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Review of James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value.*

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James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xvi + 410 pp. ISBN 0674018842.

Reviewed by Peter Briggs, Bryn Mawr College

James English begins this provocative study with a double admission. On one hand, he is intrigued with prizes in literature and the arts, and with their rapid proliferation over the past hundred years. At the same time, however, like many educated people, he wonders whether the awarding of prizes coincides with genuine and lasting cultural merit, and further, whether dividing the producers of culture into winners and losers is really an appropriate and useful social activity. From one perspective, the multiplication of prizes can be understood as an imposition upon the cultural world rather than a recognition of its intrinsic creative energies. Perhaps an appropriate response is to turn away, as from something unseemly or alien to the spirit of art.

This study takes an opposite turn, of course. Prizes exist and proliferate; the people who award them believe in them; the people who win them appreciate the recognition and encouragement; and to the extent that the public pays attention, prizes can contribute meaningfully to the shaping of cultural standards. English wishes to acknowledge these social realities and to move beyond them in order to explore the complex systems of influence, evaluation, and cultural accommodation—what he calls "the economy of prestige"—which sustains and legitimizes the awarding of prizes. He is careful to explain what he does and does not mean by invoking economics. He is not concerned to lay out the business aspects of the art world, although he acknowledges their existence. Rather, influenced by the thought of the late sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu, he wishes to view economics in a broader cultural context which includes money but is more focused upon the accommodation of different viewpoints and interests, the inclusion of non-monetary ideas and values and passions. In short, his subject is "the market . . . of general intellectual commerce" (a phrase borrowed from Goethe) where cultural values are hammered out and disseminated. In his view, the world of awards and prizes is a diversely populated scene for the ongoing creation, accumulation, and exchange of cultural capital. All players in the dynamic situation are engaged in an implicit commerce with all the others.

Cultural honors imply cultural sway. Giving and receiving prizes is an inherently equivocal and "impure" activity: it affirms admiration, celebration, generosity, and community, even as it encourages self-promotion, deal-making, political compromise, and scrambling for position in an ongoing cultural hierarchy. English writes neither to praise nor to condemn the mixed arrangement, but rather to lay out its workings as a "whole system of symbolic give and take, of coercion and negotiation, competition and alliance, mutual disdain and mutual esteem, into which prizes are extended, and which encompasses not just the selective processes and honorific ceremonies, but many less central practices, and in particular the surrounding journalistic discourse—all the hype and antihype itself" (26).

English follows this introduction with four main sections divided into thirteen chapters. The first section characterizes "The Age of Awards" in which we live. The second treats the business of cultural awards as an "industry" with its own procedures, interests, and codes of value. The third

examines styles and strategies of response to the culture of awards. The last section traces some of the international and world impacts of the awards culture.

English begins the opening section by sketching the prehistory of cultural awards from classical Athens to the Enlightenment and beyond. The rules and pace of prize-making changed radically in the twentieth century, however. The Nobel Prize in Literature, announced in 1896 and first awarded in 1901, quickly became an object of both emulation and envy; within three years the Goncourt and Femina literary prizes were instituted in France, while in the United States Joseph Pulitzer launched the literary and journalistic prizes that still bear his name. Soon the race was on to support more and more prizes with ever finer distinctions among them. English argues against the commonplace notion that we will someday drown in a surfeit of cultural awards; he adduces instance after instance in which prizes beget more prizes with a different emphasis, selection method, sponsor, or constituency. In fact, he views the prize-giving enterprise as it has developed over the past century as a self-perpetuating and self-aggrandizing social mechanism, thriving amidst competition, criticism, scandal, and mockery. Even booby prizes, awarded in derision, affirm prize-giving social customs and hierarchical habits of mind.

English's analysis of the spread of prizes draws particular attention to the ways in which the culture of awards advances hand in hand with the needs of prevailing media. New poetry or painting never sold many newspapers, but a prize was something the public could readily understand: "It is almost as though winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do, the one thing that really counts in a lifetime of more or less nonassessable, indescribable, or at least unreportable cultural accomplishments. In this context it is the prize, above all else, that defines the artist . . ." (21).

