Before Auschwitz

Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Inter-war France

Angela Kershaw

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Introduction

The appearance of Irène Némirovsky's *Suite française* in 2004 was a major publishing success which introduced twenty-first century readers to the work of a writer who had first become a media sensation in 1929. With the novel's publication in English translation in 2006, the Némirovsky phenomenon became international. Much of the media interest in the novel in France and abroad was provoked by the almost unbelievable story of the manuscript's survival. Némirovsky wrote the book as a stateless Russian Jewish immigrant during the Second World War in Nazi-occupied France. In 1940 she left Paris, where she had been living since 1919, to take refuge in the village of Issy L'Evêque, which lay just inside the demarcation line, in the occupied zone. Arrested on 13 July 1942, Némirovsky was taken to the Pithiviers transit camp, from where she was deported to Auschwitz on 17 July. She died there on 17 August. Her husband, Michael Epstein, was deported in November 1942 and also perished. Their two daughters, Denise Epstein and Elisabeth Gille, survived the Holocaust and conserved, amongst their mother's papers, a large notebook which turned out to be a complete draft of the first two parts of a projected five-part novel based on the contemporary events of occupied France. Despite the impression given by some of the rather sensationalised media coverage, the manuscript's existence had been known long before 2004. Némirovsky's papers, including the manuscript, have been conserved in the IMEC archive (Institut Mémoires de l'Edition Contemporaine) since 1995, and her daughters were aware of the manuscript's existence in the 1970s. *Suite française* was not published sooner because Elisabeth Gille did not wish to publish an incomplete novel, and Denise Epstein did not wish the novel to be published at the same time as *Le Mirador* (1992), her sister's fictional biography of Némirovsky.[1] When *Suite française* finally appeared in 2004, it attracted the attention of critics as one of a very few works of fiction about the Occupation period written contemporaneously with the events described. The award of the 2004 Renaudot prize for *Suite française* caused further media discussion because this was the first time the prize had been awarded posthumously. The success of *Suite française* has led to the appearance of previously unpublished works of fiction by Némirovsky: 'Les Echelles du levant', which had first appeared in the journal *Gringoire* in 1939, appeared in book form under the title *Le Maître des âmes* in 2005; two short stories were published under the title *Ida* in 2006; *Chaleur du*

sang, reconstructed from archival sources, appeared in 2007 and a further collection of stories, *Les Vierges et autres nouvelles* was published in 2009.[2] Most of Némirovsky's inter-war novels are now in print in French, and several have been translated into English by Sandra Smith.[3] Two biographies of Némirovsky have been published since 2004: Jonathan Weiss's *Irène Némirovsky* in 2005 and Olivier Philipponnat and Patrick Lienhardt's *La Vie d'Irène Némirovsky* in 2007.[4] In 2008, Denise Epstein published her own collection of reminiscences in the form of interviews with the French journalist Clémence Boulouque, entitled *Survivre et vivre*. Some academic work on Némirovsky is also beginning to appear, mostly in the form of articles.[5] In 2008, the University of Oxford's annual Zaharoff Lecture was delivered by Susan Suleiman, who discussed Némirovsky and Samuel Beckett as 'translingual' writers producing fiction in a language other than their mother tongue.[6] At the time of my writing this book, the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York was hosting an exhibition on 'Irène Némirovsky: Woman of Letters'. In the United Kingdom, Némirovsky has received high profile media coverage in the broadsheets and on Radio 4, featuring on programmes such as *Front Row*, *Book at Bedtime,* and *Woman's Hour*. Némirovsky, whose fiction had been completely neglected in post-war France, is an astonishing case of a literary rediscovery.

My own discovery of Némirovsky goes back to the mid-1990s when I was researching French inter-war political fiction by women writers.[7] At that time I came across Némirovsky's 1933 novel *L'Affaire Courilof*, which tells the story of a Russian anarchist hired to kill a government minister. But none of Némirovsky's fiction was conceived with the intention of conveying an ideological message. Némirovsky has nonetheless attracted ideologically based criticism, both in our time and in her own, in relation to her portrayal of Jews and because of her association with right-wing anti-Semitic publications such as *Gringoire* and *Candide*. Some of this criticism has been intemperate, and much of it has failed to take account of the historical and literary conditions of production of Némirovsky's fiction. It is, paradoxically, quite straightforward to write neutrally about politically engaged literature because it is in the nature of the genre that the meaning of the text should be unambiguous. In the case of writing which is politically *disengaged*, it is more difficult for the literary critic or historian to maintain a neutral stance because the text remains open to a plethora of potentially contradictory interpretations. In this book, I attempt to maintain scholarly objectivity in relation to debates which necessarily arouse strong reactions amongst contemporary readers. This book does not pretend that reading Némirovsky after Auschwitz is easy. Its claim to objectivity is based on an approach which considers the entirety of Némirovsky's literary output and seeks to respect the chronological development of her representations, and to contextualise those representations in relation to the literary field in which they were produced. This book is however an *engagement,* because the material requires it to be so. It is an engagement in favour of a reading

of cultural production which strives to avoid the 'apocalyptic history' to which Michael André Bernstein objects; it is a rejection of the failure to respect the particular situation of the writer at the moment of writing. This explains my choice of title: whilst much of the media discussion around Némirovsky has been generated through the perspective of readers with a knowledge of Auschwitz, this book seeks to place Némirovsky within the context in which she herself was writing—before Auschwitz.

