While Bourdieu’s work has been highly influential in the fields of general sociology and the sociology of culture, there has by all accounts been little systematic engagement with it in the field of Anglophone literature studies. One reason, to be sure, was the delay in published translations of Bourdieu’s work on literature in English. For these, Anglophone readers had to wait until *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and *The Rules of Art* (1992; trans.1996) – collections of ideas and essays, some of which dated back to the 1970s. Yet, we can also notice here the important role of the review in slowly but durably building knowledge and understanding of one’s work, and establishing one’s position in a field. In the event, Bourdieu’s work on literature appeared to most Anglophone literary scholars all at once, without preparation, and disappeared again almost as quickly.

Another barrier to what Bourdieu terms ‘the international circulation of ideas’ which affected the critical reception of his own work on literature is that of mistaken identity – or, to use the term he employs, *alloxia*: the tendency of readers to apply anachronistic, ethnocentric, sometimes even xenophobic frames of reference to foreign texts and authors. Thus, Bourdieu is no “out-moded” structuralist, and certainly no French “relativist” “postmodernist,” despite having been regularly ranged in both camps.

Then again, when we actually read Bourdieu’s work on literature, his refusal to sign up to any of the various –iques, -ismes and –logies that have become familiar in the
field literary studies can only confuse those critic who like to carve up theory into manageable categories. The one term to which he does consistently return, however – science –, is soon seized upon to re-establish order, and to either dismiss his work as “essentialist” and “reductive”, or contrast it favourably (and polemically) with the “irrational” “excesses” of poststructuralism.

**LIBER**

It was in order overcome such false frontiers, misrecognition and misrepresentation that Bourdieu launched his European literary review Liber, in October 1989. Published simultaneously in five different langages, and calling upon contributers from all over Europe, Liber aimed ‘to overcome the time-lags and misunderstandings that result from barriers of language, from the tardiness of translations (if any) and from the inertia of academic traditions’. It also sought ‘to resist all forms of provincialism and narrowness, both those of national traditions and coteries, and those within academic disciplines and specializations.’ Liber’s ecumenism was born out by the involvement of such big-name contributors as Derrida, Bobbio, Habermas, Hobsbawm, Starobinski, and Bourdieu himself.

Even more ambitiously, in its style and format (as a free supplement distributed in five national publications, including Le Monde and The Times Literary Supplement), Liber even attempted to surmount the traditional opposition between academic and non-academic criticism: ‘to offer scholars a forum in which they can explain and debate freely, and as accessibly as possible, intellectual problems which are of general concern’,
and ‘to diffuse rigorous accounts of important books and the debates they give rise to (…) to several million readers.’

Unfortunately, the review was a resounding failure, for reasons that can only be sketched within the parameters of this paper. The difficulties of managing a transnational review on the scale of Liber were considerable, involving the co-ordination of translators, academics and journalists working across the continent, and in a dozen European languages. The resulting problems soon led to the resignation of Liber’s managing-editor after just the first three issues – de facto passing her responsibility to Bourdieu, as chairman of the international editorial board. Liber’s parent journals, meanwhile, soon tired of paying for production and distribution. They had all dropped Liber by its tenth issue. As its independent financial backers also pulled out one by one, Liber was forced to retreat to France, to the French language, and eventually between the pages of Bourdieu’s own journal of sociology, Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales. It was quietly disbanded just before its tenth anniversary.

ESSE

Liber’s mission, however, has in many ways been revived by the work of the internet-based réseau ‘L’Espace des Sciences Sociales Européen’ (ESSE). Founded soon after Bourdieu’s death in 2002, like Liber ESSE’s mission is to ‘create a European sphere of interdisciplinary thinking, aimed at contributing to the constitution of a permanent European sphere of scientific and intellectual dialogue’, with a focus on the production and circulation of literary and cultural goods in Europe. Members are again drawn from across the continent, and include prominent Bourdieusiens such as Anna Boschetti,
Pacale Casanova, Joseph Jurt, Jacques Dubois and Bridget Fowler – many of whom previously contributed to Liber.

ESSE’s first objective is to describe the barriers that impede the emergence of such a transnational, multidisciplinary space as Bourdieu envisaged that Liber could become: identifying intercultural divergences and convergences, and objectifying the economic and social obstacles that slow, block, or filter the free circulation of ideas. Once those social mechanisms are identified, Bourdieu believed, we can increase, if only by a little, our chances of controlling them: a goal towards which, I hope, this paper has made some minor contribution.

NOTES

1 Three of the essays later published (with slight alterations) in The Rules were in fact published in English first, during the mid-1980s. Yet only one of these, ‘Flaubert’s point of view’, directly relates to literature.

2 Liber Year 1, Number 1 (October 1989): TLS, no. 4514, 6 October 1989.

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