Small Actors, Important Task:

Independent Publishers and their Importance for the Transmission of French and Romance Language Fiction to Sweden Since the Turn of the Millennium

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Abstract

Starting from a description of today's Swedish book market, which has seen a steady decline of French and other Romance languages as source languages for translated literature, this article investigates the importance of independent publishers for the transmission of non-anglophone fiction. In qualitative interviews, representatives of independent presses were asked to describe their business models and their relationships with big publishing houses. They were also asked to elaborate on the role of French and other Romance language fiction in Sweden today. The article's understanding of the book market is very much based on work done by literary sociologists, such as Pascale Casanova, Hans Hertel and Johan Svedjedal.

The results indicate that independent presses stepped in during the late 1990s, when the big publishing houses showed less and less interest in French and Romance language literature in translation. These independent publishers, with the help of clear niches, expert skills and perseverance, and in cooperation with media, showed that it was still possible to yield a profit publishing these kinds of translations. As a result, the major publishing houses once again took notice of French and other Romance language literature, engaging in competition with the smaller actors whose creation they had once brought about.

Key words: French and Romance language literature, Swedish translation, independent publishing, sociology

1. Introduction

The world republic of letters is changing, as are conditions for cultural mediation and literature in translation.¹ For a long time, the number of fictional works translated from English to Swedish was as large as the number of original Swedish works on the Swedish book market, while the number of works translated from the Romance languages was much smaller, making up between 5 and 10 per cent of

¹ I use the notion of a "world republic of letters" in the same way as the French literary sociologist Pascale Casanova, who – in her seminal book of the same title – describes the literary world as a complex system of power relations, e.g. between what she calls dominating and dominated languages (Casanova 1999/2004). Other researchers important for my perspective on literature and literary translations are sociologists such as Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro (e.g. *Translatio*. *Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure du mondialisation* [2008], edited by the latter, dealing – among other things – with the financial constraints of book circulation and the role of "petits éditeurs", small editors).

translated literature. Today, the number of works translated from English is considerably lower, likely because more and more readers choose to read anglophone fiction in the original language (Schmidt 2010). At the same time, even though they are not read in the original language to the same extent as their anglophone counterparts, the combined literatures of the Romance languages have also seen their position steadily weakened. As the Swedish literary sociologist Johan Svedjedal puts it, French, traditionally an important language in the Swedish cultural sphere, has been "almost obliterated" as a source language for translations of fiction (Svedjedal 2012:43; my translation). This phrasing may sound overly dramatic, but the steady decline of French as a literary language in Sweden is (as Svedjedal shows) statistically tangible, which raises questions about the long term position of French language fiction in the Swedish publishing industry.

During the last decade, since there has been a distinct lack of interest from the major publishing houses in such fiction (Hegardt & Rosell 2009:2), independent publishers have stepped in to play an important role in the transmission of French language fiction into the Swedish book market. In this article, I set out to investigate this phenomenon. Using qualitative interviews as my primary research tool, I examine the self image of these small publishers as told by interviewees. One of the most important questions asked is, of course, what the interviewees think about the position of French language literature (and, to some extent, fiction from other Romance languages) in Sweden today. Interviewees were also asked to explain how they justify their hard work, both internally for themselves and their colleagues and externally for the public. How do they describe their niche on the book market, and, since they work mostly with much smaller runs than major publishing houses and make consequently smaller profits, what are their thoughts on economic and cultural capital, as understood by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1971, Bourdieu 1983)?²

2. Tendencies of the Modern Book Market: Contraction, Concentration, Polarisation

In his article "Boken i mediesymbiosens tid" (2012, "The Book in the Age of Media Symbiosis", originally published in Danish as "500 000 £ er prisen", 1996), the Danish literary sociologist Hans Hertel analyses what he regards as dominant tendencies on the modern book market. In his presentation, he uses three key words: contraction, concentration and polarisation. *Contraction* is the "atrophy of the book market" (Hertel 2012:225; all translations from Hertel's article are my own), which is meant to denote the decrease in reading, book sales and book loans since the end

