Novel Professions

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At once outside the market and within it, the nineteenth-century professional juggled a kind of paradox. Most influential rise-of-the-professional narratives explain how the modern professional transcended the market by taking on an aura of disinterest. The professional, one version goes, reworked the aristocrat’s noblesse oblige into the professional ideal of service. In another, he aligned himself with the unwaged work of the home so that he can draw on the middle-class angel’s stock of self-sacrificing purity. Explaining how the professional enacted his distance from the market, both narratives assume that his proximity to the market requires no interpretation. This chapter reverses that assumption. It considers a moment in the emergence of the professional class when it was not the damning presence but the apparent absence of the market that posed the dilemma. In that case, neither the aristocrat nor the middle-class angel had any rhetorical tips to offer. In the 1840s, when Charlotte Brontë wrote *The Professor*, the relative invisibility of certain kinds of work as valuable labor threatened to shut its producers out of the marketplace. Studying this novel, in which the protagonist wishes to uncover rather than cover over the price of his intellectual labor, helps correct the balance of critical studies of professionalism. In so doing, it allows us to understand these opposing directions (away from, toward the market) not
only as the contradiction or the paradox of professionalism but also as its
dialectic, its ability simultaneously to enable and critique the economic sys-
tem in which it so ambivalently figures.

“How can a man put a price on his mind?” Silas Wegg asks rhetorically
(and disingenuously) in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), a novel that laments the
market’s ever-expanding reach. Written in 1846, almost two decades before
Dickens’s novel, Brontë’s *The Professor* asks a similar question, but one that
demands an answer, which takes the form of the story that unfolds. “Carry
your intellect and refinement to the market and tell me in a private note what
price is bid for them,” a character taunts the protagonist, thereby setting the
novel in motion (70). Securing a teaching position and succeeding so well
that, by novel’s end, he and his wife have opened their own school, the
eponymous professor does indeed place his intellect on the market and, find-
ing himself well-rewarded, has the last laugh. *The Professor*, in other words,
does the opposite of what later novels like *Our Mutual Friend* train us to
expect: rather than bemoan the commodification of minds, it worries about
the mind’s resistance to exchange value.

The difference between the two novels is an index of how far the profes-
sional class had come by 1865. By the time *Our Mutual Friend* appeared, the
professional class had so clearly differentiated itself from the capitalist class
that Matthew Arnold could write of “a professional class . . . with fine and
governing qualities” and “an immense business class . . . without governing
qualities” (qtd. in Reader 113). “By 1860,” wrote Reader, “the elements of
professional standing were tolerably clear” (71), and the structural contradic-
tion of the professional—simultaneously inside and outside the market—had
been papered over. *The Professor*, however, was part of an earlier moment. “In
the formative period, most of the markets for professional services had to be
created,” Magali Larson explains, “[and] common standards of what this
unique commodity—intangible services—meant . . . were lacking” (14). The
problem that faced this nascent class marketing intangible services was that it
had to write itself into being at least in part by representing itself in the idiom
of production. It had to make mental labor visible as productive labor.
However, this necessary step threatened to make the class simply another
working class rather than a new kind of middle class. To prevent this possi-
bility, the professional transformed “a service into an income-yielding prop-
erty” (Perkin 7), presenting his skills as a species of innate capital or embod-
ied property. Representing his services as simultaneously intellectual labor
and intellectual capital or property, the professional conferred upon himself
the merit of work and the prestige of ability, but he wrote himself as a kind
of contradiction in terms.
After an initial struggle, the novel’s professor finds—or creates—the right market for his talent. *The Professor* itself was not so lucky: publishers rejected it nine times during Brontë’s lifetime. Writing in 1851 to the publisher George Smith, Brontë joked:

> *The Professor’s* merits, I plainly perceive, will never be owned by anybody but Mr. Williams and me; very particular and unique must be our penetration, and I think highly of us both accordingly. You may allege that that merit is not visible to the naked eye. Granted; but the smaller the commodity the more inestimable its value. (Wise 3: 207)

Brontë slyly summed up the point of *The Professor*; that which appears to lack value because it is intangible (“not visible to the naked eye”) is in fact more valuable. The error lies not with the commodity but with the inadequacy of conventional standards of measurement.

Reversing her strategy, this time maximizing *The Professor’s* value not by paradoxically emphasizing its smallness but by granting it heft, Brontë wrote in another letter that *The Professor* “contains . . . more substance . . . than much of *Jane Eyre*, [because] it gives, I think, a new view of a grade, an occupation” (Wise 2: 161). What Brontë strove to make visible is a class that defies inherited categories of representation. She did so, first, by representing that class in terms of intellectual labor, as productive work rather than leisured play, and, second, by depicting professional expertise in terms of capital with capital’s appearance of effortlessness or what Fredric Jameson calls “profit without production” (*Cultural Turn* 136). The result is an unresolved tension between labor and capital that is symptomatic of the discourse of professionalism as a whole (both then and now). Under certain circumstances, this tension can be strategic (see chapter 3 on *David Copperfield*) but in the case of *The Professor* it seems to amount, when all is said and done, to rhetorical failure.

