

The transnational production and reception of “a future classic”: Stefan Hertmans’s *War and Turpentine* in thirty languages

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new sociological model for understanding the circulation of a single widely translated book, from local creation to transnational production and reception. Reconstructing the career of *War and Turpentine* by the Dutch-speaking Belgian author Stefan Hertmans, it examines the book’s circulation as a process mediated through a transnational literary field linking the literary field of the original and the many separate yet co-implicated national literary fields of its translations. It is argued that *War and Turpentine*’s success, which was by no means guaranteed, can be explained by cumulative interactions across these fields. Three aspects are investigated to illustrate cross-field interactions: the timely and fortuitous interventions of the work’s foreign rights manager, its anglophone reception, and the covers of its various translations.

KEYWORDS

Sociology of translation; transnational literary field; world market for translations; Stefan Hertmans; Flemish literature; world literature

Introduction¹

Oorlog en terpentijn ([*War and Turpentine*] De Bezige Bij, 2013), by the Dutch-speaking Belgian author Stefan Hertmans, stands out as one of the few novels from Flanders to have achieved widespread circulation and success in the last half century. Not since Hugo Claus’s *Het verdriet van België* [*The Sorrow of Belgium*] (De Bezige Bij, 1983) has a novel from Flanders travelled so well, so far, so quickly. The book is a creative re-imagining of the life and times of Hertmans’s soldier-artist grandfather, Urbain Martien. Distilled from the latter’s handwritten memoirs, which he entrusted to Hermans shortly before his death, it details Martien’s childhood growing up the son of a restorer of church frescos in late nineteenth-century Ghent, his experience fighting in the muddy gore of Flanders fields, and his long postwar life of dutiful marriage to his lost love’s sister. The book’s middle section is told from the perspective of Martien and unflinchingly describes the horrors at the front, where Martien is three times wounded and returned to the fight. Hertmans himself, or rather his textual surrogate, narrates the prewar and postwar sections that bookend Martien’s account, interspersing the story with Sebaldian visual realia, his own memories of his grandfather, and ruminations on how to piece together his family’s history.

War and Turpentine was a runaway success in Flanders and the Netherlands. It was widely praised by Flemish and Dutch critics, has sold more than 200,000 copies in the Dutch original (quite a feat in a small market) and won the AKO Literatuurprijs, the most prestigious annual prize for literature in the Dutch language. It has since been widely translated, a rare achievement for a book from Flanders, which must first transcend a marginal position within a Dutch-language literary field dominated by publishers in Amsterdam, and then the peripheral position of the Dutch language in the world literary system where it circulates in translation. As of March 2019, the book has been published in twenty languages alongside the Dutch original and translations in nine more are currently in progress. The book has also attracted international prize commendations: it was short-listed for the Premio Strega Europeo in 2015 and the Best Translated Book Award in 2017 and longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017 and the Dublin Literary Award in 2018. Its various translators have also won awards for their work. In most cases (but not all, as we will see), it met or exceeded its foreign publishers' expectations in terms of critical reception and sales. This is unusual for a translated novel, as these tend to go unreviewed by critics and rarely cover costs (Sapiro 2016a). For De Bezige Bij, the book's original publisher, *War and Turpentine* "was, together with *Bonita Avenue* by Peter Buwalda and *Congo* and *Against Elections* by David Van Reybrouck, the biggest recent worldwide hit we've had" (interview with Marijke Nagtegaal, March 16, 2018).²

Although *War and Turpentine's* transnational career got off to a tentative start, a complex and unpredictable chain of events eventually lifted the book from obscurity. This article sets out to chart its success. In part one, we investigate how *War and Turpentine* moved out of the Dutch language field and into the transnational literary field, looking specifically at the people involved in the translation rights acquisition process and the factors that influenced their decisions. In part two, we focus on the critical reception of the German and English translations and explore how they shaped translation cycles in other languages. Both parts draw on interviews and online questionnaires sent to acquiring editors, Stefan Hertmans, and his spouse Sigrid Bousset. In part three, we examine how paratextual elements from *War and Turpentine's* various translations were repurposed in the marketing of new translations. We analyse twenty-four book covers, many of which share striking design similarities in their cover art, an aspect that testifies to cross-field interactions.

By reconstructing the career of a single, widely translated novel in this way, we aim to arrive at a better understanding of how books travel through translation in the era of globalisation. We conclude by reflecting on the centre/periphery dynamics made manifest in the transnational production and reception of *War and Turpentine*, a book from the periphery that circulated successfully to and through the centre.

Towards a new sociological model of transnational creation, production and reception

A widely translated book traverses many different material contexts of creation, production and reception. Each translation draws, to greater or lesser degrees, on its source text(s) and/or preceding translation(s); the translation may be an individual or a collaborative effort combining input from the author(s) and/or other translators; the

acquisition and marketing of the translation may be influenced by decisions made previously by other source and target producers; and its reception in one culture may influence its reception in others. To account for these cross-field, relational aspects, we must place our object of enquiry within a larger analytical framework capable of understanding the lifecycle of a book from local creation to transnational production and reception. This entails examining the process of creation, production and reception both within and across that book's various material cycles in different languages, starting from the original and carrying through to its latest translation.

Sociological perspectives developed within translation studies can help in understanding the geopolitical and economic relations that structure the hierarchy of languages and national literatures in today's world market for book translations (see Heilbron 1995, 1999, 2008; Casanova 2004). We also gain a heuristic vocabulary, grounded in field theory, that can be used to analyse the positions and interactions of producers of translated books (see Bourdieu 2008; Sapiro 2008; Heilbron and Sapiro 2007, 2016). These perspectives build on the pioneering work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which opened the way for the sociological study of publishing (see Bourdieu 1993, 1996, 2008). Bourdieu starts from the assumption that any social space organised around a common pursuit can be approached as a field. In literary fields, as in all fields of cultural production, resources can be divided into economic capital (wealth) and symbolic capital (prestige) (Bourdieu 1993). Agents (individuals and organisations) in a given field are endowed with unequal resources and struggle to advance their position through the strategic pursuit and use of these resources pursuant to that field's "rules of the game" (Bourdieu 1996). Within the field of publishing, Bourdieu (2008) further posits a homologous relationship between publishers' position in terms of scales of production and distribution on the one hand (small-scale versus large-scale), and their logics of valuation (aesthetic versus profit-driven) on the other. Publishers situated at the large-scale pole are mainly interested in finding bestsellers that turn a quick profit (the accumulation of economic capital), whereas this economic logic is "reversed" for those at the small-scale pole; they seek to publish books that earn the recognition of respected arbiters of literary quality (the accumulation of symbolic capital) above, and even sometimes in diametric opposition to, short-term commercial success (Bourdieu 1983). In an effort to include geopolitical factors in the sociological analysis of world literature, Sapiro (2008) transposes a version of Bourdieu's national model to the transnational level. She retains Bourdieu's structural oppositions and his emphasis on economic and symbolic capital accumulation, using them to understand processes of Anglo-American-led globalisation and conglomeration and their effects on the world market for book translations since the 1980s (see also Sapiro 2009, 2010, 2015a, 2015b).