How did Némirovsky's *œuvre* develop and achieve coherence between the mid-1920s and 1942? What was its place in the literary field of 1930s France? How was it defined by, and how did it help to define, that field? To address these questions, this book draws on the methodology developed by Pierre Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art* and elsewhere.[8] Bourdieu's sociology of literature seeks to understand 'literature' not just in terms of texts, but as a social field which is determined by relations and differences, and which is inhabited by agents who constantly struggle for dominance. Thus whilst the text itself and the author who produced it remain legitimate areas of study, they are viewed in relation to other agents in the literary field: commissioning editors, reviewers, readers, translators, and so on. Bourdieu rejects any division between an 'external' and an 'internal' reading of the literary text, seeking instead to demonstrate the ways in which the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the text constantly implicate each other. He rejects the structuralist conception of textuality which relegates or even excludes any attention to the author, the Cartesian view of the author as the sole source of meaning, and the vulgar Marxist notion that a text simply reflects its conditions of production. Bourdieu's attention to the author via the concept of habitus signifies his desire to maintain the notion of authorial agency whilst avoiding positing the author as the sole source of meaning. Bourdieu's theory is based on an understanding of the emergence of literature as an autonomous field of activity in the nineteenth century. Bourdieu understands the available positions which agents come to occupy within the field as disposed across two axes which oppose the absence or presence of cultural capital (exclusively artistic consecration or esteem) and the absence or presence of economic capital (financial reward). His theory has been criticised for positing a too rigid opposition between the *champ de grande production*—commercially motivated cultural production—and the *champ de production restreinte*—artistically motivated cultural production which seeks aesthetic and intellectual validation *as opposed to* financial reward. As James F. English argued, the 'map' of cultural fields Bourdieu offers is essentially a modernist one.[9] The opposition between 'high' culture and financial reward is much less clear-cut in the postmodern cultural environment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century than it was in the nineteenth century, which is Bourdieu's starting point. English writes,

> There is no question of perfect autonomy or segregation of the various sorts of capital, such that one might occupy a zone or margin of

> 'pure' culture where money or politics or journalistic celebrity or social connections or ethnic or gender advantage mean nothing, or such that one might acquire economic capital that is free of all implication in the social, symbolic, or political economies. It is rather a matter of differing rates of exchange and principles of negotiation, both of these being among the most important stakes in the whole economy of practices.[10]

English analyses the cultural prize as one of the ways in which such negotiation, or *capital intraconversion*, is achieved in postmodern culture. My analysis of the success of *Suite française* in Chapter 6 draws on English's sympathetic rereading of Bourdieu, which seeks to extend the latter's theoretical framework in order to account for a twenty-first century cultural context which can no longer oppose 'literary' and 'commercial' success in absolute terms.[11] In the inter-war period, Bourdieu's modernist conception of an opposition between the literary and the commercial is much more obviously applicable, although here too, the positions Bourdieu describes should be viewed not as absolutes but as points along a continuum. With this caveat in mind, a structural opposition between the *champ de grande production* and the *champ de production restreinte* is a useful framework within which to understand Némirovsky's literary trajectory. The stark difference in nature and functioning between a journal such as the *Nouvelle Revue française*, whose function was to bestow artistic capital, and a publication such as *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, whose role depended entirely on the newly commercial nature of fiction in the inter-war period, suggests that the oppositions Bourdieu's theory posits did obtain during that period of France's cultural history. Gisèle Sapiro has adopted Bourdieu's framework most successfully for the inter-war period.[12]

Many commentators have pointed to the current 'social turn' in literary and cultural studies. In 2004, Jérôme Meizoz commented on the return of history and of the social in the study of literature since the end of the 1990s.[13] Wolfgang Iser, writing in 2006, suggested that in contemporary theory, 'art is always viewed in relation to its interaction with its context and with its recipient' and that 'the emphasis of modern theories is on relationships between the work of art, the dispositions of its recipients, and the realities of its context'.[14] Cultural theory is, in Terry Eagleton's words, not about asking 'Is this poem valuable?' but rather, 'What do we mean by calling a poem good or bad?':

