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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements x
Abbreviations xi

Introduction · The literary field in the 1890s 1

Chapter 1 · Men of letters and children of the sea: Joseph Conrad and the Henley Circle 22

Chapter 2 · Playing the field: Arnold Bennett as novelist, serialist and journalist 68

Chapter 3 · Light reading and the dignity of letters: George Newnes, Ltd. and the making of Arthur Conan Doyle 118

Postscript 172

Notes 176
Bibliography 217
Index 228

INTRODUCTION · THE LITERARY FIELD IN THE 1890s

> What is obvious and indisputable is this: that with the dissemination of ignorance through the length and breadth of our island, by means of the Board School, a mighty and terrible change has been wrought in the characters both of the majority of readers and of the majority of writers. The 'gentleman scholar' who still flourished when I was young, has sunken into unimportance both as reader and writer. The bagman and the stockbroker's clerk (and their lady wives and daughters) 'ave usurped his plyce and his influence as readers; and the pressman has picked up his fallen pen, – the pressman, sir, or the presswoman!
>
> 'The Yellow Dwarf', *Yellow Book*, October 1895[1]

IN APRIL 1891, EDMUND GOSSE (1849–1928) contributed an essay to the *Contemporary Review* entitled 'The Influence of Democracy on Literature'. It was a studiously even-handed piece intended to assuage his more 'gloomy' peers who thought that, in the new democratic climate of the 1890s, 'poetry is dead, the novel sunken into its dotage, all good writing obsolete, and the reign of darkness begun'. There were, he granted, grounds for 'grave apprehension'. The 'enlargement of the circle of readers' meant 'an increase of persons who, without ear, are admitted to the concert of literature'; and this wider audience, in turn, attracted publishers who 'seduced' authors 'capable of doing better things' into writing simply 'for the sake of money'. Yet, after reviewing the 'whole field', he also saw 'much that may cheer and encourage us'. He pointed out that the 'principal poetical writers of our time seem to be unaffected by the pressure of the masses' – he was less sanguine about the novelists – and, more positively, that the newspapers, the 'most democratic vehicles of thought', now treated 'literary subjects' as 'of immediate public interest'. 'When an eminent man of letters dies', he wrote, 'the comments which the London and country press make upon his career and the nature of his work are often quite astonishing'. Finally, there was the inspiring example of Tennyson whose popularity was 'one of the most singular, as it is one of the most encouraging features of our recent literary history'. While the laureate had 'never courted the public, nor striven to serve it', he had none the less come to occupy an 'extraordinary place in the affections of our people'. 'Let no man', Gosse concluded, 'needlessly dishearten his brethren in this world of disillusions, by losing faith in the ultimate survival and continuance of literature.'[2]

Eighteen months later, on witnessing the enormous crowd gathered outside

Westminster Abbey on the occasion of Tennyson's stately burial, Gosse panicked and completely changed his mind. As he observed, now in an intemperate diatribe published in the *New Review* for November 1892, the funeral on 12 October was not simply a momentous public event. It was an alarming 'parable' of contemporary literary culture, the meaning of which lay in the 'symbolic contrast' between the ambience inside and that outside the Abbey.

> Inside, the grey and vitreous atmosphere, the reverberations of music moaning somewhere out of sight, the bones and monuments of the noble dead, reverence, antiquity, beauty, rest. Outside, in the raw air, a tribe of hawkers urging upon the edges of a dense and inquisitive crowd a large sheet of pictures of the pursuit of a flea by a 'lady,' and more insidious salesmen doing a brisk trade in what they falsely pretended to be 'Tennyson's last poem'.

