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Chapter Three

The Professional Paradox:

Competitive Examinations and
Anthony Trollope’s The Three Clerks

“Calling before us some of the illustrious of the former days, [let us] ask them what they think of us and our doings? Of our astounding progress of intellect? Our march of mind? Our higher tone of morality? Our vast diffusion of education? Our art of choosing the most unfit man by competitive examination?”

—Mr. Gryll, Gryll Grange (1861)

“If honest men did not squabble for money, in this wicked world of ours, the dishonest men would get it all; and I do not see that the cause of virtue would be much improved.”

—Archdeacon Grantly, Barchester Towers (1857)

In the previous two chapters, I discussed how Brontë and Dickens professionalized their protagonists without requiring them to deny the market of economic exchange. In The Professor (1847), William Crimsworth demonstrates his professional objectivity by eschewing the market of sexual exchange, and in David Copperfield (1849–50), Copperfield proves his professionalism by occupying the objective time of manual labor rather than the accelerated time of speculation. Seven years later, when Anthony Trollope went to professionalize his protagonist in The Three Clerks (1857), the paradox of the professional—that he must appear indifferent to the market upon which he necessarily relied—had begun to take shape in the Victorian cultural imagination. “Authors are taught that they should disregard payment for their work, and be content to devote their unbought brains to the welfare of the public,” reads an infamous passage of Trollope’s Autobiography; “Brains
that are unbought will never serve the public much” (107). Trollope was, and occasionally still is, reviled for comments like this, but his scandalous remarks were not simple provocations. They made up a career-long struggle with the double bind at the heart of professional identity, and _The Three Clerks_ was one of his most important attempts to disable that bind. The novel first exposes the professional paradox and then attempts to reverse it by arguing that only when the professional admits self-interest can his judgment be trusted.

I begin this chapter by revisiting the competitive examination. In the last chapter, I explained how mid-nineteenth-century exam culture represented intelligence as a kind of mental capital. Dickens could hold at bay the disturbing implications of this form of capital only by reintroducing the factory: by drawing on his mental capital in factory time, the professional holds on to intelligence’s honest objectivity. Here, I consider the debate over competitive examinations at greater length, because it provided Trollope with the context for his intervention in the developing discourse of professionalism. The first third of _The Three Clerks_ is organized around a competitive examination, and in this portion of the novel, Trollope illuminates the contradiction underwriting professional identity and simultaneously disqualifies two of his three clerks from the tacit contest over which clerk gets to close the novel as its lone professional. The plot of the remaining third clerk illustrates Trollope’s “theory” that self-interest is the prerequisite to disinterest rather than its seedy and denied underside. In conclusion, I show how Trollope’s understanding of professional labor in _The Three Clerks_ implicitly addresses the conditions of the novel’s own production.

**Professionalizing the Civil Service:**
**The Debate over the Northcote-Trevelyan Proposal**

“The professionalization of government,” Perkin writes, “was the greatest political achievement of nineteenth-century Britain” (*Origins of Modern English Society* 270). Perkin locates this achievement in the “great social and administrative reforms”—more specifically, the Reform Acts, which extended the franchise and Civil Service reforms beginning in 1854 and culminated in 1870 in the implementation of open competitive examinations for all Civil Service positions. While the former, social reform, has received extensive treatment by a number of disciplines, the story of administrative reform is relatively unknown outside the circles of governmental history. Yet the changes experienced by the Civil Service in the mid-Victorian period are
what ultimately enabled a professional ideology to differentiate itself from a market one, a development that, in turn, made possible the rise of the welfare state. “It was chiefly in the civil servants . . . that the professional ideal began to diverge from the entrepreneurial,” Perkin writes (Origins of Modern English Society 428). While the latter ideal “was satisfied by the minimal, regulatory, decentralized laissez-faire State of Victorian theory,” it was the professional ideal that would “press on towards the expanding, centralized, interventionist State of Victorian practice” (321).

I have argued elsewhere that Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities (1859), published only two years after The Three Clerks, is the text which best etches the requirement that the professional disavow self-interest onto the cultural imagination (Ruth, “Self-Sacrificing Professional”). Sydney Carton proves his disinterest—and reforms himself and his profession—only by refusing, in the starkest of possible terms, to profit from his services. Watching the debate over the competitive exam unfold in parliament and various periodicals, it is as if we see this principle of professionalism in the act of forming. In arguing over whether competitive examinations would identify the right or wrong man, pundits simultaneously brought the professional into being by giving him a unique and, in a sense, impossible position in the socioeconomic order.