> Instead of asking whether the clarinet concerto is slightly too cloying to be entirely persuasive, it inquires about the material conditions which you need to produce concertos in the first place, and how these help to shape the work itself.[15]

Eagleton goes on to say that 'None of these meta-questions need *replace* straightforward critical questions. You can ask both kinds of question

together'. This book is an attempt to ask both these types of questions together, and indeed to affirm their interdependence. It seeks therefore to work in the 'middle zone' between close textual reading and the analysis of larger cultural trajectories which, as English remarks, is often neglected.[16] It is by offering both textual and contextual analysis that this book seeks to ascertain what kind of 'value' Némirovsky's fiction had for its contemporary readers, and what kind of 'value' it has for us today. It is not a eulogy, and it is not an attempt to 'rehabilitate' Némirovsky. There is no point in asking whether Némirovsky was 'as good as' Gide, or Sartre, or Elsa Triolet. What is important is to understand the nature of Némirovsky's literary project, to evaluate it on its own terms, and to interrogate the ways in which it was evaluated by contemporary critics. Significant space is therefore devoted to the study of reception. This book aims to provide not only an account of the works of a single author—though it does offer such an account—but also to shed light on the functioning of the inter-war literary field. As Bourdieu argues, an exclusive focus on the writer as the sole source of meaning occludes both the social space in which that writer moves, and the development of the aesthetic 'dispositions' which the author's position in the literary field implies.[17]

This book seeks to make the author's position in the field central to its analysis in order to understand the literary space in which the author was located, as well as to highlight that which the author contributed to that literary space. Paying close attention to reception is one way to achieve this goal. One of the reasons why Némirovsky interests me is that her *œuvre* functions as a lightning conductor on which many significant questions about inter-war French literary production converge: the popularity and commercial success of the novel as a genre; the 'crisis' of the novel and of representation more generally in the aftermath of the First World War; the politicisation of literary production; the relationship between 'particular' identities (such as Jewish identity) and 'French' cultural production; international cultural exchange and the presence of foreign writers and intellectuals in inter-war France; the representation and reconstruction of the French nation via imaginative literature; the re-imagining of gendered subjectivities in fiction. This book can only be a beginning, and much work remains to be done to deepen and broaden the suggestions I make here as to the nature of the relationships between Némirovsky's texts and those of other inter-war writers. It is of course impossible to explore comprehensively in a single work the very many potential textual connections between Némirovsky's fiction and that of her contemporaries. If this book stimulates other scholars to take up this challenge, it will have fulfilled an important function.

The starting point of my analysis is the reception of *David Golder* in 1929. Discussing the practice of cultural history, Alon Confino remarks that '[t]he study of reception is not an issue that simply adds to our knowledge. Rather, it is a necessary one to avoid an arbitrary choice and interpretation

of evidence'.[18] It is through the study of reception that it is possible to reconstruct the questions posed by a given text in relation to the contemporary literary field. Having ascertained in Chapter 1 the nature of Némirovsky's literary reputation in 1929, Chapter 2 takes a step backwards in time to consider the development of Némirovsky's literary identity before the publication of *David Golder*. I thereby seek to apply Bourdieu's inversion of the traditional approach of the literary critic, which begins with the author, and to underline the role played by the literary field, expressed in critical discourses, in the definition of the 'meaning' of the work of art. In Chapter 3, I examine the Russian theme in Némirovsky's writing in terms of her engagements with the *mode russe*. In Chapter 4, I consider the Jewish theme in her writing, in the context of, but also in opposition to, the interwar *renaissance juive*. Chapter 5 addresses Némirovsky's ongoing attempt to construct herself as a French novelist, an aim which she pursued in the second half of the decade by portraying contemporary French society. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 analyse Némirovsky's perhaps somewhat opportunistic, but nonetheless creative, engagement with themes and motifs which were already well established in the French literary field. The concluding chapter focuses on *Suite française*, firstly locating it in relation to its original context of production, and, secondly, analysing its current reception, out of its own time. *Suite française*, along with the rest of Némirovsky's *œuvre*, must of course be read after Auschwitz. To do so is to embark upon a journey which is emotionally as well as intellectually demanding. Writing about Némirovsky is not just an academic exercise, because her personal tragedy was real. Némirovsky's own approach to writing fiction is also the most appropriate way to read it: critical detachment must be maintained, so as to facilitate a proper appreciation of the affective force of the story. In this respect, Denise Epstein's retelling of her mother's story has been exemplary. It is perhaps appropriate that the final words of this introduction should be Epstein's: 'Je n'éprouve aucune nostalgie, simplement un sentiment de frustration et d'un gâchis énorme' ('*I experience no nostalgia, simply a feeling of frustration and of enormous waste*').[19]

1 The Making of a Literary Reputation

Ce n'est pas seulement une création romanesque de grande valeur, c'est une vue pénétrante sur notre époque et les caractères particuliers qu'y revêt la lutte pour la vie. Toute une philosophie de l'amour, de l'ambition, de l'argent se dégage de ce roman qui, par sa puissance et par son sujet même, rappelle le Père GORIOT, et qui n'en est pas moins de la plus extrême nouvauté.

