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The Intellectual Field
A World Apart

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Q. Let’s take a particular domain of the social space that you have discussed in an article in German: the literary field. “It is remarkable”, you write, “that all those who have busied themselves scientifically with literary or artistic works … have always neglected to take into account the social space in which are situated those who produce the works and their value.” An analysis which grasps this social space solely as a “milieu”, “context” or “social background” seems to you insufficient. So what is a “literary field”, what are its principles of construction?

A. The notion of field of cultural production (which is specified as artistic field, literary field, scientific field, etc.) allows one to break away from vague references to the social world (via words such as “context”, “milieu”, “social base”, “social background”) with which the social history of art and literature usually contents itself. The field of cultural production is this altogether particular social world referred to in the traditional notion of a republic of letters. But we must not remain on the level of what is merely a convenient image. And if one can observe all kinds of structural and functional homologies between the social field as a whole, or the political field, and the literary field, which, like them, has its dominated and its dominators, its conservatives and its avant-garde, its subversive struggles and its mechanisms of reproduction, the fact remains that each of these phenomena assumes within it an altogether specific form. The homology may be described as a resemblance in difference. Talking of a homology between the political field and the literary field is to affirm the existence of structurally equivalent – which does
not mean identical – characteristics in different groupings. This is a complex relation which those who have the habit of thinking in terms of all or nothing will hasten to demolish. From a certain point of view, the literary field (or the scientific field) is a field like all the others (this remark is directed against all forms of hagiography or, quite simply, against the tendency to think that social universes in which these exceptional realities, art, literature or science are produced cannot but be totally different, different from every point of view): it involves power – the power to publish or to refuse publication, for instance; it involves capital – the capital of the established author which can be partly transferred into the account of a young and still unknown author by a highly positive review or a preface; one can observe here, as in other fields, power relations, strategies, interests, etc. But there is not a single one of the characteristics designated by these concepts which does not assume in the literary field a specific and altogether irreducible function. For example, if it is true that the literary field is, like every field, the locus of power relationships (and of struggles aiming to transform or maintain them), the fact remains that the power relations which are imposed on all the agents entering the field – and which weigh with a particular brutality on the new entrants – assume a special form: they are, indeed, based on a very particular form of capital, which is both the instrument and the object of competitive struggles within the field, that is, symbolic capital as a capital of recognition or consecration, institutionalized or not, that the different agents or institutions have been able to accumulate in the course of previous struggles, at the cost of specific activities and specific strategies. One would still need to specify the nature of this recognition which can be measured neither by commercial success – it would be, rather, its opposite – nor by mere social recognition – belonging to academies, winning prizes, etc. – nor even by mere fame, which, if acquired for the wrong reasons, may discredit you. But what I have said will be enough to show you that I’m talking about something very particular. In short, with the notion of field, one gives oneself the means of grasping particularity in generality, and generality in particularity. One may demand of the most highly specialized monograph (on the French literary field at the time of Flaubert, on the revolution brought about by Manet within the artistic field, on struggles within the literary field at the end of the nineteenth century, studies which I am carrying out at present) that it provide general propositions on the functioning of the fields, and from a general theory of the functioning of the fields one can draw very powerful hypotheses on the functioning of a particular state of a particular field (for example, the field of producers of individual houses, which I am studying). But mental habits are so strong – and especially among those who deny their existence – that the notion of literary (or artistic) field is doomed to two reductions, each the opposite of the other: one can see in it a reaffirmation of the irreducibility of the world of art or literature, thus instituted as a universe apart, above the strategies, interests and struggles of everyday life; or, on the other hand, one can reduce it to the very thing against which it is constructed, by reducing these strategies, these interests or these struggles to those which take place in the political field or in ordinary existence. To give you at least one example
of these uncomprehending criticisms which destroy a complex notion by reducing it, often in all good faith, to the level of ordinary or scientific common sense in opposition to which it was erected – and such criticisms have every likelihood of receiving the approval of all those who are reassured by a return to the obvious – I would like to refer rapidly to an article by Peter Bürger, who writes: “Bourdieu, as opposed to [Adorno], defends a functionalist approach” [the labelling, which is the “scholarly” equivalent of the insult, is also a common strategy, and all the more powerful the more the label is, as here, both more of a stigma and more imprecise, thus irrefutable – P. B.]. “He analyzes the actions of subjects in what he calls the ‘cultural field’ by taking into account exclusively the chance of winning power and prestige and considers objects merely as strategic means which the producers employ in the struggle for power.” Peter Bürger accuses me of reductionism, a theory which he has himself taken the precaution of first reducing: he behaves as if I reduced the functioning of the literary field to that of the political field (by adding “exclusively” and “merely”). In reality, what I say is that, like the political field, or any other field, the literary field is the site of struggles (and who could deny it? Not Peter Bürger, in any case, given the strategy he has just employed against me …); but that these struggles have specific stakes, and that the power and prestige which they pursue are of an altogether particular type (if you have been following me, you have probably noticed that I’ve had to use, despite its lack of elegance, the adjective “specific” some twenty times!). In short, Peter Bürger reproaches me with leaving out the specificity of artistic struggles and of the interests that are engaged in them, the very thing, that is, that he began by excluding, by a strange blind spot on his part, from the notion of field which aimed precisely at explaining this specificity. This sort of selective blindness, of which my writings are often the victim, seems to me to bear witness to the resistances aroused by a scientific analysis of the social world.