As the century advanced, competitions and publicity strategies designed for newspapers were easily and brilliantly adapted to meet the needs first of film publicists, then of network television. English offers a clear-eyed account of the rise of the Oscars, the flowering of "awards" shows on television, and the spread of film and musical festivals. He argues that the various media succeeded in transforming cultural competitions into "celebrations," then into "destinations" where the rich, the talented, and the celebrated come together, and at last into "entertainments" (not unlike sporting events), to be disseminated for a profit to an eager public.

The second section of English's study, addressing cultural awards as an "industry," is in many ways the most interesting and revealing. When Alfred Nobel endowed the prizes that bear his name, he evidently gave little or no thought as to how they should be administered; and when the Swedish Academy was informed that it had been named as the awarding body, it almost turned down the assignment, arguing that it had neither the time nor the expertise to serve appropriately. Nobel's ample endowment eventually persuaded the Academy members otherwise, but the fact remains that the administration of prizes, so often overlooked by both donors and the public, implies little glory and a great deal of work. Yet whoever does the administration is likely to have a significant impact on who wins the prize.

Prize administrators occupy an important yet nearly invisible middle ground in the awards process. Their formal duties include making rules, setting deadlines, recruiting judges, circulating contest materials, planning awards ceremonies, and the like. English makes clear, however, that their real duties extend well beyond such formalities. Administrators or staff

ordinarily do a significant amount of prejudging of contestant materials in order to make the task of the announced judges more manageable. Then the administrator's real job begins as he or she tries to balance or accommodate the many cultural workers with different interests that come together around any prize. The contestants have their own distinctive interests, of course, but so too do donors or sponsors, judges, publicists, and perhaps marketing people or publishers or a board of trustees—all bringing their share of connections and cultural capital to the table. Indeed the prize itself can be said to have interests, as its ongoing reputation in the economy of prestige depends crucially upon the quality of its entrants, its judges, its winners and losers, its publicity. Then, too, the administrator must be concerned about his or her standing in the eyes of other prize administrators. (The proliferation of prizes makes this industry seem to the public to be decentralized, but because prestige is relative, all participants must keep an eye on one another in order to judge who is gaining or losing that precious asset.)

English closes this section with a chapter that seems a little beside the point, yet interesting all the same: the awards industry has spawned a secondary industry around medals, plaques, statuettes, and other prize objects. He uses mostly anecdotal evidence to suggest that the trophy industry shares many of the divided qualities of the awards industry which it supports and reflects. A successful trophy is partly art, partly craft, partly a gift, partly an icon or cynosure. Administrators, publicists, and trustees ponder what trophy best suits the award they would give, while commercial suppliers circulate catalogues of what is available. English pursues at length the vexed questions: "What is a Nobel medal or an Oscar statuette actually "worth" and to whom? A trophy ordinarily has some honorific worth to its initial recipient, but changes of time and circumstance may put it into the hands of others who conceive its worth differently as a salable object, as a talisman, or as a collectable. Should a cultural icon be allowed to become an object of mere commerce? And what right or obligation does the original presenter of a trophy have to defend its meaning at the time of presentation or to control its eventual disposition? (Since 1949, winners of Academy Awards have been obligated by contract not to sell their Oscars unless back to the Academy which bestowed them.) Trophies, like the prizes they represent, are sites of cultural contestation.

In the third section English examines the role of "scandal"—bickering judges, ungrateful or misbehaving prize recipients, mock-celebrations, put-on debates—in the awards industry. One would suppose that such unexpected and unseemly behaviors might tarnish the cultural prizes with which they are associated. English offers an extended history of the annual Booker Prize for British fiction to suggest that the opposite is true. A series of scandals—authors with political "messages" to deliver, a judge who charged that the prize was promoting "pornography," an annual newspaper debate over what, if anything, the prize signified—served to draw public attention, increase journalistic coverage (including eventually live TV), and extend a single cultural moment into weeks of controversy. English argues that the general public was always better able to understand scandals than the aesthetic merits of any novels in question, so scandals had the odd effect of making the annual competition more "real" to them. He further suggests that such controversies have had an even odder effect of perpetuating a mythology of "pure" literary merit which might be attained and recognized, if only the annual scandals and pother could somehow be avoided or set aside.

