
H-France Review Vol. 15 (April 2015), No. 45

Anna Boschetti, *Ismes: Du réalisme au postmodernisme*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2014. 352 pp. 25.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-07438-6.

Review by Bishupal Limbu, Portland State University.

How does one survive and succeed in the artistic and literary field? In *The Rules of Art*, Pierre Bourdieu answered this question by emphasizing the competitive nature of cultural production. In order to succeed, the artist or writer must distinguish himself from others, accentuate the originality of his work, and establish his unique creative genius through it. This explanation constitutes a key reference point in *Ismes: Du réalisme au postmodernisme*, Anna Boschetti's account of the various categories that have been used to group together artists, thinkers, and writers whose works may share certain characteristics but also, problematically, display qualities that diverge in significant ways. The examples Boschetti examines are realism, futurism, surrealism, existentialism, structuralism, and postmodernism, which are all framed as primarily French phenomena. These "isms," she argues, are useful insofar as they lend visibility, legitimacy, and power to the putative members of the constituted group who would otherwise, as individual actors, struggle to gain recognition. The drawback of these labels, however, is that they give the impression—a false one according to Boschetti—of unified and coherent movements, thus concealing the diversity of practices that would indicate a far more complex set of relationships between the members of the group on the one hand and between successive isms on the other.

That categories and other types of division artificially impose order upon a messy reality is, of course, not a new idea. For instance, Michel Foucault, whose contributions Boschetti dismisses rather too quickly and describes, puzzlingly, as "a work of deconstruction that relativizes all knowledge" (p. 274), demonstrated in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that what we accept unthinkingly as the "unities of discourse" may seem self-evidently consistent and harmonious but break apart and lose substance as soon as they are placed under the archaeologist's scrutiny. Foucault is clearly not Boschetti's *maître à penser*—that distinction belongs to Bourdieu and his influence is evident throughout *Ismes*. As a professor of literature, Boschetti wants to challenge prevailing models of literary study, especially literary history, that she considers inadequate and propose instead a sociologically-inspired alternative as a superior model. She indicts literary historians for neglecting the insights offered by sociology, which, she claims, could help explain oppositions and hierarchies, tendencies and transformations in the cultural field by investigating the relations between social agents.

Boschetti has a point, though it could have been made without caricaturing literary studies as "tenaciously attached to a spiritualist bias that requires the repression of the social" (p. 13). Unlike literary history, literary sociology remains a somewhat marginalized endeavor. (This may be changing: the journal *New Literary History*, despite its title, devoted the spring 2014 issue entirely to essays on the sociology of literature.) The towering figure in this field is obviously Bourdieu, but one could cite other names as well: Lucien Goldmann, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Hans Robert Jauss, Pierre Macherey, Franco Moretti, Janice Radway, John Guillory, Roger Chartier, and Gauri Viswanathan. This diverse list of names indicates not so much the prominence of literary sociology in literary studies but the many ways in which the latter may be embedded in the former. It also suggests that the line separating literary history and literary sociology may not be as impermeable as Boschetti's account

implies. Scholarly works that describe and analyze the social and institutional conditions of literary production do so under various guises. Even when a particular study makes no grand gesture of borrowing the tools of sociology, it can still be profoundly interested in taking into account relations between social agents and investigating the role of rivalries and entrenched hierarchies.

In any case, it is hard to see how substantially different the material presented in *Ismes* is from other longitudinal surveys of its kind. In order to cover the extensive ground she has chosen (at least five different “movements” or “schools,” each with its own complex characteristics) in 340-odd pages, Boschetti proposes a number of case studies that are meant to exemplify the most salient aspects of the associated ism and serve as points of comparison across isms. The first chapter, on realism, focuses mostly on Courbet and Champfleury. The second chapter, on the avant-garde in general, but more specifically on futurism and its successors, concentrates on Marinetti and refers to many other figures in secondary positions (Apollinaire--the subject of a previous book by Boschetti--the most significant among them). Existentialism, the subject of the third chapter, is represented unsurprisingly by Sartre. With structuralism, the topic of the fourth chapter, things start to get messier as we enter a period of extraordinary efflorescence in French thought. Lévi-Strauss is one key figure of this period, but also Lacan, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, and even Bourdieu who predictably gets special treatment and held up as an example of “appropriating a theoretical model [rather than] participating in a trend” (p. 239).^[1] Postmodernism, in the fifth chapter, does not seem to have a singular figure attached to it but may in fact possess two: “French Theory” and the United States in its role as the importer, enabler, and indeed inventor of “French Theory.”

In Boschetti’s account, the artistic, literary, or intellectual field appears as an arena full of competitors engaged in a battle for legitimacy, recognition, and primacy. Her thesis, which has a tendency to fade from view in the narration, is that an important strategic action in this contest involves the founding of a movement and the creation of a new label. Social agents in relatively weak positions can distinguish themselves from the dominant group by initiating a symbolic rupture that performs the double function of differentiating the new from the old and affiliating the new with the old. This task receives crucial support from a label ending in “ism,” which preserves the affiliation in the suffix and announces the difference in the new nominal or adjectival stem. Explaining how Courbet, for instance, negotiated his position as leading representative of realism, Boschetti writes: “One cannot grasp the vital necessity behind the constant effort of self-promotion characteristic of Courbet’s career if one does not take into account the seemingly insurmountable obstacles he had to confront in the struggle to achieve fame and gain access to the market... The use of a label containing ‘ism’ was part of this full-scale fight” (pp. 46-47). More established and singular figures like Flaubert, however, do not need the assistance of such labels and indeed actively mark their difference by refusing to be associated with any.