Though he felt sure this 'half-terrifying' contrast 'must have occurred to others', the newspaper reports seemed to suggest otherwise. His version of their version of events was socially and politically revealing. The papers offered 'affecting accounts of the emotion displayed by the vast crowds outside the Abbey – horny hands dashing away the tear, seamstresses holding the "little green volumes" to their faces to hide their agitation'. For Gosse, this was all nonsense invented by those who could see things only 'with their fairy telescopes out of the garrets of Fleet Street'. Giving himself the authority of an eye-witness, while nimbly modulating into the first-person plural, he claimed that inside the Abbey 'we distinguished patience, good behaviour, cheerful and untiring inquisitiveness'; while, on leaving, not only 'poetry' but 'authority, the grace and dignity of life, seemed to have been left behind us for ever'. The 'impression was one almost sinister in its abrupt transition', and he was relieved to have been 'conducted by courteous policemen through the unparalleled masses of the curious'.[3]

Not surprisingly, the actual newspaper coverage of the event bore little resemblance to Gosse's peremptory synopsis. It was, in fact, more in keeping with the remarks he made a year and a half earlier. For one thing, most papers focused on the formalities inside the Abbey. Even the Radical *Reynolds's Newspaper*, one of the most popular working-class Sunday broadsheets, devoted the bulk of its report to the 'effective and imposing character' of the service, though it emphasized that 'only an insignificant fraction of people' were allowed into the Abbey itself.[4] Moreover, opinions about the character and significance of the ceremony varied. The conservative *Times* briefly mentioned the 'seething crowd of men and women without', but it dwelt on the service which occasioned, in its view, a solemn moment of unity among the nation's elite: 'Statesmen of either party stood in common sorrow at the grave-side; medicine, the law, art, the drama, poetry, literature, science, and even the crude socialism of the day were represented by leading men, who shared in one deep feeling of general loss.' It called the event 'a piece of English

history'.[5] For the Liberal *Daily Telegraph*, it was a more democratic triumph, since one could 'discern that every rank and walk in daily English life had representatives there, drawn by the genius of the dead man to come together'. The 'dignity' of the service, it added, surpassed any 'Emperor's coronation or burial'.[6] Politically divergent though they were, these reports all at least saw the ceremony in a positive light. Yet, as Martin indicates in his biography of Tennyson, not everyone agreed. Many thought it 'disappointingly impersonal and conventional'. While Henry James reckoned it lacked 'real impressiveness', Edward Burne-Jones felt it 'flat and flattening' and hated it 'heartily'.[7] The fiercely Tory and Imperialist *National Observer* echoed these private misgivings, complaining that the service left 'small room for emotion'. It was 'redeemed of banality', the report said, only by the presence of such men as the Tory leader Lord Salisbury, the 'Statesman who guards the Empire' Tennyson 'loved', and by the fact that the laureate's 'coffin was covered by our flag'.[8]

In dismissing the papers for their allegedly universal democratic and working-class enthusiasms, Gosse was not, of course, pretending to make a judicious claim based on an impartial survey of opinion. He was using a convenient rhetorical ploy. Yet even the papers whose reports seemed to justify his cursory comments laid bare his prejudices. The Radical halfpenny *Star*, for instance, offered a discriminating, and mildly sardonic, account of the crowds outside the Abbey. It noted that the funeral coincided with the Westminster Palace Yard's seasonal handout of plants, and that, consequently, 'many people who bore bundles of green stuff had come with no express intention to honor [sic] the dead, but sought rather the possession of something to cheer themselves'. It did mention, however, that 'many of the crowd' were 'so full of emotion that they carried green-backed volumes of the dead poet's works as signs of their devotion'. To this its wry reporter, who liked colourful incongruities, added that 'American tourists improved the occasion by linking the poet's book in strange conjunction with the red Baedecker.'[9] Yet, for all its interest in the working classes, the *Star* wisely did not single out any coy seamstresses from this diverse crowd. No doubt some devotees brought along Macmillan's enormously successful one-volume *Complete Works*, bound in green sand-grain cloth boards, which had been selling between 15,000 and 19,000 copies a year since its first publication in 1884 (and, it should be noted, yielding Tennyson over £1,500 annually in royalties).[10] Retailing at 7s 6d this neat volume would have been an extraordinary extravagance for a seamstress on a weekly wage of 15s.[11]

