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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Writing between Genres: Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology *in* Literature

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Abstract

The paper considers the general theoretical and methodological problems of the sociology of literature within the conceptual framework developed by one of the most influential theorists in the field – Pierre Bourdieu. Since the theoretical premises and methodology of the studies presented in his book *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* have already received much attention, we focus on the more marginal aspects of Bourdieu's relationship to literature and their implications for his concept of reflexive sociology. We focus on the various strategies Bourdieu uses to take up literary techniques in his own work and attempt to relate the author's writing to his insights into modernist literature and his critique of sociological positivism. Particular attention is paid to his, conditionally speaking,"anti-autobiographical" texts (*Pascalian Meditations*, *The Biographical Illusion*, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*), which are often associated with prominent names in contemporary political literature. Starting from the general theme of the theory and methodology of the sociology of literature and the narrower theme of Bourdieu's relationship to literature, we attempt to shed light on a theorist whose thought can provide a basis for criticising numerous tendencies in the contemporary literary field, such as the prevalence of biographical reading, autofiction and the referential conception of language, as well as their place in the literary market.

Keywords

sociology of literature, Pierre Bourdieu, reflexive sociology, modernist literature, autobiography

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"I envied the freedom of writers (…), or of the artists who, from Duchamp to Devautour, have, in their own artistic practice, constantly subverted the belief in art and artists."

(*Pascalian Meditations* 2000, 2)

"To objectivize the novelistic illusion, and especially the relation to the so-called real world it assumes, is to remind ourselves that the reality against which we measure all fictions is merely the recognized referent of an (almost) universally shared illusion."

(*The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* 1996, 34).

Introduction: how to be(come) a sociologist of literature?

Although literature has always been concerned with society, while different authoritative and reformative actors have long been interested in social effects of literature, the sociological approach to literature is a relatively recent phenomenon in the system of modern humanities and social sciences. In the first study whose title indicates the emergence of a new (sub)discipline – the 1958 book *Sociologie de la littérature* (*Sociology of Literature*) – the French theorist Robert Escarpit pointed out that "there are at least a thousand and one ways of exploring any literary fact" (1 on page 1). While Escarpit's way of doing sociology of literature is recognizable for the empirical, quantitative analysis of various phenomena in the literary field at the level of production, distribution and reception, one of the most recent general accounts of this disciplinary field confirms the author's humorous observation. Gisèle Sapiro's book entitled *La sociologie de la littérature*, published in 2014 and translated into English in 2023[2], offers a revealing insight into the overall theoretical and methodological complexity of the disciplinary field, which has evolved over more than half a century.

In contrast to the unifying effect of disciplinary terms such as "sociology of literature", Sapiro shows that the history of the discipline has been anything but linear and homogeneous. Developed at the interface of at least two complex disciplines – sociology and literary studies, but also in close contact with other disciplines such as history, anthropology, art history, etc., this disciplinary hybrid has opened up new, exciting fields of research. However, the paths to its institutionalization were and are not easy to find. One of the first questions on this path could be: Is the sociology of literature a branch of sociology or a branch of literary studies? Should it be located primarily in sociology or in literary studies departments? And does the answer to this question depend on the specific contexts in which the sociology of literature develops and expands? And could its theories of literature and methods for analysing the literary field be divided between the two? Or do these questions fail to do justice to the truly interdisciplinary nature of the sociology of literature? Moreover, Sapiro concludes, "too 'sociological' for literary scholars and too 'literary' for sociologists, affiliated in some countries with literature, and in others with sociology, this subdiscipline suffers from a lack of institutionalization that contrasts with the richness of the work produced in the field for half a century" (2 on page 3).

Indeed, as Escarpit warned us half a century ago, it is not easy to be(come) a sociologist of literature. Advocates of the discipline are often misunderstood from at least two sides. The critiques are, in short, based on what literary scholars see as sociological reductionism on the one hand, and sociologists as a rather elitist object of study on the other (3 on page xi). As Bedecarre and Libman – the translators of Sapiro's book – notice against one-dimensional critiques coming from both literary studies and sociology: "the challenges of bringing the sociological perspective to bear upon literary study – or the literary perspective to bear upon sociology – should not be taken lightly" (3 on page xi).