This type of explanation is undoubtedly useful. It highlights aspects of the literary social field that are often overlooked in the works of staid literary history that Boschetti excoriates. It helps elucidate, for example, the intricate confluence of concerns--not all of them literary, artistic, or intellectual--that creates the conditions of possibility for new work. But this way of constructing relations between social agents and finding in them the primary motivating force for cultural and intellectual production is also limited and limiting, as demonstrated, albeit inadvertently, by long stretches of the narration in *Ismes* itself. Boschetti’s case studies do not always, or even often, conform to the story she wants to tell. In the absence of new archival research, the details chronicled in the book sound very much like the details recounted in other books for the simple reason that these details have been recorded and established by many scholars, including the art historians, literary historians, and intellectual historians on whose work Boschetti relies and from whom she would like to differentiate herself. One way out of this impasse would be to examine closely a few paintings, poems, novels, and even works of philosophy and anthropology to show how the agonistic framework with its oppositions, affiliations, hierarchies, rivalries, and circuits of influence and prestige reveals new and exciting interpretations of the material categorized under this or that label. But this rarely happens in *Ismes*. It may be that the sociological

approach, in this and other investigations that claim allegiance to it, does not allow close analysis of individual works, even when utilized by a professor of literature. If so, one must acknowledge Bourdieu's genius in beginning *The Rules of Art* with a long and masterful reading of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*.

The most compelling parts of *Ismes* occur in the chapters on existentialism and structuralism, which describe the influential role played by both popular magazines and academic journals in promoting these labels. These sections provide a fascinating and sometimes dizzying overview of the declarations, clarifications, refutations, and arguments that took place in the pages of numerous publications, including *Les Temps modernes*, *La NRF*, *L'Arc*, *Critique*, *Esprit*, *Combat*, *Le Magazine littéraire*, *L'Express*, and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Boschetti displays admirably detailed knowledge of the relations of cooperation and conflict between journals, intellectuals, academic institutions, political parties, and publishing houses, and uses this knowledge effectively to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to these circuits.

One criticism of the book could be that it tries to cover too much ground in too few pages. Despite the case study approach, which is pursued only to a certain extent, the book mostly seems to provide a synthetic record of events and information rather than systematic and thoughtful analysis. But this criticism may not be fair since works of synthesis are valuable and should be appreciated for what they provide. However, the opinionated and, at times, dismissive attitude of the author, especially in the final two chapters of the book, makes one desire more showing and less telling, which would require a more careful engagement with the material. I have already supplied a few instances of this cavalier style. Another case in point is Boschetti's treatment of the U.S. academic scene at the moment of "French Theory." According to Boschetti, U.S. institutions, focused on the prestige afforded by research and publications, enthusiastically adopted French theoretical models because "they make it possible to produce rapidly (since internal analyses do not necessarily require much erudition) and to exhibit the signs of originality and speculative 'elevation'" (p. 300). This comment would feel more justified if accompanied by examples. Sometimes the urge to explain and dismiss leads to serious misunderstandings. After discussing terms such as posthumanism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, Boschetti claims: "The American uses of the prefix 'post' often have bigger implications whose generating principle is the fantasy of the 'end of history'" (p. 312). The baffling suggestion that whole areas of study are founded on a "fantasy" almost distracts from the striking slipup that attaches Francis Fukuyama's phrase (cited with no reference to Fukuyama) to disciplines that have been vociferously critical of his thesis.

Perhaps such errors are to be expected in a book that bravely attempts to apply an idea to multiple domains. Can the same be said of omissions? Women are almost entirely absent from the pages of *Ismes*. Simone de Beauvoir is a notable exception and Julia Kristeva is mentioned in passing. When Boschetti writes about the new experimental university at Vincennes (now Université Paris 8), she names more than fifteen people, all men, but somehow manages to overlook H el ene Cixous, whose Centre d' tudes f minines, established at Vincennes, inaugurated a new era in feminist and gender studies in France. One may argue that the omission of women is largely justified because the most significant social agents were often men. But at least since futurism, women have participated, sometimes quite prominently, in intellectual and artistic movements. A case study concentrating on one of them may reveal even more valuable information regarding the self-legitimizing strategies employed by those on the margins of the dominant group.

Despite its limitations, *Ismes* is a stimulating contribution to sociologically-inflected studies of culture. Its ambitious agenda recalls that of Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, another book that acknowledges the usefulness of methods drawn from sociology. Boschetti's Bourdieu-inspired approach brings to light many unexpected connections between cultural production and the mundane but serious concerns of agents, groups, and institutions arrayed differentially in the social arena.

NOTE

[1] Boschetti writes: “The case of Pierre Bourdieu necessitates a consideration of the difference between appropriating a theoretical model and participating in a trend.... In the era of the triumph of ‘structuralism,’ Bourdieu never claimed this label and not a single commentator thought of applying it to him.... Bourdieu increased the impact of this theoretical transgression by renouncing, unlike Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, the prestigious status of philosopher to move into an ‘inferior’ discipline such as sociology” (pp. 239, 242).

Bishupal Limbu
Portland State University
limbu@pdx.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172