Literature as a Kind of Business

Asist.dr.Lidia Mihaela Necula
Universitatea "Dunărea de Jos" Galați

Résumé *: Dans la société postmoderne et post-capitaliste actuelle, où le langage et le discours occupent la première place sur la scène sociale, le monde-texte (la grande mondialisation textuelle) est accompagné par le déclin des livres et des habitudes littéraires, déterminé par l'avalanche des médias. Etant donné l'impacte décisif de l'économie sur les écrivains en général et sur la fiction littéraire de David Lodge, en particulier – David Lodge est un écrivain dont les livres sont très bien vendus dans plus de vingt pays – notre travail propose une recherche du processus de médiation textuelle qui a transformé les produits culturels de David Lodge en marque commerciale facilement vendable sur le marché littéraire.*

Mots-clés *: textualité, médiation textuelle, politique consumériste, marche lecteur*

The Beginnings …

The spectacular rise of prizes in literature over the past decades seems to be one of the great *chronicles* of post-modern cultural life. Despite its being extremely familiar, the custom of awarding prizes, medals, or trophies to artists appears to be an overwhelmingly odd practice but also a terribly alienating one.

According to James F. English in **The Economy of Prestige. Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value** (2005), such a practice is familiar inasmuch as it has a long history: its roots can be traced as far back as the Greek drama and arts contests in the sixth century B.C., the classical and medieval competitions in architecture, and the musical-composition prizes, university essay prizes, and other types of cultural awards which were well reputed by the early Renaissance. The custom becomes more common with the rise of royal and national academies and then of professional associations and learned societies from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

However, since the turn of the century, the phenomenon of *prizing* has expanded ever more hastily, and now emerges as perhaps the most all-pervading feature of cultural life, touching every corner of the cultural universe. Still, *prizing* remains an odd practice inasmuch as there is a feeling of uneasiness brought to light by the perception of art as a race with only one single champion, besieged under the load of the gold-plated medals or crystal statuettes, piling certificates or outsized checks with the rare awareness of artistic mastermind that these objects are believed to honour and reflect.

To most observers, cultural prizes denote an external imposition on the wor(l)d of art, especially literature, rather than a manifestation of its own energies. The ascendance of prizes over the past century, and particularly their forceful outburst in the latest decades, is widely seen as one of the more conspicuous warning signs of a consumer society out of control, a society that can visualize artistic accomplishment simply in terms of stardom and success. Undoubtedly, this means that a rich and varied cultural world is swiftly traded off for a shallow and homogeneous McCulture founded on the model of network TV.

Seen from this angle, prizes are no longer a celebration but rather a corruption of the most valuable facets of art (under its all forms). To an ever increasing extent, prizes have been established into the fields of our cultural activity, therein their unrelenting ability of stirring our feelings of alienation or repulsion. Nonetheless, the never ending chase of the *prize* or the relentless *gaming of fiction* seems to entail the problem of the relationship that literature bears to money, to politics, to the social and the temporal. Without doubt, this

> involves questions of power, of what constitutes specifically cultural power, how this form of power is situated in relation to other forms, and how its particular logic and mode of operation have changed over the course of the modern period. (J. F. English, 2005: 3)

Certainly, money plays a role in the world of art and literature - in sponsorship, advertising, charity, and so forth and, to a certain degree, prizes appear to be bound up with the business end of art (such as the actual financial support of cultural production and the interchange in cultural products).

To begin with, the very *nucleus* of the prize is set apart by a key duplicity. On the one hand, a prize (trophies or medals included) seems to connote with the honour it signifies and, regardless the amount of money involved, with some sort of gift. To announce or to accept a prize does not equal, not even hardly, a purchase or a payment in the narrow sense of the transaction, but rather it engages both the awarders and the recipients in an exceedingly ritualized theatre of gestures which can be readily distinguished from the performance of marketplace exchange.

