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Boris Gobille, *Le Mai 68 des écrivains. Crise politique et avant-gardes littéraires*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018. 400 pp. Bibliography, tables, and index of names. 25€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-08151-3.

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The question at the heart of Boris Gobille's fascinating new book is one with which many academics grapple: how can one call for a more open public sphere, one that does not merely reproduce privilege and social hierarchy, while holding onto one's status and authority as a scholar? Gobille does not address this question head on, but examines how it played out in a specific context: the role of writers—primarily avant-garde novelists and poets—in the student and worker uprisings of May '68. Though Gobille does consider the trajectories of specific writers, what holds his book together is a problem, not individuals. May '68 was a crisis of enormous consequence for the literary world because it was, from the outset, a “symbolic revolution,” as Michel de Certeau later described it (p. 17). Thus the March 22 Movement, which launched what grew into the May movement, declared: “The realization of each person's creativity ... is the potentiality that our revolution must seek to realize” (p. 18). This “utopia of generalized creativity” (p. 20) promised to be an extraordinary boon for writers, as speech—*la parole*—was suddenly endowed with revolutionary significance. Yet this sacralization of expression came with a catch: for this “revolution in speech” to occur, it was widely assumed that the *special* status of writers in society had to be abolished. An event that gave words unprecedented significance simultaneously stripped professional word-makers of their prestige. Gobille writes: “at the same time that symbolic *power*—or, rather, the revolutionary force with which it is credited—grew as never before in May-June '68, it became detached from all symbolic *capital*” (p. 21). To understand how May '68 functioned as a crisis in the intellectual realm, Gobille meticulously retraces the way that several avant-garde groups negotiated this paradox.

Though Gobille betrays a fondness for primary sources, drawing deeply on the archives of writers' organizations from the 1960s, his conceptual framework remains resolutely sociological. Indeed, one of the few shortcomings of this study (which, in an earlier form, was a doctoral thesis defended at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 2003) is its inclination to use its rich source material primarily to confirm or enrich a number of sociological hypotheses. This theoretical framework allows Gobille to formulate his main argument: considered from the standpoint of avant-garde writers, May '68 was “an *encounter* between a *crisis* and a *field*” (p. 9). A key term in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, “field” refers to a social domain governed by a distinct set of criteria for defining status and domination. As for “crisis,” Gobille uses it to describe a situation in which the “autonomy of social fields” (p. 10) breaks down and their

boundaries become fluid. Gobille's argument is, in short, that that the crisis that was May '68 upset avant-garde writers' customary strategies for seeking distinction within their field, particularly in the way that the events made expression, an activity to which writers believed they had a quasi-proprietary claim, central to the broader revolutionary struggle. As a crisis in the literary field, May '68 was an opportunity as well as a risk—one that, in any case, forced writers to recalibrate their professional strategies.

Gobille's lengthy book is an in-depth analysis of how a handful of literary figures parried the challenges of May '68. He begins by examining why the first authors to take public positions on the May events were "consecrated writers" like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, arguing that they were able to cash in on the symbolic capital—particularly the aura surrounding their names—that they had accumulated during the postwar years. It did not, however, take long for the May movement to challenge the very authority that had allowed these prominent writers to endorse it. This "great movement of symbolic deposing" (p. 80) was evident in the criticism directed against Louis Aragon and Sartre during assemblies held at the Sorbonne on, respectively, May 9 and 20. Into the breach of this revolt against established writers rushed a new literary generation, which had been working to undermine the field's dominant figures for some time. The challenge these newcomers now faced, however, was not the conventional problem of overthrowing a literary elite, but the far more delicate challenge of negotiating the literary field's upending by a revolutionary movement calling for "l'imagination au pouvoir."

Gobille gives considerable attention to how the new political and aesthetic landscape created by May '68 was navigated by three avant-garde groups: the writers associated with the journal *Tel Quel*, the Comité d'action étudiants-écrivains, and the Union des écrivains. Each represents, for Gobille, a different strategy in the face of the literary field's predicament. All of them were, moreover, attempting to respond to the movement's radical interrogation of the writing profession's foundational myth: the conviction that words matter, that they can influence, despite their "unbearable lightness," the course of political events.