The story of the competitive examination begins with the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854—the paper Noel Annan called the intellectual aristocracy’s “Bill of Rights” (247). It proposed replacing a patronage-driven system of recruiting young men into service with a system of selection and promotion through open competitive examination. Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan wrote:

> It would be natural to expect that so important a profession would attract into its ranks the ablest and most ambitious of the youth of the country. . . . Such, however, is by no means the case. Admission into the Civil Service is indeed eagerly sought after, but it is for the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable, that it is chiefly desired. Those whose abilities do not warrant an expectation that they will succeed in the open professions, where they must encounter the competition of their contemporaries, and those whom indolence of temperament or physical infirmities unfit for active exertions, are placed in the Civil Service, where they may obtain an honourable livelihood with little labour, and with no risk. (Parliamentary Papers 4)

Open competitive examinations would stock the service, they claimed, with intelligent, capable men. Setting the terms with which Victorians would
perceive the new knowledge class that increasingly managed them, the debate triggered by the proposal facilitated “the growing domination in the governors and administrators themselves of the entrepreneurial by the professional ideal” (Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* 325). Over the course of the debate, a dialectic emerged: through the criticism of patronage and corruption from the vantage-point of the entrepreneurial ideal, and then through the criticism of the market ideal from the more service-oriented standpoint of the gentlemanly ideal, a new professional ideal came into being.

The debate raged inside parliament and outside in the pages of such journals as *Cornhill Magazine* and *Fortnightly Review*. Even Queen Victoria weighed in, at least in her private letters. On February 7, 1854, she wrote Prime Minister Gladstone to confess “considerable misgivings” (27). The Queen worried that the exam would draw a lower class of servant without the “moral character” possessed by those admitted under the patronage system (27). Her concern was echoed by many of the periodical writers. “The object [of the reform] in point of fact,” one *Quarterly Review* author said, as if exposing a conspiracy, “is to turn the 16,000 places in the civil service of this empire into so many places and exhibitions for poor scholars” (qtd. in Mueller 195). If there was a conspiracy, it was precisely the opposite of the one imagined here. The exam may have given the appearance that the Civil Service was throwing the doors open to an intellectually entrepreneurial contingent of the lower bourgeoisie, but it was actually designed to favor those who studied at Oxford and Cambridge. In fact, it is a bit of an oversimplification, but one that allows us to understand better the simultaneous problem and opportunity the exam posed, to say that the proposal’s opponents and proponents alike wanted much the same thing—to redeem the increasingly discredited Civil Service and develop for it an aura of modern professionalism. They fundamentally disagreed, however, about the exam’s ability to deliver this.

Reformers wanted the exam to make intellectual labor visible as a kind of mental capital so that it could be objectively assessed, but critics claimed, in doing so, the exam risked devaluing the very thing whose value it was trying to determine. Opponents quickly put proponents on the defensive by setting up an opposition that proved irresistible. They opposed the disinterested, thoughtful man who would refuse to treat knowledge like a commodity by sitting for an exam but who would make, nonetheless, the most worthy civil servant to the “crammer,” a hack who treats knowledge and his own brains like commodities and who, cramming for the exam, might win the competition but would surely fail as a state servant. An 1861 *Cornhill* essay com-
plained of this “second-rate” man who profits from cramming: “Any definite test, measurable by marks, will be satisfied by a man of this kind infinitely better than by a man who really thinks about what is told him, and even about some things which are not told him. . . . In short, a useful hack is better to drive than a thoroughbred horse” (697–98). Within a few lines, however, the hack indiscriminately laboring converts into the crammer indiscriminately consuming: the candidate, we learn, “swallows pêle-mêle [a] heterogeneous mass of theories and extracts” (698).

Another *Cornhill* essay took this rhetorical tactic a step further, leaving the inferior but successful exam-taker outside both mechanical production and mindless consumption, an emblem of the pure act of exchange:

A man who beats everyone else hopelessly in examinations has almost always the same set of qualities. He goes quietly through the routine prescribed to him without turning to the right hand or the left, or allowing his attention to be diverted to any collateral subject whatever. Any definite piece of knowledge can be put in his head as neatly as if it were a bandbox, and he can always reproduce it in as perfect a state as a lady’s bonnet when it comes out of the bandbox. (697)

We have first an image of rational labor—the student single-mindedly going about his routine—the routine, though, is not of his making but has been “prescribed to him.” He is more like a machine than a person, a member of what another article called the “race of mechanically driven examinees” (846). But, as soon as the image of mechanical production appears, it is canceled by one of feminine consumption: the candidate as a hatbox. In either case, he is not an agent: the “definite piece of knowledge” is “put in his head” and although he is briefly attributed agency, it is to reproduce not to produce and even then it is immediately taken away again—the knowledge simply “comes out of the bandbox.” Whereas Northcote and Trevelyan attempted to gain support for their proposal by rhetorically opposing the servant’s idle consumption—he is the “fool of the family” feeding off the state, in Trevelyan’s opinion (qtd. in Hughes 72)—to his efficient production through open competition, critics depicted the exam as soliciting a form of mechanical labor that would return the Service to the realm of frivolous consumption. “Civil Service Examinations,” sneered the *Financial Reformer*, “are the prettiest things of this kind that we have seen for some time” (qtd. in Mueller 119).

