Novel Professions

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Introduction

The problem with this final avatar of bourgeois privilege, the meritocratic system—the problem, that is, from the point of view of the bourgeoisie—is that it is the least (not the most) defensible, because its basis is the thinnest. The oppressed may swallow being ruled by and giving reward to those who are to the manner born. But being ruled by and giving reward to people whose only asserted claim (and that a dubious one) is that they are smarter, that is too much to swallow.

—Immanuel Wallerstein

“Smart Kids” is the special topic of a recent issue of the minnesota review. Guest-editor Renny Christopher begins by confessing, “I was a smart kid. I was officially identified as a smart kid by the IQ test I took in the fourth grade” (111). Ashamed at having fallen for this magical conferral of identity, she writes, “Now I wish I could go back and kick my nine-year old self in the butt and say, ‘don’t fall for that crap!’” She discusses a friend who, when the subject of the special issue arose, explained how she had been a “dumb kid” and had proudly acted out all the behaviors associated with that label just as Christopher had performed the good-girl attributes associated with hers. This friend “told a story,” continues Christopher, “about how she, as a working-class kid, won the respect of other working-class kids in her school—by rebelling and sassing the teachers. Once, a teacher literally picked her up by the arms, carried her out into the hall, and slammed her against the lockers. . . . I was thinking, wow, that’s so cool and envying Barbara for having had the balls to defy authority like that, to be a bad kid, rather than the disgusting little conformist that I was, respecting teachers’ authority . . . playing by the rules, wanting approval from those authorities, being the perfect little fascist subject, not the brave defiant little revolutionary that Barbara was”
(111–12). If the IQ test “officially” decreed her smartness, then “I now officially and publicly renounce [it],” Christopher writes, “and declare my readiness to do penance for having so enthusiastically and unthinkingly (and dumbly?) accepted the smart kid mantle” (112). In Christopher’s piece, the dumb kids turn out to be smart and the smart kids turn out to be dupes. Having “swallowed hook, line, sinker, and fishing pole” the notion of her own innate ability, Christopher surfaces only to find she’s drowning in bourgeois conformity (111). Her unique individuality, her “special” IQ, was simply the professional-managerial class molding her in its own image (111).

The easy response to Christopher’s self-flagellation is “poor little smart kid” but her distress is genuine—“kick my . . . self,” “disgusting little conformist,” “perfect little fascist,” “do penance”—and her honesty admirable. She only says in personal terms what numerous literary critics say in more disguised form. Rather, I begin with “Smart Kids” to pose the question: Why do we literary critics say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are no better—that we are, in fact, worse—than everyone else?

Christopher takes it for granted that her academic success (now redefined as conformist failure) in contrast to her less-educated brother can be traced to that fateful fourth-grade IQ test, but one could imagine the trajectories of brother and sister playing out quite differently (and, indeed, within the implicit terms of her essay, how to account for her friend whose defiant dumb-kid past did not stop her from growing up to be Christopher’s colleague?). Recent research in the psychology of motivation suggests that affirmations of innate intelligence often have counterintuitive effects, with those told they possess superior ability less likely to pursue challenging tasks and more likely to abandon tasks once they prove difficult. After all, if you try and fail, you might lose the “smart” mantle altogether, whereas if you never try, you just did not “apply” yourself. What drops out of Christopher’s account—and becomes dangerous for the individual anxious about his or her smart identity—is effort, labor, work. Presumably, Christopher worked fairly hard to get her PhD, but this effort is summarily discounted. By ignoring all that came between the IQ test and her current post as a professor, does she not run the risk of reproducing the illusion she is at pains to dispel, the illusion upon which the IQ test rests? That ability can be abstracted from effort?

By its end, the Victorian period gave us not only Sigmund Freud but the Simon-Binet test, the prototype of the IQ test first introduced in 1905. The idea that there was something called inherent intelligence that might be objectively measured allowed the educational system to sort students into vocational or professional tracks. Where Freud made us a mystery to our-
selves, the IQ test stamped us with objective value—a seemingly straightforward, allegedly irrefutable measure of our cognitive worth. Am I smart or must I rely on effort? But how did the two—ability and effort—become separable categories in the first place? Apparently, the line between them had been drawn at least by 1875, when James Cotter Morison devoted an essay in the *Fortnightly Review* to complaining about it. He said with exasperation, “There is something offensive and even harmful in the antithesis set up between genius and learning, as if the one almost necessarily excluded the other, and as if the man of learning were, by nature of the case, a hard-working dunce who strove, by accumulating knowledge, not only to make up for his deficiency in talent, but to acquire an unfounded claim to some of its honours” (537). Terms like “effort” and “intelligence” get separated and reified and then muddled again in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the exchange between cousins Sir Francis Galton and Charles Darwin being a condensed case in point. After reading Galton’s book *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Darwin wrote him: “You have made a convert of an opponent in one sense, for I have always maintained that, excepting fools, men did not differ much in intellect, only in zeal and hard work.” Galton replied: “Character, including the aptitude for hard work, is inheritable like every other faculty” (*Memories* 290). Congratulated for abstracting a capacity from effort, Galton extended his nominalizing grasp to “effort,” which then itself becomes a kind of capacity—“being” disentangled from “doing,” “doing” morphs into another kind of “being.”

*Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* studies the way the Victorians conceived professional identity by drawing and then worrying distinctions between ability and effort, intelligence and merit, and being and doing. “The professions as we know them are very much a Victorian creation,” wrote W. J. Reader (2). At the heart of this creation, I argue, lay a tension between being and doing: a tension between the fact that people discover themselves to be suited for a certain line of work (via competitive examination, for example) and the fact that they must also over the course of time do that work, and thus come to fulfill the promise of their initial discovery. This tension developed over the course of the nineteenth century, but was at its most taut at mid-century, when Victorians begin to conceptualize an emergent professional class. The late 1840s and the 1850s, the period from which I draw my archive, established the cultural conditions for the class’s explosion in both numbers and power in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. At the start of the nineteenth century, such careers as law, medicine, and the church drew on both the gentry and upper middle classes but did not produce men who clearly identified themselves as a distinct class.
By the end of the 1850s, however, professionals were an identifiable community gaining in political and social importance, such that ambitious young men required a handbook to aid them in the momentous task of choosing a profession—H. Byerley Thomson's 1857 *The Choice of a Profession: A Concise Account and Comparative Review of the English Professions*. "The importance of the professions can hardly be overrated," Thomson wrote; "They form the head of the great English middle class, maintain its tone of independence, keep up to the mark its standard of morality, and direct its intelligence" (5). A glance at the numbers confirms the mid-century's significance: "Between 1841 and 1881," writes historian Harold Perkin, "professional occupations trebled in number, compared with a two-thirds increase in general population, and came to constitute a substantial element in the middle class" (*Origins* 428–29). By the 1860s, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse report, "What had seemed a subordinate sector of the middle class made up of managers, professionals, experts of various kinds was running England" (120). Galton's choice of the professions as the ruling principle by which *Hereditary Genius* organizes its statistics on eminent men—beginning, appropriately enough, with judges—is telling evidence for Armstrong and Tennenhouse's claim.

As various disciplines, including fiction-writing, began to professionalize—by defining objective standards of knowledge, developing processes of evaluation and accreditation, and organizing into communities in the form of chapters, associations, and societies—the novel attempted to "theorize" the professional, trying to do what nonfiction failed to do. Political economy could not make sense of this new figure whose stock-in-trade consisted of intangible services. Adam Smith, as well as those after him like David Ricardo and Karl Marx, identified three groups that constituted separate classes: owners of land, owners of capital, and owners of labor. How, then, to account for professionals who perform labor but also possess a kind of capital (mental capital in the form of measurable talent and the stored labor of knowledge acquisition)? The nascent professional also confounded assumptions about the relationship between economic and social class: if he did not look or act like a wage laborer, he nevertheless relied upon a wage or a salary; if he did not possess financial capital (though he had to have some to embark on a professional career), he claimed what we would now call cultural capital.

In short, much of what has made this class notoriously difficult to theorize both then and now is what Erik Olin Wright calls its "contradictory class locations" (quoted in Clarke 67).