To provide an insight into some of the theoretical and methodological complexity of the disciplinary field, which also arises from the relationship between literature and sociology as distinctive writing 'crafts', we will turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most prolific and influential exponents of this disciplinary hybrid, who has often been the target of both types of criticism. Building on recent research on the status of literature in his work, we will shift the focus from the theoretical and methodological framework of his famous studies on Flaubert and the emergence of the modern, 19th-century literary field gathered in *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (1992, trans. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 1996[4]), and thus further explore the implications of specific uses of literary strategies in his own writing.

How to "do" a sociology of literature?

As a general overview of the production shows, the interdisciplinarity of the sociology of literature is profoundly reflected in the general question of the relationship between the literary text and its social, historical and cultural contexts, as well as in the question of the possible theoretical and methodological choices for the analysis of the literary field, characterized by the tension between internal or text-oriented approaches on the one hand and external or contextually oriented analyses on the other (2 on page 8). Despite this theoretical and methodological split, on the internalist side, sociology of literature generally tends to demystify the assumption of artistic autonomy. It uncovers the social meanings and effects as well as the social conditions of the emergence of literary autonomy (2 on page 8), as opposed to assuming its "autonomous" origin.[1] On the other hand, external analyses of the conditions of production and reception of literature still attempt to distinguish literary books from other types of

[1] The logic of this argument is perhaps most evident in the sociological analysis of avant-garde literature and art, which explicitly deals with the concept of autonomy as a constitutive element of the literary field of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Peter Bürger discusses the concept of autonomy in a way that makes it possible to analyse its historical and social development without denying it. Autonomy, according to Bürger, "describes something real (the detachment of art as a special sphere of human activity from the nexus of the praxis of life) but simultaneously expresses this real phenomenon in concepts that block recognition of the social determinacy of the process. (…) the autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society that both reveals and obscures an actual historical development. All discussion of this category must be judged by the extent to which it succeeds in showing and explaining logically and historically the contradictoriness inherent in the thing itself" (5 on page 36).

books, both on a theoretical and methodological level. As Sapiro explains, general sociological research on literature and the literary field has focused on three main areas of interest: 1) the social conditions of production of literary works (the social, political, ideological, economic, and historical as well as the conditions of the literary field); 2) literary works (with periods, styles, themes, and forms as the object of analysis); and 3) the conditions of reception, appropriation, and social use of literature (2 on page 43). Even if they are only abstractly subsumed under these three broad categories, many objects of sociological research in the literary field often correspond and intertwine in practice.

Among the numerous theories and methods of analysis, of which the Marxist ones are the most prominent, one of the most comprehensive and recognizable approaches, which aims to encompass all three levels of analysis, was founded by one of the most influential French sociologists of the second half of the 20th century – Pierre Bourdieu. Developed at the crossroads of three major schools of thought – marxism, structuralism and durkheimism (6 on page 98) – Bourdieu's comprehensive approach to literature, as well as the analysis of the literary field as a system of relations surrounding modern literature, had a decisive influence on subsequent production at all levels of sociological research. Furthermore, the set of his concepts – such as *field*, *habitus*, *disposition*, *distinction* and *cultural capital* – have entered the general dictionary of contemporary sociological analysis of literature.