However, to more fully understand the social and material dynamics involved in the translation process itself and, just as importantly, to account for the various intra- and inter-field influences that shape the transnational career of a single widely translated book, we need more analytical tools. Recently, efforts to conceptualise patterns of production, circulation and reception of printed works and their translations have emerged at the intersection of translation studies and book history. For example, Belle and Hosiington (2017), building on Robert Darnton's "communication circuit" (1982, 2007), propose a model for analysing translations that foregrounds the role of translators as mediating figures situated at the interface between source and target circuits within complex,

cross-border networks of authors, patrons, printers, booksellers and readers. While their model provides an instructive analytical starting point, it is less suitable to our aims for three reasons. First, it is designed to study translations in a specific national, spatial, temporal and socio-cultural context (print culture in early modern England) and so reflects an ensemble of producer roles that do not map precisely onto the present day. Second, because it locates inter-field exchange mainly in the person of the translator, it implicitly prioritises bilateral (source/target) rather than relational, transnational exchange. It is therefore less well-equipped to conceptualise situations where producers of translated books from many different national fields converge together (as they do at major book fairs); nor does it take into account the asymmetric relations of power across and within national and/or language-specific fields. Finally, while it identifies the agents involved in the coming-into-being and circulation of translated books and takes into account the various commercial, social and political/ideological constraints to which they are subject, it lacks a heuristic framework for explaining these agents' actual practices and strategic objectives.

Therefore, we propose an alternative analytical framework combining insights from two sociologists of literature: Clayton Childress (2017), who provides a (monolingual) sociological basis for explaining a book's lifecycle, and Gisèle Sapiro (2009, 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b), whose transnational literary field concept describes the geopolitical relations that structure today's world market for book translations. Epistemologically, the two approaches are highly compatible: both Childress and Sapiro use Bourdieu's theory of fields to understand the context in which books come to be and the interpersonal interactions of their makers. Both explore relationships between fields and investigate how relations in one field affect practices in others – questions sociologists of literature working in the field-theoretical tradition have only just begun to address (see Benson 1999; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Eyal 2013). Furthermore, Sapiro and Childress share a focus on processes of transition from one field to another and on the transitional agents that facilitate exchange between fields.

However, while Childress refers to creation, production and reception as separate but interdependent fields (2017, 8–11), Sapiro, following Bourdieu, understands these activities as belonging to a single field (of cultural production). We tend to agree. We therefore refer to Childress' fields as "spheres" rather than "fields", in this way clearly differentiating between the stakes involved in each one while also locating them all within a theoretical discourse of cultural production. For Childress, the analysis operates at the level of a single book, charting its transitions through the various spheres of a monolingual material culture (creation, production, reception) within a single book market. His transitional agents thus bridge *material* fields. They include literary agents and acquisition editors, who link the spheres of creation and production, and marketing staff, reviewers, buyers, distributors and booksellers, who link the spheres of production and reception. Sapiro's main interest is large-scale literary transfer between (two) national and/or linguistic fields, and her cast of transitional agents include publishers of translated literature, literary agents specialised in translated literature, and state agencies promoting national literatures internationally.

Differences notwithstanding, Sapiro and Childress together constitute a conceptual basis on which to develop a sociological model for understanding the lifecycle of a widely translated book (Figure 1). This model will ideally account for both social and

material aspects of literary transfer across languages and cultures and allow for the analysis of relations between agents attached to a widely translated novel across the many linguistic and material fields it traverses. Joining the transnational with the processual in this way expands the explanatory power of the transnational literary field as a concept and helps to clarify its boundaries.

Understanding how a widely translated novel travels beyond its original literary field also requires understanding how that book moves to the heteronational and multilingual space of the transnational literary field and, from there, to the national and/or linguistic literary fields of its translations.