In what follows, I outline the ideological obstacles that faced Brontë—namely, an aesthetic principle of play that repressed intellectual labor and the reduction by political economists of labor to its simplest, manual form. On the one hand, Brontë predicated professional autonomy on a critique of aesthetic autonomy that reveals its hidden labor. Resolving the problem political economy poses, on the other hand, Brontë distinguished mental work from manual labor by drawing on a phrenological discourse in which intellectual ability is figured as a form of cerebral capital. The latter strategy, however, has the effect of undercutting the former; that is to say, the emphasis on innate capital intended to rescue professional labor from proletarianization
cuts against the emphasis on labor that drove Brontë’s critique of aesthetics. Designed to reach the same end—professional value—but by two necessarily different routes, one strategy waylays the other. In a final section, I argue that Brontë’s need to create a market for intellectual labor led her to produce a professional who inadvertently makes us reevaluate our own critical suspicion of “disinterest,” a suspicion implicit in those analyses that expose the professional’s attempts to disassociate himself from the market. By its very negation in her professional, we come to realize that the ideal of intellectual and aesthetic disinterest is not merely ideology, for in its desire for a realm outside the market logic of exchange it keeps alive our most humane desires.

I

To find a market for its protagonist’s skills, Brontë’s novel must counteract two forces conspiring to efface intellectual labor as labor: aesthetic’s principle of play and political economy’s definition of labor. In his account of what he calls the “separation at birth” of political economy and aesthetics, John Guillory offers two emblematic moments: Adam Smith’s inability to account for consumption when determining a commodity’s exchange value and Immanuel Kant’s attempt to distinguish art from the commodity by rewriting the labor of art as play. While in his earlier writings, Smith argued that the commodity’s beauty balanced production and consumption, beauty could not explain exchange value. Guillory writes, “[Commodities’] surplus of beauty over use failed to yield a formula for the determination of their price, their exchange value. In order to arrive at a quantum for the latter value, Smith and his contemporaries were forced to shift their analysis to the terrain of production, and thus to account for the exchange value of a commodity by reference to the quantum of labor it embodied” (Cultural Capital 314). Banished from political economy, the concept of beauty migrated to aesthetics where that banishment became one of its most salient characteristics. If labor (or, in Smith’s phrase, “the cost of production”) accounts for the commodity’s value, then the absence of labor defines aesthetic value. Opposed to work undertaken for compensation, Kant’s “purposiveness without purpose” is purposiveness in play. “The work of art,” Guillory explains, “never quite loses the stigma of the ‘compulsory,’ and can only efface that stigma and distinguish itself from the commodity if its production is ‘removed from all constraint, and . . . change[d] from . . . work into mere play’” (Cultural Capital 318). Once the scene of labor is removed, art most resembles the apparently effortless productions of nature.
The discrimination of beauty is annexed to aesthetics and along with it come other forms of discrimination not primarily aesthetic but intellectual. Discrimination, as Edmund Burke defined it, for example, is comprised of both differentiation, the ability to distinguish objects from each other on the basis of their features, and evaluation, the ranking of different objects according to some principle. Moral and aesthetic judgments become the province of the disinterested man of arts and letters whom Brontë called the man of “intellect and refinement”—a figure diametrically opposed to the man coarsened by trade. And, as with the work of art, the work of the discriminating intellect must be seen not as a form of work at all but as a form of play, free meditation rather than rationalized production. Honed by the Romantics, reappearing in Matthew Arnold as “disinterestedness” (246), and reaching its apotheosis in 1890s art for art’s sake and, on the intellectual side, in Thorstein Veblen’s prescriptive notion of “idle curiosity” (“The Place of Science in Modern Civilization”), this version of autonomy as possible only in the realm of non-utility was marshaled to distinguish certain forms of representation from the commodity throughout the nineteenth century.

Aesthetics might not have rendered intellectual pursuits “free play” in quite the way it did had political economy not modeled its concept of labor on factory labor—on, that is, direct, manual labor. Simple, objectified labor provided political economy with its needed universal equivalent. At the same moment, then, as political economy articulated its labor theory of value in such a way that only certain forms of labor qualified as labor, aesthetics predicated intellectual labor’s value on its not being viewed as labor. Intellectual labor was doubly barred from the market. But even as economists, including Marx, developed their labor theory of value by eliding the intellectual work of judgment and discrimination, a rapidly changing economy was rendering that theory obsolete. As Antonio Negri writes, “in the passage from manufacturing to large-scale industry . . . labor—as it became more highly qualified and complex, both individually and collectively—could not be reduced to simple, calculable quantities” (78). Intellectual labor, in short, had become a kind of oxymoron at just the moment it began to matter most.

II

In *The Professor*, Brontë proposed to write a novel in which, as she says in her preface, a “hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs—that he should never get a shilling he had not earned.” She then outfits that hero with precisely those qualities—“intellect and refinement”—
that resist quantification, making them literally invaluable (37). *The Professor* is the story of this man’s quest to turn these qualities into marketable property. His quest begins as a story about two brothers virtually separated at birth—William and Edward Crimsworth—a separation that reproduces, in fact, the separation at birth of political economy and aesthetics. Orphaned and separated after the second brother’s birth, the brothers have not seen each other in a decade when the novel opens. Each brother is aligned with one parent, possessing all the attributes that classed alignment suggests: the protagonist and narrator William has his aristocratic mother’s physical features, creative talents, and refined sensibility while Edward looks like his capitalist father and, by the time the narrative begins, has established himself as a shrewd entrepreneur. William’s repeated artistic metaphors and his references to his “love of an excellent or beautiful object, whether in animate or in inanimate nature” present him, at least at first, as a Romantic artist (39).