“The school system,” Bourdieu wrote, “present[ed] the ‘moment of truth’ of the examination as its own objective reality” (*Reproduction in Education* 159). The exam is a highly unstable signifier of objectivity, however, because
its condensation of time into one moment seemingly vulnerable to “the evils of cramming” (Sayce 697) makes it prey to charges that it is an unreliable instrument at best and one that corrupts what it claims to measure at worst. A distance must be traveled and time must pass for cultural capital to convert into economic capital. Seeming to collapse this distance in its immediacy, the exam commodifies what it aims to consecrate, buying the man who, retroactively, becomes the kind of man who can be bought. As Bourdieu speculated of the professional’s cultural capital, “How can this capital so closely linked to the person be bought without buying the person and so losing the very effect of legitimation which presupposes the dissimulation of dependence?” (“Forms of Capital” 248)

In contrast to the crammer, critics posed the “disinterested student” who “occup[ies] his leisure with other subjects than those required by the examination-statute, and follow[s] up some bent of [his] own” (Sayce 836). Disinterest is, in a sense, made possible only through leisure—“the free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches,” as Matthew Arnold would write a few years later (1057). Unlike the consumption of the crammer, this is a good form of consumption that enables, in turn, real production, real learning. But it is production and consumption that resemble neither because the two take place simultaneously, foregoing the moment of exchange. The good student’s intellectual labor is figured as work that is not really work: it is a kind of occupation—learning occupies his leisure—but one structurally removed from production destined for the market—learning occupies his leisure.

In representing the work of the intellect as simultaneous work and play, production and consumption, opponents implicitly drew on the aesthetic tradition. To distinguish the artwork from the commodity, Kant removed artistic labor from the appearance of material necessity by changing it into play. And just as Kant found himself relying on nature to represent this seemingly impossible entity, the thing produced without labor, so too critics of the exam analogized intellectual labor to nature. “The more important qualities,” wrote one opponent, “are in their very nature incapable of being brought to a definite test. It would be absurd to try to express in marks the difference between a good judge and a bad one, as to try to measure a mountain with a two-foot rule” (Anonymous 707). Constructing an analogy that demanded intellectual labor be represented as a visible object, something placing it in the realm of the potentially commodifiable, the writer avoided this possibility by retreating from the man-made world into the sublime. The same reasoning that moved Kant to ground aesthetic value in nature operated to underwrite intellectual value here. Because “[natural] beauty never passes
through the market, and can never be assigned a value in exchange,” it could appear to ground an extra-economic model of value (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 319).

Like opponents, supporters of the proposal also assumed that “the quality of the mind” is something entirely different from “the quantity of the stores with which it [is] furnished” (Morison 538), but they claimed the exam would not reward those who crammed for it but rather those in whom it detected something preexistent, something independent of the exam itself. Through examinations, Northcote and Trevelyan wrote, “the superiority of the best would become evident” (14). Intelligence, a passive object that “become[s] evident” through outside evaluation, seems to cancel labor. It is not enacted or even experienced by the person so much as harbored within him—possessed. If conducted correctly, one writer opined, the exam “place[s] the [examinee] on a standard table in such a position that if it were possible from a physical examination of his brain to judge of his brain capacity, the results of the two methods would coincide” (“Competitive Examinations” 417). The proponents defended the exam, then, by creating a figurative candidate who could hardly be accused of self-interested cramming, because he is bypassed as his capacity is illuminated like an x-rayed bone. By 1875, such a distinction between innate capacity and mere learning would apparently acquire enough cultural purchase that *Fortnightly Review* deemed it necessary to devote an entire article to challenging the “antithesis between genius and learning, as if the one almost necessarily excluded the other” (Morison 538).

It might be argued, though, that the exam’s champions resurrected the problem when they thought they were laying it to rest. That is, in depicting the examination candidate as a disinterested spectator in order to repel the charge of craven cramming, defenders of the exam reified the candidate’s capacities, characterizing them as if they were discrete and external to the candidate himself. “The problems of consciousness arising from wage-labour were repeated in the ruling class,” Lukács wrote in *History and Class Consciousness*; “The specialized ‘virtuoso,’ the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties, does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties” (100). When the “workings” of one’s mind become “objectified” in the form of “faculties,” one becomes a “vendor,” and thus, presumably, not fundamentally different from the laborer selling labor-power. The problem for mental capital, then, is that what is the primary mechanism to attribute and restrict it—the exam—also potentially denatures it. Regulating the professional monopoly of intelligence, the exam places
intelligence within a grid of equivalencies, assigning it an exchange value. At the moment of its convertibility into a relative value, the threat arises that such property will not turn into a kind of capital but will commodify its owner.