To return to your question – but I think this critical preamble wasn’t without its use – I would say that the literary field is a force-field as well as a field of struggles which aim at transforming or maintaining the established relation of forces: each of the agents commits the force (the capital) that he has acquired through previous struggles to strategies that depend for their general direction on his position in the power struggle, that is, on his specific capital. Concretely, these are, for example, the permanent struggles that oppose the ever-emergent avant-gardes to the recognized avant-garde (and which must not be confused with the struggle which sets the avant-garde in general against “bourgeois artists”, as they said in the nineteenth century). Poetry is thus the locus, in France since the mid-nineteenth century, of a permanent revolution (the cycles of renewal of the dominant school are very short): the new entrants, who are also the youngest, question what was in the preceding revolution set up against the previous orthodoxy (you have, for instance, the revolt of the Parnassians against romantic “lyricism”). This incessant revolt against the establishment is expressed, on the level of works of literature, by a process of purification. Poetry is more and more completely reduced to its
“essence”, that is, to its quintessence, in the alchemical sense, the more it is stripped in successive revolutions of everything which, although it is an accessory, seemed to define “the poetic” as such: lyricism, rhyme, metre, so-called poetic metaphor, etc.

As far as the question of limits is concerned, we must be wary of the positivist vision which, for the needs of statistics, for example, determines limits by a so-called operational decision which arbitrarily settles in the name of science a question which is not settled in reality, that of knowing who is an intellectual and who isn’t, who are the “real” intellectuals, those who really realize the essence of the intellectual. In fact, one of the major issues at stake in the struggles that occur in the literary or artistic field is the definition of the limits of the field, that is, of legitimate participation in the struggles. Saying of this or that tendency in writing that “it just isn’t poetry” or “literature” means refusing it a legitimate existence, excluding it from the game, excommunicating it. This symbolic exclusion is merely the reverse of the effort to impose a definition of legitimate practice, to constitute, for instance, as an eternal and universal essence a historical definition of an art or a genre corresponding to the specific interests of those who hold a certain specific capital. When it succeeds, this strategy which, like the competence it mobilizes, is inseparably artistic and political (in the specific sense), is of a nature to ensure that these people have power over the capital held by all the other producers, in so far as, through the imposition of a definition of legitimate practice, it is the rule of the game which will most favour the trumps that they hold which tends to be imposed on everybody (and especially, at least in the long run, on the consumers); it is their accomplishments which become the measure of all accomplishments. You see, in passing, that the aesthetic concepts that a certain aesthetic theory forces itself to ground in reason, deductively, on the Aristotelian model, and whose inconsistency, incoherence, or mere vagueness people have noted before me (here I could mention Wittgenstein), are, paradoxically, necessary only if one sets them back in the purely sociological logic of the field in which they are generated and have functioned as symbolic strategies in struggles for symbolic domination, that is, for control over a particular use of a particular category of signs and, thereby, over the way the natural and social world is envisaged.

This dominant definition imposes itself on everyone, and in particular on the new entrants, as a more or less absolute right of entry. And it is easy to understand that struggles over the definition of genres, of poetry at the turn of the century, of the novel since the Second World War and later with the defenders of the “nouveau roman”, are something altogether different from futile wars of words: the overthrowing of the dominant definition is the specific form taken by revolutions in these universes. And it is easier to understand how confrontations which will become the object of academic analyses or debates, like all the quarrels between the Ancients and the Moderns and all revolutions, romantic or other, are experienced by the protagonists as questions of life or death.

Q. The field of power, in so far as it exercises its domination within the totality of fields, exercises an influence over the literary field. However, you grant to this
field a “relative autonomy” whose historical process of formation you analyse. What, today, is the concrete situation with regard to the autonomy of this literary field?