This book is not about Gosse, nor is it about the death of Tennyson. It is, however, centrally occupied with the problem of how to interpret Gosse's 'depressed and terrified' reaction to the 'the ten thousand persons refused admittance to the Abbey'. Though it recognizes that this is partly a task for the literary critic or historian of ideas, it argues that it is *necessarily* also a question

for the sociologist of culture. This is because it maintains there is a productive, albeit treacherous, mediation between the discursive and the non-discursive, the text and the world, literary criticism and social history. Reading Gosse's diatribe, or, indeed, any written text, entails on this analysis attending to the dialectic between its qualities as a particular form of written discourse – its rhetorical and intertextual character – and the multiple determinations of its non-discursive context. Having said this, however, Gosse's essay immediately raises a central methodological problem for this book and, I would argue, for literary and cultural studies. In its obvious disdain towards seamstresses, for example, it clearly exploits the language of class prejudice. But does this make it an expression of Gosse's *class* interests? Or, again, does its dependence on the rhetoric of political fear – he had long 'dreaded' the 'eruption of a sort of Commune in literature' – mean it should be read as a *political* tract?[12] Without denying the importance of these larger socio-political commitments and contexts, this book makes a case for the relevance of a more specific set of interests, peculiar to a more limited social context which I shall call, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the 'literary field'. This does not mean that the broader dimensions of Gosse's hostile reaction cease to be significant. It simply means they have to be accorded their proper place in the hierarchy of determinations which constitutes the non-discursive context in which he wrote. The argument of this book, in short, requires that one read his diatribe, not only as a discourse on the literary field in the 1890s, but as a view from a particular non-discursive position within it. In the second part of this introduction, I shall give a more detailed account of Bourdieu's concept of the 'field' and examine some of its methodological implications for literary and cultural studies, but, at this point, I would like to look more closely at Gosse's essay itself in order to discuss some of the general issues at stake in the literary field at the end of the nineteenth century, and to elaborate on the relationship between his anxieties and his particular position in it.

Despite the tenor of some of his language, then, his reaction should not be read as another instance of an intellectual's *social* animus against the 'masses', nor as the expression of a *political* reactionary. His were, rather, the anxieties of an established man of letters and a minor avant-garde poet. By 1892, aged 43, he had a modest but respectable reputation as the author of four delicate volumes of verse – *Madrigals, Songs and Sonnets* (1870), *On Viol and Flute* (1873), *New Poems* (1879), and *Firdausi in Exile and Other Poems* (1885) – all of which bore traces of his early associations with the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne in particular; and, despite some notorious setbacks, he had established himself as an authority on English and Norwegian literature (among other things, he was Ibsen's first British advocate). For six years in the 1880s he was Clark Lecturer in English Literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, during which time he also went on a lecture tour of America. By the 1890s, he had overcome his early prejudices against fashionable society and begun to make a name for

himself as the aristocratic lady's literary man of London.[13] The clearest index of his cultural status, however, was his renowned library which contained, besides a large collection of Restoration drama, an extensive selection of 'recent books'. Mostly first editions personally inscribed by their authors, these were, Gosse claimed, 'largely records of friendships'.[14] They included works by Arnold, Browning, Bridges, Dobson, Hardy, Henley, Ibsen, James, Meredith, Pater, the Rossettis, Stevenson, Swinburne, Tennyson, Whistler, Whitman, Wilde, and, among the emergent generation, Richard Le Gallienne, Lionel Johnson, Kipling, and Yeats. This private canon of predominantly male authors, materially embodied in his library, at once encompassed contemporary literate culture for Gosse and testified to his own central place in it. It was, moreover, the specific authority of this 'literary hierarchy' that the 'vast black crowd' outside the Abbey seemed to threaten. In his 'parable', the Abbey represented the great traditions of British literate culture, which he traced from Chaucer to Tennyson, while the crowd, and its attendant 'salesmen', signified the advent of a new subversive order in the 1890s. Developing this anxious line of thought, he refigured the Abbey as a 'beautiful pinnacled structure' made of 'carven ice' which was 'kept standing' by 'a succession of happy accidents' and by an 'effort of bluff on the part of a small influential class'. 'It needs nothing', he noted with dismay, 'but that the hot popular breath should be turned upon it to sink into so much water'.[15]