The professional class is a class whose intelligence ideally resembles capital more than it does labor but whose extra-economic rationale disallows its easy assimilation into the capitalist class. “Cultural capital,” John Guillory writes, “is certainly a species of symbolic capital generally, but it is a form of symbolic capital certifiable by objective mechanisms” (“Bourdieu’s Refusal” 15). The professional’s cultural capital accrues through examination or other forms of external recognition, but it is a form of symbolic capital, and symbolic capital cannot accrue unless it refuses any externally derived recognition (money, awards, etc.). The professional paradox derives from the professional’s reliance on a form of capital that must be simultaneously visible (objective) and invisible (subjective), valuable and invaluable. It must be visible not in the form of labor but rather in the form of quantified property so that it may freely circulate on the market and so that, in the case of the Civil Service, it may provide an ostensibly objective counterpoint to patronage. Yet at the same time, to avoid the degradation of commodification, it must be invisible—defined negatively rather than positively, by its resistance to measurement and its distance from the market. The debate outlined the contradiction that sustains the professional class even as it renders professional identity particularly precarious—the contradiction of a class functionally inside but symbolically outside the market.

Perhaps nothing demonstrated Trollope’s desire to inhabit the identity of the professional seamlessly more than his speech at a Royal Literary Fund function in 1861. “I have risen on behalf of Writers of Fiction to thank you for the honour which you have done them in drinking their health, and in drinking this toast to them as a distinct and established branch of a distinct and established profession,” he said, adding in the next sentence, “I cannot sit down without professing my belief that the branch of the profession of literature is distinct, and is established, and is useful and is ornamental”; and, then, only a few sentences later: “I say that branch of the profession to which I belong is a useful as well as an ornamental branch” (qtd. in Super 320). It is as if saying it could make it so. Yet, however much Trollope wished to belong to a profession and to identify as a professional, he could never reconcile himself to the constitutive contradiction of professional identity, the contradiction that called upon him to disavow the one thing he perhaps coveted even more than a professional persona—a thriving market for his “services.”
**The Three Clerks: Sociology in Disguise**

As Pierre Bourdieu has argued of *Sentimental Education* (1869), *The Three Clerks* can be read as sociology-in-disguise, so accurate is its illustration of social reproduction. Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* isolates a group of students and unfolds the trajectory each takes as he transitions to adulthood and becomes a relative success or failure in life. From a position of apparent equality, these characters are launched, Bourdieu says, “like particles into a force-field” and “the dispositions, that is to say, the ensemble of incorporated properties, including elegance, facility of expression or even beauty, and capital in its diverse forms—economic, cultural, social—constitute the trumps which will dictate both the manner of playing and success in the game” (*Rules of Art* 10). The main character Frederic has all the trumps he needs but in fatally equivalent portions. He is not determined in one career path or another by his set of embodied and economic capital but rather is balanced between the disinterested world of art and the acquisitive world of politics and business. Waffling between the two, he is destined to fail in both—a poster-child for what Bourdieu calls “determined indeterminacy” (*Rules of Art* 4). *The Three Clerks* also launches its characters from a position of virtual equality. Harry, Alaric, and Charley have all begun careers in the Civil Service and all socialize with the same family, a clergyman’s widow and her three daughters. The tale follows these three men as they graduate to adulthood, each establishing, or failing to establish, a vocation and each courting and then marrying one of the daughters (Gertrude, Linda, or Katie).

Flaubert created a novel that manages to illustrate the determination of indeterminacy while recapitulating this indeterminacy—a kind of neutrality among, or equidistance from, established positions—at the level of the sentence, exuding aesthetic disinterest. According to Bourdieu, by occupying “that neutral place where one can soar above groups and their conflicts” (*Rules of Art* 26), Flaubert mapped the logic of symbolic capital. To explain briefly, for Bourdieu, a general economy of practices extends from the economic field at one end to the field of cultural production at the other. Those figures with primarily economic capital, like industrial or finance-capitalists, cluster at one end while those relying largely on what Bourdieu calls cultural and symbolic capital, like the professional and a step further, the artist, occupy the other. These latter must do what they do without regard for the market (“Field of Cultural Production” 321). The professional must repress his own interests in his attendance on others while the artist must subordinate personal desires in his commitment to art for art’s sake. “‘Symbolic capital’ is to be understood,” he writes, “as economic or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognized,
and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which is, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, capable of assuring ‘economic profits’” (Rules of Art 142). The field of cultural production reproduces this dynamic within itself by commercial art that satisfies extrinsic expectations and garners immediate profit, on one end, and avant-garde art that strives to satisfy only the intrinsic demands of the art itself and collects its profit either not at all or only after considerable delay, on the other.

