

Career paths and hierarchies in the pure pole of the literary field: The case of contemporary poetry

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Abstract

The present article uses contemporary Francophone poetry to see how positions are distributed at the pure pole of the literary field. We first draw the space of positions in poetry, before offering powerful methodological methods to analyze artistic careers—that is, sequence analysis that we combine with logit models. We show that, in contrast to the intuition of Bourdieu (1996) in *The Rules of Art*, poetry is not characterized by anarchy but, instead, is a very structured social space wherein recognition is consensual, as well as hierarchized. We then show that careers at the pure pole are long, progressively cumulative and irregular. These results refine previous studies where slow accumulation of reputation corresponded to linear, if not regular, careers (e.g., Giuffre, 1999). We also discuss cumulative advantage theory (e.g., Menger, 2009), as well as status-based models of hierarchies (e.g., Podolny, 2005), so as to offer a usable model of objectivizing artists' positions in their field. We thus build on Bourdieu and his followers, who have offered insights but little systemic investigation of the organization of the pure pole, whereas it plays a key conceptual role in the sociology of literature and, indeed, in the Bourdieusian framework.

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1. Introduction

Reputation building is one of the primary lines of inquiry for research on art worlds (e.g., Braden, 2009; Kapsis, 1989; Menger, 2009; Rosengren, 1985). The vocabulary varies depending on the author and her theoretical choices: Bourdieu (1996) uses the term “symbolic capital,” in order to equate it with other forms of capital (cultural, social, economic. . .) at the very heart of his sociology. Other authors speak of prestige (Verboord, 2003), esthetic quality (Ginsburgh, 2003), or glory (Rosengren, 1985)—although the preferred term for most is “reputation” (Barker-Nunn and Fine,

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1998; Becker, 2006; Lang and Lang, 1988; Menger, 2004, 2009; van Dijk, 1999; Van Rees and Vermunt, 1996). Despite this proliferation of terms, these authors seem to agree that the different terms refer to recognition of the esthetic value of an artist by actors other than the artist herself. Of course, one has to clarify who these actors are, and here again, the literature widely agrees—distinguishing two major social spaces by analytically separating recognition (the reputation acquired by the artist within his social space) from renown (consecration beyond this limited social space) (see Lang and Lang, 1988). Furthermore, reputation building processes depend on the kind of literary production considered. Bourdieu has shown that the literary field is divided into two parts: at one pole, we have pure art, and at the other, commercial art (Bourdieu, 1996; Sapiro, 2003). The logics of these two poles are opposites: in the former, artistic logic takes precedence over economic logic, whereas in the latter, artistic ideals are subordinated to commercial success (Van Rees and Dorleijn, 2001). This article looks at reputation building processes within the pure pole of the literary field.

As Bourdieu (1996) points out, understanding the formation of reputation raises two questions. The first is the distribution of positions (reputation levels) among artists. The second deals with the pathways that lead artists to occupy dominant (or dominated) positions. This article aims to answer both of these questions, drawing on the case of contemporary poetry. We thus look at the distribution of positions within the literary field. And, by turning to poetry, we are able to explore a pure pole of the literary field, as poetry's economic value is derived from the recognition of its esthetic value. Poetry is indeed an increasingly autonomous social space (Craig and Dubois, 2010; Dubois, 2006) that is highly self-referential (Dubois and François, 2013)—where the history of poetry plays a major role, as modern poetry's present is built upon its past (Friedrich, 1999). The audience of contemporary poetry is first and foremost made up of actors engaged in the field. The “rules of art” call on them to read each other's work and to discuss it in a number of different fora. Poetry is thus an exemplary case of the inverted economy theorized by Bourdieu (1996), wherein careers can be analyzed as a series of positions occupied within a given field. The present article delves into how the positions within the pure art pole are distributed. Few studies have undertaken such a task, aside from those which follow in Bourdieu's tracks, but these have not always led to systematic empirical investigation (Bandier, 1999; Boschetti, 2001; Craig, 2007a,b; Jurt, 1986, 1987; Ponton, 1973).

Two main arguments are used in the literature to describe the distribution of positions within the pure pole of an artistic field and the pathways that lead artists to occupy dominant (or dominated) positions, which we might call “external” and “internal” arguments. The external argument assumes that positions result from an external validation of hierarchies. Bourdieu and those who authored works on the artistic field in his wake (Sapiro, 2002, 2003; Van Rees and Dorleijn, 2001; Verboord, 2003) provide the best-known example of this first hypothesis. Two basic assumptions underlie this hypothesis. The first is the continual renewal of the avant-garde, meaning that esthetic revolutions constantly disrupt the structure of the field. Most studies using this hypothesis take the 19th century as their prime example, especially where poetry is concerned. As such, the avant-gardes led to the surge and subsequent consecration of romanticism, Parnasse, symbolism, and the Decadents (Bourdieu, 1996; Ponton, 1973),¹ or so the story goes. New arrivals feel the need to

¹ Parnassianism is a school of poetry school founded by Leconte de Lisle. It is a prime example of the “art for the art's sake” position, whereby poets create precious and delicate objects using literary and art history, particularly of the Antiquity, as their foundation. The symbolist movement, with Mallarmé at the helm, believed that everything exists solely to be transformed into art, with a focus on music and metaphors. The Decadents came out of symbolism, with their major representative being Verlaine. This movement provides a dramatic and subversive interpretation of symbolism.

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