It is not only a literary creation of great value, it is also a penetrating portrait of our age and the particular character of our struggles for life. An entire philosophy of love, ambition, and money emerges from this novel which, in its power and even in its subject, calls to mind Balzac's Le Père Goriot, *and which is nonetheless extremely innovative.*

—Bernard Grasset, advertisement for *David Golder*, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 7 December 1929

Roman bouleversant, intimiste, implacable, dévoilant avec une extraordinaire lucidité l'âme de chaque Français pendant l'Occupation [. . .] *Suite française* ressuscite d'une plume brillante et intuitive un pan à vif de notre mémoire.

An overwhelming, intimate and pitiless novel, an extraordinarily lucid revelation of the soul of every French person during the Occupation [. . .] Suite française *is the work of a brilliant and intuitive writer which makes a part of our memory live again.*

—Cover text, *Suite française*, Denoël, 2004

The literary reputation of Irène Némirovsky has been made twice, at an interval of more than seventy years and therefore in two very different historical, social, and literary environments. Némirovsky has acquired literary celebrity through two very different texts, *David Golder* and *Suite française*, the one published at the beginning of her career, when she was a virtually unknown Russian Jewish immigrant; and the other written at the end of her life, when she was a successful and celebrated French novelist. The quotations above suggest that the two texts have

been presented to their readers in strikingly similar terms. In both cases, the publisher seeks to create a sense of community between novelist and readers by using the inclusive first person plural pronoun; here is a writer who can tell *us* about *our* memories, about *our* epoch. This is a writer who is in touch with French history and literary history, able to resuscitate characters from France's real and imagined past. That past is a traumatic place: Grasset's comparison of Golder with Balzac's Goriot, whose wealth is eroded by the extravagant frivolity of his daughters, is particularly resonant in the context of the *années folles* and the Wall Street Crash, as is the evocation of memories of the Occupation in the year of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. And if Némirovsky is capable of making the past live again, and of interpreting the present, this is because of her extraordinary literary talent, thanks to which she can penetrate and unveil the truth of the subjects she approaches in her writing. From this brief comparison we begin to see the terms in which Némirovsky's publishers have constructed her phenomenal success: her Frenchness, her relevance to the contemporary world, and her literary skill. This chapter investigates the production and development of Némirovsky's success in the 1930s, and considers the repercussions of that success under the Occupation.

A SUCCESSFUL LITERARY CAREER

The present chapter is not concerned with questions of literary *quality*, but rather with questions of literary *success*. Bourdieu's conceptual framework provides a useful vocabulary for discussing literary success. A contextual approach to literary history and analysis relies on the notion that a work does not simply impose itself through its innate aesthetic qualities. This is a myth—a myth in which we may still need to believe, but a myth nonetheless. Literary success must be evaluated through analysis of the textual traces left by the creators of that success: those who caused the book to be produced and sold, and those who encouraged people to buy and read the text. Therefore it is by analysing the role of publishers and of critics in Némirovsky's literary trajectory that her success can best be appreciated. Bourdieu writes,

> Il suffit de poser la question interdite pour s'apercevoir que l'artiste qui fait l'œuvre est lui-même fait, au sein du champ de production, par tout l'ensemble de ceux qui contribuent à le 'découvrir' et à le consacrer en tant qu'artiste 'connu' et reconnu—critiques, préfaciers, marchands, etc. Ainsi, par exemple, le commerçant d'art (marchand de tableaux, éditeur, etc.) est inséparablement celui qui exploite le travail de l'artiste en faisant commerce de ses produits et celui qui, en le mettant sur le marché des biens symboliques, par l'exposition, la publication ou la mise en scène, assure au produit de la fabrication artistique

> une *consécration* d'autant plus importante qu'il est lui-même plus consacré. [emphasis in original][1]

> *It is enough to pose the forbidden question to perceive that the artist who makes the work is himself made, at the core of the field of production, by the whole ensemble of those who help to 'discover' him and to consecrate him as an artist who is 'known' and recognized—critics, writers of prefaces, dealers, etc. Thus, for example, the merchant in art (dealer in paintings, publisher, etc.) is inseparably both the one who exploits the work of the artist by making commerce of his products and the one who, in putting it on the market of symbolic goods through exhibition, publication or staging, ensures that the product of artistic fabrication will receive a* consecration*—and the consecration will be greater the more consecrated the merchant himself is.*[2]