A. The fields of cultural production occupy a dominated position in the field of power: that is a major fact ignored by ordinary theories of art and literature. Or, to retranslate this into a more common (but inadequate) language, I could say that artists and writers, and more generally intellectuals, are a dominated fraction of the dominant class. They are dominant, in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital and even, at least as far as certain of them are concerned, the possession of a volume of cultural capital great enough to exercise power over cultural capital; but writers and artists are dominated in their relations with those who hold political and economic power. To avoid any misunderstanding, I have to emphasize that this domination is not exercised any longer, as it used to be, through personal relations (like that between a painter and the person who has commissioned a painting or between writer and patron), but takes the form of a structural domination exercised through very general mechanisms, such as those of the market. This contradictory position of dominant-dominated, of dominated among the dominant or, to make use of the homology with the political field, of the left wing of the right wing, explains the ambiguity of the positions they adopt, an ambiguity which is linked to this precariously balanced position. Despite their revolt against those they call the “bourgeois”, they remain loyal to the bourgeois order, as can be seen in all periods of crisis in which their specific capital and their position in the social order are really threatened (one need think only of the positions adopted by writers, even the most “progressive”, like Zola, when faced with the Commune).

The autonomy of the fields of cultural production, a structural factor which determines the form of struggles internal to that field, varies considerably depending on different periods within the same society, and depending on different societies. And the relative strength, within the field, of the two poles, and the relative importance of the roles allotted to the artist or the intellectual, thereby also vary. With, on the one hand, at one extreme, the function of expert, or technician, offering his or her symbolic services to the dominant (cultural production also has its technicians, like the conveyor-belt producers of bourgeois theatre or the hack producers of pulp literature), and, on the other hand, at the other extreme, the role, won and defended against the dominant, of the free, critical thinker, the intellectual who uses his or her specific capital, won by virtue of autonomy and guaranteed by the very autonomy of the field, to intervene in the field of politics, following the model of Zola or Sartre.

Q. Intellectuals in West Germany define themselves, at least since the ’68 movement, as being pretty much on the left; they think of themselves as being in opposition to the dominant class. This is demonstrated by the relatively large impact of the “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School or of philosophers such as
Ernst Bloch. You, however, assign to intellectuals, in relation to your analysis of symbolic struggles, a place within the dominant class. The theatre of these symbolic struggles, as you say, is “the dominant class itself”; it is thus a question of “fractional struggles” within a class of which intellectuals form a part. How do you come to this analysis? Shouldn’t we raise the question of the possibilities for the literary field or for certain of its sectors of acting on the field of power? Isn’t this precisely the claim of a committed, active and realist literature?

A. Cultural producers hold a specific power, the properly symbolic power of showing things and making people believe in them, of revealing, in an explicit, objectified way, the more or less confused, vague, unformulated, even unformulable experiences of the natural world and the social world, and of thereby bringing them into existence. They may put this power at the service of the dominant. They may also, in the logic of their struggle within the field of power, put their power at the service of the dominated in the social field taken as a whole: it is well known that “artists”, from Hugo to Mallarmé, from Courbet to Pissarro, have often identified their struggles of dominated-dominant against the “bourgeois” with the struggles of the dominated as such. But, and this is true also of the so-called “organic intellectuals” of revolutionary movements, alliances founded on the homology of position (dominant-dominated=dominated) are always more uncertain, more fragile, than solidarities based on an identity of position and, thereby, of condition and habitus.

The fact remains that the specific interests of cultural producers, in so far as they are linked to fields that, by the very logic of their functioning, encourage, favour or impose the transcending of personal interest in the ordinary sense, can lead them to political or intellectual actions that can be called universal.

Q. What change does your theory involve for the science of literature, the interpretation of the literary work, or for the traditional space of the science of literature? You reject both internal hermeneutics and intertextuality, both an essentialist analysis and the “philosophy of biography”, to take up the critical terms you use to describe Sartre’s work on Flaubert. When you grasp “the work of art as an expression of the field in its totality”, what sort of consequences does that have?