The results of the author's decades-long interest in literature were published relatively late – in 1992 – under the title *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (*The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*), which have since received a significant reception, both in monographs and edited volumes on the subject of "Bourdieu & Literature" and in important contributions to the disciplinary field inspired by Bourdieu's thought, such as Pascale Casanova's influential study *La République mondiale des lettres* (*The World Republic of Letters*), published in 1999. As Ahearne and Speller note, the fact that this book revived the animosity between sociology as the supposed reductivist of literature "as literature" and literary studies as the self-proclaimed defender of its autonomy was rather unfortunate, since "Bourdieu's theory of literary autonomy takes shape precisely in reaction to such traditional sociological reductionism" (7 on page 2). Considering this critique against the backdrop of Bourdieu's concept of literature, one might agree with Jeremy Lance that "it can only be maintained at the cost of underestimating the extent of Bourdieu's engagement with the specificities of literary form" (8 on page 67). Furthermore, Ahearne explains that this objection to Bourdieu is itself reductive in relation to his approach: "It fails to do justice to the care Bourdieu takes not to fold, in this case, the literary onto the 'social' as a whole, but to construct the field of the literary as such, the field of literary position-takings as such, the mutating field of literary styles as such" (8 on page 102). While Bourdieu's concept of literature has been the subject of much discussion, in this paper I would like to draw attention to the rather marginalized aspect of his relationship to literature. Namely, I will consider Bourdieu's use of specific literary techniques as a strategy that might shed new light on the current discussion of his conception of literature and the literary field, as well as of his idea of reflexive sociology, starting from the premise that "what Bourdieu actually does with literary resources throughout his oeuvre is not reducible to the theory of literary fields as systematized in *The Rules of Art*" (8 on page 105).

From *literature in sociology* to *sociology in literature*

As for the general criticisms of the sociological study of literature, Bourdieu is aware of the complaints that the sociological research of the "rules" or laws that govern the literary and cultural field may overlook certain aspects of the artistic experience – whether on the part of the creator or on the part of the recipient. It is an experience that philosophy, alongside other disciplines, is constantly trying to describe, maintaining its "singularity" as a basic assumption (4 on page xv). Bourdieu therefore poses the following question:

> 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? (4 on page xvi)

In contrast to the "defenders of the unknowable" (4 on page xvii), Bourdieu doesn't fall for *either – or* construction of the problem (*unique – average*, *text – context*, *artistic – scientific*, etc.). In *The Rules of Art* he attempts to reconcile a literary and even philosophical premise – that literature, because of "its own specific means", "can sometimes say more, even about the social realm, than many writings with scientific pretentions" (4 on page 32) – with the sociological analysis of the distinctive processes of autonomization of literature and the literary field that have made this critical position of literature vis-à-vis society, and its other competing discourses, possible in the first place. Since the theoretical and methodological framework of Bourdieu's capital studies on literature has already received much attention, we want to turn to a different problem and shift the focus from the author's analysis of the rules of the literary field to the use of literary techniques in his own writing and their possible impact on rethinking the relationship between sociological research and its rather "strange" object of analysis – literature, both in Bourdieu's oeuvre and within the field as a whole.

A starting question for this kind of reading could be: Can a sociologist really proclaim "the truth" of the literary text, as

Bourdieu suggests in *The Rules*[2], or could the boundary between the "knowable" and the "unknowable" be problematized in the sociological discourse itself? Furthermore, are there any analogies between a novelistic and a sociological insight into the social world? Indeed, not only Bourdieu's description of Flaubert as a literary analyst of society, but also the remarks about the protagonist of his literary exemplar are strongly reminiscent of the sociological attitude towards the social world: "Frédéric is one who does not manage to invest himself in any of the games of art or money that the social world produces and proposes. His Bovaryism is grounded in the powerlessness to take the real – that is, the stakes of games called serious – seriously" (4 on page 33).

Even the translator of *Les Règles de l'art* – who is, of course, well familiar with both the content and style of these studies – notes that "literariness" is already present in Bourdieu's writing (9 on page xiv). Moreover, Ahearne notes that the web of literary references in his work "comprise one compartment of the 'thinking tools' (discursive formulae, narrative techniques, 'takes' on aspects of the social world) that he has 'present' or to hand when confronting a given problem" (8 on page 105). His work therefore requires an explicitly formalist reading, even if Bourdieu's "stance" and the reception based on his capital study of the literary field are not so close to this perspective:

> he is the 'scientist' of a society's serious 'games' whose invisible mechanisms need 'explicating'. But Bourdieu is himself implicated in a rather different kind of relation (…) Literature here signifies something like a precipitation of dislocated textual fragments whose current status is uncertain (not scientific, not documentary, not immediately instrumental), but which condition and enable certain kinds of reception. Bourdieu, the product of a certain kind of education and self-education, carries them around with him: they are ingrained into his disposition (his *habitus*). (8 on page 98)