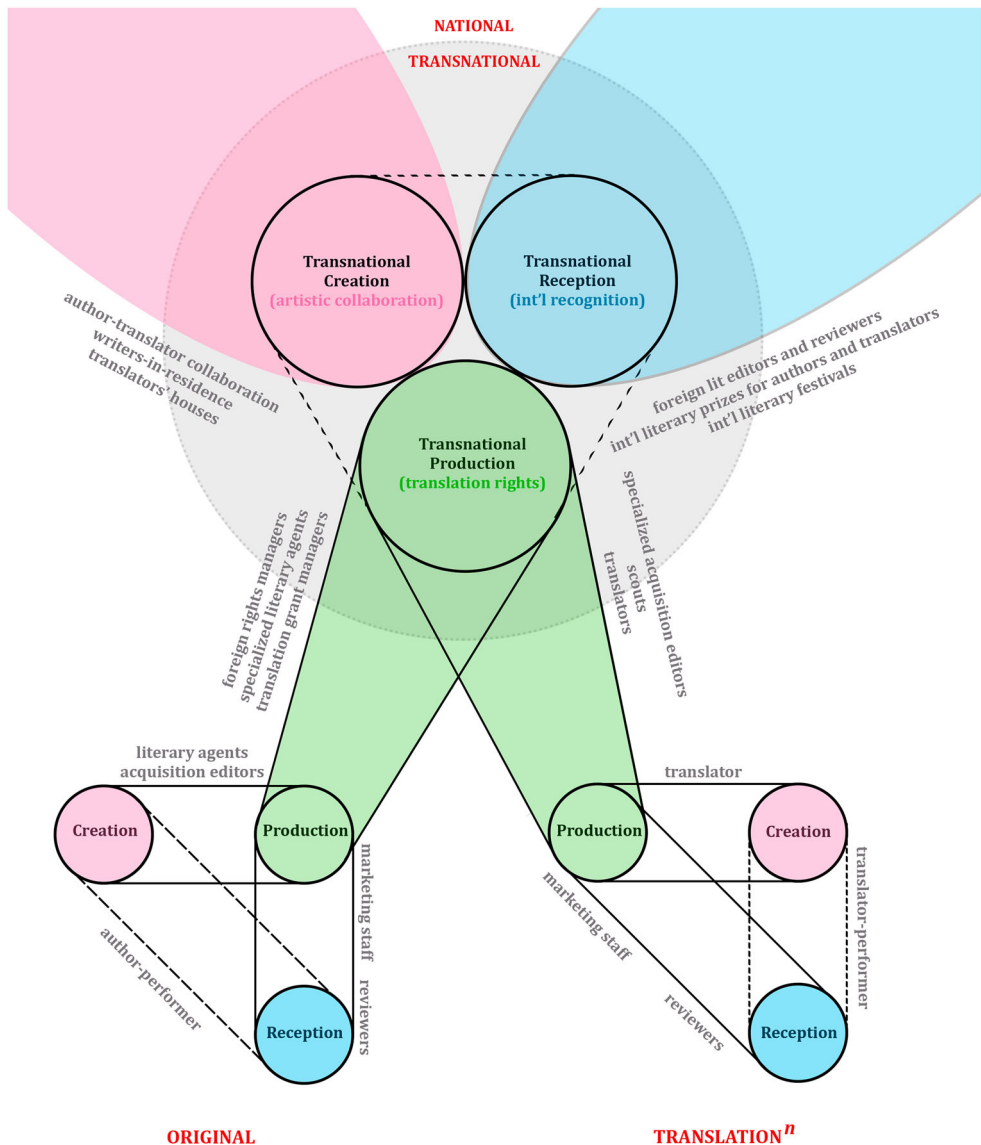


Figure 1. A model of transnational literary creation, production and reception.

field, it is in a much better position to tap into powerful transnational processes capable of propelling it around the world.³ Building on Childress, the transnational literary field can also be said to comprise three independent but interconnected spheres of practice: transnational creation, production and reception. Together, these spheres of activity constitute a global material culture shaped and constrained by geopolitical relations. The world market for translations, itself a component of the transnational literary field, is nationally delineated and asymmetrically ordered at the level of language. In the wake of Anglo-American-led processes of globalisation (Steiner 2018) and conglomeration (Steiner 2011), which have stiffened economic constraints, the world market for translations has been shown to exhibit a high degree of isomorphism: publishers of translated books have tended to emulate the selection choices of foreign counterparts they perceive to be successful. This has made the catalogues of the world's publishers of translated books increasingly similar to each other (Franssen and Kuipers 2013) and has contributed to decreased diversity both in terms of source languages (Sapiro 2010) and content (Thompson 2012). English, which exports far more books in translation than it imports, currently occupies a hyper-central position in the world market for translations. German and French are semi-central, and all other languages – including Dutch, which provides just under one percent of the world's source titles (Heilbron and Sapiro 2016, 382) – are peripheral (see Heilbron 1999; Heilbron and Sapiro 2016). These structural relations hold regardless of whether a book arrives in the transnational literary field from a literary field on the periphery or from the centre (van Es and Heilbron 2015).

A book crosses into the transnational literary field when associated agents participate in one of the three main activities around which that field is organised: collaboration and exchange between a book's creators (author and translators), which happens in the sphere of transnational creation; the buying and selling of a title's foreign rights, which happens in the sphere of transnational production; and the conferral of meaning and recognition upon a translated work, which occurs in the sphere of transnational reception.

In turn, the agents who bridge national and/or language-level creation and transnational creation are those involved in, *inter alia*, writers-in-residence programmes, translators' houses, author-translator collaborations, and other social groupings that bring a novel's transnational creators together to carry out their craft. In the case of *War and Turpentine*, for example, Hertmans was himself an active agent in the creation of the German, French and English translations, all languages in which he is highly proficient. He read proofs for the Italian translation, a language in which he is less proficient but competent. For other translations, including the Hungarian, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, he fielded translators' questions when asked and helped to solve translation problems.

Linking the sphere of transnational production with national and/or linguistic spheres of production are agents focused principally on the buying and selling of foreign rights. On the sellers' side are foreign rights managers, literary agents specialised in translated literature, translation grant managers and individuals or institutions involved in pitching novels to prospective rights buyers outside that title's original literary field. On the buyers' side are agents specialised in bringing works from the transnational level back to the national and/or linguistic level. This includes acquisition editors working in translated literature, literary scouts, and translators involved in selecting books for translation. Finally, we can also identify agents linking the sphere of transnational reception with reception circuits at the national and/or linguistic level. These include critics specialised in reviewing

foreign literature, news outlets with a multinational and/or multilingual distribution and readership, such as the *New York Review of Books*, international literary festivals, and international literary prizes for authors and translators, the most prestigious of which being the Nobel Prize in Literature.

War and Turpentine in the sphere of transnational production

War and Turpentine made its entrance into the transnational literary field in October 2013, just two months after appearing in Dutch. This quick transition is unusual for a novel from the periphery by an author who, despite being highly regarded and well-established at home, was largely unknown outside of his immediate context. In terms of its original Dutch lifecycle, the novel had only just transitioned into the sphere of reception. However, early reviews were positive, sales were strong and its Dutch publisher, De Bezige Bij, was eager to engage foreign publishers. More importantly, and in the words of the author's spouse, Sigrid Bousset, herself an important intermediary, *War and Turpentine* was the right book at the right time:

The personal and biographical aspect of the story's protagonist, Stefan's grandfather, was recognisable and affecting for thousands of readers. It was a small story that was also universal. And we had momentum. The commemoration of the centenary of World War I was approaching and here was a beautiful book by a Flemish author. (Personal correspondence, May 10, 2018)

War and Turpentine also made its entry in the right place: the Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest gathering of publishing professionals and an important hub for buying and selling translation rights. As is standard practice in the Dutch market, all subsidiary rights for *War and Turpentine* (translation rights as well as rights for other media) were controlled by De Bezige Bij, with Hertmans receiving a share of future profits. The book was included in De Bezige Bij's foreign rights guide, a catalogue prepared especially for foreign acquisition editors at Frankfurt. Importantly, the publisher had received an offer for the German rights shortly before the fair began and this information was included in the catalogue – a signal to German (and other) publishers that the book was desirable property.

