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Symbolic struggles are always much more effective (and therefore realistic) than objectivist economists think, and much less so than pure social marginalists think. The relationship between distributions and representations is both the product and the stake of a permanent struggle between those who, because of the position they occupy within the distributions, have an interest in subverting them by modifying the classifications in which they are expressed and legitimated, and those who have an interest in perpetuating misrecognition, an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes.

—Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice

The largest thesis of this book is that the debate about the canon has been misconceived from the start, and that its true significance is one of which the contestants are not generally aware. The most interesting question raised by the debate is not the familiar one of which texts or authors will be included in the literary canon, but the question of why the debate represents a crisis in literary study. In order to understand the conditions which gave rise to this crisis, however, it will be necessary first to call into question the intuitive hypothesis of “exclusion” which currently governs historical accounts of canon formation. In the chapters that follow I propose a thorough displacement of this explanatory hypothesis. Where the debate speaks of the literary canon, its inclusions and exclusions, I will speak of the school, and the institutional forms of syllabus and curriculum. I will argue that evaluative judgments are the necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of canon formation, and that it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries. Similarly, where the debate speaks about the canon as representing or failing to represent particular social groups, I will speak of the school’s historical function of distributing, or regulating access to, the forms of cultural capital. By insisting on the interrelation between representation and distribution, I hope to move beyond a certain confusion which both founds and vitiates the liberal pluralist cri-
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tique of the canon, a confusion between representation in the political sense—the relation of a representative to a constituency—and representation in the rather different sense of the relation between an image and what the image represents. The collapse of the latter sense into the former has had the unfortunate effect of allowing the participants in the “symbolic struggle” over representation in the canon to overestimate the political effects of this struggle, at the same time that the participants have remained relatively blind to the social and institutional conditions of symbolic struggles. I will argue that the concept of cultural capital can provide the basis for a new historical account of both the process of canon formation and the immediate social conditions giving rise to the debate about the canon. For while the debate seems to its participants to be about the contents of the literary canon, its significance goes well beyond the effects of any new consensus about a truly “representative” canon. The canon debate signifies nothing less than a crisis in the form of cultural capital we call “literature.”

The concept of “cultural capital” is derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, where it facilitates a revisionary sociology of great depth and complexity. The purpose of importing the term into the debate about the canon is not to endorse Bourdieu’s project in its totality (I have dissented on occasion from particular conclusions of Bourdieu’s) but to introduce an entirely different theoretical perspective into the present debate. The theory of cultural capital implies that the proper social context for analyzing the school and its literary curriculum is class. Yet the argument of this book is not simply, on that account, “Marxist.” For Bourdieu the concept of class is preeminently a sociological concept, and one which is, as Marxists know, undertheorized in Marx himself. If there exists a form of capital which is specifically symbolic or cultural, the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of this capital presupposes the division of society into groups that can be called classes. Bourdieu’s sociology assumes such a division, but it does not assume that an economic account of classes is sufficient in itself.¹ Such an account would omit precisely what in Bourdieu’s theory is “cultural.” The theory of cultural capital belongs to the general field of what in France goes by the name of “post-Marxist” thought; but this is an affiliation which is much harder to claim in our own country, where there is no indigenous Marxist tradition to overthow or move beyond. Without aspiring either to a consistent Marxism or post-Marxism, I have sought rather to make visible the relative absence of class as a working category of analysis in the canon debate. This may seem surprising to participants in the debate, who have always argued that exclusions from the canon are determined by the race, gender, or class identities of authors. But the argument of this book is that one cannot infer a process of exclusion

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from the canon by setting out from the category of class, a fact which explains why examples of excluded authors always happen to be those whose identities are marked by race or gender. The fact of class determines whether and how individuals gain access to the means of literary production, and the system regulating such access is a much more efficient mechanism of social exclusion than acts of judgment. By foregrounding the question of the relation between social groups and the means of literary production, I have thus attempted to resist the easy assumption that whatever one says about race and gender goes without saying for class too.