It is important to be clear about the source of Gosse's sudden anxiety attack. Despite his passing remark about the 'hawkers' selling their 'pictures of the pursuit of a flea by a "lady"', he was not really worried that the crowd might represent a dominant and wholly independent counter-culture, vulgar in its appeal and commercial in its aims. In this and other respects, it should be noted, his all-too-visible crowd differed significantly from the 'unknown public' Wilkie Collins claimed to have stumbled upon some twenty years earlier. In a now much cited essay of 1858 entitled 'The Unknown Public', Collins presented readers of *Household Words* with what he considered a 'new and surprising' discovery. He claimed to have found a hidden network of anonymous authors, obscure publishers, and unknown readers which extended from Whitechapel to 'a dreary little lost town at the north of Scotland'. This 'neglected' network seemed to exist beyond the 'pale of literary civilisation', and, indeed, beyond the reach of the book. It supplied some three million readers (domestic servants mainly, he thought) with 'unbound picture quarto[s]', priced at one penny, and distributed them through 'fruit-shops', 'oyster-shops', and 'lollipop-shops'. Collins knew his own audience, and so his article reads more like a short adventure tale than a dryly dispassionate sociological survey. He speaks of the 'mysterious', of a 'locust-flight of small publications', of a 'new species of literary production', and of the 'outlawed majority'. Yet, for all this moonstone rhetoric, he did not consider this cultural world apart a danger. He saw it as a humbling curiosity which revealed that

the 'eminent publishing houses', the 'members of book-clubs and circulating libraries', and the 'purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews' – in short, what he called 'the literary world' – constituted 'nothing more than a minority' in the actual scheme of things. This was no cause for alarm, however, as he felt sure the 'unknown public' would 'obey the universal law of progress'. 'Sooner or later' it would 'learn to discriminate', and when that happens 'the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known'.[16]

Gosse shared neither Collins's populist enthusiasm, nor his confidence. For him, the problem was precisely that the 'unknown public' had obeyed the 'law of progress', and emerged in 1892, not as an invitingly large 'audience', but as a vast and culturally ambitious 'crowd'. The focus of his anxieties was not, therefore, the hawkers and their vulgar pictures – the counter-culture – but the 'more insidious salesmen' with their specious 'last poem' and the seamstresses with their 'little green volumes'. He most feared the poachers within literate culture, not the philistines without. There were two reasons for this. First, he now maintained that cultural democratization *necessarily* entailed devaluation. This was especially true for poetry which was, in his view, 'not a democratic art'. Its 'essence' was 'aristocratic', that is to say, 'dependent on the suffrages of a few thousand persons who happen to possess, in greater or lesser degree, certain peculiar qualities of mind and ear'. Allied to this was his theory that any feeling's authenticity was inversely proportional to the number of people who shared in it, so 'the excitement about Tennyson's death has been far too universal to be sincere'.[17] Importantly, these assumptions also informed his long-held belief in the superiority of poetry to prose. The most damning thing he could say about the novel form, for instance, was that it 'appeals to all': 'It is so broad and flexible, includes so vast a variety of appeals to the emotions, makes so few painful demands upon the overstrained attention, that it obviously lays itself out to please the greatest number.' This was in an essay entitled 'The Tyranny of the Novel' of April 1892. The fact that women (particularly young married women, he thought) formed 'the main audience of the novelist' only made matters worse. These opinions admittedly put him in an awkward position as the friend and critical supporter of the likes of Hardy, Meredith, and James. He safeguarded them, however, by arguing that 'it is probably to the approval of male readers that most eminent novelists owe that prestige which ultimately makes them the favourites of the women'.[18] In private he put it more bluntly. When *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) was anonymously attacked in the *Saturday Review*, he told Hardy the review was probably the work of some 'ape-leading and shrivelled spinster' and reassured him that 'you have strengthened your position tremendously, among your own confrères and the serious male public'.[19] Far from being intrinsic, then, the value of literary forms was, for Gosse, dependent on the limited size and specific gender of their readership. Now the full metonymic horror of the seamstresses hiding their emotion with their volumes of poems becomes clear.