However similar their sociological experiments, Sentimental Education and The Three Clerks occupy opposite ends of the field of cultural production. Whereas Flaubert’s avant-garde Sentimental Education everywhere implies that the only readers qualified to judge it are Flaubert’s own peers, if not Flaubert alone—that, in Bourdieu’s terms, the novel belongs to the field of restricted production—Trollope’s resolutely bourgeois The Three Clerks targets a larger readership, taking up a position in the field of general production. While Flaubert flaunted his refusal to cater to the market requirements of a realist novel, thereby enacting the modern principle of aesthetic autonomy by his formal exactitude, Trollope flaunted his submission to preexisting expectations, thereby creating an ironic distance of his own. This difference in form between the two novels finds its reflection in the kind of sociology each might be said to practice. Flaubert’s dissection of mid-century France makes any participation in its culture appear invariably contaminated and contemptible, while Trollope’s novels seem to forgive their characters’ inevitable complicity, suggesting that there is more potential for virtue in doing as others do around you than there is in high-minded abstention.

Bourdieu, the son of a postman, and Trollope, a postman himself, pay particular attention to spatial coordinates—where individuals originate and where they end up. Indeed, the very first paragraphs of The Three Clerks consist of a fairly elaborate mapping of the social geography of the Civil Service. Trollope details the location, facades, and relative prestige of various offices, beginning with what is “popularly called the Weights and Measures” (8). This “well-conducted” office with its “handsome edifice” is clearly the most important branch of the service. “All material intercourse between man and man must be regulated, either justly or unjustly, by weights and measures,” Trollope explains, “and as we of all people depend most on such material intercourse, our weights and measures should to us be a source of never-ending concern” (8). Trollope grows facetious as he continues—“And then the question of the decimal coinage! is it not in these days of paramount importance?”—but that does not change the fact that this one sentence in the novel’s third paragraph establishes the logic that will govern the text as a whole. Having arranged a set of equivalents—three young men all starting
careers in the same field and wooing sisters—the novel will proceed to differentiate them, explaining how various “weights and measures” determine whether they succeed or fail.

Harry Norman and Alaric Tudor are clerks in the Office of Weights and Measures. Issuing from a landed family, Harry Norman has all the obvious advantages—money, manners, looks, intelligence, a proper education, access to society—but he lacks the will to succeed (his “fault,” according to the narrator, is that he is “somewhat shy and reserved . . . among men” [5]). The son of a deceased, bankrupted cavalry officer, Alaric Tudor has no economic capital, dubious cultural capital (“his education had been very miscellaneous”[7]), but boasts a hypertrophied will to succeed (“He was ambitious; and lived with the steady aim of making the most of such advantages as fate and fortune had put in his way” [7]). Alaric’s cousin Charley Tudor clerks in the Office of Internal Navigation, a lowly and soon-to-be-obsolete office. The son of a clergyman, Charley has no economic capital, a little cultural capital, and a moderate will to succeed. He is the third term placed between Harry’s disinterest and Alaric’s overweening ambition. Not so different from Flaubert’s Frederic, Charley has a little bit of everything but not a lot of anything. He is not clearly determined in one direction or another but rather is “easily malleable, . . . tak[ing] at once the full impression of the stamp to which he [i]s subjected” (55). But where Frederic’s blankness, the relative openness of his undetermined trajectory, is his downfall, Charley’s malleability is his trump card. According to Trollope, only by doing as others do—internalizing their protocols and norms, accepting their weights and measures—will one succeed.

The critical turning point in the plot takes the form of a competitive examination between Harry and Alaric. Presided over by examination-mad Mr. Hardlines (based on Sir Charles Trevelyen), Weights and Measures conducts a competitive examination for an important promotion. At first, it appears that Harry and Alaric each embody one side of the opposition sketched by the anti-exam pundits. We have a “free, generous intelligence” (*Parliamentary Papers* 19) set against a mind that acquires knowledge “for what it will fetch” (Sayce 836). “True” Harry withdraws from the competition, and “schem[ing]” Alaric emerges the victor (5, 19). We are not to be surprised by this outcome, considering what we already know about Alaric—that he “was perhaps not superior to Norman in point of intellect; but he was infinitely superior in having early acquired a knowledge of how best to use such intellect as he had” (7–8) and that he “got the best of [every] bargain” (8). Alaric hardly stops to enjoy his success. Instead, calling to mind one parliamentary member’s concern that the examination would produce men “too
conceited for the duties required of them” (Parliamentary Papers 61), he is “already beginning to think that this Weights and Measures should only be a stepping-stone to him” (131). What one contemporary reviewer called Alaric’s “ill-regulated ambition” (Review in Spectator 59) will later lead him to use government information for private gain, setting off a series of deceits which land him not in the parliamentary office he imagines for himself but in prison. Having commodified one’s brains, the examination proceeds to turn one, the novel suggests, into a market agent rather than the loyal Crown servant the exam was meant to identify. “He knew his own value,” Trollope writes of Alaric, “and did not fear but that he should find a price for it in some of the world’s markets” (381).

