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The metamorphosis of modes of consecration in the literary field: Academies, literary prizes, festivals



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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a structural history of the transformations of modes of consecration in the literary field, taking France as an exemplary case study. My approach combines Bourdieu's field theory with Abbott's analysis of professional development. The mechanisms of consecration must be contextualized within the political and economic constraints that the literary field is subjected to. Because of its relatively weak professional development, the consecrating authorities play a major role in the regulating of the literary field and in the building of careers. This article examines literary institutions which appear in different periods: the Académie française, which obtained its power from the state under the Old Regime; the societies of authors and the publishers, which contributed to the professional development of literary activity with the growth of the book market and the withdrawal of the state from the control of this market; the literary journals as relatively autonomous authorities; the literary prizes that are torn between autonomy and heteronomy (with the Goncourt prize as an example); the role of translation and international circulation in the process of consecration; and finally, the festival as a new form of literary recognition, which reflects the process of democratization (based on an empirical study on *Les Correspondances de Manosque*).

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1. Introduction

Artistic activities have been correctly regarded as challenging for the sociology of professions (Freidson, 1986). This is all the more true with the literary field, where no specific training (despite the rise of creative writing schools in the United States; McGurl, 2011), or entrance examination determine access to this activity (Sapiro, 2004). This is due to the absence of a monopolistic institution such as the church in the catholic religious field, professional organizations in the most institutionalized professions (i.e., legal practitioners and physicians), the university in the academic field or the Académie des Beaux-Arts in the French artistic field in the 19th Century (Bourdieu, 2013). However, literary activity cannot be reduced to a hobby. Not only do some authors make a living out of it, but even those who do not may invest much more in writing than in a hobby, and expect symbolic recognition for this investment. This recognition may stem from the readership, but access to readers is mediated by authorities such as newspapers, publishers, journals, and by what we can more generally call tastemakers. In contrast with the most centralized fields mentioned above, the literary field is characterized by the multiplicity of specific groups or bodies who are more or less institutionalized and who possess a consecrating or auto-

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legitimizing authority: academies, cenacles (or literary cliques), journals, societies of Friends of a dead author, avant-garde groups, and so on, including the educational system which participates significantly in the canonization process, meaning the posthumous consecration of authors. The weak degree of codification of the “profession” of writer and the absence of rules organizing it reinforce their importance as authoritative bodies that regulate literary life and shape writers’ careers.

Fields of artistic production achieve relative autonomy through the development of specific mechanisms of consecration, which assess the value of artwork according to specific aesthetic criteria, as opposed to reductive heteronomous criteria such as ideological or economic considerations (Bourdieu, 1992/1996). Consequently, these mechanisms constitute a good indicator of the type of constraints that weigh on the literary field. Modes of consecration designate here the typical mechanisms of recognition in different historical states of the field, and the specific authorities that embody them (e.g., academies, literary prizes, reviews in the media, bestsellers lists).

These authorities can be classified according to their degree of autonomy with regards to these constraints. Constituting, as Alain Viala writes, the “best linkages between the structures of the field and those of the social sphere in which the field is located”, these authorities also serve as “spaces for potential dialogue and conflict between the literary space and the political, financial, and religious power” (Viala, 1989: 260–261). It is therefore possible to sketch a structural history of the autonomization of the literary field by analyzing how its consecrating authorities contributed to freeing literature from the constraints imposed upon it in a given socio-historical configuration, while bringing about new forms of dependency. This configuration relies on the type of relationships that writers maintain with the State, the market and the public (Sapiro, 2003).

The relevance of field theory for analyzing literature as a relatively autonomous social fact, which cannot be reduced to a superstructure reflecting social forces as is the case in Marxist theory, while also taking into account both symbolic and material production and consumption (van Rees & Dorleijn, 2001), has been acknowledged from various theoretical standpoints, including institutional approaches (Dubois, 2005), polysystem theory (Even-Zohar, 1990), and at the global level, it has been combined with world system theory (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2007; Sapiro, 2010) and neo-institutional theory (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013). However, the historical process of autonomization has not yet been fully considered in the light of the professionalization process, which also emphasizes the role of specific organizations or authorities.

The present approach combines Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and the sociology of professions, especially Andrew Abbott’s model of “professional development” as a non-linear and non-teleological historical process occurring in competition with other professions (Abbott, 1988; Bourdieu, 1993; on the effects of the division of intellectual labor on the literary field, see Sapiro, 2011). While Abbott insists on outside competition among professions, Bourdieu’s field theory emphasizes the competition within the field. Both help to understand historical changes from a sociological standpoint. However, Bourdieu’s concept of field autonomy differs from the notion of autonomy used in the sociology of professions, which is about self-organization: in Bourdieu’s theory, autonomy refers to the relations with the external powers: religious, political, economic; it means that external constraints are refracted through specific rules of the game. The consecrating authorities play this “prismatic” role, to use Viala’s concept (Viala, 1989).

This article outlines a historical sociology of the process by which the French literary field achieved autonomy through the metamorphoses of the modes of consecration. I will therefore examine how in each period this system of constraints was redefined in relation to the State, to the dominant classes, and to the market, and how the consecrating authorities found themselves torn between these constraints and autonomous requirements. Because of the dominant position achieved by French literature in 18th century Europe, and its long-lasting hegemony in the World Republic of letters (Casanova, 1999/2004), the French literary field has served as a model for many countries. This fact enables us to generalize the modes of consecration identified in this paper, while keeping in mind that structural history requires us to reconstruct the specific configuration of social factors in each case.

The period lasting from the official recognition of the Académie française in the 17th Century to the creation of the Goncourt prize at the beginning of the 20th Century is characterized by the rise of the book market and the withdrawal of the State from the control of this market. During this period, the societies of authors, publishers, and journals came to play a major role in the organization of the literary field, contributing to its professional development and to its relative autonomization from State control. The market played a crucial role in the liberalization of print, but imposed new constraints on the literary field, which its specific authorities had to confront. While competing within the national literary field, these authorities also participated in the building of an international literary field, eventually replacing the European intellectual community once unified by a common classical Greco-Latin heritage, and by the French language later on in the 18th Century. By the mid-19th Century, as national literatures emerged, translation became the major mode of circulation of literary works and began playing a role in the process of consecration through the construction of a canon of world literature (Damrosch, 2003). By the end of the 20th Century, the mechanisms of consecration were renewed within the context of the democratization of culture by the rise of literary festivals. I will study the case of *Les Correspondances de Manosque*, the first and one of the most prestigious festivals dedicated to contemporary French literature. This structural history articulates key moments marked by the birth of new literary authorities and *longue durée* processes, which sometimes overlap, yet need to be differentiated, such as autonomization and professional development. These processes are not linear, nor are they irreversible. For this reason, historical sociology is conceived of here as structural history, based on a relational rather than a functionalist approach (Sapiro, 2012). My analysis relies on existing work—especially studies by Viala (1985) and Chartier (2000) for the 17th and 18th Centuries, by Bourdieu (1992/1996) and Charle (1979) for the 19th, and by Boschetti (1985/

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