If the professional suffers from contradictory class locations—neither in the capitalist nor the laborer's camp and yet both a (mental) capitalist and an
(intellectual) laborer—then he is also subject to ambiguous, even perhaps ambivalent, *temporalities*—neither born a professional, as the gentry is born gentry, nor self-made, like the Smilesian businessman, and yet both born (with certain aptitudes) and made (through mental effort). With a simultaneously pregnant and collapsed relationship to time, the professional putatively boasts mental “gifts” that anticipate his future (pregnant) but he simply becomes what he was always meant to be (collapsed). Phrenology and then, later, the competitive examination were central to the development of this professionalizing logic. Because they took a static measure of a person that allegedly could predict future success or failure, they provided a way to identify the future professional, the figure with professional promise. Precursors of the IQ test, phrenology and the exam also appeared to act as objective gatekeepers to the professions, counterpoints to patronage and jobbery. By converting “doing” into “being”—not what you learned but what you are capable of learning—they served useful credentialing functions for the modern professional and assured him a place higher in the social hierarchy than the businessman or manual laborer. “Agents are increasingly defined in terms only of *what they do*, by the technically defined skills or tasks that fall under their title or job, the further one descends in the hierarchy,” Pierre Bourdieu has written, “and conversely, by *what they are* as one moves up” (*State Nobility*, 119). But in this act of social magic, phrenology and the competitive examination seemed to bypass the actual work necessary to earn an identity and, thus, raised thorny epistemological questions for conceptualizing the professional. In all three novels I analyze, this tension between doing and being structures the text’s production of a credible (and credentialed) professional, as I show with regard to phrenology in chapter 1 and competitive examination in chapters 2 and 3.

The Victorian novel put phrenology and the competitive examination at the center of the Victorian fantasy of professional identity. Many scholars have explored the way phrenology saturates Victorian novels, but almost none have studied the role of the examination in Victorian fiction. Yet it is hard to imagine certain Dickens novels and virtually any of Anthony Trollope’s without the Oxbridge or civil service examinations. Even George Eliot, who generally relied less on shorthand in her elaboration of characters, made sure to introduce Fred Vincy as “the plucked Fred” and to have Fred begin his reformation by finally passing his examinations (158). “The poor young men,” commiserates Miss Ilex of *Gryll Grange* (1861) in a conversation about competitive examinations, “are not held qualified for a profession unless they have overloaded their understanding with things of no use in it” (185). “Well, Jackson!” says one fellow in a *Punch* cartoon from 1852 (see figure 1), “You see they’ve
plucked me again.” “I did intend going into the Church, and being an Ornament to the Profession—but as they won’t let me through—I think—I shall cut the whole concern,” he ends, absurdly trying to save face. “My dear Henry,” begins one faux letter-writing sister of a more fortunate fellow in
another issue of *Punch*, “Mamma and Pappa desire me to say that they were very much gratified at reading that you acquitted yourself so well at the examination, and Pappa has given me a cheque to enclose” (25). Indeed, if we are to trust Pip’s account, the competitive examination was the preferred “mental exercise” of even the ragged schools, where the “pupils entered among themselves upon a competitive examination on the subject of Boots, with the view of ascertaining who could tread hardest upon whose toes” (84).

In a culture as mesmerized by sorting and categorization as the Victorians’, nobody should be surprised to find the examination playing this central role and yet it has received attention within literary criticism only very recently. In *Pedagogical Economies* (2000), Cathy Shuman analyzes different Victorian authors’ use of the exam as a structure to negotiate and legitimize their own labor as readers and writers. In doing so, she articulates economies particular to intellectual labor—pedagogical economies of evaluation and assessment reliant for many of their terms and maneuvers upon those economies that govern the state, the market, or the home but nonetheless distinguishable from them. Although I discovered Shuman’s work after completing my own research on competitive examinations, *PE* has greatly enriched *Novel Professions*, deepening my own understanding of the paradoxes of professional identity.

In my study of Victorian fiction’s formation of professional identity, I am also indebted to a number of other works that have addressed the nineteenth-century professional and/or the category of intellectual labor. Important touchstones are Bruce Robbins’s *Secular Vocations* (1993), Thomas Pfau’s *Wordsworth’s Profession* (1997), Jonathan Freedman’s *Professions of Taste* (1990), Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse’s chapter “The Vanishing Intellectual” in *The Imaginary Puritan* (1992), Lawrence Rothfield’s *Vital Signs* (1992), and Clifford Siskin’s *The Work of Writing* (1998). Alan Mintz’s thorough discussion of *Middlemarch’s* portrayal of the rise of the professions in *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* saved me from writing a chapter on Eliot while also motivating me to look at novels written when professional identity occupied an earlier stage of manufacture. Published in 1978, Mintz’s book offers an interesting glimpse of what studies of the professional looked like before criticism grew suspicious of this world-historical figure. James Eli Adams’s analysis in *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995) of the precarious gendering of masculine intellectual labor, and the consequent need for an ascetic rhetoric of self-discipline, also informed my work here, particularly the chapter on *David Copperfield*.

More recently, Daniel Hack’s fascinating work on the Royal Literary Fund and “begging writers” and Clare Pettitt’s *Patent Inventions* (2004) has assured
me that I am pursuing an important thesis. Opening up and carefully developing lines of inquiry that my book does not consider, Hack demonstrates that the Victorian writer’s “rejection of the marketplace as the sole or ultimate index of value neither constitutes nor implies a fully professionalistic disavowal of market competition and payment, let alone a modernist embrace of market failure as a source of artistic legitimacy” (“Literary Paupers” 694). Patent Inventions appeared as I was preparing Novel Professions for press, but in many respects it, too, might be seen to complement and historicize the readings I offer. Patent Inventions, Pettitt writes, “takes the current critical discussion of copyright law and the construction of the artist in the Victorian period out of its literary-critical isolation and restores it to the wider debate in the period about labour and value” (2). Literary criticism has typically viewed the Victorian artist within the Kantian and Romantic tradition opposing art to mechanical invention, but Pettitt unearths a widespread discourse in which the artist and the manufacturer functioned as analogues for one another. “By the end of the 1830s,” she writes, “analogies between mechanical inventors and literary inventors were commonplace” (5). It is impossible to overstate the value of these contributions as correctives to our current critical tendencies. Once we see that the Victorian artist, and I would add professional, encouraged a metaphoric link between himself and the mechanical inventor, our mode of “exposing” the artist-professional’s autonomy as self-serving illusion—a critical routine discussed in greater detail below—loses a great deal of its impetus. In Pettitt and Hack’s rigorously historicized scenarios, the Victorian artist-professional underscored his position as market agent as often as he obscured it.

While I see Novel Professions following the lead of Shuman, Hack, and Pettitt, I also view it as part of the growing body of work committed to thinking through Foucault’s legacy to Victorian studies, work like Lauren Goodlad’s Victorian Culture and the Victorian State (2003) and David Wayne Thomas’s Cultivating Victorians (2004). Critics of my generation inherited a set of profoundly influential Foucauldian works that revised the way we read the Victorian novel. The Novel and the Police (1988), Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987), Uneven Developments (1988), and Epistemology of the Closet (1990) made up our diet and, as has been widely noted, we have found it difficult to do more than regurgitate their insights. “The watershed years of the late 1970s and 1980s,” Erin O’Connor contends, for example, “have left a long and ugly drought in their wake. There has been no comparably major study of nineteenth-century fiction for the past ten years and the bulk of the work being done is patently derivative, devoted to recapitulating and extending ideas laid down over a decade ago, rather than continuing its tradition of
innovation” (par. 6). A few exceptions stand out, such as Christopher Lane’s *Burdens of Intimacy* (1999), which refuses to let Foucault upstage Freud, but by and large Victorianists keep to the script of what Adams has called the “Foucauldian melodrama” (“Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century” 858). Before I outline the book’s chapters in the final section of this introduction, “Mundane Bookkeeping Matters,” I hypothesize about why this might be. Why have we found Foucault so exceedingly compelling that, even as “our broadly Foucauldian preoccupation with power verges on reduction to an utterly banal formula,” we seem paralyzed to transcend him? (Adams, “Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century” 878) And what does this have to do with the question with which I began? The question that borrowed Foucault’s own words on the modern infatuation with repression to ask about our strangely liberating self-loathing: why do we say with so much passion and so much resentment against our recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are no better—are, in fact, worse—than everyone else?