The exam does not reward the superior man but the man who knows how to use his brain as a marketable commodity. In this, Trollope appears to agree with the opponents of the proposal—the exam, as the Fortnightly Review piece put it, “traffics in brains” (Sayce 844). But Alaric is not the mechanically driven, cramming candidate. (Another unfortunate fills that role: “[Mr. A. Minussex] had so crammed himself with knowledge that his mind—like the gourmand’s stomach—had broken down under the effort, and he was now sobbing out algebraic positions under his counterpane” (126–27).) Alaric does not prepare for the exam. He does not treat his brain like a warehouse to be stocked for the exam but rather like stock itself, something to be speculated upon. According to Trollope, the problem with the exam is not that it defiles professionalism by assigning it an exchange value. The problem is rather that the exchange value applies not to professional labor already performed but to labor that has yet to exist. Allegedly gauging one’s general capacity and, thus, predicting the worth of one’s future labors, the exam acts as a form of speculation. Embodying this logic, Alaric says to himself in anticipation of the exam, “Education is nothing—mind, mind is everything” (76). Appropriately enough, then, Trollope turns Alaric into an obsessive stock-jobber, constantly trading with his insider knowledge. (Indeed, the novel portrays Alaric as so consistently compulsive in his speculations that he speculates in his personal as well as his professional life; at one point, for instance, he considers it useful to “raise an interest in Linda’s heart” [55]).

If we were dealing with anyone but Trollope, the novel would have ended there, consigning Alaric to prison while catapulting the deserving Harry Norman to great heights in another, perhaps more prestigious profession. But, in fact, the novel shuts the door on Harry as firmly as it does on Alaric, retiring him to his family estate where he occupies a place literally rather than symbolically outside the market. Trollope reproduces the anti-exam logic, but in part so that he can expose its illogic—its mystification of the fact that only
those originally possessing economic capital can claim uncommodified mental capital. Harry can afford to be high-minded because he has an independent income. Criticism has tended to take Trollope to task for his romanticized view of the gentleman, but this novel emphatically denies that figure hero status. Harry's withdrawal from the competition is depicted as an unmanly act of cowardice, one that should not surprise the reader, considering that the narrator damned Harry early in the novel by noting that he “prefer[s] the society of ladies to any of the bachelor gaieties of his unmarried acquaintance” (5). The exam, then, shakes out two identities: the businessman and the gentleman—the former claiming autonomy from patronage, the latter enjoying autonomy from the market—neither of whom approximated the professional the Civil Service sought.

**Trollope’s Unheroic Hero**

*The Three Clerks’* remaining clerk proves his aptness for civil service by being just what the pundits despised: a hack. The advocates of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report wanted a man whose intelligence was detectable by the exam, the critics wanted a man whose disinterested play led him to reject the exam, but neither group wanted a man who was essentially a mental laborer. Proponents and opponents alike heaped scorn upon the man who labors unimaginatively through his routine but this is the very man Trollope makes his hero. Where the anti-exam essayists turned the hack into a consumer, *The Three Clerks* turns its frivolous consumer into a productive, if uninspired, mental laborer who writes bad fiction published serially in cheap papers. “Gay, thoughtless, rollicking” Charley’s primary flaw is that he ingests too much of modern life—“A short pilot-coat, and a pipe of tobacco, were soon familiar to him, and he had not been six months in London before he had a house-of-call in a cross lane running between Essex Street and Norfolk Street” (15). The remainder of the novel charts his progress from a slacker civil servant and immoderate man-about-town into a writer with enough discipline to produce rather than consume petty commodities.

Charley starts off the tale at a disadvantage. Without either Alaric’s cleverness or Harry’s moral superiority, Charley, as one contemporary reviewer noted, “begins in the wildest ways—haunts taverns, consults Jews, and kisses pretty barmaids, utterly regardless of consequences” (Dallas 108). But Trollope turns Charley’s bad behavior into the sign of his potential. About the readiness with which Charley picks up the bad habits of his fellow clerks in the Office of Internal Navigation, for example, the narrator says:
How should it have been otherwise? How can any youth of nineteen or twenty do other than consort himself with the daily companions of his usual avocations? Once and again, in one case among ten thousand, a lad may be found formed of such stuff, that he receives neither the good nor bad impulses of those around him. But such a one is a *lapsus naturae*. He has been born without the proper attributes of youth. (17)

Almost *because* he is so resolutely average in comparison with the other clerks who are either too noble or too ignoble, Charley is the one most likely to succeed. He has no attribute in any impressive degree but he is also “deficient in no proportion of mind necessary to make an estimable man” (17). Like Frederic, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about him, and if he did not get “boisterous” from time to time, we would hardly remember he was there (17). He is, in fact, perfectly suited to prove that professions do not *find* the right man, as Northcote and Trevelyan expected to do with the examination, but must *make* him.

