When we think of our own life or the life of another as a logical sequence of events, with an origin, understood in the double sense of both a \textit{beginning} and a \textit{first cause}, and an end, in the sense of both a \textit{termination} and \textit{purpose}, we fall into what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘biographical illusion.’\footnote{In this essay, I refer to the following works by Bourdieu: \textit{Raisons pratiques}, (Paris, Seuil, 1994) hereafter cited as \textit{RP}; \textit{La distinction: critique sociale du jugement} (Paris, Le Sens commun, Minuit, 1979) hereafter cited as \textit{D}; \textit{Les règles de l'art} (Paris, Seuil, 1992) hereafter cited as \textit{RA}.} This illusion is very powerful. It is supported by all the symbolic power of the state, which fixes our dates of birth and death, sex, nationality, etc., \textit{attributes} that ascribe and inscribe, under the appearance of observation, our social and self identity, and \textit{define} (fix the boundaries of, but also construct the meaning of) our existences. It is supported by common sense, which speaks of life as a story, a journey or progression (a career, mobility), during which this individual “I” makes a series of consistent and coherent decisions, bound by a unitary and unifying \textit{intention}. And of course, it is supported by ordinary biographies, autobiographies and histories, which smuggle this common-sense philosophy into scholarly discourse with all those apparently innocuous little phrases and expressions – “from then on”, “already”, “from their earliest years”, and so on (\textit{RP}, 81–9).

According to Bourdieu, it is significant that the abandonment of the structure of the novel as a linear narrative coincided with the modern philosophical questioning of the \textit{sense}}
(meaning, direction) of existence as progress or teleology. Bourdieu cites the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet:

> l’avènement du roman moderne est précisément lié à cette découverte: le réel est discontinu, formé d’éléments juxtaposés sans raison dont chacun est unique, d’autant plus difficiles à saisir qu’il surgissent de façon sans cesse imprévue, hors de propos, aléatoire.²

The invention of a new mode of literary expression helped to expose the traditional representation of life as a coherent totality for what it is: a rhetorical convention, which can be broken.

Yet, we need not fall from the false tangibility or substantialism of the biographical illusion into a vague post-modern notion of “fluid identity.” Bourdieu’s theory of habitus explains the continuity through change and change through continuity that best describes the transformations that occur as agents travel along their social trajectories – understood as a series of positions successively occupied by the same agent in social space. The habitus is, so to speak, the embodiment of our position in the field. As our positions change, as we “socially age” (an aging which inevitably accompanies but is relatively independent of biological aging), we develop different interests, lifestyles and consumer practices, even manners of speech and dress. In short, we conform to the social and economic conditions that correspond to each position on our trajectory.

There is continuity, however, that runs through all our position-takings, although it is not the same as a consciously adhered to rule or intention. The embodiment of our social position, our habitus tends to reproduce the conditions in which it was produced through its actions, adjusting ours expectations, tastes, ambitions, sympathies and antipathies to our life chances and opportunities. Bourdieu writes:

Les limites objectives deviennent *sens des limites*, anticipation pratique des limites objectives acquise par l’expérience des limites objectives, *sense of one’s place* qui porte à s’exclure (biens, personnes, lieux, etc.) de ce dont on est exclu. *(D, 549)*

Indeed, because the dispositions of the habitus are durable, and since primary socialisation is, according to Bourdieu, more formative of internal dispositions than subsequent socialisation experiences, we are likely to stay within the limits of our social class.

This regularity is another factor that contributes to sustain the biographical illusion. When we look back and rationalise our actions or the actions of another, we tend to project our awareness of their consequences onto our past selves, making it sound as if we were not only clairvoyants, but had weighed up every possible course of action and predicted its probable outcome. This sounds plausible (until we spell out the assumptions behind those innocuous little phrases) because there *is* a logic behind our actions, when we examine them retrospectively. Only, it is not the logic of rational or conscious strategy. Agents whose habitus have incorporated a multitude of ‘practical schemes of perception and appreciation’ (*habitus*) do not need (and most often do not have time) to consider the purpose or long-term results of their actions, which, if they are reflected upon at all, just seem the “right” or “obvious” thing to do. For instance, intellectuals do what is in their personal and long-term professional, financial etc., interests because they are sincerely and uncynically *interested* in Maine de Biran and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Haitian literature or French Basque writers.³ Which is to say that in fields where one must be “disinterested” to succeed agents can perform *in a spontaneously disinterested manner* actions that are in their own interest – a good example (because opposed to short-term economic rationality) of what Bourdieu calls the “ontological complicity” between a habitus and the field to which it is adjusted.

³ Editors’ note: these were the topics for discussion of the other speakers at the 2001 Group 'Memory' conference.
The biographical illusion thus links up with Bourdieu’s broader critique of what he calls (borrowing the expression from John Austin) the *scholastic point of view*. Bourdieu saw that there is a sort of incompatibility between practical and theoretical or “scholastic” knowledge: theorising presupposes studious leisure, free time liberated from necessity (especially economic), and a quiet place to think – all the things associated, a long time ago, by Plato with the word *skholè* (*RP*, 215-6). Yet, we tend to forget these social conditions separating theory from practice, and so have every chance of falling into the some form of ‘theoreticist bias’: like Chomsky who writes as if ordinary speakers were grammarians, or Rational Actor Theory (which says it all). Bourdieu writes:

> Le savant qui ne sait pas ce qui le définit en tant que savant, c’est-à-dire le «point de vue scholastique», s’expose à mettre dans la tête des agents sa propre vision scholastique; à imputer à son objet ce qui appartient à la manière de l’appréhender, au mode de connaissance. (*RP*, 219)

Of course, more recent autobiographies and theorists of autobiography have come to similar conclusions. For instance, Louis Renza has argued, in “The veto of the imagination: a theory of autobiography”,⁴ that autobiographers cannot claim any connection between the writing self and the self being written about, because their texts cannot communicate the *lived experience* of the events it seeks to described. Rather than asserting, however, as Renza does, that all biographies must therefore be fictive, Bourdieu’s solution is to build into his ‘scientific’ theory a theory of the gap between objective knowledge and subjective experience – a solution, as we will see, which leads us to a reflection on the relation and difference between scientific and literary modes of expression.⁵

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**Anamnesis**


⁵ Jonathan Loesberg is therefore be wrong to draw a ‘parallel’ between Bourdieu's theory of practice, and the theory literary biography expounded by Renza, insofar as this suggests a conflation of literary and scientific discourses, and an aestheticization of scientific knowledge. See Jonathan Loesberg, ‘Bourdieu and the Sociology of Aesthetics’, *English Literary History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1993), 1033-1056, 1036 n. 5.
I would like to end this paper with a few words on another term that Bourdieu takes from the tradition stretching back to Plato: anamnesis, or the recovery of what one has forgotten. Of course, by anamnesis Bourdieu does not mean the bringing to consciousness of knowledge from past lives, which we are born with and of which learning (according to Socrates) is the recollection. Rather, he uses the term to refer to the “unforgetting” of social structures of which we have acquired a practical knowledge through slow familiarisation, and which we may think of as the immediate purpose of Bourdieu’s sociology. The clearest comparison is in fact with psychoanalysis, where the sociologist is to the social unconscious what the psychoanalyst is to the unconscious of the analysand. In both cases, the analyst’s task is to expose the vital but unacknowledged presuppositions and interests that steer our actions, often in the face of considerable resistance.

It is not only sociology, however, that according to Bourdieu can act as a sort of anamnesis. Indeed, literature can sometimes say more, ‘même sur le monde social, que nombre d’écrits à prétention scientifique’ – since literature’s characteristic putting into form permits the indirect or ‘veiled’ expression of personal and social truths which, expressed differently, might even be unbearable (RA, 68–9). Bourdieu’s principle example is Gustave Flaubert’s L’Éducation sentimentale, in which his analysis reveals a remarkably precise (and ‘quasi-scientific’) model of the social space in which Flaubert was himself situated, and in Frédéric a ‘self-objectification’ of the author in that space. At one pole, Bourdieu positions agents who are very well endowed in cultural capital and poorly in economic capital. These are the artists and art critics who gather under the umbrella of L’Art Industriel, the journal of art dealer M. Arnoux. At the other pole, he places individuals who are very rich in economic capital but poor in cultural capital. These are the diplomats, famous doctors and large landowners who attend the banquets held by the banker M. Dambreuse. Here we can see a ‘chiasmatic structure’ or inverse profiles of the structure of capital. Between these two poles are positioned the so-called professions (or in the language of Flaubert’s time, the capacités). Agents from these positions are endowed with approximately equal levels of both forms of capital. It is here that we encounter Frédéric. Frédéric is a small rentier living off his property, like
Flaubert himself, and the son of a professional. He is a split character, ambiguously balanced between the two poles of the field of power (*RA*, 23–30).

Of course, Bourdieu cannot have presumed that Flaubert was equipped with all the concepts and methods of sociology *avant la lettre*. Rather, he writes,

Sous peine de voir l’effet d’une sorte de miracle parfaitement inintelligible dans le fait que l’analyse puisse découvrir dans l’œuvre – comme je l’ai fait pour *L’Éducation sentimentale* – des structures profondes inaccessibles à l’intuition ordinaire (et à la lecture des commentateurs), il faut bien admettre que c’est à travers ce travail sur la forme que se projettent dans l’œuvre ces structures que l’écrivain, comme tout agent social, porte en lui à l’état pratique, sans en détenir véritablement la maîtrise, et que s’accomplit l’anamnèse de tout ce qui reste enfoui d’ordinaire, à l’état implicite ou inconscient. (*RA*, 184)

Literary writing, unlike science according to John Searle (cited by Bourdieu), can speak of serious matters without demanding to be taken seriously, and gives the author and his or her reader the possibility of satisfying a will-to-know without ever confronting the reality. This is in contrast to scientific understanding, according to Bourdieu, which tries to model that reality directly, ‘sans euphémismes’ (*RA*, 541).

**Conclusion**

To conclude, Bourdieu addresses these and other key issues in contemporary literary theory, concerning the status of memory, the difficulties of biography, the possibility of objectivity, and the relation and difference between literature and science. This presentation, semi-improvised and time constrained, can offer only a brief introduction to Bourdieu’s key concepts and claims as they relate to the themes of this study day. There remains much that needs to be discussed critically, and analysed more closely. To this end, I am currently writing a doctoral thesis, entitled ‘Bourdieu and Literature’, due for
submission in September 2009. There will also be conference on *Bourdieu and Literature*, held at the University of Warwick on Saturday 16 May 2009.

For more information and a booking form for the *Bourdieu and Literature* conference please visit [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/hrc/confs/bl](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/hrc/confs/bl)