Pitching *War and Turpentine* to foreign publishers and coordinating the sale of translation rights was the task of Marijke Nagtegaal, one of two foreign rights managers employed by De Bezige Bij. Nagtegaal had come to the role only a year before but brought with her a network of contacts built up over thirty years in the industry. She had also handled foreign rights for several major titles at Atlas Contact and Ambo | Anthos, two other Dutch publishers, including the worldwide bestseller *Het Diner* ([*The Dinner*], Ambo | Anthos, 2009) by Herman Koch, the only Dutch-language book in recent decades to compare to *War and Turpentine*'s success in the global literary marketplace. Nagtegaal emphasised the “buzz” the book generated at Frankfurt:

That's where it all started. And if a book generates a bit of buzz at the fair, if people get talking about it and start telling its story, then things can go really fast, and that's what happened with this book. I used that. I spent the entire week [in Frankfurt] doing deals for that book. (Interview, March 16, 2018)

German rights were the first to sell after an auction that played out at the fair. By the end of the week, the French (Gallimard), Italian (Marsilio) and English rights had sold as well. So

strong was Nagtegaal's position that they were able to split the English rights by territory, a strategy Nagtegaal had used previously for Koch's *The Dinner* but that is exceedingly rare for a book from the Dutch language area. Rights for the UK sold first (Harvill Secker), followed by Australia and New Zealand (Text) and North America (Knopf, later transferred to Pantheon). In the weeks following the fair, the Danish (People's Press), Norwegian (Pax), Swedish (Norstedts), Polish (Marginesy), Serbian (Heliks) and Slovenian (Studentska založba) rights sold as well.

Buyers

While it is difficult to comprehensively reconstruct how word of *War and Turpentine* spread among acquisition editors at Frankfurt, we can glean an idea of the process through interviews with those involved. It is clear that word-of-mouth endorsements and tip-sharing were crucial to the book's acquisition in multiple languages. We learned, for example, that *War and Turpentine's* Italian publisher, Marsilio, acquired rights after one of its editors had discussed the book with her colleague at Hanser Berlin, who at the time was bidding for the German rights against one other publisher. The German editor's willingness to act on her own advice at a time when the title had not yet been purchased for any other language – to “put her money where her mouth was” – also signalled to her Italian colleague that the book was worth pursuing. Not only had *War and Turpentine* cleared Hanser Berlin's internal vetting mechanisms but it was deemed valuable enough to go to auction for. This bolstered the editor at Marsilio in her decision to move on *War and Turpentine* too. The Italian editor's decision was more than just a nod to her German colleague's literary tastes. It can also be understood as a strategy of risk aversion, that is, an endorsement of her German colleague's ability to “pick a winner”. Publishers in one language often emulate the editorial decisions of similar publishers working in other languages as a way to hedge the tremendous uncertainty involved in betting on which books will return on investment (Franssen and Kuipers 2013). Given the overabundance of books about the Great War circulating at Frankfurt, *War and Turpentine's* subject could also be seen as adding to this uncertainty. Hertmans was clearly aware of this, and even includes it in the novel:

[T]he time approached when the inevitable hundredth anniversary of the cataclysm would release a flood of books—a new barrage alongside the almost unscalable mountain of existing historical material, books as innumerable as the sandbags on the Yser front. (Hertmans 2016: 11)

Nagtegaal's task was to ensure *War and Turpentine* was not swept away in the flood. The momentum she created and that foreign editors perpetuated at Frankfurt was enough to tip structural forces in the novel's favour, helping it to overcome the long odds faced by all books in the sphere of transnational production but particularly by those originating in languages, like Dutch, on the periphery of the world market for translations. As such, *War and Turpentine* can be understood as an example of how isomorphic dynamics at work in the transnational literary field can be leveraged through the mediation of a well-placed rights professional (in this case, Nagtegaal) to bring a novel from the periphery to the lists of the world's most prestigious literary presses at the centre.

War and Turpentine's worldwide success was also facilitated by translation grants from the Flemish Literature Fund (FLF), now known as Flanders Literature, a government organisation funded by the Flemish Community. All of the book's foreign publishers

applied for and received a translation grant, which covered up to sixty percent of the translator's fee. Nagtegaal is acutely aware of how heavily publishers of translated books rely on subsidies:

Before we suggest a book to foreign publishers, we check with [the FLF and its Dutch counterpart, the Dutch Foundation for Literature] to see if it is implicitly "subsidisable". Because of course the cost of translation plays a big role [in the publishers' decision to acquire a book]. (Personal correspondence, December 2, 2018)

Of the eight acquisition editors we surveyed, only one – Gallimard – reported that the guarantee of a translation subsidy did not affect the decision to acquire *War and Turpentine*.

Sellers

On the other side of the rights transaction, decisions on which offers to accept and which to reject were the result of consultation between Nagtegaal and Stefan Hertmans. De Bezige Bij advised Hertmans in these matters, but the final say was his. In cases where multiple bids were on the table for a given language, Hertmans and his Dutch publisher mostly agreed on which offer to accept. However, the stated motivations behind their respective preferred courses of action reveal two different strategies of capital accumulation. For Nagtegaal, a sizable bid was an indicator of a foreign publisher's commitment to the novel's economic success, which in turn bode well for its author's chances of symbolic success down the line:

A publisher like De Bezige Bij looks at the long-term interests of the author. A high advance is a good indication of how serious [a foreign publisher] is about the book and how much they will do to earn that advance back. (Personal correspondence, December 2, 2018)

Nagtegaal and her colleague Uta Matten, who has handled ten of the twenty-nine rights contracts that have thus far been struck for *War and Turpentine*, were therefore keen to solicit information from prospective publishers about aspects that could have a direct impact on the translation's economic viability, including the expected level of involvement of the translation's editors and the publisher's plans for marketing the translation. Such considerations were decisive for the decision to sell German rights to Hanser Berlin, who promised to feature *War and Turpentine* prominently. In the case of the Spanish rights, Matten asked the two publishers involved in the auction to submit marketing plans before advising Hertmans on which offer to accept. In all cases, when a bid came in, competitors in the bidding publisher's language market were alerted by De Bezige Bij in the hopes of generating momentum for an auction. For Nagtegaal, "auctions are about more than maximizing the price publishers will pay for rights; they're a way to find the best possible publisher for the book" (personal correspondence, December 3, 2018).

For Hertmans, on the other hand, economic considerations were far less important than symbolic ones. According to Bousset, who also advised him on offers, "the publisher's DNA was the decisive criterium: what authors are in its list? Do I feel at home in their company? Are they authors I respect?" This was clear in Hertman's decisions: for the German rights, he favoured the literary publisher Hanser Berlin over a larger commercial publisher. For the Spanish rights, he selected the prestigious Anagrama over a smaller,

dynamic publisher despite the latter having submitted a stronger marketing plan. For the French rights, he was thrilled to accept Gallimard's bid "on account of its high prestige". All involved were stunned and elated when Knopf, the most prestigious of American presses, stepped forward to buy the North American rights.