By means of the prize, not only are particular symbolic fortunes *cashed in* but the very rates of exchange (which determine whether or not such transactions must take place) are incessantly *gamed* and adjusted. Thus, managers, judges (critics, readership, audience), sponsors, and artists alike, all are caught in the *prizing game* each representing a particular set of complex interests concerning the rules and opportunities for capital translation.

The present article aims at embarking on the study of prizes as instruments of cultural exchange, and endeavours to come to terms with the multifaceted *brands of transaction* that it facilitates: neither art nor money represent the only stakes at game, similarly, neither artists nor consumers are the only noteworthy *players*.

In this day and age, prizes have undoubtedly become the most pervasive and influential cultural instruments that are continuously re-writing the story of the postmodern cultural apocalypse, so that *hypercommercialism* has become the air we breathe and *hypercredentialism* the water we drink.

Lately, the angry outburst of literary prizes has broadly outpaced the expansion in literary publishing. Given that, particular attention is, on the whole, directed to David Lodge the *prized brand*, all discussions are made with reference to him and his work (published in Britain, the United States or, in some scarce cases, abroad). [Because David Lodge is a vigorous writer and critic on the publishing market worldwide, reference has to be made as well to the fact that, on the global book marketplace the British fiction market began its resurgence in the early 1980s; since then, 'new titles in Britain have doubled, from about 3,650 in 1981 to about 7,000 at the turn of the century (with at least half again that many new editions and reissues of older titles, which accounts for the higher totals that typically appear in the scholarship on book publishing).' (2005: 325)

The number of significant British literary awards did not exceed more than a half dozen at the time of the pre-war but that share climbed during World War II, more as a consequence of the decline of the publishing industry than the rise of the awards industry. Since the war, however, the sudden increase of awards has consistently outpaced the resurgence in literary publishing. (326)

Part of the traditional insight about cultural prizes is that they have sharpened the dilution of cultural or aesthetic value by commercial value; they have facilitated an ever closer alignment between the works acknowledged as 'best' or 'most important' and those which are simply the bestselling or most popular. According to Pierre Bourdieu in **The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field**,

> The grip of the holders of power over the instruments of circulation – and of consecration – has undoubtedly never been as wide and as deep as it is today - and the boundary has never been as blurred between the experimental work and the *bestseller*'. (1996: 347)

Accordingly, the rise of the prize has altered all economic relationships in terms of a progressive commodification of art, a consecration of the bestseller. Top-ten lists have come to be under the command of the chartbusters (or bestsellers), while prizes have preserved a further hierarchy of symbolic value; this distinctive hierarchy of consecrated

authors and works is not in the slightest independent of commerce. The bestseller is a striking example of how, in the world of prizes, rapid notoriety is often predetermined by the constant ridicule and scorn on the part of experts in the arts press and the popular media. [In addition, commercial literature has not just come into existence recently; nor is it new and the necessities of commerce make themselves felt at the heart of the cultural field.] Arduous attempts have been made to control prizes, via journalistic attention, in the marketplace and even to acknowledge the prize as some sort of brand worthy of consumer loyalty. However, in forwarding its own (diverse, intricate, and hybrid) interests, especially during its highest period of explosive growth and widest impact (from the 1970s onwards), the awards industry has helped to shape a scale of bestsellerdom (deprived of any scale value).

In the Business!

Given that he is available in print and promoted by different publishers, both in hardback and in paperback (i.e. Secker & Warburg and Penguin, respectively) David Lodge *the writer* seems to be quite an atypical *brand name* among contemporary British novelists.

It seems that, the emergence of the big corporations on the publishing markets has entailed a new consumerist fashion: from the 1980s onwards it has become customary to have novels published simultaneously in hardback and paperback editions produced by the same conglomerate, which goes against the common practice of hardback publishing houses selling the paperback rights in a novel to a specialist paperback publisher. [Obviously, this is a straightforward win-win situation, given that both parties involved in the publishing process eventually have something to gain: it is common knowledge that books which come in hardback editions are by far much more expensive than books printed in paperback editions. Similarly, a publishing house estimates the success of a writer (and his book) by the number of the copies sold, which ultimately causes the writer to be enlisted for the longlist of the Booker Prize.

