

THE RULES
OF ART

*Genesis and Structure
of the Literary Field*

Translated by
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Pierre Bourdieu

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C'est en lisant qu'on devient liseron.

RAYMOND QUENEAU

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Translator's Preface

Tackling a major opus by Pierre Bourdieu is particularly daunting since he has been so well served by many previous English translators. I owe a debt to my predecessors, even if I have not always followed their precedents.

The Rules of Art is a complex book which spans too many academic fields for any one translator to claim particular expertise. In the Prologue, a reading of Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, and in the first part, about the conquest of autonomy in the field of cultural production, Bourdieu invites us on a 'walk through the woods' of the literary and artistic fields in the second half of the nineteenth century, including byways forgotten even by those well versed in French literary history. Portions of part II, which lays the foundation of what he calls a 'science of works of art' and of part III, an analysis of the pure aesthetic and alternatives to it, have appeared previously in a variety of contexts, but they have since been revised in the writing of this work.

I have respected Bourdieu's 'hierarchy of text', in which he complements the main argument with illustrative text in smaller type, and both are supported by a network of footnotes, many of them pithy, now moved to the end of the text. Several chapters have appendices which furnish concrete examples or push an argument in a polemical direction. His footnotes are so rich that I have hesitated to add to their number, except for occasional glosses of his key theoretical terms for those new to his thought, and of literary or

artistic movements where these seemed essential. For his citations, I have endeavoured to discover English editions, and if I could not find one, I have reproduced his reference and translated the quoted passages myself. In general, his style in French has a willed 'literariness' about it, which I have attempted to preserve, sometimes keeping his plays on words by putting his French in italics and parentheses after English renderings which cannot do them justice. Readers will be aware – and Bourdieu's self-reflexiveness does not allow us to forget – that this book is written within a charged intellectual field both in France, where sociology often struggles within a hierarchy that puts philosophy at the pinnacle of thought, and in Europe, where a basis for collective action by scholars and artists, such as he tries to provide in his Postscript, is rendered more difficult by competitiveness within their fields and threats to their autonomy emanating from outside.

I wish to thank Armand Mattelart for daring me when I first read the book to contact Bourdieu, who patiently answered the queries I brought to him. This project would have been impossible without the selfless patience of Shoggy Waryn of MIT, a second reader who accompanied me through every page, Ann Bone, whose contribution extended beyond simple copy-editing, and Kerry Emanuel, whose soft heart and customized software took much of the pain out of a labour of love.

Preface



Angel. Eminently suitable for love and literature.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*

Not *everything* appears in the collection of foolish quotations, so there's hope.

RAYMOND QUENEAU

'Shall we allow the social sciences to reduce literary experience – the most exalted that man may have, along with love – to surveys about our leisure-activities, when it concerns the very meaning of our life?'¹ Such a question, lifted from one of the innumerable timeless and nameless defences of reading and of culture, would certainly have unleashed the furious mirth that the well-meaning commonplaces of his day inspired in Flaubert. And what to say of such shopworn tropes of the scholastic cult of the Book, or of such supposedly Heideggerian-Hölderlinian revelations, each worthy of enriching the 'Bouvarde-Pécuchetian anthology' (the phrase is Queneau's) as these: 'To read is first of all to be torn out of oneself, and of one's world';² 'It is no longer possible to be in the world without the help of books';³ 'In literature, essence is revealed at a stroke; it is given in all its truth, with all its truth, like the very truth of the being which reveals itself?'⁴

If it seems to be necessary to begin by evoking some of these vapid reflections on art and life, the unique and the common, literature and science, the (social) sciences which may well elaborate laws but only by losing the 'singularity of experience', and literature which elabor-

ates no laws but which 'deals always with the individual person, in his absolute singularity',⁵ it is because, indefinitely reproduced by and for scholarly liturgy, they are also inscribed in all minds fashioned by the School. Functioning as filters or screens, they continually threaten to block or confound the understanding of scientific analysis of books and of reading.

Does the claim for the autonomy of literature, which found its exemplary expression in Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, imply that the reading of literary texts should be exclusively literary? Is it true that scientific analysis is doomed to destroy that which makes for the specificity of the literary work and of reading, beginning with aesthetic pleasure? And that the sociologist is wedded to relativism, to the levelling of values, to the lowering of greatness, to the abolition of those differences which make for the singularity of the 'creator', always located in the realm of the Unique? And all because the sociologist is thought to stand on the side of the greatest number, the average, the mean, and thus of the mediocre, the minor, the *minores*, the mass of petty, obscure actors, justly unrecognized, and to be an ally of what is repugnant to the 'creators' of an era, the content and the context, the 'referent' and the *hors-texte*, beyond the pale of literature?