At the outset, then, the novel offers an unsurprising opposition between the businessman and the aristocratic artist (the aristocrat’s independence from the market reinforcing the artist’s repudiation of it), but it quickly complicates this predictable opposition. William rejects an aristocratic uncle’s offer to provide him with a livelihood, refusing the kind of familial obligation and dependence such an arrangement would suggest and determining instead to join his brother in trade. But just as art liberated itself from aristocratic patronage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries only to subject itself to the impersonal forces of the market, William realizes in retrospect that in refusing patronage to embrace commerce, he has exchanged one master for another: “I find that I was quite right to shake off the burden of patronage, but a fool to offer my shoulders instantly for the reception of another burden” (40).

Translating foreign business correspondence in the countinghouse of his brother’s mill, William finds that in the factory logic that organizes political economy, mental labor looks just like manual labor. “Ninety pounds a year are good wages, and I expect to have the full value of my money out of you,” his brother tells him (51). That value is achieved by conditions in which the creative work of translation comes to look like the mechanical act of copying, as William describes his day to himself: “Letter-copying till noon, solitary dinner at your lodgings, letter-copying till evening, solitude” (71). Degraded to the level of the factory hand, William “endured in silence the rust and cramp of [his] best faculties” (62). The aesthetic tradition deplored just this fragmentation of the human in the division of labor, arguing that only intellectual and artistic play in which one drew freely on all one’s faculties could restore man’s wholeness. In the modern factory, by contrast, play approaches
the zero degree, and labor becomes abstract labor in which only labor time has value. As E. P. Thompson explained, money is paid not for a finished product but for time “spent”: “Not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant” (359).

William reflects a version of this antinomy when he berates himself while pondering the industrial landscape: “You have chosen trade and you shall be a tradesman! . . . Look at the sooty smoke in that hollow, and know that there is your post! There you cannot dream, you cannot speculate and theorize—there you shall out and work!” (48). William opposes intellectual speculation and theory not to the particular work he performs in the countinghouse but to a general “work” (“you cannot speculate and theorize—there you shall out and work!”). They are the very opposite of work, forms of play denied him in a space ruled by clock time. “Eight o’clock strikes! your hands are thawed, get to work!” William tells himself (72). But this very manual form of mental labor—copying something into one’s “hand”—does not simply turn William into another factory laborer. Insofar as his work is derivative, it actually places him behind such workers. He merely facilitates distribution, a symbolically secondary component of industrial capitalism, while the laborers engage in production. Like Marx, for whom knowledge was either constant capital or stored labor but in either case nonproductive, Brontë depicts intellectual labor, at least under these conditions, as second to physical labor. Literally. Though he “sprang” from bed the minute the “factory bells rang,” and though he “hurried down the street,” William tells us, he nonetheless finds that “the factory workpeople had preceded [him] by nearly an hour, and the mill was all lighted up and in full operation” (70–71). In a world run strictly by the clock, William finds himself haunted by the fear that he is in some sense “behind time”: “I started up imagining that I had overslept myself and should be behind time at the counting-house” (88).

But if it is a foregone conclusion that William will leave this dehumanizing place for one in which he can indulge what he calls his “cherished in secret, Imagination,” the terms of his departure are nonetheless surprising (62). William’s release from the countinghouse is presented as a rejection of trade that is also not a rejection. He makes it clear that he would be unhappy if he stayed, but he makes it equally clear that he would not have left of his own accord. “I had got away from Bigden Close without any breach of resolution; without any injury to my self-respect,” William says after Edward fires him, wrongly believing that William has insulted him among the townspeople; “I had not forced circumstances; circumstances had freed me” (76). A worker who does not cancel a contract on a whim, whose “self-respect” depends on his behaving always “faithfully, punctually, diligently” (55) and

Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor*
on his always exhibiting “punctuality, industry, and accuracy” (63), is as far removed from the leisured aristocrat as can be. He is in fact a model employee. “I hate irregular and slovenly habits,” he reports (65). If William implicitly rejects trade, he does not reject the attributes trade requires. If he opposes intellectual speculation and theory to work, it is not for fear of work. He rejects trade, finally, because he fears wasted labor—labor that is less productive because it is simple. By turning translating into copying, the counting-house ignores the highly complex labor of which William’s phrenological “bumps” suggest he is capable. “What good can your bumps of ideality, comparison, self-esteem, conscientiousness, do you here?” a friend asks him (60). “Ideality” and “comparison” denote abilities of creativity and evaluation that are not being tapped, and while “self-esteem” and “conscientiousness” might make him a good employee, they cannot be turned to his own profit in the factory. Boiled down to pure labor, mental labor leaves its producer subservient to capital.

III

“It is no strange thing,” the journal *The School and the Teacher* claimed at mid-century, “that men who in education, tastes and habits have all the qualifications of ‘gentlemen’ should regard themselves as worthy of something very much higher than the treatment of a servant and the wages of a mechanic. What in short the teacher desires is that his ‘calling’ shall rank as a ‘profession’; that the name of ‘schoolmaster’ shall ring as grandly on the ear as that of ‘clergyman’ or ‘solicitor’” (qtd. in Altick 240n4). When William Crimsworth starts anew in Belgium, he begins what will be a long and illustrious career as a schoolmaster. Crimsworth’s career as an educator begins in a boys’ boarding school, moves to a girls’ school, and reaches its apex when he lands a university post while simultaneously opening and operating a school with his wife Frances.