The *prize race* that all writers are caught in, willingly or not, is also influenced by the number of reviews that the author receives (positive or negative), but also by the advertising and promotion campaigns (interviews, signing sessions, reading sessions from work in progress, etc.). Therefore, given the outburst of media(ted) literature available on the market – either under the form of electronic books or audio books -, publishers have to come up with a selling strategy profitable not only for the publisher (the author included) but also for the reader, since the amounts of money to be paid on a book in a paperback edition are considerably cheaper than those which have to be paid for a book in a hardback edition.]

Nevertheless, as he himself admits in **The Year of Henry James or, Timing is All: the Story of a Novel**, David Lodge was reluctant

> to change an arrangement which suited me very well, and managed to resist pressure to do so. Eventually, it was agreed that Secker (who were acquired by Random House in the late ‘80s) and Penguin would make a joint offer for both hardback and paperback rights of any new novel on which they had an opinion. It has never been my practice to sign a contract and accept an advance for a novel which was unwritten or partially written. I submit my new novels in a finished form with which I am satisfied (though always open to editorial suggestions) and wait for an offer. (2006: 58)

The media and the other parties involved (i.e. the organizers of the book trade or of a literary festival) are responsible for the dissemination of information regarding forthcoming books long before the books are published. Because of this, the best part of

the books is published between nine months and a year after they are accepted; lately, more and more important novels have been published in July and August, a rather bad time to bring out new hardback fiction for the reason that so many people are away on holiday at that time, which keeps the number of turnings rather low (a most unfortunate thing if one aspires at finding their name on the shortlist of Booker Prize - of no lesser importance for the book trade - which eventually ensures its winner international renown and success for the best original full-length novel.)

A long-established winner of prizes and awards for his fiction, David Lodge (well-known for a particular *writing signature*) has to keep up to his reader's expectations and maintain his readership he has gained throughout his career as a writer, dramatist, scriptwriter and literary critic. Consequently, writers changing their writing style probably face the challenge of their lives since there are so many parties involved in the process of production, consumption, and reception that one has to take into account. (A good illustration of this is the case of the disappointing performance of **Author, Author** which can be partly attributed to the resistance of readers to the subject of the book and its genre, both very different from anything David Lodge's usual audience expects from him.)

In what follows, discussion shall be made on David Lodge the *name brand* with particular reference to the long debated **Author, Author** controversy. David Lodge starts his *prize winning career* in 1975 when he is voted as winner of the Hawthornden Prize for the best work of imaginative literature and the Yorkshire Post Fiction Prize, both won for **Changing Places**, a novel included in the trilogy of the campus novel **Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work** which has brought him world-wide fame and name. Five years later, in 1980, he is nominated winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year for **How Far Can You Go?** and, another four years later, in 1984, David Lodge is shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction for **Small World.**

Undoubtedly, in 1975 **Changing Places** is a *prize winning book* for David Lodge. Similarly, history seems to repeat itself five years later, in 1989, when he is again shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction for **Nice Work** and two more other prizes follow, namely, the Royal Television Society Award for the Best Drama Serial, for **Nice Work** and also the Sunday Express Book of the Year Award, also for **Nice Work**. In 1990, at the International Television Festival from Monte Carlo, David Lodge is awarded The Silver Nymph for the screenplay of **Nice Work**; in 1995 he wins the Writers' Guild Award for the Best Adapted Screenplay, for Dickens's **Martin Chuzzlewit**. One year later, in 1996, he is appointed regional winner and finalist for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region) for the Best Book, for **Therapy.** In 2001**,** due to a considerable number of copies sold, **Thinks …** is chosen a National Bestseller, and finally, in 2009, David Lodge is shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region) for the Best Book, for **Deaf Sentence**.