It is therefore not surprising that there are several researchers who have already dealt with this "other" side of literature in Bourdieu's work. For example, Ahearne provides an insight into *Meditations Pascaliennes* (*Pascalian Meditations*, 1997) in terms of its literary self-consciousness, affective tonality, leitmotifs, textual interleaving, and stylistic and rhetorical play (8 on page 106). In addition, David engages with another work which is distinct from, and to some extent methodologically opposed to, the analysis of the literary field in *The Rules of Art* – Bourdieu's close reading of Apollinaire's poem *Automne malade*[10]. With the aim "to read Bourdieu less as a sociologist of literature, and more as a sociologist *in* literature" (10 on page 120), David recalls literary references in Bourdieu's writings and distinguishes four coexisting modalities of Bourdieu's "non-objectifying" relation to literature – *technical*, *rhetorical*, *analytical* and *ethical*, which he explains as follows:

> a) the recourse to literary works envisaged as a repertoire of techniques (enunciative, narrative or stylistic) which can be transferred to sociological writing; (b) the invocation of canonical authors in support of sociological arguments that might not otherwise be accepted by cultivated readers (an argument from authority); (c) the reference to a literary text presented as a more or less rigorous equivalent of sociological analysis; (d) the explication of the literary ethic of a writer as a detour to evoke the academic or personal ethic of the sociologist. (10 on page 120)

To address the first, *technical* modality, David refers to Bourdieu's observations on the relation between literature and sociology from *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Here Bourdieu claims that literature can provide particular resources and insights for a sociologist that are not available in this sense in other discourses (11 on page 206) and have critical implications for sociology itself. According to Bourdieu, literature can help the sociologist to escape "the censorships and presuppositions implied in the scientistic or positivist representation of scientific work" (11 on page 207). Bourdieu contrasts this kind of representation, which would correspond more to linear histories of social or individual life, with the modernist literature as a more reliable sociological source:

> I realized (…) the full extent to which the linear life-stories with which ethnographers and sociologists are content are artificial and how the apparently exceedingly formal researches of Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, or Claude Simon would appear today to me to be more "realistic" (if the word has any meaning), anthropologically more truthful, closer to the truth of temporal experience, than the linear narratives to which traditional novels have accustomed us. (11 on page 207)

As Bourdieu explains, this insight has serious consequences for the question of what is considered a sociological *matter*, for it encouraged him "to raise to the status of legitimate scientific discourse, worthy of scientific publication and debate, a whole range of so-called 'raw' documents that (he) tended to exclude, more unconsciously than consciously"[3] (11 on page 208).

In a comprehensive study that deals with Bourdieu's concept of literature Speller is going in the similar direction, as he begins his analysis by addressing a clear distinction between

[2] Bourdieu concludes his reading of Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* with a distinction between the kind of "revealing" sociological reading and the specifically "concealing" nature of a literary text: "By interrupting the complicity that unites author and reader in the same relation of denegation of the reality expressed by the text, it reveals the truth that the text enunciates but in such a way that it does not say it; moreover, sociological reading *a contrario* brings to light the truth of the text itself, whose specificity is defined precisely by the fact that it does not say what it says in the same way as the sociological reading does" (4 on pages 32–33).

[3] This last remark strongly associates Bourdieu's problems to those explained in Freud's F*ragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, one of the best-known examples of a life story that resists scientific – in this case psychoanalytic – analysis.

literature and sociology, highlighted in *The Rules of Art*, according to which literature offers a specific "indirect expression and experience of truths which, if confronted in reality, could be 'insupportable'" (12 on page 107). However, Speller soon moves on to elements of this relationship, which he recognizes as "cross-overs" between literature and sociology (12 on page 115). In considering Bourdieu's writing style, he mentions that

> literary authors seem also to have inspired Bourdieu's use of 'polyonomasie', the plurality of perspectives on the same person or object, which, especially in Modernist literature (Bourdieu mentions in various places Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce, Flaubert, but also Cervantes, who in some ways anticipated Modernism), shatters the fixed and unitary gaze of the observer, and according to Bourdieu brings us closer to the reality of co-existing, and sometimes directly competing, points of view. (12 on page 116)

Furthermore, if literature *per se* – and specifically modernist literature – can inspire a specific sociological perspective on social reality, as is the case with Bourdieu, then their relation in the system of knowledge could look different from the one that subordinates both literature and sociology in the binary of scientific and artistic though, together with other analogies such as objectivity and subjectivity, collectivity and singularity, realistic and imaginative, contextual and formalist, etc. As Speller claims, in this perspective "it is not sociological theory that provides new insight into the literary text, but the literary text that gives the sociologist a fresh perspective on his object" (12 on page 117).