William Crimsworth’s meteoric rise through the ranks of this protoprofession is another form of translation: the translation of faces and bodies into terms of inner worth. Throughout the novel, Crimsworth is uniquely able to decipher faces, which he correlates with the pages of a book (46). While William and Edward both, for example, can read French and German business correspondence, Edward cannot read a countenance: “He was trying to read my character,” the protagonist says as his brother watches him work, “but I felt as secure against his scrutiny as if I had on a casque with the visor down—or rather I showed him my countenance with the confidence that
one would show an unlearned man a letter written in Greek; he might see
lines, and trace characters, but he could make nothing of them” (53). The
younger Crimsworth owns a weapon his older brother must do without or,
rather, to follow William’s own self-correction in which he refines the vehicle
of his metaphor from that of the costume of a medieval knight (“casque with
visor”) to that of an internalized language (Greek), he possesses embodied
property his brother lacks. Edward’s capital equips him to run a mill, while
the protagonist’s bumps permit him to run the business of learning itself, to
oversee the classroom where his labor can now be productive, manufacturing
for his students “praise and blame in very small retail parcels” (163).

Unlike reading business correspondence, reading skulls would seem to be
an aesthetic practice, a practice in which one discriminates subtle differences
rather than distilling objects into their objectified exchange value. But the
logic of the factory persists as Brontë rewrites aesthetic play into labor so that
it can possess market value. Overseeing translation rather than performing it,
William Crimsworth schools his Belgian students in Latin and English, while
he himself uses phrenology to translate persons into commensurable values.
Consequently, although the romantic space of a girls’ school replaces the hard
space of the factory, the classroom in which Crimsworth ultimately finds his
calling nonetheless looks strikingly like the mill from which he has fled.

At the girls’ school, Crimsworth finds an unruly mob, “interrupt[ing him]
perpetually with little silly questions and uncalled-for remarks,” but by
quickly reading their characters and establishing a hierarchy among them, he
establishes order (115). “My first business this afternoon,” Crimsworth
relates, “consisted in reading the list of places for the month.” He provides a
student ranking, listing not the relative merits and faults of their papers but
the details of their heads (referred to in the novel as “organs”), ending at “the
bottom of the list” with that pupil whose “organs of benevolence, veneration,
conscientiousness, adhesiveness, were singularly small, those of self-esteem,
firmness, destructiveness, combativeness, preposterously large” (129). “As
much as in the factory interior,” Roger Cooter wrote, “the phrenology head
was an advertisement for a more automated reality in which character itself
reduced to digits on a graph” (112).” In the classroom, political economy was
reformulated as a pedagogical economy, but rather than being inserted with-
in the division of labor, the professor presided over it. “I felt in myself com-
plete power to manage my pupils,” Crimsworth says (117).

In the detailed accounts of lessons and the descriptions of his strict man-
agement of students, Crimsworth’s classroom takes shape as a Taylorist
utopia, a place Brontë described in the same vocabulary she used to describe
the mill—a place where “a wasteful expense of energy and labour” (160) must
be avoided and all “vacant moments must be turned to profitable account” (92). But even as Crimsworth pursues his “system,” rationalizing his educational efforts by reducing his students to the shapes of their skulls, the novel attempts to protect Crimsworth himself from the threat of universal equivalence (97). Crimsworth’s mental labor must be seen to be work so that it can be inserted into the market—and thus demand compensation—but it must at the same time be differentiated from manual labor by being depicted as work performed under his own auspices, autonomous rather than supervised labor.

One critical passage demonstrates Crimsworth’s professional autonomy. In doing so, it dissolves both the purity of aesthetic autonomy and the purity of the middle-class girl in order to disclose the labor embodied in what at first appear to be effortless productions of nature. In a discussion dedicated to convincing us of Crimsworth’s disinterested rather than prurient interest in his female students, allaying “any doubt” the “incredulous reader” might possess as to Crimsworth’s “conscientious self-denial and self-control,” Crimsworth says that “a master stands in a somewhat different relation towards a pretty light-headed . . . girl to that occupied by a partner at a ball, or a gallant on the promenade” (148). “To the tutor,” he continues, “female charms are like tapestry hangings of which the wrong side is continually turned towards him; and even when he sees the smooth, neat, external surface he so well knows what knots, long stitches, and jagged ends are behind that he has scarce temptation to admire too fondly the seemly forms and bright colors exposed to general view” (149). Adorno wrote that “it is impossible to conceive of the autonomy of art without covering up work” and it is just this covering up that The Professor prohibits (qtd. in Bürger 35). The underside of the beautiful tapestry betrays the cost of its production: in the long stitches, we see work’s long stretches; in the pressure of knots and the hurried jagged ends, we see material necessity. It is this side, the side of labor, that Crimsworth occupies. After all, his objectified labor is embodied in the finished girl his finishing school produces. Paradoxically, then, Crimsworth’s exposure of art’s labor and, thus, its lack of autonomy enables him to achieve the disinterested interest that characterizes professional autonomy. Restoring labor to aesthetics, the novel pulls intellectual labor into political economy and makes it value-able. But by depicting intellectual labor as artisanal rather than industrial, the passage means to reserve for that labor an autonomy not generally possible under industrial production.10