A. The theory of the field does lead both to a rejection of the direct relating of individual biography to the work of literature (or the relating of the “social class” of origin to the work) and also to a rejection of the internal analysis of an individual work or even of intertextual analysis. This is because what we have to do is all these things at the same time. I postulate the existence of a pretty rigorous correspondence, a homology, between the space of works considered in their differences, their variations (in the manner of intertextuality), and the space of producers and institutions of production, reviews, publishing houses, etc. We have to note the different positions in the field of production as they may be defined by taking into
account the genre being practised, rank in this genre, which can be decided by such factors as places of publication (publisher, review, gallery, etc.) and the signs of recognition or, quite simply, the length of time that has elapsed since they entered the game, but also by more external indicators, such as social and geographical origin, which can be retranslated into positions occupied within a field. To all these different positions correspond the positions adopted in the space of modes of expression, of literary or artistic forms (alexandrine or other metres, rhyme or free verse, sonnet or ballad, etc.), of themes and, of course, of all sorts of more subtle signs that traditional literary analysis detected long ago. In other words, to read a work adequately, in the singularity of its textuality, one has to read it consciously or unconsciously in its intertextuality, that is, across the system of variants by which it is situated within the space of contemporary works; but this diacritical reading is inseparable from a structural apprehension of the relevant author who is defined, in his dispositions and the aesthetic positions he adopts, by the objective relations which define and determine his position in the space of production and which determine or guide the relations of competition that he entertains with other authors and the set of strategies, formal strategies especially, which make of him a “real” artist or a “real” writer – in opposition to the “naive” artist or writer, such as “le douanier” Rousseau or Brisset, who do not know, properly speaking, what they are doing. This doesn’t mean that non-naive artists, whose paradigm, in my eyes, is Duchamp, are totally aware of everything that they are doing, which would amount to making of them cynics or impostors. It is necessary and sufficient for them to be “with it”, for them to be up to date with what has happened and is happening in the field, for them to have a “historical feel” for the field, for its past and also its future, for its future developments, for all that still remains to be done. All of this is a form of the feel for the game, which excludes cynicism, which even demands that you get caught up in the game, taken up by the game to the point of being able to anticipate its future. But this doesn’t at all imply a theory of the game as game (which would be enough to transform the illusio as an investment in the game or interest in the game, into an illusion pure and simple) nor even a theory of the game, of the laws according to which it functions and the rational strategies that are necessary to win in it. Non-naivety does not exclude a form of innocence … In short, the essentially diacritical nature of the production which occurs within a field means that one can and must read the whole field, both the field in which people adopt certain positions in order to make a stand and the field of positions as such, in every work produced in these conditions. This implies that all the oppositions habitually made between external and internal, hermeneutics and sociology, text and context, are totally fictitious; they are meant to justify sectarian refusals, unconscious prejudices (and in particular the aristocratism of the lector who doesn’t want to get his hands dirty by studying the sociology of the producers) or, quite simply, the desire for the least expenditure of effort. This is because the method of analysis that I am proposing cannot really be put into operation other than at the cost of an enormous amount of work. It demands that you do everything done by the adepts of each of the methods known (internal
reading, biographical analysis, etc.), in general on the level of one single author, and that everything that you also do has to be done in order to really construct the field of works and the field of producers and the system of relations established between these two sets of relations.

Q. What place, in your opinion, is occupied by the subject who produces literature or art? Does the old representation of the writer as a “creator of the symbolic”, as the person who “names” or who “sees” in the sense Cassandra sees, that old but still intact and active representation, still seem to you to be important? What use can a writer draw from your theory?

A. The author really is a creator, but in an entirely different sense from that understood by literary or artistic hagiography. Manet, for instance, brings about a real symbolic revolution, in the same way as do certain great religious or political prophets. He profoundly transforms our world-view, that is, the categories of perception and evaluation of the world, the principles of construction of the social world, the definition of what is important and what isn’t, of what deserves to be represented and what doesn’t. For example, he inaugurates and imposes the representation of the contemporary world, men wearing top hats and carrying umbrellas, the urban landscape, in its ordinary triviality. This is a rejection of all the hierarchies, both intellectual and social, which identify the most noble (worthy as such of being represented) with the most ancient – ancient costume, the plaster casts of painting studios, the obligatory subjects of the Greek or biblical tradition, etc. In this sense, the symbolic revolution, which overturns mental structures and deeply upsets people’s minds – which explains the violence of the reactions of bourgeois critics and public – may be called the revolution par excellence. The critics, who perceive and denounce the avant-garde painter as a political revolutionary, aren’t altogether wrong, even if the symbolic revolution is doomed, most of the time, to remain confined to the symbolic domain. The power of naming, in particular of naming the unnameable, that which is still unnoticed or repressed, is a considerable power. Words, said Sartre, can wreak havoc. This is the case, for instance, when they bring into public and thus official and open existence, when they show or half-show, things which existed only in an implicit, confused, or even repressed state. To represent, to bring to light, is no small task. And one can, in this sense, speak of creation.

Note