**SACRIFICING THE PROFESSIONAL IN VICTORIAN STUDIES**

“It is a comfort to think what a rising profession I belong to.”
—Henry Sidgwick, 1874, quoted in Lubenow

“I would not want to be a Victorian scholar these days.”
—Literature professor quoted in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2002

The Foucauldian essay that did the most to shape Victorian studies’ approach to the figure of the professional is without question Mary Poovey’s “The Man-of-Letters Hero: *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer.” This brilliant chapter from *Uneven Developments* argues that *David Copperfield* distracts readers from David’s implication in the vulgar market by appropriating the disinterest associated with the self-sacrificing wife and mother. According to this view, David needs Agnes not because her selflessness complements his disinterestedness but because it throws a mystifying veil over his mercenary motives. We have been operating ever since under the assumption that the nineteenth-century professional fostered the illusion that he transcended the market upon which he exchanged his services. We charge ourselves with exposing this fraudulent claim, laying bare the rhetorical machinations behind the professional’s apparent transcendence. But can it be only coincidence that demystifying the professional became an irresistible thesis at
the same time a shrinking academic market put critics under unprecedented pressure to professionalize? If literary works are allegories of their own production, as some have claimed, could not literary criticism also harbor self-referential allegories? Might twinned impulses of resentment (over professionalization’s acceleration) and self-abnegation (for critics’ own participation) play a role in the sacrifice of the professional?

In the mid-nineteenth century, the novelist viewed herself or himself as part of the professional class s/he was helping to usher forth. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, literary critics have only begun to think of themselves as members of, as one scholar writes, “what we now call a ‘profession’” (Harpham, “End of Theory” 194). “Where the word ‘professional’ seemed a bit off in 1950,” George Levine comments, “now it would be merely absurd to deny that humanities departments are in the business of professional training” (“Aesthetics and Ideology Revisited” 4). Sociologically classified as professionals for the whole of the twentieth century, we never referred to ourselves as such but rather as “intellectuals” or “scholars” or, more recently, “teachers of critical thinking.” Now we are professional academics, our colleagues are more or less “professionalized,” and our graduate students are “preprofessional” or, what is more of the same thing, “hyperprofessional.”

Adopting this identity has been fraught from the start, as is clear in the slide from the anodyne “professional” to the pathological “hyperprofessional” as well as in Levine’s brutally crisp formulation, “the business of professional training.”

Anxiety about “the state of the profession” has gone hand-in-hand with thinking of ourselves as professionals, and the term “profession” seems both a defense against and a metonym for crisis. That is, to identify oneself with “the profession” is to feel at once nested in an institution with a respected history and wildly swung among the cumulative crises threatening the profession with incoherence since the 1980s—crises ranging from, to quote one critic, “the political demonization of the NEA and the NEH, the media manufacture of a 90s red scare . . . incessant carping in the media and among humanities scholars about the fashions of cultural studies and canon revision, and any number of more local skirmishes about the value of language disciplines in general . . . to say nothing of the more pressing and troubling corporate reorganization of our universities” (Gregory, par. 1). When one invokes “the profession,” one both quells anxiety and incites it.

To some scholars, the ubiquity of the term indicates our fall from the status of intellectual into reified specialist. Recently Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued that the rise of a narrow professionalism marks the end of the heady, speculative era of theory. “Fields of cultural endeavor, once heroic,
now consider themselves ‘Professions,’” he writes; “The rise of professional-
ism made literary study available not just to aesthetically responsive scholars 
but to ambitious people who understood the structure and ethos of a post-
thoretical professionalism” (“End of Theory” 194). A whiff of blame-the-
victim clings to this essay, which nowhere mentions the altered academic 
market forcing young literary critics to put their ambitions on hyperbolic dis-
play. Indeed, aspiring critics—graduate students—are the ones predisposed 
to feel the most ambivalent about professionalization. On the one hand, if 
professionalization is taken to mean an aggressive self-marketing achieved 
primarily through research productivity, one might view it as intellectual 
quantity at the price of quality, and this view might provide a tempting comp-
sensatory buffer when the young scholar as yet lacks quantity. On the other 
hand, non-productivity is not an alternative that will land the student a job 
and so she perforce must produce and “professionalize.” A colleague who 
earned her PhD at Duke in the 1990s reports, “We were ironic about the pro-
fessionalization of graduate programs even as we were anxious about our own 
professionalization. We were defensively ironic.”

While the rise of the profession spells the end of theory for Harpham, the 
rise of theory coincides with—in fact, constitutes—criticism’s professional-
ization for John Guillory. In his influential book *Cultural Capital* and in a 
series of equally influential essays since, Guillory argues that literary study, 
once an important form of cultural capital, is increasingly marginalized in a 
post-1970s economy favoring a new technical-professional class over the tra-
ditional middle class. One need not be familiar with Shakespeare to join the 
ranks of this new class but rather must possess certain skills. Theory’s “rigor,” 
he suggests, can be viewed as an unconscious response to this new economy, 
a misrecognized attempt to “model the intellectual work of the theorist on 
the new social form of intellectual work, the technobureaucratic labor of the 
new professional-managerial class” (183). In fact, Guillory’s argument that 
new economic conditions have sidelined literature allows him to read any 
number of the profession’s moments—from the theory explosion in the 
1970s to the canon debate in the 1980s to the emergence of cultural studies 
and the “preprofessionalism” of graduate students in the 1990s—as symp-
toms of “a larger, protracted crisis in the decline of the relevance of the 
humanities” (“Bourdieu’s Refusal” 128).

Guillory’s sociological approach connecting the profession’s internal 
changes to larger, structural changes in its social status is more promising than 
one that accounts for change in terms of generational temperaments. It also 
usefully redirects our attention from local skirmishes over, say, cultural studies 
to the ugly reality of our downsizing. But Guillory’s fatalism is disabling,
Training our gaze on the real threat to literary study, Guillory then tells us that all we can do is sit back and watch the death throes of our cultural capital. About the global conditions determining our local circumstances in the academy, he writes, “there is nothing that members of our profession can do” (“Preprofessionalism” 5). A number of critics echo Guillory. Levine, for example, offers a set of recommendations to English departments in a recent article, cites Guillory, and then concludes on the following dispirited note: “In the end, what happens to the profession and to the teaching we are supposed to be doing in it is likely to be largely decided by forces well beyond the control of even the strongest energies inside higher education” (“Two Nations” 16).

Guillory’s argument rests on two premises that come together to make the end of literary study as we know it a foregone conclusion. Guillory assumes that the economy has qualitatively changed since around 1970, and he is no doubt right about that (see Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*). In today’s post-Fordist economy, intellectual labor is much more valuable but far less secure. However, Guillory’s corollary assumption that literary study is irrelevant to this new economy is less obviously the case. He points to declining enrollment in literature classes since 1970 as evidence of our increasing futility, but, looking at the data on enrollment from a different angle, the question becomes not why did enrollment drop in the 1970s, but rather why has there been, as Michael Bérubé writes, “a resurgence of undergraduate interest in the English major in the 1980s and 1990s?” (*Employment of English* 21). The new economy, Bérubé persuasively argues, creates a context in which “a general liberal arts degree might be seen by prospective employers as more attractive than a degree that signified a college career of technical-vocational training” (22). “Whatever the status of ‘literature’ as an index of cultivation and class status,” he continues, “degrees in English may still be convertible into gainful employment—*not* because they mark their recipients as literate, well-rounded young men and women who can allude to Shakespeare in business memos, but because they mark their recipients as people who can potentially negotiate a wide range of intellectual tasks and handle (in various ways) disparate kinds of ‘textual’ material” (23). Looked at this way, the conflict of interest is not between literature professors and the students who no longer need them, but between humanities faculty and a new administrative culture deploying the cost-cutting techniques of the new economy. In other words, it is a labor relations issue—an issue for the profession as a profession, as a body that insists on defining for itself the terms and organization of its practice. “The historical shaping of the knowledge class,” John Frow explains, “took place around a process of legal and
industrial struggle over the conditions for autonomy of work practices” (125).

Ironically, then, we have begun to refer to “the profession” at precisely the moment we face deprofessionalization. Having conceded our modest identity as professionals, we find we are, again, out of step with reality—that, to borrow Bill Readings’s now-famous line, “the professoriat is being proletarianized” (1). Charles B. Harris elaborates, “What we thought was the contested terrain—such issues as the literary canon, multiculturalism, the humanities curriculum—turns out to have been merely a beachhead. Now we understand that the real targets of this escalating assault are tenure and shared governance, the twin bulwarks of our professional identity” (25). Although our autonomy was always relative, the institutions of shared governance and tenure ensured that it was not simply chimerical. Increasingly, universities and colleges replace retiring tenured faculty in literature departments not with tenure-line hires but with adjunct labor without the job security or work conditions that make relative autonomy possible. The pre- and hyper-professionalization of junior scholars is best understood, therefore, not as the profession’s invasion by careerist critics but as the consequence of heightened competition stemming from a catch-22: dwindling demand for fresh (or stale) PhDs, as tenure lines evaporate, and an oversupply of PhDs, as departments expand graduate programs in misguided and often hapless bids to hold onto tenure lines. If “disavowal” is understood psychoanalytically as the simultaneous recognition and denial of a disturbing reality, perhaps our now-incessant invocation of “the profession” is one way we disavow our deprofessionalization.