In sum, *War and Turpentine's* progression through the sphere of transnational production was mediated by one crucially important transitional agent: the book's principal foreign rights manager, Marijke Nagtegaal. When we looked on either side of the translation rights transaction, we found publishers in different language markets looking to each other for cues on what to buy. Once the German rights sold to Hanser Berlin, similar publishers working in other languages began to consider the book as well. And once prestigious publishers had been found for French and English, thus completing the triad of the world's three most central literary languages, many other languages quickly followed. On the other side of the transaction, we found a source publisher eager to capitalise on its network of foreign publishers in order to guarantee their commitment to the book's (and the author's) economic and symbolic success, and an author eager to tap into their stores of symbolic capital.

***War and Turpentine* in the sphere of transnational reception**

For the thirteen publishers who acquired *War and Turpentine* in late 2013 and early 2014, the transition from the sphere of transnational production to their own national fields was complete and a new material cycle could begin. In each case, the book would undergo translation (creation), be marketed and distributed (production) and find critics and readers in its target market (reception). On the whole, *War and Turpentine* met or exceeded the expectations of its foreign publishers. This was reflected in the results of an original survey sent to the acquiring editors of the book's currently published translations. Of the nine editors who responded, eight reported being "satisfied" (one) or "very satisfied" (seven) with the book's reception in their language area. Seven reported being "satisfied" (four) or "very satisfied" (three) with the book's sales performance and seven described the book as either a "huge" (two) or "moderate" (five) success for their publishing house overall. However, *War and Turpentine* struggled in some languages early in its transnational reception career and its later success was by no means guaranteed.

First wave of translations: few reviews, disappointing sales

In the months after the first translations of *War and Turpentine* came to market in mid-2015, the elation experienced at Frankfurt in 2013 gave way to frustration and concern: reviews were generally positive but thin on the ground, and sales were disappointing. The first translation to reach its national field of reception was Hanser Berlin's German hardback edition, published in December 2014. The book garnered less critical attention than anticipated, and sales were slow. Accusatory fingers were immediately pointed at the book's new and internally contested title, *Der Himmel meines Großvaters* [My Grandfather's Heaven]. Julia Graf, the acquiring editor explains:

For us, a literal translation of the book's title wasn't an option. Translated into German, "War and Turpentine" takes on a completely different connotation: cheaper, not very literary. It

sounds like a rather commercial historical novel. As we were aiming at establishing Stefan Hertmans as an important literary voice in the German book market, we sought a more sophisticated, more literary title, in consultation with the author and our marketing and sales department. We like the title we chose very much because it has a poetic sound and because the German word *Himmel* has the double meaning of heaven and sky. It alludes to the *Himmel* you see when hiding from the enemy, the *Himmel* in art and the *Himmel* of love. As to whether this was the right decision or not, I simply can't give an answer. (Personal correspondence, May 29, 2019)

Also underpinning the decision to opt for a non-literal translation of the book's title was a wariness about linking the book too closely with the Great War, since Hanser Berlin had calculated that the German market was already oversaturated with literary titles dealing with the conflict. However, for Hertmans and Bousset, this was precisely one of the book's crucial narrative aspects and selling points. They argued adamantly for a literal translation of the book's title but Hanser Berlin's publisher sided with his editor. One can only speculate about the extent to which this decision shaped the book's tepid reception in Germany. However, it certainly affected how the book was presented to readers. As Bousset observed, "Ultimately, German bookstores' front windows were full of war books and Stefan Hertman's book wasn't one of them" (personal correspondence, May 31, 2019).

In a clear instance of cross-field emulation, *War and Turpentine's* Danish publisher, People's Press, adopted the German title as well. Its fate was similar: *Min bedstefars himmel* generated a few glowing reviews, but sales were flat. All subsequent translations in other countries opted for a literal translation of the original title – including the revised German paperback edition, published by Diogenes in March 2018. According to Susanne von Ledebur, who handled the book for Diogenes, the decision to replace *Der Himmel meines Großvaters* came at the request of the author. After discussing the matter with her colleagues at Hanser Berlin and obtaining their consent, Diogenes moved ahead with *Krieg und Terpentin* (personal correspondence with von Ledebur, May 29, 2019).

The pattern of slow sales repeated itself in other first-wave language markets as well. The Italian acquisition editor who secured the book for Marsilio on the advice of her German colleague called its debut in Italy "a fiasco" (personal correspondence, May 29, 2019), and this time its performance could not be blamed on the title change. For her, *Guerra e trementina* failed because it was crowded out by the many other books on the Great War that came to market around the same time. Furthermore, Italian readers were apparently not interested in a Great War story set in Flanders, where the Italians did not fight.

For Hertmans, Bousset and Nagtegaal, it was beginning to look like *War and Turpentine's* career beyond Dutch would play out the way those of most translated novels do: a positive but small reception, meagre sales and a short shelf life. Nagtegaal recalls:

I remember sitting around a table with Stefan [Hertmans] and his wife and Stefan said, "I really want this book to do something. I've worked on it for so long and it's not taking off. The translations are there but they're just not moving." And all I could say was these are things you can't predict, you know? Foreign publishers know their particular markets best so we have to trust their [marketing] decisions. It's too easy to blame a cover, a title, a marketing strategy. You need some luck. (Interview, March 16, 2018)

They held out hope for the English translation, which did not appear in the UK until June 2016 and in North America until September, nearly three years after being acquired at

Frankfurt and well after many other first-wave translations had already come to market. According to the English translator, David McKay, Harvill Secker's publication timeline was not tuned to publishers in other language markets: "Throughout the whole process, they weren't so worried about timing, as long as they got it in before the 100th anniversary of the end of the War" (interview, December 11, 2018).

"A future classic"

In the weeks after its release in the UK, *War and Turpentine* was reviewed in *Kirkus* (June 1, 2016), *The Sunday Times* (Mills, June 26, 2016), *Publishers Weekly* (June 27, 2016), *The Guardian* (Mukherjee, July 2, 2016) and *The Times* (Wilson, July 16, 2016). All were positive, but Neel Mukherjee's review in *The Guardian* stands out as the most glowing and, as it turned out, the most prophetic. He calls Hertmans "one of the great living Flemish poets" (Mukherjee, July 2, 2016) and praises the book's blending of different generic conventions. Mukherjee closes his article with a bold consecratory proclamation:

Urbain considered himself and his life ordinary. More than 20 years after his death, he has been given a kind of immortality by his grandson, an extraordinary afterlife that he never could have imagined. *War and Turpentine* has all the markings of a future classic. (ibid.)