For a good number of accredited writers and readers of literature, not to mention philosophers, of greater or lesser standing, who, from Bergson to Heidegger and beyond, intend to assign science a priori limits, the case is already made. And countless are those who forbid sociology any profaning contact with the work of art. We might cite Gadamer, who places at the outset of his 'art of understanding' a postulate of incomprehensibility or, at the very least, of inexplicability: 'The fact that the work of art represents a challenge to our understanding because it *indefinitely escapes all explanation*, and offers an *ever insurmountable resistance* to whoever would translate it into the identity of a concept, has been precisely for me the point of departure for my hermeneutic theory.'⁶ I will not debate this postulate (but does it even bear debating?). I would simply ask why so many critics, so many writers, so many philosophers take such satisfaction in professing that the experience of a work of art is ineffable, that it escapes by definition all rational understanding; why they are so eager to concede without a struggle the defeat of knowledge; and where does their irrepressible need to belittle rational understanding come from, this rage to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art, or, to use a more suitable word, its transcendence.

Why such insistence on conferring upon the work of art – and upon the understanding it calls for – this *status of exception*, if not

in order to stamp with prejudicial discredit the (necessarily laborious and imperfect) attempts of those who would submit these products of human action to the ordinary treatment of ordinary science, and thereby assert the (spiritual) transcendence of those who know how to *recognize* that transcendence? Why such implacable hostility to those who try to advance the understanding of the work of art and of aesthetic experience, if not because the very ambition to produce a scientific analysis of that *individuum ineffabile* and of the *individuum ineffabile* who produced it, constitutes a mortal threat to the pretension, so common (at least among art lovers) and yet so 'distinguished', of thinking of oneself as an ineffable individual, capable of ineffable experiences of that ineffable? Why, in short, such *resistance to analysis*, if not because it inflicts upon 'creators', and upon those who seek to identify with them by a 'creative' reading, the last and perhaps the worst of those wounds inflicted, according to Freud, upon narcissism, after those going under the names of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud himself?

Is it legitimate to invoke the experience of the lover, to make of love, as an astonished abandon to the work grasped in its inexpressible singularity, the only form of understanding which accords with the work of art? And to see in the scientific analysis of art, and of the love of art, the form *par excellence* of scientific arrogance, which, under cover of explaining, does not hesitate to threaten the 'creator' and the reader in their liberty and their singularity? Against all those defenders of the unknowable, bent on manning the impregnable ramparts of human liberty against the encroachments of science, I would oppose this very Kantian thought of Goethe's, which all natural scientists and social scientists could claim as their own: 'Our opinion is that it well becomes man to assume that there is something unknowable, but that he does not have to set any limit to his inquiry.'⁷ I think that Kant expresses well the image that scientists have of their enterprise when he suggests that the reconciliation of knowing and being is a sort of *focus imaginarius*, the imaginary from which science must measure itself without ever being able to reach it (despite the illusions of absolute knowledge and the end of history, more common among philosophers than among scientists . . .). As for the threat that science might pose to the liberty and singularity of the literary experience, it suffices, to do justice to the matter, to observe that the ability, procured by science, to explain and understand that experience – and thus to give oneself the possibility of a genuine freedom from one's determinations – is offered to all those who want to and can appropriate it.

A more legitimate fear might be that science, in putting the love of

art under its scalpel, might succeed in killing pleasure, and that, capable of delivering understanding, it might be unable to convey feeling. So one can only approve of an effort like that of Michel Chaillou, when – basing himself on the primacy of feeling, or emotional experience, of *aisthesis* – he offers a literary evocation of the literary life, strangely missing from the ‘literary’ histories of literature.⁸ By contriving to reintroduce into an apparently self-contained literary space what one may call, with Schopenhauer, the *parerga et paralipomena*, the neglected ‘margins’ of the text, all that ordinary commentators leave aside, and by evoking, by the magic virtue of nomination, that which made (and was) the life of authors – the humble domestic details, picturesque if not grotesque or ‘crottesque’ [squalid], of their existence amid its most ordinary setting – he subverts the ordinary hierarchy of literary interests. Armed with all the resources of erudition, not in order to contribute to the sacralizing celebration of the classics, to the cult of ancestors and of the ‘gift of the dead’, but to summon and prepare the reader to ‘clink glasses with the dead’, as Saint-Amant said, Chaillou thus tears fetishized texts and authors from the sanctuary of History and academicism, and sets them free.