Yet the danger did not lie simply in democratization *per se*, since, for Gosse, the *process* of popular appropriation now also seemed to involve corruption. At this point the real issue at stake in his diatribe emerges. What worried him was how such a large crowd came to be mourning Tennyson's death in the first place. As his earlier essay suggests, such concerns formed part of the debate about what Henry Harland's 'Yellow Dwarf' called the 'mighty and terrible' changes in late-Victorian culture, the causes of which were a recurrent topic of discussion among contemporary commentators. The electoral reforms, which steadily created a universal male franchise, featured prominently, but the most popular explanation, as we shall see, was that the Education Acts passed between 1870 and 1891, which gradually led to free, universal, and compulsory elementary education, had created a new culturally aspiring 'mass' readership. In a characteristically disdainful article responding to Gosse's piece on Tennyson, the *National Observer* also pointed to the influence of the university extension scheme, the Oxbridge initiative of the 1860s.

> It is not for nothing that a cheap pretence of education has been extended – in the name of the Universities – to the suburbs and remoter provinces. Now every housemaid can lisp the poet's name, and tell you accurately the place he occupies in her literary text-book.[20]

In fact, Read indicates that, while the system was immensely successful – 'in the peak year of 1891–2 Oxford and Cambridge together provided 722 extension classes attended by nearly 47,000 people' – only a 'minority of these came from the working classes'.[21] As Harland hinted, however, these political and educational initiatives coincided with wider changes in late-Victorian society, including the rise of the lower middle classes, the professional advancement of women, and the advent of the 'New Journalism', which combined to challenge the pre-eminence of the mid-Victorian 'gentleman scholar'. Speaking as a member of that endangered genteel tradition, and once again disclaiming his earlier remarks, Gosse now put the blame squarely on the new developments in popular journalism. Like Hall Caine, whose article in the *Times* for 17 October 1892 he cited, he felt the 'whole enormous popular manifestation', and the transformation of the literary field it implied, was the effect of excessive news coverage.[22] Caine, one of the best-sellers of the period, liked to think of himself as the champion of 'primitive simplicity' in a corrupt modern age. A devotee of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he believed that such virtues were being eroded by the 'spread of education' and that his duty, as an historical novelist, was to show the new generation the 'tenderness of the higher life, the courtly golden life, so fast passing from our midst'.[23] In keeping with this general outlook, his *Times* article contrasted Wordsworth's 'unreported and half-known' funeral at Grasmere – 'noble and touching in its simplicity' – with the papers' unwelcome 'garrulity' at the death of his successor to the laureateship. There was, he added, 'something out of tune in the spectacle of Tennyson, who had hidden himself from the world throughout his life,

exposed to its gaze in his coffin'.[24] Five years later, by the way, Caine was publicly rebuked for exploiting the press for his own worldly self-promotion.

Gosse readily concurred. Yet, for him, the problem lay not only with the quantity, but with the style, of modern reporting. With its instinct for 'mere commercial success', the new periodical press, in his view, emphasized the 'personal' at the expense of the 'purely literary' aspects of authorship, and so ran the risk of making 'the artist more interesting than his art'.

This was a peril unknown in ancient times. The plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were scarcely more closely identified with the man who wrote them than Gothic cathedrals were with their architects.