By analysing in some detail the debates which Némirovsky's novels provoked in the cultural press of the inter-war period, this chapter explores the ways in which Némirovsky's literary success resulted from a series of complex social relations in the inter-war literary field. As Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés argue, the study of reception is an important aspect of the 'storytelling project' that is literary history:

> The history of literature is in fact more accurately defined as the multiple histories of its production and its reception. Literary historians over the centuries have always taken into account the complexities of literary production, but the new methodological paradigms developed by a variety of critical theories in the last few decades have made imperative an awareness of the equally complicated and significant nature of literary reception.[3]

Such an approach is justified both by Némirovsky's own approach to the task of being a writer, and by the aims of this book. Némirovsky was a novelist who actively managed her relationships with her publishers and her critics, and there is good reason to suppose that her choice of literary themes was at least in part a response to the critical discussion her fiction was generating. Her case thus supports Bourdieu's view that 'on ne peut faire dans la science des œuvres deux parts, l'une consacrée à la production, l'autre à la réception' ('*all this means that one cannot divide a science of works into two parts: one devoted to production, the other to perception*'): production and reception of the literary text are locked into an iterative relationship.[4] Whilst this book is focused on the work of a single author, it seeks to view that author through a wide-angled lens, such that the entire literary field of inter-war France comes into focus. It is through the analysis of the reception of individual works that it is possible to reconstruct the properties of the field and thus eventually, understand the complex phenomenon

of the work of art.[5] The approach taken throughout this book to the study of Némirovsky's fictional output, and of French inter-war literature more generally, is firmly grounded in a belief in the importance of reception for an understanding of texts and their contexts. A literary review can both demonstrate the state of the contemporary literary field, and change it; the issues a reviewer raises in relation to a new text necessarily arise out of the current literary-critical status quo (there is no *tabula rasa*) but might also modify the literary-critical environment by raising a new question or by posing an existing question differently. The 'meaning' of a text and, not least, its ideological significance, is determined in relation to the literary field which produced it and is in significant measure a function of the ways in which that text is represented by its critics.[6] We return to the construction of literary value, celebrity, and success through the media in Chapter 6 in order to understand the phenomenon which has in part motivated the writing of this book—the success of *Suite française* in France in 2004 and in English translation in 2006. Here though, the rules of the game will have changed somewhat, since we shall observe the reception of a text in a literary and historical environment very different from that in which it was produced, or which produced it.

Before turning to a closer analysis of the construction of Némirovsky's celebrity and subsequent reputation as a novelist, it will be useful to have in mind an overview of the entirety of her output. Before the success of *David Golder* in 1929, Némirovsky had already published four short works in the subscription series *Les Œuvres libres*: 'Le Malentendu' (February 1926); 'L'Enfant génial' (April 1927); 'L'Ennemie' (July 1928); 'Le Bal' (February 1929).[7] *Les Œuvres libres*, launched by the publishing house Fayard in June 1921, was a monthly publication offering a selection of unabridged and previously unpublished stories by various authors in a single volume.[8] Two of the works Némirovsky published here were immediately reissued in book form in 1930 in the wake of the success of *David Golder*: 'Le Malentendu' by Fayard and 'Le Bal' by Grasset. These early texts treat the themes which were to occupy Némirovsky's literary imagination for the first half of the 1930s: Jews; the world of business and finance; Russian emigration; love. The order in which I present these themes is not coincidental: Némirovsky frequently pairs Jews with money and Russians with love. These early stories also depict the sometimes complex, sometimes frivolous relationships between love, money, and pleasure which developed as the *années folles* began to shade into the Depression. Between 1929 and 1935, Némirovsky drew on her personal history to produce a series of novels in which Jewish and Russian themes dominated. It is particularly in the early texts, notably *David Golder* (1929), *Le Bal* (1930), and *Le Pion sur l'échiquier* (1934) that we find stereotyped portrayals of Jewish characters, although the later novel *Les Chiens et les loups* (1940) is not exempt from this problem. *David Golder* and *Le Bal* recount very different stories of Jewish immigrants making a life in France: Golder is a

