books*, Sarah Kerr claims that "Like Borges—whom [Bolaño] loved and from whom he learned much—Bolaño was attracted to the idea of literature that could speak to the Americas."<sup>174</sup> Bolaño's *opus* partially meets halfway with the North American prejudice about Latin America. This is what Josefina Ludmer — a former Yale professor from Argentina — says about her students: "To put it simplistically, what interests them is Latin American barbarity: the dictatorships, magical realism... In other words, what they don't have. That's what they're interested in [...] reading; why would they want to read more of the same?" (Andrews, Loc. 519). As I have already said, in order to interest the American reader, the foreign literary output is often flattened into an exotic, stereotypical re-creation of a pre-set cultural cliché. Ludmer's quotation demonstrates that this is not just a supply-side problem. Bolaño is an exceptional writer but as for "barbarity" his works present plenty of it.

This is nothing new, and it is connected with the so-called Sarmiento dichotomy. Sarmiento was an Argentinian senator who became president of Argentina in 1868. His six-years long presidency has been characterized by his focus on education and democracy, in a country where the previous decades had been nefarious in terms of national stability and growth. He was a pretty active intellectual too. In his masterpiece, *Facundo - Civilization and Barbarism*, he encapsulated the issue of civilization against the wilder aspects of a rural culture of brutality and terror. Doing so, and doing it via an excellent prose, Sarmiento created a milestone of Latin American literature. This autobiographical mix of fiction and non-fiction set the dialectic between civilization and barbarism as *the* conflict in Latin American literature — and culture at large. For example, going back to *The Savage Detectives*, Sarah Pollack argues that it

plays on a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in defining itself vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy,

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<sup>174</sup> Kerr, Sarah. "The Triumph of Roberto Bolaño". *New York Review of Books*. 18 December 2008. Web.

mature vs. adolescent, responsible vs. reckless, upstanding vs. delinquent. In a nutshell, [...]: civilization vs. barbarism.<sup>175</sup>

Pollack then proposes two convincing — and, curiously, rather complementary — reasons why *The Savage Detectives* works with the North American readership. On one hand, the U.S. readers have the opportunity of unveiling their concealed adolescent idealism as they discover Bolaño's poetry of action (and viceversa). By observing the Seventies through the Latin American prism, they can re-enact their golden years. On the other hand, *The Savage Detectives* may be considered as a cautionary tale that suggests where these rebellious inputs — if taken too seriously — can lead. Namely, a tragic/pathetic adult life. Pollack then fittingly mentions David Brooks' notion of "the gravitational pull of the great Boomer Narcissus". She does so in order to tie these two contradictory factors around the same trunk: in other words, Brooks' claims that (he starts discussing the reception of *On The Road*) the Dominant Reading of Western cultural products follows the script interpreted by the Baby Boomers. Now that those Boomers are Babies no more, they are looking for something audacious *but* reassuring at the same time. That being said, summarizing the reasons why *The Savage Detectives* broke through the northern hemisphere just relying on the Boomer Narcissus paradigm would be reductive to say the least. One can not exclude Bolaño's own intertextuality, his constant references with other — from a spatial *and* temporal point of view — literatures, his ability of being *post-* and modernist at the same time, his obsessive dialogue with Violence and Evil, etcetera. However, that would be material for another dissertation.

Finally, I conclude by lingering on this quotation: "Instead of being viewed as an allegory of universal human experience, the remote and exotic setting, fantastic characters, and magical and violent occurrences came to symbolize what was quintessentially 'Latin'"<sup>176</sup>; even though these words were written by Pollack in order to describe how *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has been misread by Western

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<sup>175</sup> Pollack, Sarah. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States". *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3. 2009.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

readers, they can be smoothly adapted to Bolano's major works. Another world has been created, a world distant from the American and European *weltanschauung*, one that fulfills their need for purpose, fancy and *re-enchantment*.

### 3. 4 Of Fame And Other Ghosts

I have already displayed through this dissertation the reasons why some — in my case, literature in translation — books succeed and other just do not: nevertheless, there is a bigger, unavoidable question which overshadows the others. Namely, “uncertainty is built into cultural markets” (Andrews, Loc. 794). At first, the way in which Chris Andrews almost dismisses the very idea of analyzing Bolañomania as a research-worthy phenomenon can be rather daunting: “Even the most meticulous empirical research could not provide a complete explanation for a cultural phenomenon of this kind, in which contingencies and uncertainty play a significant part” (Andrews, Loc. 493). As I am going to show in this last subchapter, Andrews' point of view can be better understood after a *blitz* in the sociology field.