How could the sociologist, who must also break with idealism and literary hagiography, not feel an affinity with this ‘carefree knowledge’ [*gai savoir*], which relies on the free associations made possible by a liberated and liberating usage of historical references in order to repudiate the prophetic pomp of the grand critiques of authors and the sacerdotal droning of scholarly tradition? However, contrary to what the common image of sociology might lead one to believe, the sociologist cannot be completely content with the literary evocation of literary life. If attention to the perceptible is perfectly suitable when applied to the text, it does lead to neglect of the essential when it bears on the social world within which the text is produced. The task of bringing authors and their environments back to life could be that of a sociologist, and there is no shortage of analyses of art and literature whose purpose is the reconstruction of a social ‘reality’ that can be understood in the visible, the tangible, and the concrete solidity of daily experience. But, as I shall try to demonstrate throughout this book, the sociologist – close in this respect to the philosopher according to Plato – stands opposed to ‘the friend of beautiful spectacles and voices’ that the writer also is: the ‘reality’ that he tracks cannot be reduced to the immediate data of the sensory experience in which it is revealed; he aims not to offer (in)sight, or feeling, but to construct systems of intelligible relations capable of making sense of sentient data.

Is this to say that one is once more returned to the old antinomy of the intelligible and the sensible? In fact, it will be up to the reader to judge if, as I believe (having experienced it myself), scientific analysis of the social conditions of the production and reception of a work of art, far from reducing it or destroying it, in fact intensifies the literary experience. As we shall see with respect to Flaubert, such analysis seems to abolish the singularity of the ‘creator’ in favour of the relations which made the work intelligible, only better to rediscover it at the end of the task of reconstructing the space in which the author finds himself encompassed and included as a point. To recognize this point in the literary space, which is also the point from which is formed a singular point of view *on* that space, is to be in a position to understand and to feel, by mental identification with a constructed position, the singularity of that position and of the person who occupies it, and the extraordinary effort which, at least in the particular case of Flaubert, was necessary to make it exist.

The love of art, like love itself, even and especially of the *amour fou* kind, feels founded in its object. It is in order to convince oneself of being right in (or having reasons for) loving that such love so often has recourse to commentary, to that sort of apologetic discourse that the believer addresses to himself or herself and which, as well as its minimal effect of redoubling his or her belief, may also awaken and summon others to that belief. This is why scientific analysis, when it is able to uncover what makes the work of art *necessary*, that is to say, its informing formula, its generative principle, its *raison d’être*, also furnishes artistic experience, and the pleasure which accompanies it, with its best justification, its richest nourishment. Through it, sensible love of the work can fulfil itself in a sort of *amor intellectualis rei*, the assimilation of the object to the subject and the immersion of the subject in the object, the active surrender to the singular necessity of the literary object (which, more often than not, is itself the product of a similar submission).

But is this not paying too high a price for the intensification of experience, to have to confront the reduction to historical necessity of something that wants to be lived as an absolute experience, freed from the contingencies of a genesis? In reality, to understand the social genesis of the literary field – of the belief which sustains it, of the language game played in it, of the interests and the material or symbolic stakes engendered in it – is not to surrender to the pleasure of reduction or destruction (even if, as Wittgenstein suggests in his ‘Lecture on ethics’,⁹ the effort to understand no doubt owes something to the ‘pleasure of destroying prejudices’ and to the ‘irresistible seduction’ exercised by ‘explanations of the type “this is *only* that”’),

especially by way of antidote to the pharisaical complacencies of the cult of art).

To seek in the logic of the literary field or the artistic field – paradoxical worlds capable of inspiring or of imposing the most disinterested ‘interests’ – the principle of the work of art’s existence in what makes it historic, but also transhistoric, is to treat this work as an intentional sign haunted and regulated by something else, of which it is also a symptom. It is to suppose that in it is enunciated an expressive impulse which the imposition of form required by the social necessity of the field tends to render unrecognizable. Renouncing the angelic belief in a pure interest in pure form is the price we must pay for understanding the logic of those social universes which, through the social alchemy of their historical laws of functioning, succeed in extracting from the often merciless clash of passions and selfish interests the sublimated essence of the universal. It is to offer a vision more true and, ultimately, more reassuring, because less superhuman, of the highest achievements of the human enterprise.

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Pierre Bourdieu

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