Hertmans, Bousset and Nagtegaal could not have hoped for a better review. Mukherjee's "a future classic" one-liner handed the book's producers a golden blurb for their covers. It has thus far been used in front or back covers by six publishers, including De Bezige Bij in its latest reprint of the Dutch original, with surely more to come. By consecrating *War and Turpentine* in this way in *The Guardian*, Mukherjee was making the case for immortality, not only for *War and Turpentine's* protagonist, but also for the book itself.

Mukherjee is a Man Booker–shortlisted novelist and reviews two to three books a year for *The Guardian*. His interest in novels from Belgium stems from a stint in 2011 as a writer in residence in Brussels at the Passa Porta International House of Literature. Passa Porta supports literary exchange by bringing international writers to Brussels for residencies, seminars, readings and the biannual Passa Porta Festival. During Mukherjee's stay, he became acquainted with important figures in Brussels's literary circles, including Koen Van Bockstal, the former director of the Flemish Literature Fund, and Sigrid Bousset, Passa Porta's director until 2014.⁴

War and Turpentine's strong reception in the UK would provide crucial momentum for a consecration every author and publisher longs for: a positive review in *The New York Times*. This appeared on August 5, 2016 in a Friday "Books of the Times" feature by fiction critic Dwight Garner who, echoing Mukherjee, praised the book's canonic quality, calling it "old-fashioned" and "built to last" (Garner, August 5, 2016). Then, a (very rare) second review appeared sixteen days later in the Sunday edition by the writer Dominic Smith under the title "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Soldier" (August 21, 2016). On December 4, in the run-up to the holiday book-buying season, *The New York Times* included *War and Turpentine* on its list of "100 Notable Books of 2016" (*The New York Times*, December 4, 2016) and a week later, capping a meteoric rise, the book was one of five fiction titles (and one of two translations) included in *The New York Times* "10 Best Books of 2016" (December 11, 2016).

The pattern of stagnant sales abroad had been broken: sales in the UK (the only anglophone market for which we were able to obtain data) topped 10,000 copies at the time, which its editor called “very successful for a literary international author’s debut in English” in her questionnaire response. It had taken more than four years of circulation in the transnational literary field, but Hertmans’s book was finally moving. The anglophone reception gave *War and Turpentine* a renewed élan in the sphere of transnational production. Sigrid Bousset credits the anglophone reception, and particularly the “10 Best Books of 2016” mention in *The New York Times*, with stimulating “a new wave” of rights acquisitions. Rights for Spanish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Macedonian, Portuguese and Turkish all would sell in late 2016 and early 2017.

Tracing cross-field interactions in *War and Turpentine*’s book covers

Convergences across *War and Turpentine*’s various material cycles can also be identified through its book covers. Gérard Genette (1997, 1) locates covers within a book’s paratext, and, more specifically, its peritext, that is, the sum of framing elements physically attached to a text that “enable a text to become a book”. In her analysis of paratexts, which constitutes “the first in-depth attempt to explore Genette’s concept and its importance for translation studies research” (2018, 2), Kathryn Batchelor signals the importance of editors in determining a (translated) book’s cover. She underscores Nathalie Mälzer’s recommendation to “shift the focus from the study of cultural adaptation in literary translations carried out by translators to the adaptations made by the various agents of the publishing industry to bring these books to the market” (quoted in Batchelor 2018, 39). Book covers typically contain multiple peritextual elements: a title, a by-line, a publisher’s logo, a summary text, cover art, and blurbs. In this section, we focus on the latter two elements as they most clearly illustrate cross-field interaction between *War and Turpentine*’s original and translations. We examine twenty-four of its existing covers to explore how similarities in their peritextual elements can help us better understand the transnational literary field in which *War and Turpentine* circulates.⁵

Surprisingly, there are no immediate visual clues linking *War and Turpentine*’s original Dutch cover to the book’s main themes of memory, tragic love, art and the Great War, nor to its setting in Flanders. Instead, it features a black-and-white photograph of a deserted road cutting through a muddy field. Clouds span a grayscale sky where the road meets the horizon. The far-off silhouette of a brick house and the sodden field are the only identifiers that localise the image to wartime Flanders, although the photo could have been taken anywhere and is timeless in its sparseness. Above the image, set against a deep purple background covering the top half of the cover, is the author’s name in black italics, the title in white all caps and the word “roman” (novel) in black italics. The overall effect is dark and ominous.

In tracing these visual elements through to later covers, we distinguish between two types of mirroring: (i) literal reproductions, where a translation or reedition’s cover art and composition is (almost) identical to a previous cover; and (ii) thematic reproductions, where a cover uses the same motif as a previous cover. In the case of *War and Turpentine*, there are several instances of literal reproduction (see A, B and C in Figure 2): the black-and-white photograph of the original was reused in the hardback and paperback Dutch reeditions (De Bezige Bij 2013), and in the Polish translation (Marginesy 2015) as well.

In turn, the Serbian cover (Heliks 2014) is almost identical to the Dutch original, save the addition of the publisher's red logo and the omission of the word "novel".

A second series of literal reproductions begins with the German hardback cover (Hanser Berlin 2014), which retains the horizontally split layout and cloudy sky of the Dutch original, but renders the clouds in a painting rather than a photograph. The author's name runs across the skyline in dark blue but is backed by a sea-blue line creating the suggestion of a seascape rather than a landscape. This becomes more tangible in the German paperback edition (Diogenes 2018), which portrays a foreground of calm, azure waters leading to a thin horizon of land set against a blue sky filled with white, cumulous clouds.

The element of the clouded seascape returns in the third series of literal reproductions, beginning with the UK hardcover (Harvill Secker 2016) that portrays a man and a woman in turn-of-the-century dress standing together on a beach. Their faces are blurred, and the grey, cloudy sky conjures a gloomy romance. A young boy bends down to collect something in the surf. The cover was reused with minimal changes in the Australian (Text 2016) and Croatian (Fraktura 2016) editions.