There is a darker side to the potential role of ongoing scandal, however. English notes the "inappropriate" awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound in 1949, the awkward refusal of a Nobel Prize by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1964, and the unseemly public "campaign" to secure a Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison in 1987 as instances in which the political stakes behind the different prizes became all too apparent. He argues that these cultural prizes need to retain a little of their aura of "magic" and purity, even if it is based on collective make-believe, and that getting caught in the crossfire of politically inspired culture wars is one of the few things that could threaten the continuing success of the cultural awards industry.

The political stakes implicit in cultural prizes are even more central in the fourth and final section of this study, a brief survey of the international dimension of the awards industry. English observes that the intertwining of sports competitions and cultural celebrations characterized the international scene from the 1890s onward and suggests that both ventures served as implicit vehicles for enhancing national prestige. Events like the Olympics or the annual awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature also won a popular following by being "a dependably serial event with the very contours—a win/lose competition, global in scale, nationalist in appeal—most suitable for journalistic consumption" (259). That nationalistic flavor began to fade, however, from the 1970s onward under the globalization of the economy of prestige and the crosscurrents of post-colonial thought and culture. The result was "a new geography of prestige" (264) which transformed local culture into global culture without requiring or reflecting a supporting national culture. He surveys the successful career of the South African musical group Ladysmith Black Mambazo to illustrate the point. His second instance of new geography is more paradoxical: the well-known international film festivals tend to feature their host cities as regular cultural "destinations," even as they exhibit films far removed from their local roots and thereby express a certain "deterritorialization" of prestige.

The unwinding of the European colonial system between 1945 and 1970 posed then and continues to pose now serious challenges to the awards industry. All agree that awards should go to excellence, but what constitutes cultural excellence, always a contentious question, has become even more so in a post-colonial world characterized by endless tensions—"tensions between local and global, domestic and foreign, indigenous and imported and imposed forms of cultural capital" (263). As an illustration, English reviews the considerable controversy within Africa following the award of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature to Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka. He also reviews the publishing history and critical reception of Keri Hulme's prize-winning "Maori" novel, *the bone people*, to raise the question whether ethnic inclusiveness is to be the hallmark of an emerging "world literature." To the extent that the awards industry is promoting such a goal, English argues, literature will tend to feature socially concerned cultural heroes more than individual works of art.

This study concludes with three appendices. The first offers statistical confirmation of the proliferation of cultural prizes. The second takes on the popular supposition that prizes follow on the heels of commercial success; in fact, the likelihood that a best seller will also win a Pulitzer Prize or National Book Award has diminished over the past fifty years. The third appendix offers a review of the major awards of six well-known prize recipients. Although the rapid multiplication of prizes means in theory that there are more to go around and recognition can be spread more broadly, in practice prize committees often turn toward brand-name candidates

whose worthiness has already been established by winning earlier awards. How else could one explain the fact the musician Michael Jackson won 240 cultural awards (here dutifully enumerated) over the past three decades?

At the outset English, himself a literary critic, expressed the opinion that most modern cultural studies are either too closely focused and particular or too general and all-embracing. He argues that to understand the workings of a living culture, it makes sense to focus on the middle distance too often overlooked: "What's left out is the whole middle-zone of cultural space, a space crowded not just with artists and consumers but with bureaucrats, functionaries, patrons, and administrators of culture, vigorously producing and deploying such instruments as the best-of list, the film festival, the artists' convention, the book club, the piano competition" (12). More than we wish to admit, some important makers of culture inhabit that middle space and deserve serious study. English's book is intended to open, not close, a critical conversation about the cultural roles of those middle folk. He writes about what he knows, which means that his study is biased toward British and American perspectives; another observer from a different sphere or specialty might tell the story differently. Also his discussion is very much driven by his choice of illustrative examples; a different chooser might reach quite different conclusions. The real point, however, is that English has opened a conversation with intelligence, clarity, and conviction, and, as with so many cultural engagements, it now falls to others to keep up the quality of that conversation.