The Professor displaces economic desire onto sexual desire so that Crimsworth can illustrate his autonomy without ever disavowing or, for that matter, even dampening his economic appetites. By presenting Crimsworth
as outside the sexual or marriage market within which the “partner at a ball” and the “gallant on the promenade” circulate, the novel signals his professional autonomy without needing to define him against the commercial market it desires for him. This displacement facilitates the novel’s critique of the principle of aesthetic autonomy with its implicit conceptual reliance on nature. What appears effortless in the passage—the girl’s beauty—has in fact a history of effort behind it. The novel uncovers the hidden intellectual labor—the lessons in elocution, the cultivation of judgment and taste—so that its costs can be tallied, but while such an accounting enhances the value of the girl’s instructor, it necessarily subtracts from the girl’s. She no longer appears beautiful but rather duplicitous, hiding her rough underbelly from suitors. By exposing the labor of aesthetics, Brontë uncouples aristocratic independence from disinterest, and she also breaks the tie between disinterest and the middle-class angel. Defining her modern professional, Brontë simultaneously disables his two competitors in the market for disinterest.

Brontë’s insistence on labor where aesthetics once played makes concealed labor visible. As a result, beauty itself must be reevaluated. Describing one student, Crimsworth says:

Raven-black hair, very dark eyes, absolutely regular features . . . formed in her that assemblage of points whose union many persons regard as the perfection of beauty. How, with the tintless pallor of her skin and the classic straightness of her lineaments, she was able to look sensual, I don’t know. I think her lips and eyes contrived the affair, and the result left no uncertainty on the beholder’s mind. She was sensual now, and in ten years’ time she would be coarse—promise plain was written in her face of much future folly. (114–15)

Here it is not a past that is unearthed by the professional reader of faces but a future foretold. In either case, time is restored to what might otherwise appear to belong not to history but to timeless nature.

If the novel argues that beauty tries to distract our attention from time, then it makes sense that what first attracts our narrator’s attention to Frances, the student who becomes his wife, is her overt submission to time:

When I first cast my eyes on her, she sat looking fixedly down, her chin resting on her hand, and she did not change her attitude till I commenced the lesson. None of the Belgian girls would have retained one position, and that a reflective one, for the same length of time. (151)
Later in the novel, Crimsworth comments, “I knew she could retain a thinking attitude for a long time without change” (194). Such an ability suggests the self-discipline required by the modern economy, the ability to subordinate oneself to time rather than evade it. The other striking feature about this description of Frances is that we are given very few features at all: “I know well enough that I have left on your mind’s eye no distinct picture of her,” Crimsworth says, “I have not painted her complexion, nor her eyes, nor her hair, nor even drawn the outline of her shape” (152–53). Crimsworth’s withholding of details is not, he tells us, perversity but ignorance: “It is not my intention to communicate to you a knowledge I myself gained little by little” (152). Though he has read every face he encounters instantaneously, providing us with immediate and elaborate analyses, he claims to be incapable of reading this face at a glance. Instead, what we see as the tale continues is Frances at work.

As Crimsworth places Frances on a regimen of reading, translating, and writing (176), the novel’s representation of intellectual labor passes from his own work as professor to hers as pupil. The “benefits of [Crimsworth’s] system” (176) quickly become apparent:

Frances did not become pale or feeble in consequence of her sedentary employment; perhaps the stimulus it communicated to her mind counterbalanced the inaction it imposed on her body. She changed, indeed she changed obviously and rapidly; but it was for the better. (175)

Work that does not exercise the body—which, indeed, “impose[s]” “inaction” on the body—has material effects nonetheless: “A clearness of skin almost bloom, and a plumpness almost embonpoint, softened the decided lines of her feature. Her figure . . . became rounder” (175). In Crimsworth’s classroom, translation becomes not copying, not derivative imitation, but original production. After practicing translation, Frances begins “composition[s].” “Such occupation,” Crimsworth informs us, “seemed the very breath of her nostrils, and soon her improved productions wrung from me the avowal that those qualities in her that I had termed taste and fancy ought rather to have been denominated judgment and imagination” (174). Inspiration—“breath”—is tied to the body—“nostrils”—in a metaphorical formulation, the awkwardness of which might be seen as insisting that even in the realm of “judgment and imagination,” mental labor is also material. This sentence is noteworthy, however, primarily for another reason: it undermines labor even as it intends to reinforce it.

What Crimsworth “had termed taste and fancy” are not presented to us as
developing into “judgment and imagination” through steady practice but rather as “qualities” that exist in her which he had not yet properly appreciated. Generating a rhetorical effect found throughout Brontë’s prose, this sentence portrays Frances’s hard work not as producing something but as disclosing something—in this case, inherent aesthetic ability. Brontë works to restore labor to intellectual activity and yet the urgency with which she wishes to render this immaterial labor material leads her to repeatedly present that labor less as work after all and more as a form of property or capital. Similarly, Crimsworth later notices that Frances’s “mental power manifested [itself] gradually and steadily” (176). “Mental power” exists a priori; it is just more or less visible. He, to pluck another example from many, does not depict Frances as responding to circumstances in particular ways but rather Frances “display[s]” a faculty when “circumstances . . . forced it out of the depths where it burned latent” (262). Talent, ability, mental power, and capacity exist. They are only more or less visible—on display or latent.