This is not an (analysis of) *autobiography*

In the outlined framework, Bourdieu's "anti-autobiographical" texts occupy a special place, since the theoretical and methodological problems are articulated there at the level of both content and form – or, more precisely, their inherent relationship. Their novelty in the specter of sociological discourses has also influenced a significant part of contemporary political literature, such as the works of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, Edouard Louis and others. Although the relations between these authors are often mentioned regarding the contemporary French intelectual field, when considering the specter of 20th century and contemporary French literature, Maja Vukušić Zorica refers to Bourdieu's last published work and puts this relationship in question: "To what extent is Bourdieu's *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (*Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*) really the model of Eribon and Louis, or what has changed from Bourdieu to Eribon and Louis?" (13 on page 296).

One of the peculiarities of Bourdieu's work is certainly the refusal of "autobiography" as a generic signifier of his texts about his own life, written in the first person, which thus differ from his other, in a narrative sense more classical, sociological analyses of various social phenomena. Therefore the already mentioned *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* is opened with an allusive moto: "This is not an autobiography", recalling Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. The key question here is how does Bourdieu's critique of autobiography relate both to his sociological project – that of reflexive sociology, and to his artistic preferences – that of modernist literature? As Bourdieu asserts at the beginning of *Pascalian Meditations*, against the illusion of the self-transparency of consciousness, "it is not sufficient to perform the return of thought onto itself that is commonly associated with the idea of reflexivity" (14 on page 9). According to the author, "the most effective reflection is the one that consists in objectifying the subject of objectification" (14 on page 10). Bourdieu goes on to explain: "I mean by that the one that dispossesses the knowing subject of the privilege it normally grants itself and that deploys all the available instruments of objectification (statistical surveys, ethnographic observation, historical research, etc.) in order to bring to light the presuppositions it owes to its inclusion in the object of knowledge" (14 on page 10). And what about the possibility of language itself – and literary language in particular – to *objectify* and *dissposses* the writing subject in its own way, *with its own specific means*?

The opening of Bourdieu's "Impersonal Confessions" from *Pascalian Meditations* is symptomatic in this sense, as it takes its critical aim at both his sociological and philosophical counterparts:

> To take away the objectifying brutality of the analysis I have sketched here of the philosophical habitus of a generation of French philosophers that has the particularity of having imposed its particularities on the whole world, and so, perhaps, to overcome a few resistances, I think it may be useful to perform an exercise in reflexivity by trying to outline the broad features of my years of philosophical apprenticeship. (14 on page 33)

However, this intention is not autobiographical in the traditional, generic sense, as Bourdieu goes on to explain: "I shall speak very little about myself, the singular self, in any case, that Pascal calls 'hateful'. And if I nonetheless never cease to speak about myself, it will be the impersonal self that the most personal confessions pass over in silence, or refuse, on account of its very impersonality" (14 on page 33). This narrative choice, together with other autopoetic commentaries, is integral to the author's critical inquiry into the emergence of the modern philosophical field. Thus Bourdieu articulates on a textual level what he is trying to criticise regarding the concept of knowing/philosophical subject, as he notes that "the ambition of being one's own foundation is inseparable from the refusal to take note of the empirical genesis of that ambition and, more generally, of thought and its categories" (14 on page 47).