The literary movement that coalesced around *Tel Quel* and its charismatic leader, the author Philippe Sollers, was already ascendant before the May events. This group was well positioned to benefit from revolutionary ferment, not least because it had recently abandoned its prior apolitical stance, allying itself with the French Communist Party. *Tel Quel* contended that its literary radicalism aligned with the Party's political radicalism: its doctrine of "textualism"—the notion that language speaks, not individual subjects—was supposed to instantiate in linguistic terms the allegedly Marxist conception of proletarian labor as a subject-less process. The *Tel Quel* group also claimed—once again taking considerable liberties with Marxist theory—that the bourgeoisie was ideologically committed to "speech" rather than "textuality," conveniently equating capitalist rule with literary conservatism. Yet May '68 ended up posing a serious threat to *Tel Quel's* bid for symbolic dominance. Not only was the Communist Party destabilized by the movement's anti-institutionalist spirit, but the protests conveyed a democratic preference for free and open discourse that made *Tel Quel's* textualism seem effete and elitist. In the wake of the May events, these writers were compelled to critique the uprising, illustrating, as Gobille puts it, "the way a literary avant-garde that has accumulated a certain amount of symbolic capital [will] attempt to survive an adverse political event" (p. 156). The *telqueliens'* strategy was to divest May '68 of its revolutionary bone fides: it had been, they contended, a petty bourgeois movement, steeped in a philosophy of expressivity and the corresponding idea of the subject—positions far too idealistic to be compatible with orthodox Marxism.

For all its efforts to equate textualism with revolutionary legitimacy, *Tel Quel* struck other literary movements as a “particularly cunning, if not twisted” way of endowing writing with a sacred aura (p. 167). This was notably true of the authors associated with the Comité d’action étudiants-écrivains (CAEE), the first writers’ group formed during the events. The CAEE’s response to the May crisis was to call for a radical “depersonalization” of writing: rejecting the institution of authorship and the principle of signed texts, they admonished writers to release the “impersonal within oneself” and to embrace the “will ... to be interchangeable” (p. 177). In this way, they emphasized the importance of writing to the revolutionary cause, even as they critiqued the author function—a step that *Tel Quel* had refrained from taking—in the name of a “communism of writing” (p. 178).

Yet another position was adopted by the Union des écrivains (UE), which was founded after the occupation of the Société des gens de lettres, a prestigious professional association for writers, on May 21. Like the CAEE, the UE praised the literary value of revolutionary speech (“la prise de parole”). Yet rather than focus exclusively on what writing could do for the revolution, which was *Tel Quel*’s and the CAEE’s concern, the UE emphasized what the revolution could do for professional writers. It was crucial, they argued, that writers abandon the view of writing as a “liberal profession,” detached from the world of labor and other practical concerns. In this way, the UE “threw the denial of economics that structures the literary field off balance”: while it sacralized revolutionary speech, it simultaneously desacralized authorial prestige, proposing that writers be seen “not as exceptional beings detached from the contingencies characteristic of common mortals, but as ordinary social figure[s] who [are] also exposed to material exploitation” (p. 198). The UE was the only one of these groups to favor trade-unionism.

After this thorough examination of the problem of justifying writing amidst the radical democratization of speech, Gobbille turns to a different though related challenge posed by the May events: that of how avant-garde movements grappled with the uprising’s apparent realization of their longstanding demands. Keeping his argument firmly couched in sociological categories, he describes this as the problem of “realized prophecy.” Drawing on Bourdieu’s reformulation of Max Weber’s religious sociology, Gobbille describes prophecy as an activity that seeks to subvert the existing symbolic order. Crises are, consequently, propitious breeding grounds for prophetic discourse. Avant-garde movements that had long criticized the established intellectual order thus experienced May ’68 as a moment when their dreams seemed on the verge of becoming reality. The problem was that the movement’s radical critique of authority foreclosed the emergence of “prophets,” at the very moment when their prophecy seemed validated. Different groups responded to this difficulty in different ways. The CAEE foundered on the fact that its members who were best positioned to call for the renunciation of authorship (notably Marguerite Duras and Maurice Blanchot) were already established authors: the content of their prophecy was negated by the “logics of differentiation and division” the structured the literary field. As for the surrealists, they were, by the 1960s, an avant-garde that had survived long past their 1930s heyday, but 1968 gave them the heady sensation that their goal—a re-enchantment of the world through dreams and the imagination—could at last be achieved. Yet at the same time, May made it impossible for the surrealists to maintain quality control over the surrealist brand—“l’appellation contrôlée ‘surréaliste,’” in Gobbille’s felicitous phrasing (p. 268). In particular, the radically democratic spirit of the May movement could not abide the practices associated with surrealism’s founder André Breton (who had died in 1966), notably the excommunication of dissident members. Thus for some avant-garde groups, the moment of grace they hoped May ’68

would prove, ultimately, a *coup de grâce*. In the aftermath of the events, both the CAEE and the surrealists (at least as an organized movement) disbanded.