“It is only with reference to the articulations and hierarchy of a professional bureaucracy that a sense of the self and its worth—its merit—emerges and becomes measurable,” Stanley Fish writes, underscoring the way the professional’s sense of his unique merit is paradoxically contingent upon the collective apparatus of educational institutions and professional associations. “Everyone wants to believe,” Fish continues, “that his rewards have been earned rather than bestowed, and conversely, everyone wants to believe that his ill fortune is a comment not on his abilities, but on the perversity of a corrupt and blinkered system” (“Authors-Readers” 27). During periods of professional instability and contraction, when whole armies of undeniably qualified professionals collect at the bottom of the ladder, the successful and the unsuccessful alike find it hard to believe that “rewards have been earned rather than bestowed” and that the system is not “corrupt and blinkered.” “I don’t believe in meritorious competition anymore,” one assistant professor writes in the Chronicle of Higher Education; “There’s so little difference
between [struggling adjuncts] and me that claiming superiority would be an exercise in silliness” (Coleman C3). Self-consciousness about the mechanisms of the profession spreads, and the fact that “the self of the professional is constituted and legitimized by the very structures—social and institutional—from which it is supposedly aloof” looms into view, seeming to expose professionalism itself as inherently and irredeemably compromised (Fish, “Authors-Readers” 27). As a result, the idealistic individualizing rhetoric of “calling” is replaced with the cynical, deindividualizing rhetoric of bureaucracy—“the spirit [now] is bureaucratic rather than charismatic,” Harpham writes (“End of Theory” 194)—and the only way one can conceive of escaping bureaucracy is by betraying how thoroughly one is determined by it. At such a juncture, a Foucauldianism unmasking the meritocratic ideology of liberal individualism as a disciplinary regime necessarily carries the ring of truth.

Certainly, it is the case that, as Jeff Nunokawa writes, Foucault inspired “the strain of literary criticism that has told the most on the Victorian novel over the course of the last two decades” (843). Perhaps the most exemplary of the work exploring the Victorian novel’s participation in the ruses of liberal individualism remains D. A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police. According to Miller, the Victorian novel inscribes a disciplinary double bind whereby the bourgeois individual’s belief in her autonomy only conscripts her in her own incarceration. What is the relationship between a Foucauldian vision of self-defeating agency and the critic’s experience of professional disequilibrium, when the critic’s compensatory hyperprofessionalization accompanies the structural devaluation of the profession itself? Speaking of David Copperfield’s ragtag cast of characters, Miller describes a “spectacle of . . . pathetically reduced beings, maimed by their own defense mechanisms, and whose undoubtedly immense energy can only be expended to fix them all the more irremovably in a total social system” (207). Is this point particularly persuasive under conditions when the “undoubtedly immense energy” of the critic only invests her further in a rapidly depreciating discipline, a field devalued by the university and, as Guillory at least argues, the culture as a whole? However unconscious and mediated the connection, it can be no accident that it is precisely when we are experiencing a very real shrinking of our professional autonomy that we come to “realize” that autonomy itself is illusory.

Miller does not finger the professional per se, but that figure exemplifies liberal individualism. Putatively succeeding on the basis of his own merits and considered “the proprietor of his own person and capacities,” the professional is the hero in the liberal fantasy of individual autonomy and, conse-
quently, the scapegoat in the Foucauldian unmasking of liberalism (Larson 222). As if to bring this subtext to the surface, Mary Poovey’s “The Man-of-Letters Hero: David Copperfield and the Professional Writer” appeared soon after Miller’s essay on the same novel. Whereas Miller’s exposé of liberalism is arguably also an implicit or displaced scandal of professionalism, Poovey’s masterful piece explicitly indicts the professional. In her hands, the professional becomes both a synecdoche for and the agent of a liberalism that champions freedom but secretly defers to the market and/or disciplinary society. The professional, she writes, “reinforced and disguised” the lie of liberal individualism (107).¹⁸

A hermeneutics of suspicion governs Poovey’s reading: David is “self-serving” (118), “manipul[ative] (117), and “complicitous” (120), while the novel itself “collude[s]” (122), cover[s] over” (123), “distracts” (119), and “disguise[s]” (122).¹⁹ Posting a zero-sum game wherein one ascends social and economic heights only by pushing others down, Poovey argues that the professional appears meritorious only insofar as others are understood to be undeserving.²⁰ The novel papers over the fact that others might be equally worthy by translating class differences into variations of moral character. This argument rides on Poovey’s ability to persuade us that no qualitative difference separates David from Uriah Heep. David and Uriah “manipulate others for their self-serving ends,” she writes, “[but] whereas Heep’s connivances are eventually clearly revealed, David’s manipulations remain obscure. Only when the reader reads against the narrator’s disarming claims do certain actions appear as what they are: self-aggrandizing attempts to better himself at someone else’s expense” (117).

Poovey’s approach dismantles professional identity by conflating the professional with other classed identities, alternately conflating him with the capitalist and the manual laborer. When she focuses on David’s hidden greed, she wants to demonstrate that the professional and the capitalist are essentially identical—both equally acquisitive and exploitative of others. And, as I argue below, when she drops the professional’s dissimulated motives to consider the organization and conditions of professional work, she wishes to show that the professional and the factory hand are one and the same—both equally alienated. In sum, for Poovey, professional services are just like other commodities on the market. If we believe they are different, it is simply because Victorian novels like David Copperfield have convinced us so. Or did they? “The extent of symbolic work necessary to deploy these figures (literary man and domestic woman) revealed that they were not really outside the market economy or class society,” writes Poovey (123). The fictive act suggesting that professional and domestic work is something other than self-
interested labor has been too assiduously performed or, rather, the professional protests too much—his declarations of innate and earned merit betray his anxiety that he depends on the class system he allegedly transcends. But then it might just as reasonably be claimed that Poovey has had to expend a great deal of energy herself. Without Poovey, would we have believed that the literary man and the housewife were in fact qualitatively different from the market-oriented capitalist and laborer? And would we have been simply wrong?

Perhaps symbolic performances like David Copperfield did go some way toward placing professional and domestic careers in another realm and generating another logic to regulate their practice. Perhaps the experience of being a professional or housewife was different precisely because it was believed to be different by those having the experience. For help conceptualizing this here, and throughout Novel Professions, I rely on Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s formulation of the “double discourse of value.” “On the one hand,” Smith writes, “there is the discourse of economic theory: money, commerce, technology, industry, production and consumption, workers and consumers; on the other hand, there is the aesthetic axiology: culture, art, genius, creation and appreciation, artists and connoisseurs” (127). Work conducted in the world of economics is self-interested and profit-oriented, exchanged as commodities, while the work of aesthetics is not work at all but “play.” Poovey wishes to demonstrate that while literature claimed to belong to the latter, it actually inhabited the former discourse. Presenting himself as exempt from “the alienation endemic to all kinds of labor under capitalism” (13) and, thereby, promoting the false notion that “there was some boundary to the alienation of market relations” (118), the literary professional pretended to be engaged in aesthetics when in fact he was driven by economics. To underscore this point, Poovey details the myriad ways Victorian writing resembled Taylorized labor, discussing serialization’s “factory-like conditions of production” and “standardization of form” (124). Conversely, she effaces the way belief in literature’s status as artistic creation influenced the relationship the writer had to his or her writing. She also ignores the more material ways the scene of writing contrasted with the managed monotony of the assembly line, such as the ability to work at home with one’s own “tools,” to set one’s own hours despite being on a schedule, to see what one conceives in one’s head materialized through one’s effort, and the like. In sum, in order to prove that literature belongs to the first discourse, a hermeneutics of suspicion denies all the ways in which it also belongs to the second. More to the point, it denies the very existence of the second discourse as anything but mere ideology.