On the level of thematic reproduction, all covers discussed above can be said to be perpetuating the same visual motif of a clouded horizon, which can be traced back to the Dutch original. The emphasis on the sky is intensified in the German hardback cover, both through the visual prominence of the painted clouds and its modified title, *Der Himmel meines Großvaters* [My Grandfather's Heavens]. In total, fifteen covers feature a cloudy sky, despite there being no direct link to the story itself, apart from a vague portending of tragedy and war.

Another grouping of thematically related covers centres around stylizations of the soldier-artist (see D in Figure 2). This motif originates with the French hardback cover (Gallimard 2015) that features an image of the arm of a fallen soldier holding a paintbrush. A mirror image of the soldier-painter then reappears on the paperback cover (Gallimard 2017). The US hardcover (Pantheon 2016), Afrikaans paperback (Protea 2016), and US paperback (Vintage US 2017) covers portray the two elements of war and art as well, albeit somewhat less literally than their French predecessor. The US hardcover shows a beige painter's palette dolloped with red against an earth-green background. The word "war" is rendered in the same red, thus linking the two themes through the colour of blood. The Afrikaans cover reproduces a sepia-tone image of the protagonist in his uniform and sets the author's name and the book's title in white letter type in the middle of the image against a background of thick blood-red paint strokes. The US paperback is the most abstract of the group and evokes layers of dripping paint in various dark tones.

A final series of thematically related covers deals with stylizations of soldiers, trenches and battlefields. Two covers are notable here: the Hungarian (Európa 2016) and UK paperback (Vintage 2017). Both feature a field of red poppies that recalls John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields" and herald what has become the quintessential trans-national commemorative symbol of the Great War.

These various peritextual similarities in *War and Turpentine's* book covers are not random and suggest three main constraints shaping publishers' decisions: the idiosyncratic taste of individual publishers (as one editor we surveyed declared, "We loved the original cover and we used it in our edition"), series consistency (as in the case of the

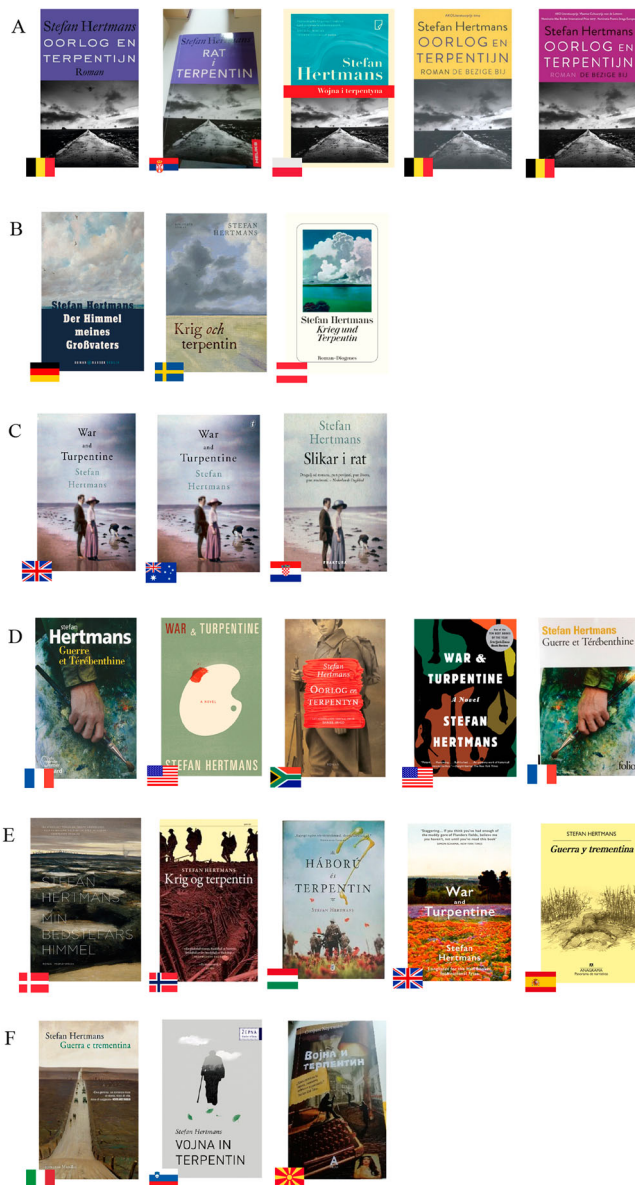


Figure 2. Twenty-four War and Turpentine covers arranged by similarities in visual elements. (A) Black-and-white photograph of landscape with road leading to horizon and a cloudy sky. L to R: Dutch (De Bezige Bij, original hardcover), Serbian (Heliks, paperback), Polish (Marginesy, hardcover), Dutch (De Bezige Bij, hardcover reprint), Dutch (De Bezige Bij, 2018 paperback). (B) Painted landscape and a sky filled with cumulus clouds. L to R: German (Hanser Berlin, hardcover), Swedish (Norstedts, hardcover), German (Diogenes, Austrian paperback) (C) Well-dressed man and woman at the seaside. L to R: English (Harvill Secker, UK hardcover), English (Text, Australian paperback), Croatian (Fractura, hardcover) (D) Stylizations of the soldier-artist. L to R: French (Gallimard [Du Monde Entier], hardcover), English (Pantheon, US hardcover), Afrikaans (Protea Boekhuis, paperback), English (Vintage, US paperback), French (Gallimard [Folio], paperback). (E) Stylizations of soldiers, trenches and/or battlefields. L to R: Danish (People’s Press, paperback), Norwegian (Pax, hardcover), Hungarian (Európa, hardcover), English (Vintage, UK paperback), Spanish (Anagrama, paperback). (F) Multiple, less explicit similarities with the above. L to R: Italian (Marsilio, hardcover), Slovenian (Studentska založba [Žepna Beletrina], paperback), Macedonian (Antolog, paperback).

Spanish translation, whose design conforms to the standard style of *Panorama de narativas*'s iconic yellow background), and isomorphic dynamics linked to language dominance. All of these constraints can be understood to serve economic and symbolic aims simultaneously, as the function of a book's cover is to attract potential consumers as well as to provide readers with classificatory cues about a book's value within a given culture. As Pellatt (2013) shows in her study of the "paratranslation" of Chinese book covers for non-Chinese readers, publishers of translated books often resort to cultural stereotypes to accomplish this. The present case suggests that, in the absence of readily available cultural stereotypes for Flanders, many foreign publishers either defaulted to the original cover or took their cues from the covers of the most central languages.