It would be productive to consider Bourdieu's writing strategy from *Pascalian Meditations* in the light of his earlier short essay entitled "L'illusion biographique" (1986, "The Biographical Illusion"), where he considers the problem of life story and history as a linear, structured, progressive flow of events, which could be recognized in specters of genres, from philosophy and history to the novel, biography and autobiography. Regarding the role of autobiographical narrative as part of a

sociological interview as a method, Bourdieu notes that this narrative "is always at least partially motivated by a concern to give meaning, to rationalize, to show the inherent logic, both for the past and for the future, to make consistent and constant, through the creation of intelligible relationships, like that of the cause (immediate or final) and effect between successive states, which are thus turned into steps of a necessary development" (15 on page 211). While part of the literary tradition reinforces or even inspires this kind of *meaningful* story, Bourdieu already here insists that the modernist literature, namely the novel, plays a crucial role in the displacement of the traditional plot: "the structure of the novel as a linear narrative was dropped at the time when the vision of life as an unfolding strip, both in terms of meaning and direction, was brought into question" (15 on page 211). Bourdieu thus invokes Robbe-Grillet for an argument that is not only literary but also sociologically valuable: that "reality is discontinuous, formed of elements juxtaposed without reason" (15 on page 211). As Bourdieu explains, the integrative narrative of a unique self is supported by various social procedures and institutions which endow this subject or agent with identity, normality, responsibility, predictability, etc. (15 on page 212), such as the proper name, the signature, the civil register, and the curriculum vitae. According to Bourdieu, what remains outside the site and could potentially disrupt the construction is the insight into the distribution and structure of the different types of capital in the respective fields – namely the already recalled objectification of the subject (of objectification). It is astonishing that this kind of objectification can only be articulated through a specific relationship to literature, which is both non-objectifying and desubjectivised.

In this sense, Bourdieu's last work – *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, first published in German as *Ein Soziologischer Selbstversuch* (2002) and then in French as *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004) – also rejects the genre of autobiography as "conventional" and "illusory" (16 on page 1), while paradoxically articulating the author's life story. In order to objectify the writing subject, however, this work repeatedly self-consciously plays through the conventions of the genre, such as the expected sequence of events: "at the risk of surprising a reader who perhaps expects to see me begin at the beginning, that is to say, with the evocation of my earliest years and the social world of my childhood, I must, as a point of method, first examine the state of the field at the moment I entered it, in the 1950s" (16 on page 4). Bourdieu spans the arc here from his own identification with Balzac (16 on page 66) to the realisation that "the adult man who writes this does not know how, has never known how, to do justice to the child who lived through these experi- ences, his times of despair and rage, his longing for vengeance" (16 on page 93). Therefore, his commentary on *Leçon sur la leçon* (1982, *A Lecture on the Lecture*), his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in April 1982, could be applied to this text itself:

> Why, in order to find a way out, did I have to practise that kind of semi-controlled schizophrenia in which, just as a patient describes what he says or does while saying that he is doing or saying something else, I give the commentary on my message, the giving of a lecture, through another message which contradicts its essential features by giving away everything that is signified and presupposed by giving a lecture? It is not the only time in my life when I have had the sense of being constrained by a greater force to do something that cost me dearly and the need for which was felt only by me. (16 on page 109)

This kind of textual "schizophrenia", as *A Lecture* shows, is at the core of Bourdieu's understanding of sociology:

> sociology, the science of institutions and of the happy or unhappy relationship one may have with institutions, presupposes and produces a distance that is insurmountable and sometimes intolerable, and not only for the institution; it shakes you ot of that state of innocence which enables you to fulfil the expectation of the institution with a sense of satisfaction. As a parable or a paradigm, the lecture on the lecture, a discourse which reflects itself in the act of discourse, should at least have the virtue of reminding us of one of the most fundamental properties of sociology as I concieve it: all the propositions that this science enunciates can and must be applied to the subject who practises this science. (17 on page 177)

But how much of the entaglement between critique of autobiography, founding an ethics and aesthetics in modernism and an invitation for a reflexivity outlived Bourdieu's last work? Only a look at the current state of the literary field could reveal a certain prevalence of autofiction and readings, which Bourdieu describes in *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (1979, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*) as resistance to the formalist exploration of the work[18]. Although the author's analysis of "legitimate" taste, largely in line with the modernist literature that Bourdieu himself affirms throughout his work, takes a clearly critical stance towards the mechanisms of reproducing class distinctions, his insight into the processes of identification interwoven with popular taste does not abandon the critical stance. While much of Bourdieu's reception has foregrounded the critical analyst, his other works, loosely connected to the general theme of *The Rules of Art*, show that the question of how to write a sociological work is also guided by the outlined framework. Thus, what David calls the *technical* modality of Bourdieu's relationship to literature – the transfer of literary techniques and references to sociological writing – is closely linked to the *ethical* modality of this relationship. In this sense, the key to understanding Bourdieu's attitude is modernist literature as the most frequent and important reference in his work. In contrast to the critical analysis in *Distinction*, the possibility of rethinking sociological theory and methodology from the perspective of modernist experimental writing opens up a new perspective on the central questions of sociology of literature.