What is gained by refusing professional labor its specificity is obvious:
sharp insight into the ways liberal individualism covers over the constitutive inequities of capitalist society. But something is lost, and not just for the student of Victorian culture. The hermeneutics of suspicion pervades literary criticism as a whole, shaping our approach to the professional and also to what we do as professionals—aesthetics. “Marxists, cultural materialists, poststructuralists, and deconstructive psychoanalysts, have . . . shared a hermeneutics of suspicion,” Isobel Armstrong writes in *The Radical Aesthetic*, and consequently, “the concept of the aesthetic has been steadily emptied of content” (2). Like the professional, the thinking goes, aesthetics is not what it purports to be. This parallel makes perfect sense once one considers the significant overlap between discourses of aesthetics and professionalism, both of which define practitioners by their distance from economic determination. In fact, the critical pillorying of the professional is best considered a subset of the last two decades’ deconstruction of aesthetic autonomy—the discovery that “disinterested assessment” and “autonomy” are ideological mystifications.

While Armstrong is surely right about the general tenor of contemporary criticism, she too hastily assimilates the “Marxists” and “cultural materialists” into the group she names, forgetting that a certain strain of Marxist thinking always bore art’s position within both discourses in mind. Peter Bürger wrote in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984):

> Conceiving of art’s apartness from society as its ‘nature,’ means involuntarily adopting the *l’art pour l’art* concept of art and simultaneously making it impossible to explain this apartness as the product of a historical and social development. If, on the other hand, one puts forward the view that art’s independence from society exists only in the artist’s imagination . . . the correct insight that autonomy is a historically conditioned phenomenon turns into its denial; what remains is a mere illusion. Both approaches miss the complexity of autonomy, whose characteristic is that it describes something real (the detachment of art as a special sphere from the nexus of the praxis of life) but simultaneously expresses this real phenomenon in concepts that block recognition of the social determinacy of the process. (36)

The aesthetic discourse in the double discourse of value cannot be reduced to “mere illusion.” Certainly, this discourse fetishizes art by obscuring all the labor producing the art object that cannot be attributed to the artist’s effortless “genius,” but one is not at liberty to dismiss it from one’s analysis on that basis alone. Art has an autonomy despite its being only “apparent” or, rather, precisely *because* it appears to.
The appearance of art’s autonomy is an impression built up over time, as neo-Marxist Pierre Bourdieu painstakingly illustrates in his 1996 *Rules of Art*. I will return to Poovey below, but I want to pause on Bourdieu for a moment because the logic of cultural production he outlines informs much of *Novel Professions*. It might seem strange that a book critical of the “prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion” would mobilize Bourdieu, considering that Anglo-American critics view him as an economic determinist who cynically reduces intellectual and aesthetic disinterest to self-interest (Thomas ix).24

“The constitution of relatively autonomous areas of practice,” Bourdieu writes, “is accompanied by a process through which symbolic interests (often described as ‘spiritual’ or ‘cultural’) come to be set up in opposition to strictly economic interests as defined in the field of economic transactions by the fundamental tautology ‘business is business’; strictly ‘cultural’ or ‘aesthetic’ interest, disinterested interest, is the paradoxical product of the ideological labor in which writers and artists, those most directly interested, become autonomous by being opposed to material interests, i.e., by being symbolically nullified as interests” (“Structures” 172). Those persons most directly interested represent themselves as disinterested, he says, and this might be taken to imply that the artist or writer is hypocritical, or, at best, obtusely unaware of her own unconscious motivations. Bourdieu means to suggest neither. His word is “paradox”—the principle of aesthetic autonomy is the “paradoxical product” of “ideological labor.” “The fundamental law of this paradoxical game,” Bourdieu repeats in *Rules of Art*, “is that there one has an interest in disinterestedness” (21). If the artist or writer’s work is to enjoy any abiding value, we must perceive it to have been produced without regard to exchange value. Disavowing the market, the artist makes one possible (though not inevitable). This is not semantics but a historically determined reality produced through the “process of autonomization of the intellectual and artistic field” that began in reaction to the emergence of market capitalism (“Field of Cultural Production” 36).25

This is not to say that critics have simply misread Bourdieu but that his formulations are better read in light of his larger project. Certainly *Distinction* scorns the principle of disinterestedness as inauthentic class ideology by demonstrating that the appreciation of the autotelic art object requires not an essentially superior capacity of judgment but a kind of elite training in the snobbish rewards of difficult art. And, similarly, but from the perspective of art production rather than consumption, *Rules of Art* shows how the posture of aesthetic autonomy is disingenuous in at least one sense—Flaubert could only tout his artistic independence from the commercial market, because he possessed economic independence. In *Rules of Art*, however,
Bourdieu moves beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion, yielding a dialectical advance: he argues that the principle of aesthetic and intellectual autonomy is an element of class mystification and, at the same time, is among the “most precious collective achievements of intellectuals” (339). Over the course of a century, intellectuals—Flaubert being the most visible—developed a critical disposition that was “simultaneously the product and the guarantee of their autonomy” (339). “Objective structures . . . become mental structures through a learning process that takes place in a universe organized according to these same structures and subject to sanctions formulated in a language also structured according to the same oppositions,” explains Bourdieu (State Nobility 39). In a chicken-and-egg fashion, proclamations of independence facilitated the institutionalizations of independence—practices of peer review, fellowships not tied to special interests, and so on—and vice versa. By consolidating both the institutional basis for assertions of intellectual independence and a mass-cultural audience for those assertions, artists and intellectuals created a position of relative autonomy from which they could then speak about affairs of state and the market with peculiar authority (Bourdieu cites the Dreyfus affair as the first major example of this).

Critics have noticed the shift from Distinction to Rules of Art and have interpreted it as a kind of logical discrepancy or contradiction. Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman comment, for example, “Bourdieu’s work . . . seems increasingly to posit a politics and ethics on an implicit aesthetics that is apparently at odds with claims he makes at other places in his work” (5). And Allen Dunn identifies a “gap between Bourdieu’s demystifying account of various social practices and the various types of value commitment evident in his calls for reform,” though he acknowledges that “the tensions that shape [Bourdieu’s] work may be productive as well as problematic” (“Review” 202–3). Guillory, perhaps Bourdieu’s most careful reader in the United States, has articulated the difference between the texts without reducing it to contradiction. “In comparing Distinction’s critique of consumption with Bourdieu’s description elsewhere of restricted production,” he writes, “[we discover] that the severity of Distinction’s critique of consumption is inversely related to his idealization of autonomous production” (Cultural Capital 338). To what extent, Guillory implies, can this inconsistency be seen as a virtue, revealing a truth about the artist-intellectual? How is the autonomy of the artist-intellectual both an instance of class privilege and an institutionalized logic that can act as an indispensable “check” on other institutionalized forms of power?

“The disavowal [of self-interest],” Bourdieu writes, “is neither a real negation of the ‘economic’ interest which always haunts the most ‘disinterested’
practices, nor a simple ‘dissimulation’ of the mercenary aspects of the prac-
tice” (“Production of Belief” 262). The disavowal of self-interest might be
understood as the result of a fit between “social and mental structures” (State
Nobility 1), a disposition shaped by the professional apparatus and social
world of professionalism (and art). What Bourdieu describes is not so far
from Freud’s understanding of sublimation as a socially valuable form of
repression. Because professions require long periods of apprenticeship or
knowledge acquisition, individuals must “discipline” themselves by repressing
immediate desires, and thus foregoing immediate rewards, in favor of more
immaterial and/or long-term goals. As sociologist Oswald Hall has written,
one begins the process of becoming a professional by first “generating an
ambition” and “one function of an ambition is to discipline present conduct
in the interest of a future goal” (89). “An ambition,” he continues, “is usually
conceived to be a highly subjective matter, generated in private fashion and
internalized as a drive. . . . The fewer the day-to-day rewards in the early
stages of a career and the longer delayed the substantial rewards, the more
ambition is needed” (89). One must become adept at repressing self-interest,
channeling desire into what Eliot in Middlemarch calls “far-reaching investi-
gation” (145) and “far-resonant action” (vii). One must work up an internal
drive by investing “far-reaching inquiry” with its own erotic charge, as Eliot
illustrates when she explains how Lydgate happens upon his vocation:

The page he opened on was under the heading of “Anatomy” and the
first passage that drew his eyes was on the valves of the heart. He was not
much acquainted with valves of any sort, but he knew that valvae were
folding doors, and through this crevice came a sudden light startling
him with his first vivid notion of finely adjusted mechanism in the
human frame. A liberal education had of course left him free to read the
indecent passages in the school classics, but beyond a general sense of
secrecy and obscenity in connexion with his internal structure, had left
his imagination quite unbiased . . . the moment of vocation had come,
and before he got down from his chair the world was made new to him
by a presentiment of endless processes . . . From that hour Lydgate felt
the growth of an intellectual passion. (142–43)

Putting Eliot’s logic in reverse, one could say that the peeping tom is the
failed doctor, the man who could not generate a durable ambition out of his
early excitements. (And, indeed, the first “crisis” to almost derail Lydgate is
one prompted by the voyeurism of theatergoing.) This early excitement must
supply ambition with enough energy to withstand the many temptations and
aggravations competing for the self’s attention, particularly during the long period of credentialing. In Lydgate’s case, as Eliot explains, “scientific interest” must take “the form of professional enthusiasm” that is “not to be stifled by that initiation in makeshift called his ‘prentice days’ . . . [or] his studies in London, Edinburgh, and Paris” (143).