The above mentioned *prize wining list* seems to rule out some of David Lodge's novels, and, because inquiring for the causes that account for the lesser success of some book or another relies exclusively on speculation, reference shall be made hereafter solely to one of David Lodge's recent novels, **Author, Author** (2004).

In **The Year of Henry James or, Timing is All: the Story of a Novel**, David Lodge reveals that, to some extent the success or failure of a book depends entirely on three factors, equally important and interrelated: time, reviews and readers. According to him,

> Timing is not all, however, in the evaluation of literature. Time is all. Only time will tell whether **The Master** is a better book than **Author, Author**, or vice versa, or whether they are equally admirable in different ways, or equally negligible. (2006: 101)

Obviously, this is a clear reference to the damaging effects that the prior appearance of Colm Tóibín's **The Master** had on the reception of David Lodge's 2004 novel, **Author, Author.** However, one should not overlook the fact that these *prizing races* are mere

commercial strategies invented by a consumerist culture that seems to have swallowed up most of the publishing market. Therefore, given that 'the novel is a form of communication, covering both its composition and its reception.' (D. Lodge, 'The Novel as Communication' in **The Practice of Writing***,* 1996: 180), a book's life does not depend on the number of copies which are sold at a certain moment in time, but rather on its media(tion), i.e. both the consumption of a book as well as its afterlife are considerably determined by its readers.

Writing always involves not only an activity of communication (the author communicates himself to the world) but also one of mediation (the author has to allow himself to be re-written) and reception. The first stage of this mediation is to submit the book to a publisher and then wait for the publisher's verdict on it, a quite edgy experience, all the more if the author tries to change direction and alter the *textual print* to which his readership has grown used throughout the years. No doubt, **Author, Author** is a quite different novel from anything David Lodge has written before, so, this might have been another reason for this novel's rather poor reception.

Second only to the time factor, there come the reviews, another factor directly responsible for the success or failure of a book. In David Lodge's case, the favourable, admiring British reviews of **Author, Author** greatly outnumbered the unfavourable, dismissive ones.

> The **Sunday Times** was gratifying but **The Times** was sniffy. The **Telegraph** was a rave, but the **Guardian** was lukewarm. The **Scotsman** commended me for following James's injunction to himself to 'dramatise, dramatise,' while the **TLS** declared that I 'utterly neglected' it. In the **New Statesman** George Walden concluded: 'As a novel … it doesn't work, and had it not been a novel at all it might have been a better biography,' while in the **Spectator** Anita Brookner declared: 'This is a compelling book, which reads seamlessly, organically, as a novel.' Most of the reviews made reference to Colm Tóibín's, and several compared the two novels, sometimes in his favour, sometimes in mine. 'It's not that David Lodge has written a weak novel about Henry James. It's just that it suffers in comparison to a brilliant one,' said Adam Mars-Jones in the **Observer.** 'Lodge has settled James more comfortably into his own skin than any other biographer, or novelist, to date,' said Jonathan Heawood in the same day's **Independent on Sunday.** (D. Lodge, 2006: 84-5)

However, things were not similar across the Atlantic and the American reviews for **Author, Author** were deeply disappointing.

> Curiously, given the subject, the down market papers **New York Newsday** and **People Magazine** were among the few that were enthusiastic, but they don't carry much literary weight. The **Boston Globe** was gratifying, and the **Washington Post** and the **New York Review of Books** were friendly, but the rest of the reviews in important publications were negative. Inevitably they mentioned that the novel went over much of the same ground as **The Master,** published in the USA in June, and invariably they compared it unfavourable to Colm Tóibín's book. (2006: 96)

Clearly, **Author, Author** was not a world-class, **Guy Domville** type of failure, but it obviously was not the success hoped for either. The British reviewers were about three to one in favour, and the good ones were very good indeed. **Author, Author** also did very

well in those round-ups of people's 'Books of the Year' just before Christmas. But the number of hostile or unenthusiastic reviews was significant, and there were proportionally more of them in America. [It is equally important to note that the publication of **L'Auteur! L'Auteur!** in France, for example, enjoyed almost unanimously favourable reviews, unlike the rather dismissive reception of **Author, Author** both in Britain and in the US. However, due mention needs to be made to the fact that **L'Auteur! L'Auteur!** was published in France in January 2005, nine months before the French edition of **The Master**, and it was on the bestseller list of **L'Express** for nine weeks, and sold (in the French equivalent of hardback) twice as many copies as Secker sold in the same period after publication.]