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² In his 1971 article "Le marché des biens symboliques", Bourdieu describes the circulation of symbolic goods as a field with two opposing poles: small-scale and large-scale circulation. Independent publishers make up part of the infrastructure of small-scale circulation, where – as further discussed in Bourdieu's 1983 article "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" – aesthetic criteria prevail over the large public's approbation. Bourdieu's writings on publishing is discussed by Sapiro in her article "Translation and the Field of Publishing: A Commentary on Pierre Bourdieu's 'A Conservative Revolution in Publishing' " (Sapiro 2008).

of the 1970s. *Concentration* is described as a direct consequence of the conglomerisation of the media market; whereby the large-scale economics of the modern book industry force publishers to merge into larger units in order to survive ever harsher competition. Since Hertel published his article, there has also been much talk of so-called vertical integration as the major publishing houses, in a particular kind of accelerated concentration process, continue to acquire several or all parts of the supply chain (Sundin 2012). A well-known example from the Swedish book market is the purchase of the chain store Pocket Shop 2012 by Bonniergruppen, Sweden's biggest publishing group. Lastly, *Polarisation* is described by Hertel as a direct consequence of contraction and concentration. The latter two create a growing gap on the book market; between big and small publishers, between big and small book shops and chain stores, and between bestsellers and – as Hertel puts it – the thousands of titles that "fall dead to the ground" (Hertel 2012:225).

Hertel goes on to elaborate on this discussion of polarisation, and speaks of a kind of "ghetto effect" in which independent presses run the risk of developing into subcultures, isolated and "disarmed" in what he calls the circuits of specialised literature ("speciallitterära kretslopp"), his own term for what the French literary sociologist Robert Escarpit has termed "le circuit lettré" (Hertel 2012:226, Escarpit 1992). There is a risk, Hertel concludes, that the independent publishers might isolate themselves, "like masonic lodges or pockets of resistance, composed of uncompromising underground creatures", which, of course, would endanger their businesses (Hertel 2012:232).

This article aims to discuss independent publishers and their importance for the transmission of French and other Romance language fiction to Sweden, but to do so a slight adjustment of Hertel's argument is needed. I suggest that the aforementioned polarisation between small and major publishers can be negated, and that this has occurred several times on the Swedish book market since the turn of the millennium. However, it should still be emphasised that the eventual interaction between major and small publishers made possible in the wake of this negated polarisation is never on equal terms, as a result of the big disparities when it comes to economic resources and distribution capability.

The working hypothesis of this article as posited by Hertel was a difficult one to circumvent: namely the idea that the major publishers had abandoned the Romance language literatures and consequently condemned them to an insecure existence in what Hertel calls the "the circuits of specialised literature". If that were the case, this would entail a serious marginalisation of the Romance language literatures in Swedish translation. Conducting interviews with representatives from three independent presses publishing Romance language fiction in Swedish translation – Elisabeth Grate bokförlag, Sekwa förlag and Astor förlag – I found that the hypothesis was to a certain degree true, but that at the same time it was also unjustifiably over-simplified.

3. French and Other Romance Language Fiction on the Swedish Book Market

The three publishers examined in this article are all small-scale businesses. Elisabeth Grate bokförlag was founded in 2002 and has one employee (2015). Sekwa förlag was founded in 2005 and has two employees (2015). Astor förlag meanwhile was founded in 2010 and wound up in 2014. In other words, these publishers are in reality single individuals, hiring freelance labour for different specialised tasks such translation, typesetting, and graphic design. As a result, they publish only a small number of books. Every year, Sekwa förlag releases between 12 and 15 new titles (still a large amount, given the small scale of their operations). By way of comparison, Albert Bonniers förlag, part of the Bonnierförlagen group, publishes around 100 new titles every year. Editions are small – a first edition from Sekwa förlag usually has a print run of between 1500 and 3000 copies. Financially, this means considerable difficulties in turning a profit. Semir Susic, together with Erik Larsson founder of the now closed down Astor förlag, estimates that they would have needed to sell between 3000 and 5000 copies of every book, in order to make a reasonable profit. This, however, is a difficult goal for an independent publisher in Sweden. While more successful than Astor förlag, Elisabeth Grate bokförlag and Sekwa förlag nonetheless suffer from financial challenges. Some of Sekwa's titles are published at a loss, and they have been forced to expand the catalogue to such books that can be expected to sell more copies.