Disavowal is not the same as denial, it is important to remember. Whereas the latter attempts to refuse a repressed desire wholesale, the former converts part of it into something that can be admitted into consciousness. Victorian writers were quite capable of such a distinction and in Victorian fiction “disinterest” is a remarkably elaborated term that is not always, or even perhaps usually, placed in simple opposition to economic self-interest. Instead “disinterest” is often predicated upon an acknowledgment of self-interest. Characters who have trouble admitting to themselves all the ways in which they are beholden to their own desires are the least “independent” of Victorian characters—denial being the defense mechanism of the hypocrite, like Middlemarch’s Mr. Bulstrode. Conversely, Bulstrode’s counterpoint Mr. Farebrother is perhaps the most magnanimous character in all of Victorian fiction and one who can freely admit, for example, that he covets a particular post not for the souls he can save but because he “should be glad of the forty pounds” (174). Victorian authors already knew, that is to say, what Bourdieu figures out in Rules of Art—that “disinterest” cannot be pure self-sacrifice without turning into mere dissimulation but that the options are not purity versus complicity in the first place. Rather, autonomy makes politics possible as anything more than the private opinion of an individual. What results from disavowal, then, is neither absolute freedom nor deferred capitulation to special interests but rather “the freedom of the salon des refusés, who reject those who reject them and who establish an antithetical market in symbolic goods,” as Guillory writes of the artists. “The point is not, then,” he continues, “simply to expose this freedom as unreal, when in fact the space cleared by the refusal of market demand is precisely the space in which social determinations can be explored without wholly acceding to market demand and in which many new possibilities for the development of art are created” (“Bourdieu’s Refusal” 394). The surprisingly self-scrutinized Victorian professional might be a model, then, for our own activity as intellectuals. In particular, such a figure might encourage us to recognize that the “crisis of the profession” is not a crisis of too much professionalization, as it is often portrayed, but of too little—an erosion of professional control over
the autonomous work practices that are simultaneously the guarantee of and the reward for our interested disinterestedness. (The rewards we experience as professionals are directly tied to our autonomy. In a survey of professors, Judith Gappa and Shelly MacDermid found that by far “the greatest level of satisfaction [86 percent] came from faculty autonomy and independence” [5].)

To return to Poovey, I hope it is now clear that by unmasking aesthetic “freedom” Poovey unravels the paradox whereby certain kinds of work are not understood as work but only at the high cost of sacrificing what is unique about professional labor. Poovey complains that Dickens’s depiction of David’s writing and Agnes’s housekeeping “convey[s] the twin impressions that some kinds of work are less ‘degrading’ and less alienating than others and that some laborers are so selfless and skilled that to them work is simultaneously an expression of self and a gift to others” (101). If one agrees with Poovey that the logic of market relations informs every pursuit in one way or another, does that necessarily mean all labor is equally alienated? Is writing a story the same as capping bottles? Can work never gratify the self while also doubling as a gift to others? “In the experience of vocation,” writes Mintz, “selfish ambitions for personal distinction and selfless aspirations toward general amelioration are parts of a single matrix of desire” (20). Relatively autonomous cultural production does not rely primarily upon individual exceptionalism but is built into institutions and dispositions over the course of a century. And the vocational disposition, in circular fashion, depended on the development of institutions organized so as to cultivate in its members a pleasure in holding the market at arm’s length.

All work under capitalism is certainly implicated in capitalism’s logic of equivalence, but that does not mean all work is equal. Hunting down the gaps, contradictions, and subterfuges of a text, a hermeneutics of suspicion is incapable of withholding judgment in order to illuminate the positive as well as the negative aspects of professionalism. “The dialectic’s first function,” Fredric Jameson writes, “[is] the suspension of the moralizing judgment, the transcendence of good and evil, which is to say, the neutralization of some choice between the positive and the negative judgment” (“Theoretical Hesitation” 277). Denouncing the professional, Victorianists fail to see that this figure’s paradoxical position inside and outside the market—at once complicit and transcendent—is not a counterfeit but a dialectic—that is, a position that works both ways, enabling but also destabilizing the system within which it functions. The professions enable capitalism by falsely holding out the promise of unalienated labor to everyone. Yet they also destabilize it because by holding out the promise of gratifying work, they remind us
that work should be gratifying. The professions, as Herbert Marcuse wrote in *Negations* about art, contain “not only quiescence about what is, but also remembrance of what could be” (98).

**MUNDANE BOOKKEEPING MATTERS**

When I think of the future of literary studies, I try to concentrate . . . on the mundane bookkeeping matters of the profession, out of the conviction that if the profession offers its aspirants good material and intellectual working conditions, the shape and the range of the knowledges produced in the profession will eventually take care of themselves.

—Michael Bérubé (“Days of Future Past” 20)

“Isn’t there, after all (and risking accusations of naiveté), something pretty decent and creative in a struggle to get beyond the self?” George Levine asks in his latest study of the Victorians, *Dying to Know* (2002), which he characterizes as “something of a defense of those impossible strivings toward disinterest” (14, 13). “Is it true,” he wonders, “that all disinterest is interested?” (14). However close my thesis may appear to his, I would argue that any defense of “disinterest” must first recognize that it requires the advocacy of one’s self-interest. Second, it must acknowledge the fact that “disinterest” no longer has the cultural resonance it once enjoyed. Whereas Bourdieu traces the nineteenth-century construction of the high/mass culture boundary, a boundary intimately tied up with the disinterest/interest dualism, Paul DiMaggio describes its contemporary erosion: “Changes in social structure and the rise of an open market of cultural goods have weakened institutionalized cultural authority, set off spirals of cultural inflation, and created more differentiated, less hierarchical, less universal, and less symbolically potent systems of cultural classification than those in place during the first part of this century” (39). As a result of these complex changes, the principle of disinterestedness, once critical to the legitimation of professional identity, has lost some of its rhetorical edge. But even if it were still effective, the ideal of disinterest may actually work against professionals now, at least those in academia. As Andrew Ross argues, the ideal cultivates in scholars a capacity for self-sacrifice that has been used to deprive them of their work autonomy by “ma[king] it easy for power to shift rapidly to managers and administrators” (“Mental Labor Problem” 23). Faculty must insist rather on their “autonomy,” a term only a short metonymic distance from “disinterest,” but one more likely to resonate with both a professoriate and a public suspicious of claims to purity.
“It’s in vain, Trot, to recall the past, unless it works some influence upon the present,” Aunt Betsey says to David Copperfield, and this book is motivated in part by concern over the structural declassing of today’s professional (329). As numerous professions devolve into managed labor, it is hard to remember that historically professions have been defined by “the degree to which they . . . gained the organized power to control themselves the terms, conditions and content of their work in the settings where they perform their work” (Friedson 22). There is a disorienting disconnect between pundits’ representation of intellectual labor and its lived experience. We are bombarded with jingoism about living in the so-called Information Age, “the domination of intellectual over manual labor” (Aronowitz, “On Intellectuals” 52), the skyrocketing importance of immaterial labor (Hardt), the need for symbolic analysts in a global economy (Reich), “expertise call[ing] the tune in today’s economic order” (Hodges xii), and “the rise of a creative class” (Florida), while at the same time tremendous job insecurity exists among the well-credentialed, management places ever-greater pressure on knowledge workers to produce more surplus value, and a crushing gap exists between the intellectual skills possessed and the formulaic work increasingly required. It has become more difficult to maintain that professionals “enjoy a semi-autonomy that gives [them] a freedom in their work afforded no other laborers in today’s economy” (McGowan 44). Certainly, it is hard to maintain this with regard to academics when, as Gary Rhoades demonstrates in Managed Professionals, “the terms and position of faculty’s professional labor are being renegotiated as managers seek to reform, reinvent, re-engineer, redesign, or reorganize colleges and universities” (2).