successful and powerful financier, whilst *Le Bal*'s Alfred Kampf struggles to raise his social standing to match his newly acquired wealth. In *Le Pion sur l'échiquier*, Jewishness and money are again associated in the portrait of the businessman Beryl. That Némirovsky ceased to write about Jewish themes after 1933 is hardly surprising; she would however return to the theme of Jewish emigration in *Les Chiens et les loups* where she opposed the Eastern immigrant Jew to the assimilated European Jew in the context of the politics, economics, and society of inter-war France. This work offers a more nuanced account of Jewish identity than is to be found in the novels of the early 1930s. The theme of Russian emigration dominates *Les Mouches d'automne* (1931) and *Le Vin de solitude* (1935). The earlier text recounts the collective history of a land-owning family who flee the Russian Revolution and take refuge in Paris; the later novel focuses on an individual female protagonist, Hélène, who is Russian but adores France, and eventually fulfils her dream of making a life there. *L'Affaire Courilof* (1933) tells the story of a Russian anarchist hired to assassinate a government minister in the early years of the twentieth century. The scenario of this text anticipates those of Sartre's *Les Mains sales* and Camus's *Les Justes*. These six novels might be taken as a first phase of Némirovsky's writing project, with the mid-point of the decade as a turning point. In 1936 Némirovsky published *Jézabel*, a novel in which her ability to create narrative suspense and intrigue come to the fore. This novel is a psychological drama which explores mother-daughter relationships and the problems of ageing for women, themes which had already surfaced in her earlier texts. In the second half of the decade, Némirovsky turned her attention away from the problems of Russian emigration and the Jewish diaspora and toward those of inter-war France. *Le Pion sur l'échiquier* and *Le Vin de solitude* might be seen as transitional texts insofar as both anticipate what seems to have been a growing desire on Némirovsky's part to write in detail about France of the inter-war period. *Le Pion sur l'échiquer* (1934), *La Proie* (1938) and *Deux* (1939) analyse the effects of the First World War and the Depression on two generations of French men. *Le Pion sur l'échiquer* and *Deux* deal with the difficult re-integration of young war veterans into the changed economic and political environment of France in the 1920s and 1930s. *La Proie* considers the fate of their sons who, too young to have fought, experience a sort of *nouveau mal du siècle* and find themselves equally unable to make a satisfactory life in the uncertain inter-war years. The idea of a *nouveau mal du siècle* resulting from 'the catastrophic effects of the First World War on that generation of French writers who were never old enough to fight but who were brought up under a subsequently redundant militarist moral code' originated in an essay by Benjamin Crémieux published in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1923.[9] *Les Biens de ce monde*, serialised in the right-wing anti-Semitic journal *Gringoire* in 1941 and published in book form only posthumously (1947), and *Les Feux de l'automne*, not published in Némirovsky's lifetime, but also published posthumously as a book

(1957), offer an extended fresco of France from before the outbreak of the First World War to the armistice of 22 June 1940 and the beginning of the Occupation. These novels, which analyse the economic and emotional effects of two world wars on communities as well as individuals, might be seen as a prelude to *Suite française*, which takes up the story of the fall of France ('Tempête en juin') and the Occupation ('Dolce').

To summarise then, Némirovsky's fictional output falls into two main phases: up to 1935, she focused on Russian and Jewish themes; after 1935 she turned her attention to inter-war France, in particular, the effects of war on the French nation. These themes will occupy our attention in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively. In addition to these novels, Némirovsky also published a large number of short stories in various journals and reviews. Four stories were published in 1934 in a collection entitled *Films parlés*.[10] Apart from a preface to a French translation of James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, this was the only work Némirovsky published with Gallimard.

BERNARD GRASSET AND THE INTER-WAR LITERARY MARKETPLACE

On 11 January 1930, Frédéric Lefèvre devoted his famous 'Une heure avec . . . ' column in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, in which he interviewed the popular writers of the day, to Némirovsky. In the interview, Némirovsky recounted how Bernard Grasset came to publish *David Golder*. The manuscript had been rejected by Fayard for *Les Œuvres libres* on account of its length, so Némirovsky, unwilling to alter her work, sent it to Grasset with a *poste restante* address and bearing her married name, Epstein.[11] Némirovsky says in the interview that she wanted to keep her contact with Grasset a secret from her family and friends in case it was unsuccessful. Contemporary readers may have interpreted this as artistic modesty. Némirovsky's biographer Jonathan Weiss suggests that Némirovsky did not want Grasset to link *David Golder* to the author of the *Œuvres libres* stories (though two of these had in any case been published under a pseudonym).[12] It also seems plausible that Némirovsky wanted to keep her options open with *Les Œuvres libres*, since she could presumably have taken up their offer to publish a shortened version of the text if Grasset had not been interested, without Fayard ever knowing that she had approached a rival publisher. Némirvosky would go on to publish two further stories with *Les Œuvres libres*: 'Film parlé' (July 1931), which became the title story for the 1934 Gallimard collection, and 'La Comédie bourgeoise' (June 1932), also reprinted in that volume. How then did Némirovsky's choice of publisher position her in the literary field? *Les Œuvres libres* was situated at the commercial pole of literary production: it published popular, accessible literature, its volumes were cheap and it paid its authors well for their stories.[13] This did not, however, preclude the participation of aesthetically consecrated