It seems clear that these small publishers are, at least to some extent, motivated by concerns other than profit. When Elisabeth Grate bokförlag was founded in 2002, it was the only publisher in Sweden specialising exclusively in French language fiction. Three years later, Grate was joined by Sekwa, with a similar, but not identical, business concept. Together, the two publishers have taken responsibility for a large part of the transmission of French fiction to the Swedish reading public. According to statistics put together by the Swedish linguist Elisabeth Bladh, during the first decade of the 21st century, Grate and Sekwa together published works by 17 French language authors. During that same period, their most important competitor, Albert Bonniers förlag, published works by 22 French language authors (Bladh 2012:152). However, these statistics are disproportionally weighted against the small publishers, as Grate was founded in 2002 and the first release from Sekwa was published as late as 2007, which means that Albert Bonniers förlag enjoyed a significant head start.

Nevertheless, these figures indicate that the publication of French language literature from the major publishing houses is still very limited if even a very small independent press can quickly reach the same level as a larger rival. This parity is mentioned as a crucial incentive by all the publishers interviewed for this article. Johanna Daehli, manager at Sekwa förlag (co-founded with Helén Enqvist) experienced how the major publishing houses "let go" of French language fiction during the late 1990s, abandoning the section of the book market. Not only did they give up their coverage of French language literature, they also stopped publishing works by authors previously included in their catalogue, leaving the field open for other actors to step in. As a result, Grate was able to publish works by Jean-Marie

Gustave Le Clézio and Patrick Modiano. Meanwhile two other independent presses, Modernista and Lind & Co, started publishing the works of Marguerite Duras.

Astor's Semir Susic feels that Sweden's literary world lacks what he calls "bridges to the Romance and other European literatures". "Regrettably", he says, "it seems like Swedes do not consider themselves as a part of Europe, possibly as an exceptional, superior part of Europe; there is a kind of complacency present when Sweden is compared to the continent." Financial concerns are likely to have played an important role when the major publishing houses decided to reduce their publication of French and other Romance language literature. According to Susic, this is literature rich in cultural capital, but in Sweden this does not necessarily mean that it will gain a large audience. There are no large profits to be made for the major publishers in this part of the book market, Susic concludes. Consequently, insofar as these actors publish translated literature, they tend to focus on anglophone authors.

4. Niche Marketing Strategies

Starting up Sekwa förlag, Johanna Daehli's idea was to reach those readers still interested in French language fiction, as the major publishers had "left a hole that needed to be filled". Daehli wanted to counter the prejudice attitude that "French literature is difficult and philosophical", aimed at a small elite of academic readers. (This prejudiced understanding of French literature is most likely a consequence of the somewhat imbalanced translation of French fiction to Swedish since the Second World War, largely focused on existentialist literature and examples of "le nouveau roman" [Erlandsson 1993:14-15].) In other words, one of the goals of Sekwa förlag was to prove that French language fiction could be accessible. Yet this was not to be accomplished by simply publishing genre literature, such as chick lit or crime fiction. Instead, according to Daehli, it would be done by choosing "well-written books that could still interest a large number of readers". Another explicit starting-point was to focus on female writers. This also meant that Sekwa's catalogue was to be limited to a clear niche. This tactic quickly proved to be a success, since it gave rise to a very distinct public profile in subsequent media coverage.

Sekwa's niche strategy can be compared to the genesis of Astor förlag, which was to publish "crisis literature" from the Romance languages, i.e. literature with a leitmotif of the financial crisis in Southern Europe after 2007/2008, a tactic that also rendered some interest in the media. In a similar way, Elisabeth Grate, founder and owner of Elisabeth Grate bokförlag, found that her strictly limited business model of publishing only French language fiction in Swedish translation was described by journalists as "exciting" or "brave".

A clear niche creates a specific clientele, a fact which all three interviewees mention. There is an interest in French and other Romance language fiction among Swedish readers, but these interested readers make up a very small segment of the book market. Daehli points out that Sekwa förlag has a very loyal audience; there

³ The interviews were conducted in Swedish. All translations are my own.

are readers who regard the publisher as a kind of subscription service, a label to trust no matter what book is being sold. Elisabeth Grate has a similar experience, in that customers buy her books "because they are Grate books". In Grate's case, this pattern of consumption is encouraged by a consistent visual identity that is easy to recognise, a tactic not as necessary for the major publishing houses.