What should go without saying is that the emphasis on class in the following argument does not imply the theoretical privileging of class over race and gender. Without venturing here into what is now a quasi-theological controversy, I would insist only that a given social problem should be understood in relation to the context which yields the best explanation for that problem. In the case of the literary curriculum, I propose that the problem of what is called canon formation is best understood as a problem in the constitution and distribution of cultural capital, or more specifically, a problem of access to the means of literary production and consumption. The “means” in question are provided by the school, which regulates and thus distributes cultural capital unequally. The largest context for analyzing the school as an institution is therefore the reproduction of the social order, with all of its various inequities. The particular authors who happen to be canonical have a minor role in this system of reproduction, but the far larger role belongs to the school itself, which regulates access to literary production by regulating access to literacy, to the practices of reading and writing. The literary syllabus is the institutional form by means of which this knowledge is disseminated, and it constitutes capital in two senses: First, it is linguistic capital, the means by which one attains to a socially credentialed and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as “Standard English.” And second, it is symbolic capital, a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person. For reasons to be argued more fully within the chapters of this book, I regard these two kinds of capital as ultimately more socially significant in their effects than the “ideological” content of literary works, a content which the critics of the canon see as reinforcing the exclusion of minority authors from the canon by expressing the same values which determine exclusionary judgments. Literary works must be seen rather as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation, or more simply, in the way in which they are taught.
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For the purposes of a sociologically informed history of canon formation, it is the category of “literature” which invites the closest scrutiny. That category organizes the literary curriculum in such a way as to create the illusion of a fixed and exclusive “canon,” an illusion which is belied by the real history of literary curricula in the schools. For that very reason, calling the canon into question has failed to inaugurate a historico-critical inquiry into the category of literature, even while it has registered a crisis in the cultural capital so denominated. The overarching project of the present study is an inquiry into just this crisis, one which attempts to explain why the category of literature has come to seem institutionally dysfunctional, a circumstance which I will relate to the emergence of a technically trained “New Class,” or “professional-managerial class.” To put this thesis in its briefest form, the category of “literature” names the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form of capital increasingly marginal to the social function of the present educational system. From this perspective the issue of “canonicity” will seem less important than the historical crisis of literature, since it is this crisis—the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature—which gives rise to the canon debate. The category of literature remains the impensé of the debate, in spite of what passes on the left as a critique of that category’s transcendent value, and on the right as a mythological “death of literature.”

After offering an analysis of the current debate in Chapter 1, along the lines suggested above, I proceed in the second part of this book to examine the historical category of “literature” as the organizing principle of canonical selection at three moments in the history of the English vernacular canon. These case studies are keyed to the level of the school system and are intended to demonstrate the articulation of the school’s institutional agendas with social struggles in the society at large. The context of the first case study is the institution of a vernacular literary curriculum in the primary schools of the eighteenth century. Taking as the occasion of my analysis the peculiar canonical significance of Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, a poem which appears to thematize canon formation in its topos of the “mute, inglorious Milton,” I attempt to show that the poem’s notorious popularity is an effect of its very successful “translation” of classical literacy into an anthology of quotable vernacular phrases. This translation could then be appropriated in an eighteenth-century polemic on behalf of instituting a vernacular curriculum, a curriculum which preserved a place of honor for Gray’s Elegy at its very threshold. The emergence of a vernacular curriculum tended ultimately to fix criteria of selection for canonicity which no longer privileged the standards derived from the Greek and Roman classics, and thus no longer privileged figures
such as Waller and Denham, who were thought to embody such standards. If the "middling sort," especially those trained in the Dissenting Academies, embraced English literature as a politically empowering educational program, because it facilitated entrance into the relatively homogenized linguistic arena of the "public sphere," this reevaluation of the cultural capital of vernacular literary works was responsible for the emergence of the category of literature itself, as well as for the first crisis in the status of the vernacular canon, the problem of assimilating new vernacular genres such as the novel. Wordsworth and Coleridge responded to this crisis with a programmatic attempt to reaffirm the High Cultural status of traditional canonical works in English against, on the one hand, popular novels and narrative poetry, and, on the other, the quasi-Latinate "poetic diction" supposed to have characterized especially the work of Gray. The effect of that program, which was of course shared by a literary culture much larger than the circle of Wordsworth and Coleridge, was to reserve the term "literature" for High Canonical works, and in this way to maintain the cultural capital of those works.