Throughout the novel, the prose depicts activities that occur over time as qualities figured as objects or people. For example, Brontë does not simply show our hero behaving cautiously and tactfully but rather capitalizes “Caution” and “Tact” and refers to them as his “faculties” (63). Immaterial events that happen in time are understood in spatial, quasi-material terms: Crimsworth does not “think” but rather “thoughts occup[y] [his] mind” (90). One particularly dizzying passage describes Crimsworth’s love for Frances: she, we learn, is “my best object of sympathy on earth . . . my ideal of the shrine in which to seal my stores of love; personification of discretion and forethought, of diligence and perseverance, of self-denial and self-control—those guardians, those trusty keepers of the gift I longed to confer on her” (195–96). Frances moves from being an object, to an ideal, to a personification, and then is dropped from the prose as all that she personifies—discretion, forethought, diligence, and perseverance—is itself personified in the form of “guardians” and “trusty keepers.” The tangible—the person—becomes intangible—a set of qualities—and then the intangible is personified, rendered tangible. Throughout the novel, immaterial qualities take on a solidity of their own, as if the novel needs to distinguish attributes from the person who possesses them so that it may more readily assess their worth.

The rhetorical twists in which, in a sense, “verbs” become “nouns” is symptomatic, a measure of the novel’s desire to professionalize intellectual labor. Even Frances, at first exempted from phrenological assessment, gets “read” just like every other character, as the novel attempts to confer upon her the prestige of innate property. Assessing the “calibre of her capacity,” Crimsworth finds that the place where intelligence is located is highly
developed while the space indicating the animal instincts is underdeveloped: “The shape of her head was different [from the other students’]; the superior part more developed; the base considerably less so” (156, 151). The novel replaces aesthetic beauty with something we might call “embodied intelligence,” intelligence that is stored within, and at the same time manifested upon, the body. Thus, when we do finally hear Crimsworth call someone (Frances) beautiful, he declares it in the following, strange formulation: “The intelligence of her face seemed beauty to me” (201). Intelligence has become a property of the body (“of her face”) and, as such, can now be considered beautiful—just as, conversely, even those conventionally understood to boast “personal attractions” look instead disfigured when the expert’s eye notices upon them the “brand of mental inferiority” (149–50).

In the novel’s logic, what one does becomes rather what one is capable of doing as indicated by embodied properties. Crimsworth’s student ranking, for example, does not evaluate what each student has learned or failed to learn but rather what each student is capable of learning, her “aptitude for cultivation,” to borrow a phrase from Brontë’s letters about her own students (Wise 1: 199). Once transformed into innate property or capital, ability can then act as a prophylactic against proletarianization. The language of “aptitude,” “faculties,” or “organs” converts into an asset what would, as mental labor, be leechable into abstract time. Intellectual assets not only ostensibly protect intellectual labor from reduction to manual labor, they also render their owner superior to the industrial capitalist. “I kept the padlock of silence,” Crimsworth tells us about his conduct at the mill, “on mental wealth of which [Edward] was no sharer” (63). Crimsworth’s “mental wealth” is superior, the novel wants us to believe, to his brother’s more conventional kind, because whereas a capitalist can lose his money capital though bad business or bad luck, the professional cannot in the same sense lose mental capital: it is inseparable from its owner. While it can be abstracted from the professional (as ability, aptitude, or IQ, for instance), it cannot be separated from him. Learning at one point that Edward has lost everything, we are to understand William’s steady rise as intrinsic to his particular vocation, one that draws on a form of capital immune to the risks endemic to economic capital.

One might argue that this tendency to turn activities into measurable abilities and measurable abilities, in turn, into “wealth” simply reproduces at the sentence level the book’s larger plan wherein the labor of Crimsworth and Frances eventually earns them what Brontë calls in her preface “a small competency” but what is in the book enough capital for them to retire in comfort and ensure that their son receives an elite education. Brontë, then, simply lays bare the modus operandi of the professional who, to recall Perkin’s
words, “transform[s] a service into an income-yielding property” (7). Somehow, though, the effect here is not one of mutual reinforcement but of contradiction. The nominalizing tendency of Brontë’s prose in general, and of the language of phrenology in particular, radically undercuts the novel’s emphasis on the merit of labor. By showcasing the phrenological work of reading character, Brontë ironically privileges a form of intellectual labor that purports to determine the value of someone without needing to evaluate her labor. The professor’s students, for example, do not need to put pen to paper for him to know their worth: “In less than five minutes,” Crimsworth says after scanning the girls’ heads on the very first day of class, “[the students] had revealed to me their characters” (115). Representing work in the form of natural property (bumps, organs, faculties, gifts, and the like) visible to the expert’s eye, Brontë does the very thing she forbids of beauty in particular and aesthetics in general: she erases the time of labor. The mental labor she is at pains to depict disappears into mental properties that look like nothing more than the apparently effortless productions of nature.

Like the later IQ test, phrenology assumed that people differed from each other in their innate abilities, that these innate abilities were open to assessment by educational professionals, and that professional evaluations would then dictate the proper—or, more to the point, natural—stations for individuals in society. In place of class struggle, the professional claimed to substitute a hierarchy with a meritocracy structured around “the vertical career hierarchy rather than the horizontal connection of class” (Perkin, Rise 9) that was putatively the by-product not of power or money but of an unmediated nature. “The meritocratic illusion,” Daniel Cottom writes, “is the belief that one can isolate merit within a society by means of a neutral rationality and thus promote a society that stratifies itself according to the laws of nature” (16). The language that developed to underwrite the expert class, a language of “natural talents” and “intellectual gifts,” echoed Kant in his use of nature to underwrite art. In both cases, nature confers authority and prestige by obscuring material history.