According to Trollope, men act professionally in a system that expects them to do so and that rewards them accordingly, not out of any innate capacity for professionalism. “Assigning someone to a group of superior essence (noblemen as opposed to commoners, men as opposed to women, educated as opposed to uneducated, etc.),” Bourdieu wrote, “causes that person to undergo a subjective transformation that brings about a real transformation likely to bring him closer to the assigned definition” (*State Nobility* 112). Or, as Friedson comments, “the producers themselves have to be produced” (32). Trollope writes, “Had [Charley] gone into the Weights and Measures . . . he would have worked without a groan from ten till five, and have become as good a model as the best of them” (18). This hypothesis is duly proven, as are all the narrator’s hypotheses in this novel of “almost ritualistic predictability” (Shuman, *Pedagogical* 89). Charley does manage to make it into Weights and Measures, though he escapes examination. Instead, what the narrator sarcastically calls his “heart-rending tales” make his ascendance of the Civil Service’s ranks possible (534).

Soon after Charley’s first story appears in the penny paper *Daily Delight*, the Office of Internal Navigation is dissolved. “Mr. Oldeschole began to set his house in order, hopelessly,” writes the narrator of Charley’s old boss, “for any such effort the time was gone by” (527). Harry recommends that Charley be given his now-vacated post. Charley is admitted and given a position “equal in seniority and standing as that which he had held at the Navigation, and much higher, of course, in pay” (536). Meddling reformers protest that Charley was “admitted without examination” (536). At a parliament session,
they compare Charley to one of the Internal Navigation clerks who was cut adrift altogether. Why, they ask, are the two treated so differently? Passing around a badly scrawled note written by the fired clerk alongside a literary review offering “some half-dozen lines, highly eulogistic” of Charley’s first story, one member calls for everyone to compare the two and “then the House would see whether or no the produce of the Civil Service field had been properly winnowed” (538). But even if the House endorses Charley, our narrator does not: “Poor Screwy was the goose, and certainly got the sauce best suited to him when he was turned adrift out of the Civil Service. Charley was the gander and fond as I am of him for his many excellent qualities, I am fain to own that justice might fairly have demanded that he be cooked after the same receipt” (536).

At the transition between adolescence and manhood, Bourdieu writes, young men “must enter into one or another of the social games which are socially recognized, and engage in an inaugural investment, both economic and psychological” (Rules of Art 13). Charley has a bad track record as a civil servant and his fiction does not indicate any great talent in that sphere either. It is rather the industriousness he exhibits as he writes that matters—the investment he makes is determined not by the aesthetic value of his fiction but by the labor he commits to it. Charley does not need to produce anything remarkable but rather must demonstrate his capacity for disciplined mental labor. Telling in this respect is that the novel’s highest praise refers to what Charley is not rather than what he is when he writes: “At this time Charley was not idle” (533). “Entering a career in Trollope means the formation of a ‘disposition’ for that very career,” Nicholas Dames writes (“Trollope and the Career” 255), and Charley prepares himself for Weights and Measures by developing a disposition for prosaic brainwork.1 Demonstrating that he has “what the bourgeois call a serious side” (Bourdieu, Rules of Art 11)—that he does not suffer from Alaric’s conceitness nor from Harry’s impractical loftiness—Charley buckles down to inherit the professional status bequeathed him as the son of a professional. “The vocational process in Trollope,” Dames explains, “might be best expressed as the narrative of learning to want what you are in the way of getting” (“Trollope and the Career” 255).

While some Victorian novels blithely reproduced the ideological chiasmus whereby the professional or artistic protagonist cultivates the disinterest that then implicitly earns him those material conditions that in reality make disinterest possible (inheritance, market success, tenure), Charley achieves the relative autonomy of the tenured bureaucrat not through any act of disinterested devotion to the state but instead through the hack’s refusal to disregard
payment and the success he subsequently enjoys. As his editor holds forth on possible literary topics for the young author, we learn that “the author himself, with base mind, was thinking how much he should be paid for his past labours” (535). When Charley does ask his editor about payment, saying that “he understood that there was so much per sheet, or something of that sort” (535), the editor explains that, at the moment, payment is out of the question—Charley must “have the courage . . . to work through with the Daily Delight till it had achieved its promised popularity” (535). Refusing to defer payment, refusing the logic by which cultural capital converts to economic form only after a distance is traveled and time passed, Charley decides to peddle his wares elsewhere. “You will find it very difficult to fly if you tie the whole weight of the Daily Delight under your wings,” a friend tells him; “So Charley prepared himself for solitary soaring” (535). If Frederic in Sentimental Education fails because he cannot commit to one game, then Charley succeeds in part because he refuses to be played.

