

**BOURDIEU, PIERRE.** *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* Ed. Randal Johnson. Columbia University Press, 1993, viii + 322 pp., \$40.00 cloth, SI 6.50 paper.

Prolific Pierre Bourdieu, French sociologist and author of more than twenty books and one hundred articles (a good many available in English), is represented here by a collection of ten essays previously published between 1968 and 1987—the majority having already appeared in English (three essays on Flaubert began as the 1986 Gauss lectures at Princeton University). Since 1984, Bourdieu is best known in the English-speaking world for his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, in which he asserted that taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (p. 6)

Cultural practices, or what might also be called the practice of culture, consist for Bourdieu of the means by which a social system—in particular one that consists of domination—not only reproduces but also legitimizes itself. And yet for Bourdieu taste and the culture that accommodates and inspires it are neither cause nor effect of this systematic domination. He instead regards taste and the objects it valorizes as epiphenomenal symbols of a total social system, which precisely as symbols implicitly legitimize domination and also provide critical occasions for what he elsewhere calls reflexive sociology (see for example *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*, 1990, and his "best-selling" study of French academic life, *Homo Academicus*, 1988).

In general, then, it is the practice of culture—and in particular the symbolic exchanges that occur therein—that provides Bourdieu with a reflective glass in which to discern the movements of social agents. (The supposition that culture reflects society is no less insightful than the canard that art reflects nature.) Indeed, for Bourdieu the dynamic arc of all such movements can best be plotted amidst the static coordinates of the cultural "field" in and upon which they occur. Hence, to understand the meaning of any cultural, literary, or artistic "movement" (and of course its products) requires a preliminary charting of the field where it takes place. *The Field of Cultural Production* attempts to provide a map of that field as well as a justification for the claim that such a map adequately accounts for all cultural landmarks and, more importantly, both the actual and potential movements that it supposedly sanctions. I take it that a crucial difference between cultural history and the science of sociology requires Bourdieu to provide something more than an account of those social structures requisite for the production of certain cultural artifacts; he must in addition offer a plausible account of cultural movements that *might* have happened in place of the ones that did. Bourdieu does not shy away from such sociological expectation, as for example:

One can also ... undertake a structural explanation of this art [nineteenth-century historical painting] relating it to the institutional conditions of its production: its aesthetic is inscribed (to the point that one can practically

deduce it) in the logic of functioning of a sclerotic academic institution. (p. 240).

But please note that Bourdieu can fulfill the sociological expectation only after he disqualifies aesthetically successful artworks. That is, it is only after collapsing all distinction between artwork and ideology that Bourdieu is able to "deduce" the "aesthetic" of the former, for what he sees "inscribed" in it is nothing but the latter. Failure is by nature transparent—it is rather the opacity of success that Bourdieu needs to describe and "deduce."

*The Field of Cultural Production* is fashioned as both an introduction to Bourdieu's sociology and as a survey of his major essays on art and literature, Randal Johnson, who edited the collection, provides a twenty-five-page introduction that gives a lucid explication of the principal terms in Bourdieu's sociology and a cogent, if uncritical, synopsis of the positions taken in the essays. The ten essays are ranged under three headings: the first three compose a section entitled "The Field of Cultural Production." In the title essay Bourdieu describes the task of a sociology of cultural analysis as follows: "The task is that of constructing the space of positions and the space of position-takings in which they are expressed" (p. 30). But again, this is not a causal model—as it is not the case for Bourdieu that the position-taking embodied by cultural artifacts is *determined* solely by the space of possible positions. Culture and taste, in short, though not determined by society are nonetheless not to be understood as the issue of fully autonomous agents. Rather than either causal *or* autonomous, Bourdieu prefers the term "inseparable" to fusal to recognize the possibility of serious damage resulting from the fall. My contention is that there is damage and a price must be paid. The price is the consequence of regarding the fall as error.

Gutwirth is primarily interested in why we laugh, the conditions for laughter, and what laughter does for the human subject. He believes that the violence of laughter is always directed at individuals or oneself, and still that laughter can do no real damage. Gutwirth is not particularly concerned with what laughter does to language, meaning, and knowledge. And perhaps because of this, he is unable to recognize that these selves and others are the products of epistemological and ontological categories to which the violence of laughter does damage.

In his reading of Baudelaire's text "*De l'essence du rire*," coupled with an explication of the "unsettling" movement of ironic consciousness, Paul de Man (in *Blindness and Insight*) is able critically to assess "the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world." In so doing, he undermines many of Gutwirth's fundamental premises about the human subject. For de Man, the fall of Baudelaire's philosopher and the accompanying laughter do not simply bring about empirical and intersubjective realization (or the collapse of man's pride). They begin a radical reconstruction of subjectivity—a subjectivity that does not contain or reflect language, but is constituted by it. This is not the subject Gutwirth takes as given.