The problem with The Professor, then, is not, as Neville Newman would have it, that intellectual labor is not real labor. Citing Brontë’s claim in her preface that “whatever small competency [her hero] might gain should be won by the sweat of his brow,” Newman says, “The sweat he expends [at a girls’ boarding school] is metaphorical at best” (11). The Professor pointedly refuses the assumption that immaterial labor does not count as real work, that metaphorical sweat cannot convey true effort. The problem is rather that an unresolved tension runs through the novel. As I’ve argued throughout, bringing intellect to the market in the first half of the nineteenth century
required representing it in terms of productive work rather than leisureed play, while ensuring that mental labor did not get reduced on that market to manual labor seemed to require that it be represented in terms of innate capital. Both forms of representation enabled Brontë to illuminate what was previously invisible—the one by uncovering hidden labor, the other by materializing the immaterial—but the latter representation (innate capital) effectively undoes the time necessary for the former (labor). Reifying intellectual capacity as timeless, natural property that is simply more or less visible, Brontë ironically ends up reinforcing a simplistic definition of labor. Labor becomes, finally, simply pure labor—empty time that does not produce anything although it might disclose something. In short, Brontë markets her professional by providing two definitions, one of which threatens to cancel the other.

Crimsworth’s “mental wealth” (63) becomes actual wealth as he and his wife accrue “capital to invest” (280) and “realize an independency” (280). The expectations Brontë raised in the preface do, then, make the ending of the novel come as something of a surprise. That the “small competency” has accumulated from teaching rather than physical labor is not surprising but that it is not teaching alone that earns Crimsworth his independence is unexpected. It is earned rather by an uneasy combination of teaching and investing. In one brief paragraph, we learn that the idyllic pastoral life to which the Crimsworths retire owes itself as much to economic capital as to mental capital and labor:

Behold us now at the close of the ten years, and we have realized an independency. The rapidity with which we attained this end had its origin in three reasons:—Firstly, we worked so hard for it; secondly, we had no incumbrances to delay success; thirdly, as soon as we had capital to invest, two well-skilled counselors, one in Belgium, one in England . . . gave us a word each of advice as to the sort of investment to be chosen. The suggestion made was judicious, and being promptly acted on, the result proved gainful; I communicated details to [the counselors]; nobody else can be interested in hearing them. (280)

The risky market in which Edward places William’s capital appears to be secure enough when mediated by experts (“well-skilled counselors”) whose “judicious” tips are followed by a professional who appreciates the value of time and “promptly act[s].” Representing investment in the market as if William were still somehow talking about professional labor does not allow Brontë to get through the passage smoothly, however. Instead, she has
Crimsworth blame the reader for the fact that she herself preferred not to elaborate: “nobody else can be interested.” Still she chose this recipe for independence, as if at the last moment she wished to write away the dilemma that disfigured her text, as if representing labor combining with capital as unremarkable would make readers less likely to remark on the uneasy combination of mental labor and mental capital that constitutes her own professional.

IV

“Because political economy and aesthetics were once part of the same discourse,” Mary Poovey writes, “and because their separation was never complete, each discourse continued to haunt the other in the form of vestigial traces” (“Aesthetics” 82). If in many nineteenth-century texts the terms of political economy and aesthetics “haunt” each other, then in The Professor the latter is collapsed into the former as the practices of aesthetics are written into market language and social, extra-economic relations depicted in economic terms. Marx argued that feudal relations were social relations first and economic relations second while capitalism reversed that priority so that the laborer mistakenly imagines himself to be voluntarily exchanging his labor-power. In Brontë’s novel, however, it is as if everything involving William, particularly social relations, has been filtered through the logic of market equivalence so the reader might understand his every judgment to be perfectly free and autonomous, made under no emotional obligation or affective influence, no compromise of his professional independence. To take one example, interactions among family members are described as “transaction[s]” in which “mental power” possesses the capacity to “extort” others (176). When a friend offers to help him, to take another example, Crimsworth replies with no hint of irony or whimsy, “I am in your debt already; you did me an important service when I was at X . . . that service I have never repaid, and at present I decline positively adding another item to the account” (227–28). It seems that services, even between friends, require payment if one is not to be compromised. Crimsworth’s eccentricity has a logic that makes sense only when the professional is under particular duress to establish the value of his services. In order to avoid any appearance of impropriety, in order to appear perfectly impartial, the professional must refuse any gifts—those items that are offered as if outside the logic of exchange but which might demand, nonetheless, a return. Far from being procured, then, by distance or removal from the market, Crimsworth’s professional independence is achieved only through the most thoroughgoing adoption of market logic.13
In the example above, Crimsworth is careful to refuse what might be perceived as “the interests in disinterestedness,” to borrow Martha Woodmansee’s phrase (11). Embracing market discourse ironically protects him from any self-interested motives that might accompany allegedly disinterested aid. Crimsworth’s suspicion of disinterest is not unlike the implicit suspicion evinced in critical arguments that illustrate how the professional or the artist rhetorically enacts his distance from the market. In such arguments, distance from the market becomes a kind of credit that then ensures the value of the professional or artist. Woodmansee’s important _The Author, Art, and the Market_, for example, argues that the “momentous shift from an instrumentalist theory of art to the modern theory of art as an autonomous object that is to be contemplated disinterestedly” was a reaction to a fast-growing bourgeois market for literature (32). As certain poets and writers found themselves neglected by this new public, they developed a theory that could rescue aesthetic value from market determination. (See chapter 4 for a more extensive discussion of Woodmansee’s book.) The articulation of aesthetic disinterest was itself, then, far from disinterested. Woodmansee’s analysis is persuasive and, as a kind of elaboration upon Raymond Williams’s observation that aesthetic ideology contained “elements of compensation,” it is extremely useful (36). However, it neglects the other side of aesthetic ideology, a side Williams was quick to acknowledge: its expression of, as he wrote, “certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying” (36). And yet, though right to acknowledge the progressive side of aesthetic ideology, Williams slightly misstates the case. It is not that aesthetics preserved older values but rather that aesthetics, born in the same moment as, and in opposition to, political economy, offers an alternative system of value. With aesthetics, Peter Bürger writes, “a new way of perceiving that is immune to the means-ends rationality comes into existence” (41). That aesthetics produced this new mode by repressing labor indicates that its alternative system is one side of a coin whose other side is political economy.