It will be useful to emphasize here what this book is not: It is not an institutional history of literary study. I have not, for example, undertaken an account of the emergence of literary study such as that provided by Gerald Graff in his invaluable Professing English. The current interest of university professors in the origins of their profession is entirely legitimate, but it may also have tended to obscure the significance of the earlier institution of the vernacular syllabus in the lower levels of the school system. My intention throughout has been to stress the interconnectedness of the educational system, and hence I have constructed the second case study around a moment in which the vernacular curriculum in the university became strongly distinguished from the curriculum in the primary and secondary levels. This was the moment of the great canonical reformation of the New Critics. In Chapter 3 I give an account of the New Critical revision of the English canon, which canonized the moderns and revalued the metaphysical poets, by setting this reformation in the context of a project for redefining the cultural capital produced by literary study in the university. In the circumstance in which the linguistic capital defined by "Standard English" was being more or less successfully disseminated at the lower levels of the school system, the literary curriculum at the university level acquired a new kind of distinction when the New Critics attributed to literary works a conceptual and linguistic difficulty that could only be approached by the technique of "close reading." This distinction of literary language, for which the metaphysical and the modern poets provided the canonical exemplars, in turn became the vector of a certain "ideology" of literary culture. I ar-
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gue, however, that the ideology of the New Critical canonical form is not reducible to the explicitly political ideas of the New Critics, but rather produces its effects when the cultural capital of literature is set against a "mass culture" which at once reveres and neglects the monuments of High Culture.

Chapter 4 turns to the highest level of the educational system, the graduate school, where in the last twenty-five years the literary syllabus has been supplemented by a list of texts which effectively circulate as a "canon of theory." This new syllabus, consisting largely of philosophical works, was thought to inaugurate a definitive challenge to the authority of an exclusively literary syllabus, although the syllabus of theory was also always indissolubly bound to that syllabus, as the means for producing new readings of literary works. In order to understand in retrospect how the texts of theory came to be canonically organized in programs of graduate study, I offer a reading of Paul de Man's crucial intervention into the dissemination of theory. I propose specifically a "symptomatic reading" of the oeuvre of de Man, one which attempts to demonstrate (1) that the dissemination of the theory-canon was dependent on the emergence of charismatic "master thinkers"; (2) that theory in its preeminent "deconstructive" form resurrected the discipline of rhetoric as a means of redefining literature, and as a way of extending the properties of literariness to nonliterary (primarily philosophical) texts; and (3) that the social context for the emergence of the theory-canon can be located in new institutional conditions of intellectual work. These conditions, the transformation of the professional literary critic’s intellectual labor by the technobureaucratic restructuring of the university, ultimately account for the dual form of the syllabus in the graduate schools, the two canons of literature and theory. The syllabus of theory has the oblique purpose of signifying a rapprochement with the technobureaucratic constraints upon intellectual labor, symptomatically registered as a fetishization of "rigor." The moment of theory is determined, then, by a certain defunctioning of the literary curriculum, a crisis in the market value of its cultural capital occasioned by the emergence of a professional-managerial class which no longer requires the (primarily literary) cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie. This crisis calls forth a redefinition of literature itself, a redefinition which incorporates as a new aspect of literary study the "technical" quality of the knowledge valued by the professional-managerial class. Needless to say, the emergence of theory is the symptom of a problem which theory itself could not solve. The fact that today we so easily recognize the names of the master theorists confirms the emergence of these names as a "canon" supplementing the canon of literature in the graduate schools, and testifies to the perceived inadequacy of the

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literary syllabus to constitute a program of study complete in itself. I intend to demonstrate finally that the failure of theory to construct a new rationale for the literary curriculum was a necessary condition for the development of a new critique of the curriculum, the “canon debate” of the last decade.