writers: Proust had published an extract from *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in *Les Œuvres libres* in 1921.[14] Némirovsky's move to Grasset was certainly not a move away from commercial publishing. Grasset firmly believed that book sales depended on making sure the author's name became well-known, and he expended a considerable amount of time and energy in making contacts with those he believed to be the 'opinion-makers'.[15] Némirovsky was fully aware of Grasset's commercial approach to publishing and was keen to benefit from it. She told an interviewer in 1930 that 'Grasset est un *as de la publicité*. Ce n'est pas moi qui le nierait et qui songerait jamais à m'en plaindre' [emphasis in original] (*Grasset is a* publishing ace. *I won't deny it and I would never think of complaining about it*).[16] Although Grasset was criticised for his commercial approach to literature, he made the careers of some of the most important writers of the inter-war period, including André Malraux, Philippe Soupault, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Blaise Cendrars.[17] Némirovsky's association with *Les Œuvres libres* and with Grasset, and the significant commercial success of her fiction, should not be taken as indications that she was a literary lightweight. Indeed, from 1935, she would contribute stories to the *Revue des deux mondes* which, whilst also a high-circulation publication, was close to the Académie française and represented a heavyweight, if conservative, literary voice.[18]

Bernard Grasset intervened extensively in the press on the publication of *David Golder* with the obvious intention of creating the novel as a literary sensation. This type of literary marketing was an important feature of the inter-war literary field, as the sale of books was a burgeoning area of economic activity. In his study of the French bestseller, Christopher Todd notes the increasingly sophisticated advertising techniques employed in the period, and the sharp rise in book production, which more than doubled between 1920 and 1928.[19] The publication of *David Golder* was announced in a large advertisement in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* on 7 December 1929 which, as we have seen, hailed the novel as a new *Père Goriot*. Lefèvre's 'Une heure avec Irène Némirovsky' interview on 11 January 1930 appeared on the front page of the paper, accompanied by a drawing of Némirovsky. On 18 January, Grasset published an article entitled 'Le succès foudroyant de *David Golder*' in *Le Matin* and *L'Œuvre*,[20] as well as another large advertisement in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* which included quotations from laudatory reviews in *L'Action française* and *Le Temps*, and from Lefèvre's interview of the previous week. On 25 January *Les Nouvelles littéraires* carried another, smaller, advertisement, and on 8 February a further large advertisement appeared in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* quoting yet more plaudits from high-profile critics in a range of well-known publications.[21] *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, founded in 1922 and owned by the publishing house Larousse, was the leading literary and cultural review of its time. It was exactly the right vehicle for Grasset's publicity campaign designed to launch his new literary discovery. *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, which had an extensive readership,[22] aimed to reflect the full range of contemporary cultural activity and was neither excessively conservative nor excessively experimental.

Anyone who was anyone in literary circles appeared in its pages.[23] Grasset's promotion of Némirovsky shows how clearly he understood the idea that literary value is not (only) a property of texts, but is conferred by the extra-textual discussion they generate. As Bourdieu puts it:

> Le producteur de la *valeur de l'œuvre d'art* n'est pas l'artiste mais le champ de production en tant qu'univers de croyance qui produit la valeur de l'œuvre d'art comme *fétiche* en produisant la croyance dans le pouvoir créateur de l'artiste. [emphasis in original][24]

> *The producer of the* value of the work of art *is not the artist but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as fetish by producing the belief in the creative power of the artist*. [emphasis in original][25]

Grasset's publicity campaign was a very successful attempt to create the sort of critical circularity which Bourdieu has disparagingly described as a game of mutually reflecting mirrors, whereby critics respond to the texts of other critics rather than to the novel in question;[26] by collecting together positive reviews, Grasset sought to create belief in the literary value of Némirovsky's novel by creating an impression of critical unanimity. Grasset's strategy suggests that Bourdieu's notion of a type of artistic legitimacy achieved via media visibility is not actually very new, but was operating most successfully in the inter-war period, thanks to the proliferation of literary, cultural, and political reviews and journals.[27] Following Bourdieu, Grasset's interventions in the literary field—specifically his prediction and underlining of her success—would be sufficient to place Némirovsky in the camp of the bourgeois (that is, 'commercial') novelist who occupies the *champ de grande production*:

> Pour les écrivains 'bourgeois' et leur public, le succès est, par soi, une garantie de valeur. C'est ce qui fait que, sur ce marché, le succès va au succès: on contribue à faire les *best-sellers* en publiant leurs tirages ; les critiques ne peuvent rien faire de mieux pour un livre ou une pièce que de lui 'prédire le succès'.[28]

> *For 'bourgeois' writers and their readers, success is intrinsically a guarantee of value. That is why, in this market, the successful get more successful. Publishers help to make* best-sellers *by printing further impressions; the best thing a critic can do for a book or play is to predict 'success' for it*.[29]