Once its professional’s economic interests are secured, _The Professor_ does finally return to the issue of aesthetic disinterest. In a scene that might be considered the late counterpart to that early scene in which a friend teases Crimsworth, “Carry your intellect and refinement to the market and tell me in a private note what price is bid for them,” the same friend (Hunsden) asks Frances about the value of “poetical associations”:

“Mademoiselle, what is an association? I never saw one. What is its length, breadth, weight, value—aye, value? What price will it bring in the market?”
“Your portrait, to anyone who loved you, would, for the sake of asso-
ciation, be without price.”

That inscrutable Hunsden heard this remark and felt it rather acute-
ly, too, somewhere; for he coloured—a thing not unusual for him, when
hit unawares on a tender point. (261)

Art’s refusal of exchange value (“without price”) is recovered here, but it is,
significantly, by way of Frances not Crimsworth, who places himself clearly
outside the discussion, not participating in it but calmly commenting upon
it. Frances, it is true, has by this point in the novel become a kind of proxy
for Crimsworth. Or, perhaps more accurately, Frances picks up where
Crimsworth leaves off as the novel transfers its energy from the one to the
other. It is Frances whom we follow in the novel’s final chapter as she moves
through her school, displaying her “superior mind” for her students’ benefit
(274). Having given the professional proximity to the market, it is as if
Brontë then wished to give him distance, and realized that the fulfillment of
that wish required beginning a new story with a protagonist who has not so
thoroughly internalized market logic.

If the novel is a failure, as so many critics and readers have charged, then
it is not because Brontë was unable effectively to use a male narrator. Nor is
it because Brontë’s “proper gifts were consciously denied full play in [the
novel],” as one critic notes, relying on both the language of intellectual prop-
erty Brontë helped popularize as well as the aesthetic vocabulary of “play” she
tried to pull from circulation (Ward 102). The Professor fails because the
novel’s apparent success at producing a marketable professional leaves its
readers and even perhaps itself deeply dissatisfied, desiring a story quite dif-
ferent from the one that just unfolded. It is not only that the capital-and-
labor theory of value underwriting her prosperous professional is conflicted
at best and self-imploding at worst, but that the novel produces a professional
so market-oriented that it seems, by negation, to trigger a longing for anoth-
er professional, one more disposed to subordinate the market to higher con-
cerns, one for whom service is not first and foremost transformable into an
income-yielding property but is rather service for others without regard for
self. At its most effective, the professional class convinces us that it is “a class
which is necessarily not-for-itself” but for others (Frow 127). This rhetoric of
service is, of course, self-serving insofar as it furnishes the professional class
with moral authority, cultural prestige, and material income, but it is also an
ideal worth preserving, particularly in an era of widespread deprofessional-
ization. It is an ideal that insists that market logic is not the only logic, an
insistence first expressed in the notion of aesthetic disinterest and one that,
as Herbert Marcuse once wrote, “keeps alive the best desires of men amidst a bad reality” (102).

I do not want to conclude this chapter, however, by flourishing the ideal of disinterestedness. To do so would be to freeze the dialectic between the regressive and progressive sides of aesthetic ideology, merely championing one side over the other. Today, as humanities professors are increasingly called upon to justify what we do in market terms, we are especially likely to find Brontë’s market-oriented protagonist repugnant. But a better response than repugnance with its accompanying retreat to the progressive side of the aesthetic ideal is to ask whether this narrative of professorial professionalization offers any clues to our crisis of professorial deprofessionalization, a crisis best documented by colleges and universities’ growing reliance on adjunct labor. The Professor suggests that professional labor challenged aesthetics in order to insert itself into the market but that it did so at an enormous cost—the cost of condemning itself to a never-ending struggle to distinguish itself from virtually every other form of labor under capital. The novel distinguishes professional labor by depicting mental labor as a form of capital—mental capital—which authorizes the professional’s status as manager rather than managed. In this way, though, the novel implicates itself in what Adorno called the “age-old culpability that lies in the divorce of physical from mental labour” (323), erroneously imagining that such a divorce protects mental labor from proletarianization. But mental labor is never immune to the danger of being modeled upon routinized physical labor and, thus, subordinated to capital. This is what Crimsworth finds when he works for his brother and what scores of humanities PhDs find today when they look for tenure-track jobs only to find a system increasingly designed to pay them by the course. The Professor prompts us to ask: Is there a way to fight for intellectual autonomy that foregrounds rather than represses mental labor’s similarities to other forms of labor?