Now, however, an 'interesting or picturesque figure, if identified with poetry, may attract an amount of attention and admiration which is spurious as regards the poetry, and of no real significance'.[25] Having had his faith in the resilience of literature severely tested, Gosse now shared his friend Henry James's contempt for 'this age of advertisement and newspaperism, this age of interviewing'.[26] Indeed, James's short story, 'The Death of the Lion', which first appeared in the *Yellow Book* for April 1894, reiterated Gosse's earlier anxieties in fictional form. The satirical story, which describes the death of the author, Neil Paraday, who falls victim to a paper called the *Empire* and its interviewers, is filtered through the consciousness of a young penitent male journalist. As he makes clear, the guilt for Paraday's death does not fall only on the brazen papers. Women are as much to blame. At one point, he turns on one of Paraday's many new-style Thracian fans, a young American 'terrible and laughable in her bright directness':

'Ah that dreadful word "personal"!' I wailed; 'we're dying of it, for you women bring it out with murderous effect. When you meet with a genius as fine as this idol of ours let him off the dreary duty of being a personality as well. Know him only by what's best in him and spare him for the same sweet sake.'[27]

In reality, the 'New Journalists' of the 1890s were unrepentant. Though the 'personal' interview was imported from America by the enterprising editor of the *World*, Edmund Yates, in the late 1870s – his series 'Celebrities at Home' included Tennyson at Haslemere – the most famous exponent of the genre in the 1890s was Raymond Blathwayt.[28] He mounted a robust defence of his new style of reporting, claiming that

It is in America that interviewing first rose to the status of a trade. In England we hope to give it the dignity of a profession.

He identified the interviewer with the modern 'scientific spirit', called him the 'veritable photographer and preserver of the history of his own time', defended his role as a mediator between 'the public and the novelist', and dignified the much disparaged genre by tracing it back to Boswell and even to the Gospels.[29]

Blathwayt's celebrity interviews appeared in new popular papers like *Great*

Thoughts (1884), the *Review of Reviews* (1890), *Black and White* (1891), *Bookman* (1891), and the *Idler* (1892), but, for Gosse, the blame for the new trend in 'personal' journalism fell on 'the *Tit-Bits* and *Pearson's Weeklies* in the world'.[30] This was uncharitable. The new-style late-Victorian penny weeklies, pioneered by George Newnes's *Tit-Bits* (1881), did publish some interviews, but they were hardly responsible for the success of the genre. Their staple was the anecdote, typified by the following instructive paragraph in the 'Personal Tit-Bits' column for 22 October 1892:

> Amongst the many anecdotes that have been given of Tennyson, the fact has not been recalled that the poet was an amateur printer. In his earlier days he had a small hand-press of his own, on which he used to set up his poems in type, and take 'proofs', which he would correct and revise again and again. It was by this unsparing self-criticism and tireless revision of his work that Tennyson gained the perfection of his style.[31]

That Gosse saw *Tit-Bits* as the archetype of the new brazenly intrusive, commercialized culture was unsurprising, however. For many literary intellectuals, Newnes's enormously successful weekly had been a symbol of all that threatened 'pure and original literature' at least since 1889 when W. E. Henley's outspokenly avant-garde *Scots Observer* railed against the 'degradation of every-day literature in England'.[32] It conceded that *Tit-Bits* could be trying to educate the newly 'enfranchised Briton' – this is what Newnes's first major defender, E. G. Salmon, had argued three years earlier – but, for the *Observer*, such lofty aims were hopelessly at odds with its popular, fragmentary, and ephemeral format.