5. Media Coverage and its Importance

Drawing on the experiences from the independent presses, one arrives at a general but important conclusion: without the big budget of the larger publishing houses, the smaller actors become very much dependent on other players in the literary field, chiefly the media. As a result, they are also sensitive to economic change and financial instability. So far, Johanna Daehli feels that Sekwa förlag has been spoilt by the media when it comes to the number of reviews, but that today, in an economically difficult media climate, there is less and less space for literature in the papers. Daehli estimates that books from Sekwa today receive a third of the number of reviews that could have been expected only two or three years ago. This is, of course, a consequence of the shrinking media coverage of literature generally (Samuelsson 2015). Editors are forced to pick a very small number of books to review, and they tend to give priority to Swedish authors (Samuelsson 2013:117). This is a problem for Sekwa and other publishers focusing on translated fiction. They are, as Daehli puts it, highly dependent on reviews. Their books are not displayed by the chain stores in large piles; someone must speak for them, otherwise they won't sell.

Elisabeth Grate speaks of similar experiences when it comes to the importance of press coverage. One example was the publication of Modiano's novel *Nätternas gräs* in 2013 (*L'herbe des nuits*, 2012), the year before the author was rewarded the Nobel Prize of Literature. When the well-known Swedish critic Mats Gellerfelt wrote about the publication and about Modiano's earlier work, Grate immediately sold 500 copies of the novel, which is approximately a fifth of a "usual" Grate release. Booksellers contacted the publisher, asking for more copies of the novel. Elisabeth Grate calls this kind of media assistance "the Gellerfelt effect".

Contributions from broadcasting media can also play a key role for the publisher. For example, Modiano's *Nätternas gräs* was featured in serialised book readings on Swedish Public Radio, which also broadcast readings of two short stories published by Grate, Franck Pavloff's *Brun morgon*, 2003 (*Matin Brun*, 1998) and Jean Giono's *Mannen som planterade träd*, 2006 (*L'homme qui plantait des arbres*, 1954). These readings have affected sales in a significant way. Grate for example was contacted by a high school teacher who wanted to buy copies of *Brun morgon* for an entire class of students. When working with very small runs such an order can make a big difference.

6. The Chance Factor

Another important factor for the independent publishers seems to be simply pure chance, and circumstance. It is though of course a certain kind of luck, good fortune merited or earned thanks to skill and perseverance. Grate for example was lucky enough to publish two authors who – with just a few years in between – were both awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature: Le Clézio (2008) and Modiano (2014). As a rule, Grate print books in small editions that sell slowly. But the publisher largely survives thanks to exceptions to this rule. Grate's first book by Le Clézio, *Afrikanen* (*L'Africain*, 2004), was published in 2005 and printed in a run of 2000 copies. 2008, when it was announced that Le Clézio had been awarded the Nobel Prize, there were still 1650 copies of the novel left in stock; meaning it had sold 350 copies in three years. Elisabeth Grate jokingly points out that Grate's books do not sell "until the author happens to be awarded the Nobel Prize". 2008, just before Le Clézio's prize was announced, she felt that she might be forced to quit the business. But thanks to the prize, she could print a second edition of *Afrikanen* that quickly sold out. According to *Svensk bokhandel*, the Swedish book industry's official news magazine, Grate turned a 200 000 SEK loss into a profit of 2 900 000 (Westlund 2009).

Sadly for small publishers luck does not last. The Nobel Prize, as Elisabeth Grate puts it, "means good business" but you have to act fast, in order to profit from the attention. The "Nobel effect" only lasts for a short time. For Christmas 2008, everyone wanted to buy a book by Le Clézio, but the interest rapidly faded. Next year, of course, there was a new laureate. Most of those who bought a Le Clézio book in 2008 never returned as customers. Still, Elisabeth Grate estimates that books by her two "Nobel Prize authors" still sell approximately ten times as many copies as a "normal" Grate book.

Like Grate, Sekwa förlag is dependent on exceptions from the rule of small editions and slow sales. In their case, Johanna Daehli explains, one single title has meant all the difference: Muriel Barbery's novel *Igelkottens elegans*, published in 2009 (*L'élegance du hérisson*, 2006). Barbery's novel sold very well in France, and was also an unexpected success abroad, with translations into more than 30 languages and widespread popularity, even in "unusual" markets such as Brazil and South Korea. Somewhat surprisingly, Sweden's major publishing houses completely disregarded Barbery's novel. Consequently, the prestigious French publishing house Gallimard sold the rights to the then newly founded Sekwa, who went on to sell more than 30 000 copies of the first Swedish edition, more than ten times their usual sales. So far, the pocket book edition has sold more than 250 000 copies, and still (2015) continues to sell in the thousands every year.