Gutwirth's blinkered analysis of laughter and the comic is due to his reliance on an Enlightenment metaphysics. This is problematic because he refers only obliquely to contemporary critics of these formulations, without taking their work into account. And this is why, for Gutwirth, falling is never violent and never really dangerous and blindness

is never permanent nor disempowering. Yet, the violence of the fall that *does* blind makes blindness a violent insight.

This violent insight can be traced through Jacques Derrida's interpretation, in *Writing and Difference*, of Georges Bataille's laughter as an "absolute renunciation of meaning" and knowledge (p. 256). Bataille laughs at Hegel's "'*submission*' to the self-evidence of meaning" (p. 256). Because Hegel surrenders absolutely to knowledge, for he knows no other aim, he is forced to rid his discourse of poetry, chance, ecstasy, and laughter. Bataille's burst of laughter reveals and exceeds Hegel's inability to sacrifice meaning—a sacrifice "without return and without reserves" (p. 257). Thus, laughter is unrepresentable for Hegel because of the damage it would introduce. This is "the blind spot of Hegelianism" (p. 259). That is, it is Hegel's refusal to see outside the dialectics of Hegelian reason.

For Gutwirth, laughter is violent. But it involves a specific kind of violence. At best, it is the necessarily brief, unenduring, and painless defeat of reason (p. 28). At worst, it is inconsequential (pp. 28, 120, 122). Gutwirth allows for "the subversiveness of laughter as a subversiveness that manages to exact no price" (p. 28). The mitigated violence at persons and institutions is painless aggression because it is "aggression legitimated" (p. 106). It is "the unthreatening aspect of anarchy" (p. 107). In all cases, Gutwirth's violence maintains the structures of language, meaning, knowledge, and reason that are critically assessed by de Man and Bataille (via Derrida).

Thus, Gutwirth can account for the irrationalism of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, who use laughter and humor to attack the structures of reason, logic, and meaning, because as he sees it, these thinkers problematize reason and meaning inconsequentially. Contra Gutwirth, Jean Baudrillard, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, takes their violent anti-rationalism further by not simply deconstructing the categories but dissolving them altogether. For Baudrillard, "we laugh in proportion to the destruction of meaning" (p. 208). For meaning and the construction of subjectivity are epistemologically and ontologically coded notions: "Virtually and literally speaking, *there has never been a linguistic subject ... there has never been a subject of consciousness, and there has never been a subject of the unconscious*" (p. 222). All are (inscribed) fictions, all are simulated models, rational models for "*the subject of knowledge*," which is now also shattered (p. 122).

Many of Gutwirth's analyses of philosophical, literary, and cinematic texts are important. But he is looking in the wrong theoretical places. Gutwirth would do well to consider: Michel Foucault's laughter at the destruction of familiar theoretical landmarks, the destruction of the dialectics of sex and the destruction of the familial order; Helene Cixous's violent feminine laughter of disorder which seeks to refuse, attack, and overthrow the history of reason, the history of writing, and the phallogocentrism of both these traditions; Jean-Francois Lyotard's surprised laughter at the sublime imposition of a forbidden representation; and Gilles Deleuze's joy in the relationship between irony, humor, and the law which accounts for the laughter of Socrates's disciples at their master's death.

Gutwirth accuses Quixote of "human error in the guise of a misreading" (p. 171), as he (Quixote) sweeps facts under the rug of romanticism. Gutwirth can be accused of the reverse: blinded by the light of metaphysics, he can be blamed for his blind refusal

strategically to misread. By contrast, Baudrillard ends his analysis of *Witz* with a hypothesis and a perceptive anecdote: "When we laugh or enjoy, it is because, in one way or another, a twisting or distortion of the signifier or energy has managed to create a void. Thus the story of someone who loses his key in a dark alley and is looking for it under the streetlight, describe the relation between the space of literary or artistic positions and the space of literary or artistic position-takings. I would instead offer the term "microcosm" as an apt description of the model Bourdieu is struggling to put in play here: "In short, it is a question of understanding works of art as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated" (p. 37). Bourdieu's debts to Marx and to Hegel are apparent. But the most admirable, and perhaps most fruitful aspect of Bourdieu's sociological method is the attempt to maintain a certain tension between the static and dynamic components of his model: "*The literary or artistic field is afield of forces, but it is also afield of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces*" (p. 30). Put differently: Bourdieu's achievement has been described as constructing a methodological space between the structuralism of Althusser and the existentialism of Sartre—between, that is, structure and agency.