True as it is that different authors have different ways of coping with the reviews they get for their books (some read them enthusiastically as they appear, others wait for their publishers to send them; some don't read them at all, and others claim not to but secretly learn what they contain), this cannot be said to apply to readers or publishers as well. Accordingly, a reader's final decision of whether or not to buy a certain *author* is significantly influenced by these reviews (among other mediating paratextual elements such as the blurb, the jacket or the picture inscribed on the front cover) and eventually has a certain impact on the number of turnings cashed in by the publishing house; equally, publishers are constantly surveying the market and give a great deal of importance to these reviews, which are influential to and responsible for the degree of enthusiasm and commitment shown to the new book (which, in due course, is indicated by the kind of financial advance they offer the writer and which, in turn, is based on their assessment of how many copies they will sell). In other words, when a publisher pays the writer more for the novel, it means that a great number of copies is likely to sell, which requires more effort that has to be put into promoting and marketing the book in order to recoup the investment.

Furthermore, such an indirect marketing and publicity strategy directly involves the writer who is expected to have an active part in the process; simply put, there is an interdependence relationship between the increased financial investment in the publishing campaign of a book and the increased financial rewards for the writer. Needless to say that the success of a book depends tremendously on publicity: each and every one of the three factors already listed above is directly accountable for the greater or the lesser success of a book.

> Although such ideas as the 'impersonality' of art, 'the intentional fallacy' and 'the Death of the Author' have dominated academic theorizing about literature since the 1920s, the general reading public remains inveterately curious about the human beings who create the books, and publishers have found that interviews with writers in the press, and on TV and radio, or as a component of readings, signings and similar meet-the-author events in bookshops and at literary festivals, can boost a writer's sales more than reviews. If you have accepted a substantial advance for a book, both self-interest and a sense of obligation make it hard to refuse to participate in such activities, and some writers positively enjoy the opportunity to explain their work, the personal contact with their readers, and the element of performance involved. (80-81)

Without a doubt, the significant number of coincidences even before submitting his novel for publishing, led David Lodge to suspect that he had 'strayed into a zone of Jamesian ironies as a result of writing **Author, Author**' and was 'in some measure re-enacting the story of' his own novel. (94)

> That was indeed the supreme irony, for me, of the year of Henry James. Colm Tóibín was my Du Maurier, **The Master**

> his **Trilby**, and **Author, Author** was my **Guy Domville.** Like James I must suffer the pangs of professional envy and jealousy while struggling to conceal them. The correspondences were not, of course, exact – Colm was not a close friend of mine, his novel was in a different class from Du Maurier's and not a bestseller (*yet*, but if it won the Booker, it would bury mine under an avalanche of publicity and sales), and **Author, Author** was not a flop – but they were close enough to cause me some discomfort and dismay. (94-95)

Given the circumstances, David Lodge involves himself more and starts collaborating with his publicist at Random House. This change of attitude has had a positive outcome on the third factor, generally responsible for the success or failure of a book, namely readership. Owing to this publicity campaign, **Author, Author** received significant media attention in the run-up to publication (unmatched to any of his previous books).