At a time when nonacademic journals like Salon run pieces entitled “From Ivory Tower to Academic Sweatshop” (Wright), it comes as something of a shock to stumble across the following sentence in The Political Unconscious: “It is surely fatuous,” Jameson wrote in 1981, “for intellectuals to seek to glamorize their tasks—which can for the most part be subsumed under the rubric of the elaboration, reproduction, or critique of ideology—by assimilating them to real work on the assembly line and to the experience of the resistance of matter in genuine labor” (45). That any professor working today would think comparing her tasks to a factory job glamorizes them would be funny if it were not so ironic. The factory may have been the vehicle of benign, and even romantic, metaphors as late as 1981, but it is now all too literal, as new titles on education’s corporate reorganization seek to make clear—titles such as Stanley Aronowitz’s The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning (2001), David F. Noble’s Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education (2002),

Jameson implies that the key distinction is that which separates brainwork from handiwork—“writing and thinking” from hammering and hauling. “One cannot assimilate without intellectual dishonesty the ‘production’ of texts to the production of goods by factory workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense,” he writes (45). But the key difference between alienated and unalienated labor, as Harry Braverman argued three decades ago, is rather the discrepancy between the experience of work that unites conception and execution and the experience of work that parcels them out. Prying conception and execution apart has the effect of separating means from ends and turning the means into what Jameson elsewhere has called “desacralized technique” (“Vanishing Mediator” 8). Creative work, however, produces “objects that [figuratively] ‘return’ to their creator, thereby permitting the entire ‘reappropriation’ of one’s own activity” (Moretti 116). Opposed to the monotonously repeated task undertaken without any conception of the process as a whole, it is the gratifying loop that begins as an idea in one’s head, becomes a reality through one’s creative efforts, and is now reflected upon in the outside world.

I propose that we reserve “professional” to designate those efforts performed under the relatively autonomous conditions that foster creativity. My intent is not to restrict creative labor to the traditionally defined professions—law, medicine, and so on—but to universalize an idea associated with the professions. The association of creative labor with the professions can be found throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When H. Byerley Thomson attempted to differentiate professional labor from other gainful employment in his 1857 *The Choice of a Profession*, he used artistic labor to characterize professional labor as a whole:

> The test by which an operation belongs to intellectual, or to bodily labour, or to barter is by observing what is the principal object of the exertion. Thus an artist sells to his client a certain quantity of canvas, covered with a thick coat of paint, the whole surrounded by a gilt frame; but he is not therefore a merchant, the principal object, and real consideration of the purchase being the intellectual, and imaginative design expressed by the picture, to which point canvas, and frame are subordinate accessories. (3)

At the moment Thomson defined professional labor, it was the artist and not the more predictable lawyer or the doctor that stood as the paradigmatic
professional. Over a century later, in 1971, when D.W. Winnicott wanted to suggest the diversity of the “creative impulse,” he wrote, “[the creative impulse] is present as much in the moment-by-moment living of a backward child who is enjoying breathing as it is in the inspiration of an architect who suddenly knows what it is that he wishes to construct, and who is thinking in terms of material that can actually be used so that his creative impulse may take form and shape, and the world may witness” (69). In order to portray creativity’s range, Winnicott established a continuum between an example that virtually nobody would recognize as creative—breathing—and an example that presumably everybody would recognize as creative—the thought process of an architect. It is no accident that when Winnicott wanted to invoke archetypal creative work, the work he chose belonged to the category “professional.”

Admittedly, the reverse is also true: for the same duration of time, the professional has been associated with soul-stultifying bureaucracy. “I scarcely know a professional man I can like,” wrote the narrator of J. A. Froude’s 1849 *The Nemesis of Faith*: “You know a lawyer when you see him, or a doctor, or a professional clergyman. They are not simply men, but men of a particular sort, and, unfortunately, something not more but less than men—men who have sacrificed their own selves to become the paid instruments of a system” (2–3). And when, in 1923, Georg Lukács developed the concept of “reification,” it was the professional not the proletariat who exemplified its extreme case: “The problems of consciousness arising from wage labour were repeated in the ruling class in a refined and spiritualized, but, for that very reason, intensified form. . . . The journalist’s lack of conviction, the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs, is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification” (100). The very things that can make a professional career inspiring—working with ideas and people rather than manufacturing things—make it horrific when instrumentalized. Reproducing history’s Jekyll/Hyde oscillation between the self-actualizing and the self-exploiting expert, Victorian studies cycles between affirmation and denunciation of the professional.

In *Novel Professions*, I argue that three mid-nineteenth-century novels—Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1847), Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and Anthony Trollope’s *The Three Clerks* (1857)—offer us an opportunity to break out of this oscillation and revise our approach to the professional. They are all narratives of professionalization that dissolved conceptual obstacles to the mid-Victorian formation of a discrete professional identity. Written during the “mid-century consolidation” of the professional ethos, they offer a series of blueprints for the professional (Reader 59).
Furthermore, two of these novels—The Professor and The Three Clerks—prove particularly resistant to a hermeneutics of suspicion, which explains in part why critics have studiously ignored them for the last twenty years. Criticism’s suspicion of the professional needs him to assert a disinterest that the critic can reveal as self-interest, but neither The Professor nor The Three Clerks has its protagonist make such a claim: the former does not attempt to disingenuously distance its protoprofessional from the market but rather inserts him into it, and the latter prizes not the alleged purity of its hero but rather his impurity, his very self-interest making him a credible professional.

The third text—David Copperfield—is the ur-object of a hermeneutics of suspicion but I argue that it produces its professional by a logic quite different from the nefarious one ascribed to it. In my view, rather than appropriating the housewife’s disinterest to authorize himself, David combines the categories of capital and labor to create himself as a trustworthy professional whose talent follows the reliable routines of clock time. My readings of these novels show that when we stop scanning texts for the hypocritical gesture of disinterest we have been trained to expose, we make possible a very different critical relationship. When we withhold what Jameson called above “our moralizing judgment,” we do not seize on the gap or contradiction that putatively belies the Victorian novel’s version of professionalism but rather enter into its struggle to theorize intellectual labor.

Opening up our now-narrow theoretical framework, we also satisfy a historicist desire to recover the novel’s role in the production of a specifically professional identity. “This book,” begins another study of the Victorians, Anita Levy’s Reproductive Urges (1999), “is occasioned by an uneasiness, become more urgent of late, with the interpretive procedures governing Victorian studies since about 1980” (1). Here, Levy speaks for many Victorianists, and I wonder if our uneasiness is related in a symptomatic way to the fact that Victorian studies uncannily, if unwittingly, reproduces the tendency of today’s economy to evacuate professional identity. The contemporary economy converts professionals into knowledge workers, while the trend in Victorian studies has been to assimilate the professional into the bourgeois. Victorianists, as Pam Morris writes, “work within a monolithic model of the middle class” (679), and, thereby, Lauren Goodlad adds, obscure the “under-recognized sites of contest within mainstream ideologies of middle-class Englishness” (143). Both Morris and Goodlad blame this on the dominance of the Foucauldian paradigm. Criticism suffers from “an insufficiently expansive model of Victorian middle-class identity,” Goodlad writes, “[for] reasons relating at least partly to the totalizing tendencies of Foucault’s model of the rise of disciplinary subjectivity” (143).
It has been so easy to lump the professional in with the middle class more generally in part because the emergent Victorian professional’s own self-perception, as mediated by fiction, relied upon categories derived from bourgeois political economy. The Victorian novel combined the existing terms in strategic, rhetorical formulations meant to yield something altogether new. By rewriting the available plots of production with characters’ “capital” (industrial or financial) and “labor” (factory, rural, or artisanal), the novel invented formulas for the value of professional services, formulas whose combinations also entailed cancellations. For example, *David Copperfield* invents professional value by combining capital and labor in such a way that the magic of capital marries the honesty of labor and, thereby, cancels capital’s suspicious speculativeness and labor’s machinelike monotony. Thus far, criticism has been preoccupied with how the Victorian novel produced the expert by appropriating the disinterested personas of the housewife and the aristocrat. But when free from the need to uncover disinterest’s inevitable contamination by interest, we see that the novel necessarily produced the professional by first reconfiguring the market-oriented identities of the capitalist and the laborer. These novels articulate their professionals’ relationship to the market by carefully building on already existing market logic.