Another crucial methodological claim, and one incidentally that accords well with Bourdieu's presumption that culture reflects society, is that there, is a specific, but inverted, economic logic to the production, circulation, and value of the symbolic goods of culture. Further, this inverted and quasi-autonomous cultural capital is inevitably tied to economic capital. This claim is perhaps best explicated in light of Bourdieu's well-known concept of symbolic capital: "Symbolic capital' is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a 'credit' which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits" (p. 75). Bourdieu's occasional gift for the terse formulation sums up this inverted logic (and also draws a bead on Kant) in the quip that there is always an interest in disinterest. Some might object that the term that serves as the crux for this economic inversion, *Verneinung* (denial/disavowal), is borrowed from Freud's analysis of individuals and is therefore inappropriately applied to an analysis of social systems. Nonetheless, there is a valuable insight in Bourdieu's claim that what is systematically (and, one might add, necessarily) avoided via the mechanism of disavowal is any recognition of what he calls the *fact* of legitimacy:

To be unaware that a dominant culture owes its main features and social functions—especially that of symbolically legitimizing a form of domination—so the fact that it is not perceived as such, in short, to ignore the fact of legitimacy is either to condemn oneself to a class-based ethnocentrism which leads the defenders of restricted culture so ignore the material foundations of the symbolic domination of one culture by another, or implicitly to commit oneself to a populism which betrays a shameful recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture man effort to rehabilitate middle-brow culture. (p. 129)

The middle section of the collection consists of four essays on Flaubert and provides ample opportunity to measure the success of what Bourdieu terms his "sociology of cultural works." The first thing that needs to be said is that Bourdieu is a sensitive and accomplished reader of Flaubert—here especially of *Sentimental Education*—and that these essays merit reading for that alone. But unfortunately it is just the success of Bourdieu's literary analysis that places a heavier burden of expectation on his sociology. And here he and it fall short. Take for example the way in which Bourdieu characterizes his reading of Flaubert:

What made Flaubert so radically original, and what confers on his work an incomparable *value*, is his relationship, albeit negative, with the whole literary world in which he acted and whose contradictions and problems he assumed absolutely; so that the only chance of grasping and accounting for the singularity of his creative project is to proceed in exactly the reverse direction of those who sing the litany of Uniqueness, (p. 205)

But rather than describe Flaubert as the most typical embodiment of his "whole literary world" by sociologically reconstructing that world, Bourdieu instead reconstructs that world via Flaubert's own presentation of it. That is, the success of Bourdieu's reconstruction of that literary world is deeply indebted to Flaubert's own self-understanding and self-presentation *as an embodiment*—however contradictory and scarred—of the entirety of that world. Bourdieu's sociology of cultural works is thus not flawed, but rather condemned to succeed only in regard to those works which present themselves as embodiments of a whole; works that perform, in other words, as microcosms rather than fragments.

Further, in a display of simultaneous naivete and hubris, Bourdieu summarizes his sociology of cultural works with the following questions: "What do we gain through this particular approach to the work of art? Is it worth reducing and destroying, in short breaking the spell of the work in order to account for it and to learn what it is all about?" (p. 190). However, it is not obviously the case that the meaning of an artwork ("what it is all about") is *separable* from its "spell"; nor ought one have much confidence in the assumedly non-mythic character of academic methods of disenchantment. In regard to disenchantment—and without any desire to add to the volume of writing either critical of or supportive of Bourdieu's stylistic method—it might nonetheless with some justice be reported that the most consistently disenchanting aspect of Bourdieu's sociological program is his style of writing: *caveat lector*.

Under the heading "The Pure Gaze: Essays on Art," the third section of this collection is composed of three final essays. (The last of these is one that originally appeared in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1987, perhaps thereby providing—with this review—some support to Bourdieu's claim regarding the reflexive character of [academic] culture.) But the claim Bourdieu presents here as his innovative conclusion—"what is forgotten ... is the historical process ... establishing the relatively autonomous field of production and with it the realm of pure aesthetics or pure thought whose existence it makes possible" (p. 266)—is neither insightful nor novel. One need only recall Lukács's essays on realism—especially "The Ideology of Modernism"—to

realize the shallowness of Bourdieu's claim. Even Clement Greenberg, the man most often accused of formulating a pure aesthetic for modernist painting, also regards it as a profoundly historical and conventional phenomenon.

Straw persons populate these pages: "the pure gaze" is a straw aesthetic category, "art lover" a straw sociological one. But perhaps it is just, all this hay that provides the overall impression that Bourdieu's essays on art amount to a balanced account, for these straw figures are indeed nicely complemented by a stick-figure version of Kant. I recommend this collection to all who seek distinction for themselves by pretending to understand taste.

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