The overwhelming success during what Daehli calls "the hedgehog years" ("igelkottsåren", since hedgehog in Swedish translates as "igelkott"), meant that Sekwa could afford to make brave business decisions, publishing several books that might be regarded as commercially risky. Just as in the case of Elisabeth Grate bokförlag though, success was short-lived, and Daehli has been forced to be more careful. Today, she explains, Sekwa publishes a few (1–2) "literary" titles every year, which are balanced by a larger number of titles expected to be "commercially safe".

Both Elisabeth Grate bokförlag and Sekwa förlag had the necessary foundations to persevere under difficult financial conditions, until one or several of their books started to sell in larger numbers. Astor förlag, however, never made it that far. Semir Susic explains that they were in the running for the rights to Italian author Silvia Avallone's popular and critically acclaimed novel *Acciaio* (2010), but lost to larger competitor Natur & Kultur, who published it, with great success, as *Stål* (2012). In other circumstances Avallone's novel may well have been Astor's "hedgehog".

7. Polarisation negated

In the theoretical discussion above, I posited a slight refinement of Hertel's argument about the polarisation between independent and major publishers on the modern book market, and claimed that polarisation *can* indeed be negated. During my study of these three publishers – Grate, Sekwa and Astor – I have not seen, as Hertel suggests, that they tend to isolate themselves as "ghetto cultures". On the contrary, there is a considerable amount of interplay between these publishers and the major publishing houses, as the major actors let themselves be influenced by their much smaller and specialised competitors.

All the publishers I have spoken to testify to a rising interest in Romance language literature in Sweden over the last few years. One important factor for this development has been the continuing effort of these independent publishers, generating important media attention. Grate and Sekwa have shown that it is possible to succeed as transmitters of non-anglophone literature, or more prosaically, that it is possible to make a profit translating French and other Romance language fiction. At the same time, a considerable part of the audience has realised that this kind of literature need not be difficult or complicated.

In other words, independent publishers have put Romance language fiction on the agenda, resulting in a renewed interest from the major publishing houses. To give one example, Elisabeth Grate bokförlag competed with (and lost to) Wahlström & Widstrand, today a part of Bonnierförlagen, for the rights to Goncourt Prize nominee Édouard Louis' debut novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (published in Swedish as *Göra sig kvitt Eddy Bellegueule*, 2014). According to Elisabeth Grate, titles "no longer have to wait to be translated and published"; today, one has to be "on one's toes", much more so than before.

8. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it is possible to apply the following description of how the transmission of French and other Romance language literature has developed since the late 1990s, as seen through the somewhat critical eyes of specialised publishers: the major publishing houses, experiencing difficulty in making profit on translations of non-anglophone fiction, showed less and less interest in this kind of literature, which opened up the market for smaller actors, very much spurred on by this diminishing interest from larger competitors. These independent publishers, with the help of clear niches, expert skills and perseverance, and in cooperation with media, showed that it was indeed possible to yield a profit publishing these

kinds of translations. As a result, the major publishing houses once again took notice of French and other Romance language literature, engaging in competition with the smaller actors whose creation they had once brought about. In other words, it could be claimed that the major publishing houses, for a number of years, effectively "outsourced" the coverage of Romance language literature, in that they let smaller competitors do the long-term work, shouldering much of the economic risk, only to step back in when it once again seemed possible to turn a profit.⁴

Taking a more sympathetic view of the situation, one could conclude that the major publishing houses simply needed to be reminded of Romance literature's potential; they were too quick to scale down their ambitions when it came to the transmission of non-anglophone fiction, and the smaller publishers helped prove that they were in fact mistaken. Now, hopefully, publishers of different sizes can come together in order to publish a wider range of French and other Romance language fiction in Sweden.

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⁴ This understanding of the "independents" as a kind of "research and development departments for the big publishers" is not uncommon among independent publishers in Europe. See e.g. Duffy 2015.

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Interviews (all conducted in May 2015)

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