Various aspects of Némirovsky's literary trajectory suggest that this would be an appropriate interpretation—she published with 'commercial' publishers, managed her relationships with those publishers very carefully,

and as a result her writing was financially remunerative.[30] However, there was space in the inter-war literary field for the widespread popularity and success of aesthetically interesting writers, thanks to the expansion of publishing, journalism, and education. The existence of a journal such as *Les Nouvelles littéraires* suggests that there was no absolute distinction between 'popular' and 'quality' writers—Christophe Charle says of *Les Nouvelles littéraires* that

> [l]eur éclectisme littéraire, leur apolitisme affiché, leur ouverture à tous les types d'activités culturelles et leurs interviews de personnalités par Frédéric Lefèvre entretiennent l'intérêt et profitent de l'élargissement du public cultivé au moment où les facultés de lettres sont en plein essor.
>
> *the journal's literary eclecticism, its overtly apolitical character, its openness to all types of cultural activities and Frédéric Lefèvre's interviews with famous personalities maintained readers' interest, taking advantage of the expansion of a cultivated reading public at the time when university literature departments were expanding*).[31]

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the structuring of the literary field according to a fundamental opposition between 'heteronomy' (economic dominance) and 'autonomy' (aesthetic independence)[32] can lead to the positing of a stark and oversimplified opposition between 'commercial' and properly 'literary' consecration.[31] However, in the 1999 essay 'Une révolution conservatrice dans l'édition', Bourdieu convincingly stresses the *relationship* between economic and symbolic capital and the *continuum* between the two extremes of the commercial and the arcane:

> [. . .] du fait que le livre, objet à double face, économique et symbolique, est à la fois marchandise et signification, l'éditeur est aussi un *personnage double*, qui doit savoir concilier l'art et l'argent, l'amour de la littérature et la recherche du profit, dans des stratégies qui se situent quelque part entre les deux extrêmes, la soumission réaliste ou cynique aux considérations commerciales et l'indifférence héroïque ou insensée aux nécessités de l'économie. [emphasis in original][33]
>
> *A book's dual nature—as both a signifier and a commodity, a symbolic and an economic entity—requires an editor to have a* dual character, *one that can reconcile art and money, love of literature and the pursuit of profit, by devising strategies situated somewhere between the two extremes of cynical subservience and heroic indifference to the house's economic needs*. [emphasis in original][34]

Bourdieu's fundamental proposition that the cultural field operates according to an inverted economic logic, where financial disinterestedness is highly

valued,[36] remains a useful one, as long as it is recognised that the positions he proposes are not absolutes: once the structure is applied, it becomes clear that most writers fall somewhere between the extremes. Bourdieu's project is to theorise the discursive production of literary value by examining the struggles which constantly take place between agents in the literary field for the right to determine what 'is' and 'is not' art. Bourdieu's theory should not lead us to say that a given author 'is' or 'is not' good, but rather that an author occupying a certain position in the literary field will not be deemed 'good' by authors or agents occupying an opposite position in that field. Bourdieu argues that the volume of sales is indicative of the position the writer occupies in the field, not of literary quality.[37]

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION

Némirovsky's relationship with Grasset lasted until 1933. Following the success of *David Golder*, she published *Le Bal*, *Les Mouches d'automne* and *L'Affaire Courilof* with Grasset before moving definitively to Albin Michel. A thematic analysis of the reception of these novels illustrates the nature and functioning of the literary field into which Grasset launched Némirovsky. My focus on these four novels is motivated by both methodological and practical considerations: these reviews form a coherent corpus, and consideration of them is facilitated by the survival of Grasset's dossiers of press cuttings relating to Némirovsky.[38] The existence of this resource makes it feasible to trace the major preoccupations of contemporary critics with considerable accuracy.

There is no doubt that the construction of *David Golder* as a 'masterpiece', a 'chef d'œuvre', was partly a result of Grasset's deliberate interventions in the press. But this strategy was only available to him because discussion of what constituted a masterpiece of French literature was already a significant feature of the inter-war literary field. Whilst many critics did immediately hail *David Golder* as a masterpiece,[39] others were more sceptical. In some cases this arose simply from a difference of opinion about the work, but in others the literary marketplace itself was called into question. Some argued that contemporary critics cannot judge what is or is not a masterpiece in their own time.[40] On the publication of *Le Bal*, Simone Ratel accused literary publishers of forcing the talents of their authors. She criticised the negative literary effects of the financial pressure to encourage authors to publish a second novel quickly on the back of a big success.[41] Claude Pierrey suggested to Némirovsky in an interview that critics were accusing her of a publicity stunt based on the sensationalised story of the anonymous manuscript. The fact that she had given birth to her first daughter between the writing of *David Golder* and the discovery of its author's identity only served to heighten readers' interest in this new literary star: 'On dit, Madame . . . Tout d'abord que vous êtes très riche, que la publicité, payée par vous, n'a fait qu'exploiter la légende adroite de la "poste restante", celle,