> As he is whirled by omnibus or train from his suburban home to his office in the city he reads in his favourite journal – a kind of rag-bag in print – that Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is a great work. This statement he repeats ever afterwards with the conviction of one who has seen it in type. He finds it sandwiched in between a paragraph on 'Artists and their Models', and another on 'Beauty and How to Get it'. The three are of equal value to him.[33]

Like Gosse, then, the *Observer* insisted that the new 'popular culture' of the 1890s was eroding literate culture in the process of appropriating it; and, again like Gosse, it appealed to 'our recognized judges of literary merit' to control the damage.[34] Prefiguring the Modernists of the 1920s, the *Observer* looked to the 'Critic' as the saviour who would 'insist that books and poems are not to be esteemed, like loaves of bread or pots of ale, by the number of their purchasers; that popularity, save in such rare instances as Tennyson's, is the most fallible of tests; that literature exists of itself and for itself'.[35]

II

But what is the literary field and how might our understanding of it affect how we read these contemporary reactions to its transformation in the 1890s? In the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), Marx, the most self-

critical of all Marxists, famously raised a problem for any material or sociological study of culture: 'It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization.'[36] The theory of the field is Bourdieu's answer to this methodological challenge. It stands precisely at the perilous junction between culture and society, and it represents the focal point of his sustained analysis of their *indirect* connection. A literary field is, Bourdieu contends, a social 'microcosm' that has its own 'structure' and its own 'laws'; while writers, critics, and, indeed, publishers, printers, distributors, and readers are 'specialists' with 'particular interests' specific to that self-contained world.

> It is this peculiar universe, this 'Republic of Letters', with its relations of power and its struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order, that is the basis for the strategies of producers, for the form of art they defend, for the alliances they form, for the schools they found, in short, for their specific interests.

Not that he wishes to deny the importance or the inevitability of the field's connection to the larger world. His analysis is intended only to put these broader issues in their proper secondary place. He recognizes that the literary field is embedded in, and indirectly affected by, changing social, economic, political, and technological conditions, and that its structure is never static. But, he claims, the field is relatively autonomous in respect to such influences. Instead of 'reflecting' outside developments, in any straightforwardly linear way, it 'refracts' them through its own changing structure, in the way a prism refracts light. This anti-reductive thrust of his argument is directed primarily at the more crude latter-day Marxists who claim that the literary world is part of the cultural superstructure 'determined' by the economic base, and sociologists who see social class as the decisive factor in any cultural analysis. For Bourdieu, by contrast, it is only once we know the field's 'specific laws of operation' that we can understand what is at stake in Gosse's diatribe or, for that matter, any act of writing or reading.[37]

The aim of this book is to demonstrate, through a detailed examination of three late-Victorian writers' careers, the power of the field as a theory of context, not only for cultural or book historians, but also for literary critics. Since the larger questions to do with its external determinants will emerge in the course of the book as a whole, I would like at this point to focus on Bourdieu's understanding of the field's internal organization and functioning. Most importantly, the theory presupposes a *structural* model of sociocultural relations. It is concerned not only with the actual interactions between, say, authors and publishers – the staple of pioneering studies like John Sutherland's *Victorian Novelists and their Publishers* (1976) – but with the implicit structures underlying such relations. This shift from an interactive to a structural perspective can best be explained by comparing Bourdieu's analysis with a more traditional model of cultural relations, like Robert Darnton's useful and

influential 'communications circuit' which maps the networks of literary production and consumption. Darnton's purpose in formulating his circuit was to combat the blight of academic specialism, which he rightly identified as the main methodological weakness in the emergent field of book history. 'Some holistic view of the book as a means of communication seems necessary', he argued in 1982, 'if book history is to avoid being fragmented into esoteric specializations'. The circuit provides just that vantage-point. It encompasses the entire life cycle of the text from writing to reading, and through publication, material production, and distribution. But, as Darnton insisted, this is not simply a one-way system, since writing and reading are inextricable. Writers are not only themselves readers, they address implied readers and respond to explicit reviews. 'So the circuit runs full cycle.' As such his model gave a welcome outline of the 'whole' in relation to which the 'parts' examined by bibliographers, cultural historians, sociologists, economists, and literary critics, could take on their 'full significance'.[38]