Conclusion

While Bourdieu's most famous studies on literature, collected in the book *The Rules of Art*, have received a significant reception, in this paper we have attempted to approach the question

of Bourdieu's relationship to literature from a relatively marginal perspective by focusing on texts that have not previously been the center of attention on this topic. This focus also allows us to concentrate on elements of Bourdieu's interest in literature that cannot easily be subjected to the critique of alleged "sociological reductionism" that Bourdieu himself was critical of. In an attempt to capture those aspects of Bourdieu's *non-objectifying* conception of literature, we have examined how the author develops his understanding of the subject of knowledge, reflection, narration and writing in a corpus that we can conditionally call "anti-autobiographical", since here Bourdieu reaches for the convention of autobiographical narration while articulating a critical distance from both the genre and its implications in sociological research. Contrary to critiques of Bourdieu's sociological analyses of the literary field, and to some extent contrary to critical insights about the distinction of legitimate taste, at various points in his work the author affirms modernist writing as a model that critically interrogates not only the literary tradition but also scholarly discourse based on the assumption of a coherent subject of knowledge. By adopting some of the procedures of modernist texts such as narrative fragmentation, the expression of narrative self-consciousness and autoreferentiality, in works such as *Pascalian Meditations* and the *Sketch for an Auto-Analysis* Bourdieu not only establishes the concept of a critical, reflexive sociology, but also grounds it in specific writing strategies. From this corpus, a new face of the famous theorist emerges, as well as a voice that can serve as a support for the critique of numerous tendencies in the contemporary literary field, such as the dominance of biographism and the referential idea of (not only literary) language.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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Jan Váňa
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While this draft is clearly written and well structured, it has several major shortcomings that prevent it from developing into a solid research paper.

First, it attempts to address too many topics, each of which would require a separate paper—or even a book—to be treated adequately. The issues of disciplinary boundary work, institutionalization, and knowledge production in the sociology of literature—and related fields, often disguised under different labels—have been integral to sociological studies of literature well before sociology was established as a discipline. Then, the discussion of the complexity and evasiveness of this “discipline” has long been a recurring theme in research in the sociology of literature and has appeared regularly in papers and books at least since the 1970s. Another major issue concerns the kinds of knowledge provided by literature/art and sociology and the potential asymmetries that occur depending on the analytical perspective. A fourth major theme is the use of aesthetic devices, or literary style, by sociologists. All of these are here touched upon rather superficially and in an eclectic way. It is therefore necessary for the paper to identify its primary argument and consistently focus on it.

Second, the scope of theoretical material discussed. On the one hand, it is legitimate to focus on a single author—such as Bourdieu—and examine a hitherto neglected aspect of his work. On the other hand, for such an approach to be persuasive, it requires at least a minimal contextualization within the broader body of works addressing similar questions. Without this, the paper gives the impression that Bourdieu was the first to raise these issues and that he did so independently of earlier scholarly scholarship.

Third, the overall framing oscillates between an analysis of Bourdieu’s work and an assessment of the sociology of literature as a broader intellectual tradition. For example, the author writes “As a general overview of the production shows (...)“. What exactly does the “general overview” refer to here? Is it meant to apply to the two books discussed in the introduction? If so, a justification is needed for why these two books are taken as representative of the production in the sociology of literature as a whole. Why not, for example, György Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, Leo Löwenthal,

Raymond Williams, John Hall, Wendy Griswold, or others? Of course, one cannot always cite the whole list of relevant sources, but a justification of the selection is always necessary. The other way to fix this is to be more careful in phrasing the goals of the study. Narrowing the focus exclusively to Bourdieu, rather than to the sociology of literature per se, would help clarify the scope and strengthen the overall argument.
Further, I include several reading suggestions and comments on specific passages in the manuscript.