The three case studies described above do not constitute a history of literary canon formation, but attempt to redirect the focus of the debate away from the question of who is in or out of the canon to the question of the canonical form in its social and institutional contexts. The form we call “literature” organizes the syllabus and determines criteria of selection much more directly than the particular social biases of judgment which have been invoked to explain the canonical or noncanonical status of particular authors. Yet the argument that such social bias is the determinant of canon formation has been so generally accepted in critical discourse that it is now capable of being elaborated into a general critique of aesthetic judgment. In its most extreme form this critique seeks to discredit the concept of the aesthetic altogether, as intrinsically repressive. In the final chapter of this book I argue that the extrapolation of a critique of aesthetics from the critique of the canon is mistaken in its fundamental premise. This premise takes the form of a refusal of “aesthetic value,” on the grounds that aesthetic values cannot be distinguished from any other values in the social realm, not even economic value. This argument has received its most sophisticated treatment in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Contingencies of Value, which disables the category of the aesthetic by reversing the cardinal principle of Kantian aesthetics—the “uselessness” of the work of art—and discovering in every work of art the manifest expression of economic “use value.” The persuasiveness of this argument is belied, however, by its failure to historicize the concept of value itself. So far from being the transhistorical equivalent of judgment, the concept of value has a very specific origin in the eighteenth-century discourse of political economy. The value-concept has a history of which the canon debate remains unaware, and which needs to be recovered before one sets out to critique the concept of a specifically “aesthetic” value. I proceed in Chapter 5 to reconstruct the historical relation between aesthetics and political economy in order to demonstrate the origin of the value-concept in the struggle to distinguish the work of art from the commodity. The reduction of aesthetic value to economic use value forgets precisely the fact that the problem of the work of art was crucial for political economy’s founding distinction between use value and exchange value. The conflation of these two terms in current anti-aesthetic arguments betrays how much the present critique of judgment has actually forgotten about the intimate historical relations between
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aesthetic and economic discourses. The cost of that amnesia is a kind of false enlightenment, the restatement in altogether more reductive terms of a relation between the aesthetic and the economic much more interestingly and problematically engaged in eighteenth-century moral philosophy than in our recent neorelativist critiques.

Turning finally to Bourdieu's sociology of art, I argue that the simple reduction of aesthetics to the quasi-economic concept of "use value" loses sight of what Bourdieu describes as the emergence of aesthetic production as a "relatively autonomous" field of cultural activity in the eighteenth century. That is to say, the production and distribution of cultural works as cultural capital cannot be explained by making no distinction between cultural and material capital. The consequences of this argument for our understanding of what we call canon formation are profound. For the specificity of aesthetic judgment is not on this view simply an illusion to be exploded, but rather a privileged site for reimagining the relation between the cultural and the economic in social life.

The strangest consequence of the canon debate has surely been the discrediting of judgment, as though human beings could ever refrain from judging the things they make. But if this notion has been bad sociology, it has proven to be even worse politics. The argument that one should suspend judgment on behalf of the politically urgent objective of making the canon more "representative" of diverse social groups invited the reactionary objection to the abandonment of "standards." The most politically strategic argument for revising the canon remains the argument that the works so revalued are important and valuable cultural works. If literary critics are not yet in a position to recognize the inevitability of the social practice of judgment, that is a measure of how far the critique of the canon still is from developing a sociology of judgment. The theory of cultural capital elaborated in this book is an attempt to construct just such a sociology.