For Darnton, the agents in the 'communications circuit' are defined primarily in terms of their *function* in the process of *material* production. Authors produce manuscripts, publishers and distributors provide services, printers and binders supply skilled manual labour, and readers are end-product consumers. Given his particular goals, this basic functionalist insight into the workings of the entire circuit has obvious methodological value. The trouble is it brings blindnesses of its own. In particular, it fails to reckon on the other ways in which a literary culture is organized and, as a consequence, it writes out a further dimension to the overall process of production. First, the agents' positions in the culture are defined not only horizontally, in terms of their *function* in the circuit, but vertically, in terms of their *status* in the intricately structured field. Though these two dimensions are, of course, intimately related – printers' abilities to fulfil their function as printers necessarily have an impact on their status, etc. – they are significantly distinct. As Leopold Wagner reminded literary aspirants in his handbook *How to Publish* (1898), an 'author cannot be too careful in his choice of a publisher'.

> Assuming publishers to be all equally stable, and honourable as men of business, there is just the same subtle difference between them as exists between the Lyceum and the Gaiety, Exeter Hall and the Crystal Palace, the Royal Albert Hall and the Alhambra as places of public resort. A book may derive prestige from the imprint of one publisher, and be quite discredited by the imprint of another house in the same street.[39]

What is true for publishers is true for writers, printers, distributors, reviewers, and readers as well. Each has a changeable and, indeed, often precarious status relative to his or her immediate competitors and to the field of production as a whole. Moreover, this vertical ranking of agents has, as Wagner suggests, an important bearing on their function. Publishers not only issue books, they invest them with prestige; just as printers produce both material commodities and status objects. When rightly conceived, then, the

communications circuit should be read both as a map of the tangible process of material production and distribution, as Darnton's analysis insists, and as an index of the more elusive process which Bourdieu calls 'symbolic production'.[40] For now we can take this to refer simply to the way a particular cultural *status* is conferred on any agent or text in the circuit. That Darnton fails adequately to address this second aspect of production should not come as a surprise, since it is directly related to the limitations of his interactive model. It is precisely at this point that Bourdieu's structural concept of the field acquires its methodological force. 'Symbolic production', he contends, is made possible only by the hierarchical structure of the field itself.

What 'makes reputations' is not . . . this or that 'influential' person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher; it is not even the whole set of what are sometimes called 'personalities of the world of arts and letters'; it is the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.[41]

This account of the genesis of cultural status, which goes to the heart of Bourdieu's structural sociology of culture, is consciously directed against the common-sense views of someone like Wagner. Yet it is worth noting that Wagner's language belies his intuitively individualistic sense that renowned publishers can single-handedly make an aspirant's name. Prestige, he implies, is bound up with the large structural divisions within the culture, since, by analogy, the hierarchy of publishers is comparable to the hierarchy that set the West End theatre above the music hall.

Bourdieu might be a structural sociologist but he is no friend of the structuralists. While he accepts their critique of the New Critical idea of the literary work as a self-contained verbal text, and endorses their counter-ideal of intertextuality, he shares Darnton's distrust of any theory which remains exclusively preoccupied with textuality, however broadly conceived, and which evades the question of the material and sociohistorical conditions of writing or reading. None the less his concept of the field does make him an ally of the structuralists in at least one respect. By shifting the burden of analysis from celebrated individuals or works to the objective conditions that make particular ways of writing and reading possible, he reinforces their assault on the great man theory of cultural history. But, where the structuralists see only intertextual conditions – what Bourdieu calls the 'paradise of ideas' – he insists upon the social and material conditions of intertextuality itself.[42] For him, a writer's participation in an intertextual network (Foucault's 'field of strategic possibilities') simultaneously implicates him or her in a network of value, or disputes about value, which is ultimately grounded in the non-discursive, social structure of the field.[43] And, since this structure is specific to certain periods and countries, writing is always entangled in social history. This has