Cross-field interactions can also be traced in another peritextual element within a book's cover: blurbs. Blurbs are short snippets in praise of the text written by a critic, another author, a prize jury or some other conveyor of recognition. Often, they are derived from book reviews in newspapers. In the case of *War and Turpentine*, early covers tended to contain blurbs from reviews in Dutch-language newspapers and magazines. In regions where reception networks are highly integrated across languages, as in the Scandinavian countries, blurbs were sometimes sourced from neighbouring reception fields: the Swedish cover contains two blurbs from Danish newspapers, for instance. Of the covers in the first wave of translations (those appearing before the English translation), all sourced their blurbs from either Dutch or Belgian newspapers or from the local press. After the appearance of the English translation and the positive critical reception it eventually generated, blurbs from the anglophone fields of reception, specifically Mukherjee's review in *The Guardian* and Garner's review in *The New York Times*, begin to appear on the covers of translations in other language markets. All covers published after the English translation devote at least one blurb to an anglophone source. The German paperback edition and the Macedonian translation use exclusively anglophone blurbs on their covers. The Croatian and Spanish versions quote *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* among other international newspapers.

Transnational processes of production and reception come full-circle in the remarketing of the Dutch original. Its latest cover, that of its twenty-fourth print run, features three blurbs: one from the AKO Literatuurprijs jury report, one from *The New York Times*, one from *The Guardian*. Neel Mukherjee is mentioned by name.

We do not delve into the specific circumstances of each cover's creation here, i.e. what instructions the cover designers received from the publisher or editor, or whether likenesses to other covers were intentional. It would be interesting to follow up the evidence of cross-field interaction we have presented with interviews with the cover designers themselves. While we illustrate the phenomenon here, further research is needed to more fully understand paratextual convergences across material and linguistic fields.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the centre/periphery model

The extraordinary worldwide success of *War and Turpentine*, a book by an author relatively unknown outside his small language area that nonetheless found its way into thirty languages and counting, involved many agents working within and across

many material and national fields. To understand how they interacted to propel the book around the world, we put forward a model that describes a single, widely translated book's travels from local creation to transnational production and reception. We focused particularly on the agents specialised in shepherding the book to and through the transnational literary field. As sociologists of translation have shown, this field is characterised by asymmetric relations of power at the level of language, with English occupying a central position, French and German occupying semi-central positions, and all other languages crowded out to the periphery of the world market for translations. This dominance is reinforced by the fact that book producers at the centre are both intertwined in and drivers of processes of globalisation and conglomeration in worldwide publishing. When a book from the periphery enters the transnational literary field – in our case, through the intervention of *War and Turpentine's* foreign rights manager – it becomes subject to the structural dynamics and power relations of that field. When a critical mass of powerful publishers rally behind a title in word and deed, dynamics of isomorphism can sometimes lead to a chain reaction of rights acquisitions that quickly jumpstart new cycles of creation, production and reception in many languages.

In our case, these “first wave” cycles played out more or less simultaneously with each other in each of their respective national fields. However, as each translation progressed through creation, production and reception, often its trajectory was influenced by factors that can be traced back to the book's other material cycles, in other languages. A clear example of this can be found in *War and Turpentine's* title changes: the German hardback publisher's decision to opt for a non-literal translation of the book's title was emulated by the Danish publisher but later changed to a literal translation by the German paperback publisher when sales of the German hardback (and Danish paperback) flatlined and the author protested. We observed various patterns of transnational influence in the cover art of various book covers and in the appropriation of blurbs from other languages as well.

Our primary aim in this article was, first, to describe the process and the agents involved in the circulation of a widely translated novel, and, second, to provide evidence of interaction across *War and Turpentine's* first-wave material cycles. A next step will be to better understand how these cross-field interactions square with current views of a world market for translations divided according to a very few central languages and very many peripheral ones. Surely, imitation across national and material fields is not random: agents tended to follow some of their foreign peers rather than others. The title's anglophone reception – including the influential review by Neel Mukherjee in *The Guardian* and the book's inclusion in the *New York Times* “top ten books of 2016” list – had an important and in some cases decisive impact on publishers considering the title in other language fields, as the second-wave translations of *War and Turpentine* show. It was also quickly seized upon in the (re)marketing strategies of publishers who had already acquired the title, as well as by the book's original publisher, many of which appropriated anglophone blurbs on their covers. At first glance, this seems to underwrite the hypercentrality of English and, similarly, the transnational symbolic power of anglophone critics. However, the benefit of a relational, processual and cumulative perspective such as the one we put forward here is that it nuances the centre/periphery analytical model and helps to show that *War and Turpentine's* success, including its breakthrough in

English, was the result of interactions across co-implicated cycles of creation, production and reception mediated via the transnational literary field. In short, it shows how a book with “all the markings of a future classic” also carries with it the markings of a transnational past.

Notes

1. This article is the result of an entirely joint and co-ordinated effort on the part of the authors. Jack McMartin is the author of the sections “Towards a sociological model of transnational creation, production and reception”, “*War and Turpentine* in the sphere of transnational production” and “*War and Turpentine* in the sphere of transnational reception” and Paola Gentile is the author of “Tracing cross-field interactions through *War and Turpentine*’s book covers”, the introduction and the conclusion. The research-related tasks (interviews and surveys) were equally distributed between the two authors.
2. The interviews and written correspondence with Nagtegaal, Hertmans and Bousset were conducted in Dutch. Quotations included in this article were translated into English by Jack McMartin.
3. Not all translated books circulate through the transnational literary field. Some come about through bilateral interactions between two national and/or linguistic fields and do not involve agents operating in the transnational literary field. However, in the era of globalization, most widely translated books do.
4. Passa Porta and the Flemish Literature Fund are positioned at the intersection between national and transnational spheres (see McMartin 2019a, 2019b). Several other reviewers of *War and Turpentine* in various languages have links with the two organisations, including the Danish author Jens Christian Grøndahl and the French critic Florence Noiville.
5. We are grateful to all the publishers for granting us permission to reproduce the book covers.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Paola Gentile is a postdoctoral researcher and adjunct professor of Dutch at the University of Trieste. She was a postdoctoral researcher from 2016 to 2019 at KU Leuven with a project on the selection, reception and image building of Dutch-language literature translated into Italian. Since 2019, she has been working on the project *The Imagological Importance of Translation Policy: The Transfer of Estonian Images through Translation*, coordinated by Luc van Doorslaer at the University of Tartu. Her research interests include the reception of Dutch-language literature in Italy, translation and imagology, and the sociology of translation.

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