“These ‘new’ middle classes,” Immanuel Wallerstein has written, “were very difficult to describe in the nineteenth-century categories of analysis” (141), and even as the novels in *Novel Professions* successfully resolve ideological obstacles to professional identity formation, their attempts to draw on extant plots of labor and capital generate some telling paradoxes or structural failures: *The Professor* offers two definitions of the professional but one undercuts the other, *David Copperfield* ushers in the autonomous professional by paradoxically submitting him to the clock time associated with managed labor, and *The Three Clerks* transforms a thoughtless youth into a prosperous professional but has to give him not one but two professions to do so. Yet when we stop looking for a disavowal of self-interest—a disavowal we would be hard-pressed to find in at least two of the three novels—we view these “flaws” less as the contradictions or missteps that betray professionalism than as the inevitable by-products of attempts to define an identity that is relatively unique in the modern world—an identity that cannot be fully explained in either the terms of Adam Smith’s market or Foucault’s disciplinary society.

Each chapter of *Novel Professions* reads one mid-nineteenth-century novel in order to reveal the Victorians’ surprisingly modern conception of an interested professionalism. Chapter 1 “Between Labor and Capital: Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor*” argues that a tension runs through the novel between representing the professional in terms of his innate mental capital and repre-
senting him in terms of his productive labor. Both representations illuminate
the previously invisible—the one by seeming to materialize the immaterial
mind, the other by uncovering hidden mental work—but the depiction of
intellectual capacity as a timeless, natural property threatens to erase the time
required for its display as labor. The final section argues that The Professor
relies on the notion of mental capital because it imagines that such a concept
works as a prophylactic against proletarianization. But mental labor is always
vulnerable to being modeled upon routinized manual labor, as increasing
numbers of humanities PhDs find today when they look for tenure-track
salaries only to encounter a system more willing to pay them piecemeal. The
Professor’s structural failure, then, suggests that the important distinction is
not between mental and manual work but rather between work that unites
conception and execution and work that parcels them out.

David Copperfield solves the problem of The Professor’s conflicting models
of the professional—as mental laborer and as mental capitalist—by inventing
“cultural capital,” a form of capital that combines the merit of effort with the
prestige of innate property. Chapter 2 “Becoming Professional: Time in
David Copperfield” begins by surveying the post-Poovey, post-Miller field of
Copperfield criticism. I then read David Copperfield as a novel authorizing the
new professional class by developing a formula for professional value that
relied on a mystified notion of inherent merit but which also established a
standard of time discipline that required professionals to subordinate their
own interests to the service of others. Broadly put, Dickens combines the
finance capitalist and the factory laborer to form David Copperfield, a pro-
fessional author who possesses mental capital but who, rather than speculat-
ing on it, adheres to the clock time of the patiently earned hourly wage. It is
a commonplace of Dickens studies that Dickens despised factory conditions,
but, as this chapter shows, he can reassure his readers that David is an hon-
est professional only by clinging to factory time.

Like Brontë and Dickens, Trollope builds a professional in The Three
Clerks (1857), but his professional eschews the category of capital altogether,
relying solely on that of labor. Refusing the paradox of the professional estab-
lished by the mid-nineteenth-century debate over competitive examinations,
Trollope argues that only if the professional understands his labor as being
traded for market value, not as invaluable or as removed from the taint of
exchange, will he achieve relative autonomy or independence. In “The
Professional Paradox: Competitive Examinations and Trollope’s The Three
Clerks” (chapter 3), I argue that this only apparently paradoxical logic chimes
remarkably well with Pierre Bourdieu’s thesis that disinterest is a function of
institutional structures, not moral character. The last section of the chapter
explains how the novel addresses the circumstances of Trollope’s own highly heteronomous position in the literary marketplace in such a way that his overt self-interest as an author is “forgiven.” By depicting himself in his Autobiography and his hero in The Three Clerks as a hack but doing so as if the term were one he self-reflexively embraced rather than had thrust upon him, Trollope escapes being reduced to a hack by posterity. Critics have begun, in fact, to speak of Trollope as a kind of hero. When one considers that this generation of Victorianists has been trained to read the disavowal of interest as deeply disingenuous if not downright devious, Trollope’s rejection of this disavowal makes his sudden rise in critical fortune predictable.

The book’s concluding chapter, “Deprofessionalized Critics in the Twenty-First Century,” juxtaposes a work representative of 1990s criticism, Martha Woodmansee’s The Author, Art, and the Market (1994), to an influential new work that is its mirror opposite, Amanda Anderson’s The Powers of Distance (2001), in order to show that literary critics cycle predictably between exposing aesthetic value’s “concealed” exchange value and reasserting aesthetic disinterest. This circuit inflicts new damage in the current context of academic deprofessionalization. Specifically, it predisposes critics to uphold a static ideological binary between self-interest and disinterest that was better suited to an earlier mode of mass production, an opposition that relies on a high/low aesthetic opposition which is itself unraveling. I argue that Victorian studies scholars today must grapple with the problems and promises of the professional not by shuttling between narratives of complicity and transcendence but rather by attending to the uniqueness of the professional’s structural position—a position of relative autonomy that was a century in the making but is in jeopardy today.

A scene from Middlemarch perhaps best illustrates the wide divide separating autonomous intellectual labor from other forms of labor under capitalism and is, thus, a fitting scene with which to end my introduction. That archetypal professional Tertius Lydgate studies a book on fever “far into the smallest hour” by his fireside:

As he threw down his book, stretched his legs towards the embers in the grate, and clasped his hands at the back of his head, in that agreeable afterglow of excitement when thought lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connexions with the rest of our existence—seems, as it were, to throw itself on its back after strength—Lydgate felt a triumphant delight in his studies and something like pity for those less lucky men who were not of his profession. (163)
Poovey criticizes the idea that there exists a “sphere to which one can retreat—a literal or imaginative hearth . . . where one's motives do not appear as something other than what they are because self-interest and self-denial really are the same” (122). Yet in his late-night hunt for the “obscure conditions” causing fever, Lydgate does manage to gratify his _amour-propre_ while simultaneously serving humanity. Savoring a literal _and_ an imaginative hearth in the “agreeable afterglow” of his research, Lydgate experiences his profession as an intellectual adventure, something calling for a kind of self-denyng work that doubles as self-interested play. This feeling was in fact endemic to Victorians who saw themselves as part of emerging professions. Being a professional in the mid-Victorian period was, W. C. Lubenow writes, “exhilarating” (6). “It is a comfort to think what a rising profession I belong to,” Henry Sidgwick wrote in a letter; one “feels at the centre of things” (qtd. in Lubenow 6).

Lydgate’s transcendent moment—a “suffusive sense” of totality, “[when thought] seems, as it were, to throw itself on its back after strength”—marks the difference between, as Habermas puts it, “an objectification of essential powers and their alienation, between a satisfied praxis that returns to itself and a praxis that is impeded and fragmented” (64). It is a moment, Eliot’s narrator implies, we have all felt (not specific to Lydgate, it is rather “that afterglow”). But while the narrator pulls us within the realm of its possibility, Lydgate kicks us out: “Lydgate felt . . . something like pity for those less lucky men who were not of his profession.” Arguably, this sentence seals Lydgate’s fate. Pitying others their lack of transcendent moments, he will be made by the novel to forfeit them himself. And yet, if his “something like pity” looks a little like condescension, is it not also honest? After all, most tasks do not boast that boomerang whereby thought opens out onto the world and returns to itself refreshed. For his candor—or, at the very least, for the complacency with which he assumes that he, if not his profession, will be different from “the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats”—Eliot condemns Lydgate to a life void of the very thing she values most—glimpses of the social totality (143). That an author so resolutely intellectual herself sacrifices her novel’s intellectual is less hypocritical of Eliot than it is self-abnegating.

“We are rescued from fragmentation only by consciousness of the whole and intellectuals specialize in this consciousness,” Durkheim wrote (x). In a culture in which the intellectual’s _very raison d’être_ is everyone else’s exclusion from those moments of “consciousness of the whole” she enjoys, her self-loathing is virtually inevitable. Add to this a situation like the one facing the
professional critic today, in which not only everyone else but also most of her colleagues are locked out of such moments, and her self-loathing is overdetermined. Perhaps if we cease hating ourselves for being “professionals,” we will be better readers of Victorian novels of professionalization. We might find, then, that the knots in their narratives do not indicate the hypocrisy of their protagonists but rather the uncanny capacity of professionalism to jam the otherwise seamless logic of modernity.