

John R.W. Speller

*Bourdieu and Literature*

Cambridge, UK, Open Book, 2011, 203 pp.

John R.W. Speller's study provides an excellent tool for testing Pierre Bourdieu's thinking and its relevance to our current cultural context. Speller begins by recognising that «the literary and cultural fields have now entered a phase of 'involution' in the face of commercial and political pressures, bringing with them new forms of censorship and patronage» (15). If that sort of radical liberalism invades society as well as culture and literature every day, the analysis by Bourdieu, according to Speller, can still be relevant to understanding how the global market unifies transnational cultural productions. Indeed, Bourdieu may offer the possibility of studying these productions despite their heterogeneity, as Speller confirms towards the end of this volume: «against the idea that commercial competition leads to a diversification of supply [...] Bourdieu points to the fact of increasing homogenisation of cultural products» (176).

In order to successfully demonstrate Bourdieu's complete usefulness as a topical literate, Speller commences by synthesising Bourdieu's sociology of literature, paying particular heed to his main concepts in comparison with other more "hegemonic" theories, such as structuralist and Marxist interpretations. Thus, Speller must retrace the theoretical unity of Bourdieu's various concepts to demonstrate the strength of Bourdieu's explicatory system concerning Literature. Consequently, Speller rightly endeavours to analyse the main notions of Bourdieu's sociology of literature in their interrelation, acknowledging that «the three key concepts of capital, habitus and

field [...] only have their full explicative force in relation to each other» (186).

At the same time, the author manages to defend Bourdieu against the charge of provincialism, an accusation made by those who considered him an intellectual too involved in the French way of thinking to aspire to a generalization of his theories and unable to surpass the boundaries of the country in which his analysis was applied and processed. By re-constructing Bourdieu as a comprehensive thinker despite his diverse periods and nuances of thought, Speller demonstrates that the fundamental concepts of Bourdieu's sociology can be applied at a global or even cross-national level, specifically revealing that those concepts affect the circulation of precise «relations of domination and subordination between different literary traditions» (185). In particular, the notion of the "literary field", perhaps Bourdieu's most important elaboration, is investigated from different perspectives by Speller, who argues that this notion acts as a mediator between socio-historical conditions and Literature. Speller insists on the importance of the "literary field", seeing as it avoids any risk of social determinism on Literature, yet always permits «a *retranslation* of the broader social struggle into the terms of the literary debate» (68).

In addition, Speller convincingly demonstrates how Bourdieu relates literary works to social conditions by again utilizing the concept of the literary field. This concept preserves for Literature a realistic position within a historical context rather than presenting an autonomist position on the order of *L'art pour l'art*: «works can then be understood as the expression, translated or 'mediated' into a literary form, of the author's social position and history, and by implication as an objectification of the social structure» (67). In search of an autonomy of literary values, writers undoubtedly try to escape from the hegemony of the market by their imaginative production. They could invoke values alternative to those suggested by temporal powers, such as authority or profit, and concurrently stress their distinction from the owners of economic capital. In the third chapter, Speller points out the basis of the "autonomy" conceived by Bourdieu within the literary

field, in other words the «writers' ability to resist or ignore external (especially religious, political, and commercial) demands» (48). Conversely, Speller reminds us that the artists' lack of economic capital is compensated by earning another capital, the cultural one. This alternative compensation, in turn, is built on «the respect given to the literary vocation, the sacredness of literary texts and idols» (79).

The midsection of Speller's book is expressly dedicated to the crossroads of Literature and Bourdieu's sociology. On one hand, Speller considers the sociology of literature as a scientific discipline. Starting from the contribution of Lévi-Strauss (26), Speller states the legitimacy of social sciences, a branch of study to which Bourdieu also claims to belong. In particular, the sociogramme technique, elaborated in Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art* (1992), draws Speller's attention (53 ff.). According to the author, this work should not be interpreted as a critical study, but rather represents Bourdieu's movement towards the scientific community. Indeed, the difference between the literary field and experimental models is not to be found in the scientific procedure, but in the agents of transformation. In fact, Bourdieu takes into account social transformations over time, proposing to study the role of writers and scientists within historical struggles and conflicts.

On the other hand, Speller studies how Literature inspires Bourdieu's sociological works. He reveals, for example, the role played by Flaubert. In his first chapter, Speller focuses on *Les Règles de l'art* and on the presence of Flaubert; the very prologue of Bourdieu's book was dedicated to the French writer. Some chapters later, Speller indicates other works influenced by Flaubert, such as an article written by Bourdieu and Boltanski that imitates *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues* and aims to express the lexicon of the social dominant discourse (133). Also, the key concept of the literary field seems to stem from Literature (however, it is also derived from an epistemological basis, such as Bachelard's relational principles and Althusser's ideological apparatus). In particular, Speller connects Bourdieu's elaboration with the notion of the Republic of Letters and with some of Valéry's claims about cultural capital.

In chapter five, the study turns to the consideration of Literature as cultural politics. Bourdieu's undertaking in the political sphere revolves around the promotion of sociologists to a central role in government. According to Speller, «Bourdieu even hoped eventually to see a role for the sociologist at the level of political decision-making, in the way that economists are consulted currently» (139). Therefore, Speller focuses on Bourdieu's project for an International Parliament of Writers, which, after a decade, failed in its purpose of creating a sort of "collective intellectual" figure, who would have given origin, as a collective grouping, to a new global symbolic capital (149).

Symmetrically, cultural policies about Literature are at the heart of chapter six. Here, Speller recovers the ideas of the School Reform elaborated by Bourdieu in his didactic work. According to Bourdieu, academies ratify social differences «behind apparently objective categories based on merit» (155). Literature, however, always defends the autonomy that the sociological methodology of Bourdieu bestows upon it, that is to say its task of «instrument of mental emancipation» (162). Consequently, literary education should assume an appropriate role against the homogenization of the critical sensibility. In fact, Speller delineates Bourdieu's involvement in a project outlined by the Professors of the Collège de France in 1985 that had been assigned to them by President of the Republic, François Mitterrand. Speller analyses Bourdieu's propositions of providing universal access to the cultural production, in line with the belief that «unlike economic poverty, cultural dispossession tends to exclude awareness of one's own state of deprivation» (172).

In conclusion, according to Speller, Literature becomes a prism that illuminates various aspects of Bourdieu's vision. Speller's study demonstrates that Literature is not only a field for testing a sociological methodology, but also a real social player, an active participant in Bourdieu's overall interpretation of human communities as both a reflection of social transformations and a cultural vehicle of such modifications.

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