Le Mai 68 des écrivains is a significant contribution to the literature on May '68 for two reasons. First, it uses extensive archival materials and interviews to provide an exhaustive, almost micro-historical account of writers' movements during the May events and their immediate aftermath. Eschewing broader questions of intellectual engagement and ideological orientation, Gobille zeroes in on the specific opportunities and difficulties the uprising created for literary avant-gardes. Second, through his sociological analysis, Gobille offers an intriguing analysis of the way in which May '68 *qua* event forced actors to adjust their strategies to a new political environment, in which radical egalitarianism had quickly become the norm. Though his focus is on writers, Gobille's study provides insight into the political dynamics of this unusual moment.

Gobille's use of Bourdieu's sociology allows him to offer fascinating accounts of the intellectual strategies pursued by writers in '68, particularly the way they sought to transform the critique of traditional ideas of authorship into a paradoxical status symbol. Yet his study also shares this approach's shortcomings. In this paradigm, ideas are gutted of their meaning and arguments shorn of their capacity for persuasion; they are reduced to little more than weapons for pursuing control over a particular field. This is evident, for instance, in Gobille's analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous intervention at an assembly held at the Sorbonne on May 20. The paradox of Sartre, for Gobille, is that he managed to hold onto and even enhance his intellectual prestige amidst May 68's anti-authoritarian climate. Gobille describes this feat as a "singular political and social alchemy," in which Sartre managed to deploy his "symbolic capital" while respecting the egalitarian rhetoric his audience expected of him (p. 91). This description no doubt contains an element of truth. But it also minimizes the fact that Sartre's thought had always embraced the virtues of revolt, and that even his status as an intellectual was tied to a mistrust of authority and convention. Rather than being an ingenious balancing act of social prestige and revolutionary rhetoric, would it not be possible to say that Sartre, by virtue of his writings and example, was simply more convincing before an audience of rebellious youth than many of his intellectual peers? For all its acuity, Gobille's analysis seems to reject in advance the plausibility of such an explanation.

Gobille's sociological approach also leaves him somewhat empty-handed when it comes to assessing May '68's significance as an historical event. He makes the reasonable point that so many "real or fantasized" social changes have been attributed to May '68 that is prudent "not to extend the event's significance beyond that which can be attested empirically" (p. 370). After studying, over nearly 400 pages and in exhaustive detail, the writers' paradox of May '68—if everyone's words matter, what happens to word professionals?—Gobille says relatively little about this puzzle's lingering effects. He does note that in the uprising's aftermath, writers found it difficult to capitalize on their political engagement and that the profile of literary avant-gardes declined precipitously. Yet these conclusions seem frustratingly narrow. Gobille misses an opportunity to reflect on the broader cultural impact of the emancipatory politics of May '68, viewed through the lens of avant-garde movements. How has the conflict between the literary experimentation championed by *Tel Quel* and the testimonial form of expression favored by many student protestors played out in French intellectual life since '68? What effects has the movement's critique of authorship and celebration of de-personalization had on French culture? Precisely because, as Gobille shows, May '68's egalitarian ethos forced so many writers to confront the problem of their own status in society, one wants to know what kinds of insights

they drew from this experience once the upheaval had ended. And because these questions relate to the movement's revolutionary ideas as such, and not simply to the problem of the writer's professional status, they cannot be addressed solely by examining the internal politics of literary groups, however revealing these might be.

That said, Gobille's book achieves its ambition admirably. By examining the highly specific world of writers, he offers a fine-grained analysis of how May '68 upset conventional social expectations and altered the course of individual trajectories. At the same time, he provides ample evidence (as Bourdieusian sociology often does) that art and cultural activities are driven by self-interest and the desire for distinction, even in the most utopian of contexts. For all its idealism, the slogan "l'imagination au pouvoir" is still a *volonté de pouvoir*.

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