Although they are demonstrated by a wide range of solid sources, the factors I have discussed through chapter 3. 3 are not enough to justify a success of such a magnitude as Bolaño's one. Even though I have shown *who* talked about Bolaño, *when* and on *which* journal, claiming that Lethem's review or Wood's one launched Bolañomania in the U.S. would be incorrect, since literary critics write about several books per year and not all of them receive the same attention. And what if, say, Oprah included 2666 in her book club? Maybe Bolaño's sales might have reached the six zeros. What I want to point out is that the perfect storm is unpredictable by definition<sup>177</sup>. A recent book — *Le travail créateur: s'accomplir dans l'incertain* — by Pierre-Michel Menger<sup>178</sup> argues that uncertainty is a *constitutive* principle of creative works. Whether it is the quality of a cultural product, or its distribution or its

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<sup>177</sup> This principle of uncertainty is nothing new indeed. For example, Richard Caves defines it the “nobody knows” property.

<sup>178</sup> Pierre-Michel Menger is professor at the Collège de France. Chair in Sociology of Creative Work.

reception to be discussed, uncertainty can not be excluded. I will obviously focus on reception.

When asked about the conditions *sine qua non* such creative works are not successful<sup>179</sup>, Menger begins by lavishing the factors that trigger the remuneration — that is, another word for *success* — of a labour in a “standard” situation (say, a non-artistic one). Apart from random factors such as good or bad general condition, unsuccessful recruiting etcetera, remuneration depends from the amount of 1) demand for a given good and/or service 2) endeavor by the workers 3) skills and experience piled up by them and the 4) obsolescence of what they have achieved in their initial training. Then, Menger readjusts these conditions to the creative field.

The benefit of the initial training is abnormally low [...] The amount of paid work correlates with the individual’s reputation, and the relation between effort and the quality of the result can be extremely variable from one project or work to another. [...] The differences between individuals are very great, even between two artists who have had the same training and the same professional experience.<sup>180</sup>

In fact, due to the lack of absolute, pre-set standards of quality, competition invalidates the importance of the initial training. “Their overestimating their chances of becoming professional seems like an almost functional necessity for engaging in activities in which there is such a high uncertainty of success and such intense competition.”<sup>181</sup> Play the part, be the part. To some extent, this happens also in the publishing industry as a whole: if you do not believe in your offer, you will not sell it. As a consequence, some spontaneous questions pop up: is commercial success the best meter in order to measure the quality of a book? Who deserves success? “It is just a matter of talent” can *not* be the right answer.

From a literary point of view, this situation causes an obvious short circuit. If a book sells, its fans will see it as a prove of its unquestionable qualities. Its critics, of

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<sup>179</sup> Heinich, Nathalie. “Creativity, Reason and Uncertainty”. *Books and Ideas*. 24 February 2012. Web.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

course, will think it is just because of hype — as if the *real* Literary Authors are those who do not sell. Andrews is right when he says that

The uncertainty principle can be hard to accept because it is cruel. Not only does it follow from the principle that success is unfairly distributed overall; it also follows that the distribution of success is not even systematically unfair, so individual failure cannot be regarded as a guarantee of merit. (Andrews, Loc. 818)

There is a sort of tragic twist behind this principle. Being *talent* not a measurable quality, the “nobody knows” assumption implies that anybody can potentially wait for her/his moment. As Menger (and Andrews) specifies though, this situation is regulated by — yet again<sup>182</sup> — the Pareto principle, since “the 20% of the participating individuals concentrate the 80% of the gains.” (Menger, 7).

Interestingly enough, this trap is widely illustrated in the fictional universe created by Bolaño. “In Bolaño’s works reputations are unreliable guides to talent: [moreover], they are fundamentally unstable.” (Andrews, Loc. 850) One of the most impressive passages written by Bolaño is — in my opinion — the one about Lacouture’s feverish predictions in *Amulet*:

For Marcel Proust, a desperate and prolonged period of oblivion shall begin in the year 2033. Ezra Pound shall disappear from certain libraries in the year 2089. Vachel Lindsay shall appeal to the masses in the year 2101. César Vallejo shall be read underground in the year 2045. Jorge Luis Borges shall be read underground in the year 2045. Vicente Huidobro shall appeal to the masses in the year 2101. Virginia Woolf shall be reincarnated as an Argentinean fiction writer in the year 2076. Louis-Ferdinand Celine shall enter Purgatory in the year 2094. Paul Eluard shall appeal to the masses in the year 2101. (Bolaño, *Amulet*, 144)

And so on. Unlike those who try to limit his boom in the U.S. as predictable, Bolaño saw how literary success is ultimately shaped by uncertainty. This principle is hard to accept and may be considered as some sort of pedestrian exit strategy — but

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<sup>182</sup> See Chapter 1.

reception is made by the people and people are not always predictable. For example, some of them write terrific novels.

# CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have shown that

1) Any analysis of the American publishing market potentially leads to intertwined economic, social and political issues. For example, labelling American readers as “provincial” and “insular” (see 1. 2. 1) is mainly an excuse on which Big Publishers insist in order to rely on more trustworthy books (read: American titles). The academic snobbery regarding foreign literature (see 1. 2. 2) is another obstacle in terms of international literature diffusion in the U. S., along with the idea that translating is *betraying* the original text: however, both of these prejudices are less strong than, say, only ten years ago. In order to discuss properly about the American publishing scarce appetite for international literature, I have given an overview of the economic situation — which is precarious to say the least: excluding Amazon — the firm which is re-inventing publishing as a business — from the discourse would have been quite arguable (see 1. 3).

2) in the last fifteen years something has been done. New publishers have emerged, dozens of new literature-in-translation blogs have been flourishing. In few words — I have timidly proposed a neologism, *translactivism* which has been trying to improve this situation. I have shown how many and how *active* these small publishers, magazines, organizations and awards are (see 2. 4-5). In terms of literature’s diffusion the questions remain the same:

What pleasures does a reader receive that cause them to pick up a work of “literature”? How does this overcome the “negative priming” that’s become associated with literature in translation? How does someone actually find out about a pattern-shattering book and what actually gets them to pick it up? [...] Which literary books are the one that acquire a sort of “cool” veneer that helps them find a cult audience - one that slowly moves from cult to mainstream in a way that mimics the viral spread of Internet video? (Post, Loc. 5058)

I have discussed about how small publishers can enlarge their readership: since the e-commerce has revolutionized the book market, *discoverability* is the new key word (see 2. 1). This notion acquired even more relevance within the e-book market.

Frisch&Co. is the best example of how digital publishing can be helpful for international literature (see 2.3). As Post argues, “the thing about ebooks [...] and any other techno-social developments that shake the foundations of the existing power structure, is that these paradigm shifts open up as many possibilities as they destroy” (Post, Loc. 4002).

3) considering the last decades, Roberto Bolaño can be considered as the most relevant case study as far as international literature diffusion is concerned, since his books have been *terrifically* acclaimed both by readers and critics. I have provided detailed information about Bolaño’s diffusion (by focusing on a wide range of media coverage, see 3. 1) and reception (by focusing on his *exceptionality* and *Americanness*, see 3. 3) in the United States. Despite this amazing case though, it is still impossible to “build” such a success in order to invert the 3% trend. This is mainly because — fortunately? — uncertainty is built *into* the cultural market (see 3. 4). Although such things as literary fame and public acclaim are essential factors in publishing, they maintain a certain degree of indetermination even in the age of *discoverability* and *metadata*.

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# APPENDIX

This appendix is based on Chad Post's Translation Database information. It presents two different sets of charts. The first shows the most translated languages per year by relying on the number of titles translated into English. The second shows which countries have introduced more books per year in the Anglosphere. In both cases, I have considered the period between 2008 and 2014.

## 1. LANGUAGE/TITLES

2008

Language	Titles
French	60
Spanish	48
German	31
Arabic	28
Japanese	19

2009

Language	Titles
Spanish	62
French	54
German	31
Arabic	22
Italian	22

2010

Language	Titles
French	60
Spanish	52
German	35
Japanese	26
Italian	15

2011

Language	Titles
French	63
Spanish	50
German	39
Japanese	23
Italian	20

2012

Language	Titles
French	68
Spanish	58
German	57
Italian	35
Japanese	28

2013

Language	Titles
French	90
Spanish	71
German	58
Italian	35
Japanese	29

2014

Language	Titles
French	106
German	85
Spanish	67
Italian	36
Arabic	31

## 2.COUNTRY/TITLES

2008 C/T

Country	Titles
France	50
Germany	25
Japan	19
Russia	19
Spain	16

2009 C/T

Country	Titles
France	33
Italy	23
Japan	20
Spain	20
Sweden	17

2010 C/T

Country	Titles
France	35
Japan	26
Germany	22
Argentina	15
Israel	15

2011 C/T

Country	Titles
France	40
Japan	23
Germany	22
Spain	20
Italy	19

2012 C/T

Country	Titles
France	47
Germany	37
Italy	34
Japan	28
Sweden	27

2013 C/T

Country	Titles
France	66
Germany	44
Italy	35
Spain	31
Japan	29

2014 C/T

Country	Titles
France	85
Germany	63
Italy	34
Russia	28
China	25