Generally, all literary novels published in the same year or season compete against each other for readers, for sales, for critical approval, and more and more increasingly nowadays, for prizes. Under normal circumstances, chances are that David Lodge's **Author, Author** would have been better received had it been the only novel published in 2004 on Henry James. However, things seem to have got out of control and stepped into the 'zone of Jamesian ironies' (94) such as Henry James himself loved to create, especially in his wonderful stories ('The Lesson of the Master', 'The Death of the Lion', 'The Figure in the Carpet', 'The middle Years, 'The Next Time', and several others). Thus, the moment when two more writers published outstanding novels on the same subject, namely Colm Tóibín's **The Master** (published in March 2004 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize), and Allan Hollinghurst's **The Line of Beauty** (published in April 2004, winner of the Booker Prize) all three writers suddenly seemed to turn into characters in a Jamesian plot: **The Master** and **Author, Author** were most directly in competition with each other, while **The Line of Beauty** simply alluded, occasionally and hastily, to the life and character of Henry James.

Instead of Conclusions

Unquestionably, during the past decades it has become quite fashionable for literary prizes like the Booker to be announced; the publishing of their shortlists and (more recently) longlists, has certainly sharpened and institutionalized the element of competition in the writing and publishing of fiction, a two-sided 'development which may have been good for the Novel, inasmuch as it has increased public interest in literary fiction, but not for the equanimity of novelists, publishers and agents.' (11)

Bringing matters to a close, the **Author, Author** controversy does not arise from the fact that it was published in 2004 (also branded as *the year of Henry James* due to the great number of novels published on Henry James then) since the decisive importance of the order of publication of the two books, or what might have happened had it been reversed, remain matters of speculation; but rather because the novel was not received as an independent work of art but as yet another treatment of the same subject matter. A novel about Henry James is most certainly bound to be controversial, and the existence of a rival novel gave prospects for prejudicial comparisons which don't normally present themselves in reviewing fiction.

> Colm Tóibín's novel and mine had much more in common than either had with any of the others. (For reasons to be explained, I have not read **The Master**, but I have assimilated some information about it indirectly, and have had the facts checked by others.) Both are long, extensively

> researched books, sympathetic to James, which attempt to represent known facts of his life from inside his consciousness, using a novelist's license to imagine thoughts, feelings and spoken words which can never be reliably documented by a biographer. (13)

When two novels have the same theme in common, or share the same historical background, the general tendency (also quite unreasonable) is for literary critics or reviewers to compare and contrast them more directly.

> The calamitous first night of James's play **Guy Domville** in January 1895 is central to both. Colm Tóibín begins with this traumatic experience, and traces James's gradual recovery from it and rededication to the art of prose fiction, following his life, with occasional retrospective digressions, up until and just beyond his acquisition of Lamb House in Rye in 1897. The first half of my main story leads up to the first night of **Guy Domville***,* and the second half corresponds almost exactly to the chronological span of **The Master.** (13)

However, despite the considerable number of similarities, the structure of each book is different, and each deals in part with particular aspects and events of James's life. The backbone of **Author, Author** is Henry James's friendship with George Du Maurier, who does not figure in Tóibin's book in any way; also, unlike David Lodge's novel, **The Master** seems to be dealing extensively with James's relationship with Lady Louisa Wolsey.

> Both of us invented some incidents – Tóibin perhaps more boldly than I (at least, I have received that impression) and I feel safe in assuming that these additions to the record are quite different in each book. The main story of my novel is framed by an account of Henry James's last illness and death, which is not covered by Colm Tóibín. But there is nevertheless a significant amount of overlap between the narrative content of the two novels. (13)

Obviously, 'writers are always uncomfortable when they find themselves in this situation, because it threatens to detract for the originality of their wok – originality being a highly valued quality in modern literary culture' (11) as, if the case be so, it alters seriously the future life of the book under discussion.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1996). **The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field**, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press;

English, J. F. (2005). **The Economy of Prestige. Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value, Cambridge,** Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press;

Lodge, D. (1996). '*The Novel as Communication*' in **The Practice of Writing***,* London: Penguin Books;

■■■ ■■■ (2006). **The Year of Henry James *or* Timing is All: the Story of a Novel**, London: Harvill Secker.