Missing references regarding the disciplinary boundary work:
Ferguson, P. P., Desan, P., & Griswold, W. (1988). Editors' Introduction: Mirrors, Frames, and Demons: Reflections on the Sociology of Literature. *Critical Inquiry*, *14*(3), Article 3. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/448448
Griswold, W. (1993). Recent moves in the sociology of literature. *Annual review of sociology*, *19*(1), Article 1. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.19.080193.002323
English, J. F. (2010). Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After "the Sociology of Literature". *New Literary History*, *41*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2010.0005
Barnwell, A. (2015). Enduring divisions: Critique, method, and questions of value in the sociology of literature. *Cultural Sociology*, *9*(4), Article 4.
Váňa, J. (2020). More than just a product: Strengthening literature in sociological analysis. *Sociology Compass*, *14*(6), Article 6. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12789
The section on sociology in literature lacks references beyond Bourdieu, which creates the impression that sociology in literature has been a rather marginal stream of thought explored primarily by Bourdieu. I suggest starting with the following works:
Lepenies, W. (1988). *Between literature and science: The rise of sociology* (Vol. 10). Cambridge University Press.
Hoggart, R. (1966). Literature and Society. *The American Scholar*, *35*(2), Article 2.
Coser, L. A. (1963). Sociology through literature: An introductory reader.
Harrington, A. (2002). Knowing the social world through literature: Sociological reflections on Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 5(1), 51–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570110098073
Becker, H. S. (2007). *Telling About Society*. University of Chicago Press. Especially last three chapters.
Furthermore, the topic of sociological writing employing literary/artistic devices lies at the very foundation of the discipline. I suggest exploring the following references:
Nisbet, R. A. (1962). Sociology as an Art Form. *Pacific Sociological Review*, *5*(2), Article 2. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1388389
Swedberg, R. (2014). The art of social theory. Princeton University Press.
Turner, C. (2010). Metaphors. In: Investigating Sociological Theory. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251898

Regarding the concrete passages, the author claims to "shift the focus (...) to the use of literary techniques (...) and their possible impact on rethinking the relationship between sociological research and (...), literature— both in Bourdieu's oeuvre and within the field as a whole". However, addressing "the field as a whole" in this way is not provided.
"Can a sociologist really proclaim "the truth" of the literary text, as Bourdieu suggests in *The Rules*"
- Bourdieu does not say that the sociological reading reveals the truth of the literary text, but that it reveals the fact that literary text expresses social reality in a concealed, indirect way.

"their relation in the system of knowledge could look different from the one that subordinates both literature and sociology in the binary of scientific and artistic though, together with other

analogies such as objectivity and subjectivity, collectivity and singularity, realistic and imaginative, contextual and formalist"
Again, this has been already thoroughly addressed by previous research—both preceding and following Bourdieu. Among the "foundinding fathers" of sociology, a particularly relevant author is Georg Simmel and his concept of Soziologische Ästhetik. See, for example:
Simmel, G., & Harrington, A. (2020). *Essays on art and aesthetics*. The University of Chicago Press.
Within the sociology of culture / cultural sociology, which was also Bourdieu's domain, particularly intriguing is the work of Eduardo de la Fuente, e.g.:
De La Fuente, E. (2007). Thenew sociology of art': Putting art back into social science approaches to the arts. *Cultural Sociology*, *1*(3), Article 3.
de la Fuente, E. (2019). After the cultural turn: For a textural sociology. *The Sociological Review*, *67* (3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118825233
As for the notion of "the literary text that gives the sociologist a fresh perspective on his object", I suggest looking at the work of Rita Felski who devoted several papers and book chapters to examining literary works as sources of social insight.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
No

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 23 December 2025

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Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

The article is as described in the abstract. Rather than focusing on Bourdieu's own discussion of literature, the author looks instead at literary motifs in other aspects of his work.

I thought this was a very worthwhile contribution, taking an original approach to Bourdieu's oeuvre.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.