If Flaubert mapped the field of cultural production, then he also submitted to its implicit rules. Conversely, Trollope attempted to escape those rules by making them explicit, specifically the rule requiring one to disavow material interest in favor of a heroic commitment to art or, in the professional’s case, to “service.” By acting out of honest self-interest rather than pretending to some higher nobility of purpose, Charley succeeds.4 According to Trollope, it was unreasonable and naïve to expect one to work disinterestedly, without rewards, and, so long as one did an honest day’s work, no shame needed to attach to professional or artistic self-interest. “No work can be fairly done but by routine,” Trollope writes, and Charley signals his submission to bureaucratic routine by submitting to the mechanics of serial publication, a form in which his writing comes out “bit by bit” (534). In the sphere of arts and letters where one most expects to find disinterested play or flights of self-aggrandizing fancy, Trollope places the kind of dutiful, plodding labor the civil servant must prove himself capable of performing. “Fortunately,” Secretary of the Board of Trade James Booth wrote in response to the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, “commanding talents, or extensive acquirements in any great number are not required.” He continued:

They would, in fact, be misplaced in almost every department of the Government. It is rather steady and persevering devotion to the every day business of the department that is to be desired: and it is one of the chief objections to your system of competition that from the over-education of clerks, accompanied probably by a corresponding amount of self-estimation, there would, looking at the character of the work to be done,
and the slow rate of promotion, be much disappointment and dissatisfaction with their work, attended probably as a general consequence, with listlessness and indulgence. (Parliamentary Papers 134)

Implying much the same thing, Lord Ellenborough admonished reformers, “Recollect that the civil servant in England is a clerk” (qtd. in Reader 95).

As for the reformers, there is no danger in their having abandoned their examination system when they promoted Charley, because, again, the Civil Service does not so much identify as it does produce the right man. Disinterest, Trollope suggests, is a function of institutional circumstances and expectations, not moral character. He shifts the emphasis from individual motivation to the structure of the field, much like sociologist Talcott Parsons a half-century later and Bourdieu a half-century after Parsons. “The conflict is not generally a simple one between the actor’s self-interest and his altruistic regard for others or for ideals,” Parsons wrote of the paradox of the professional, “but between different components of the normally unified goal of ‘success’” (58). What are the steps—the norms and values one must internalize, the dispositions one must cultivate—to succeed in any given field? Being a man who naturally desires the esteem of those around him, Charley quickly internalizes the values of the Weights and Measures and behaves accordingly. If he was a very bad servant when relegated to the idle and useless Internal Navigation Office, he is a splendid one once he is placed “among the stern morals and hard work of the Weights and Measures” (118), if only because “Charley led a busy life; and as men who have really something to do have seldom time to get into much mischief, he had been peculiarly moral and respectable” (496).

If Harry’s attenuated will to succeed leads him to abandon his career and Alaric’s swollen one makes him mismanage his, this is only to be expected. Both the under- and overdeveloped will stem from the characters’ stock of capital, embodied and economic, which cause them to inherit seamlessly the positions of their fathers—Harry reproducing the gentility of his father’s life, Alaric reproducing the disreputable vicissitudes of his father’s. Charley’s father is a clergyman, a man belonging to one of the ancient, gentlemanly professions, and the professional too begets a professional. Charley, however, is a modern professional, and if he looks more like a manual laborer than he does like the genteel professional man of the past, it is because Trollope refuses to define the professional by his devotion to disinterested service. Attempting to escape the ideological double bind stipulating that the professional be materially within but symbolically removed from the market, Trollope reduces intellectual labor to labor’s simplest form. Pure labor pretends to be nothing.
other than what it is. It is as if only by adopting the most transparent system
of “weights and measures”—the simplest, and, thus, most reliable unit of
value—can one act with integrity and also, to borrow a phrase from the
novel, “get on in the world” (42).

In his essay “The Civil Service as a Profession,” first given as a presenta-
tion to his own (postal) branch of the service, then published in Cornhill in
1861, Trollope claimed that his goal was to “prove that the Civil Service may
be made as noble, as independent, and as free a profession as the bar or
church; as arms or medicine” (214). For Trollope, that independence is con-
ferred when one imagines oneself within the apparently straightforward space
of the market:

For every half-crown that they receive, let [civil servants] be careful to
give work to the value of three and sixpence, and then let them not care
a straw for any man. He who so arranges his weights and measures, never
does care a straw for any man. There is no difficulty in so arranging them,
in so fixing his pennyworths of work. That he may attain his object—that
manly independence without which no profession can be pleasant—it is
not necessary that all the world should know the amount of return he
make. It is only necessary that one person should know it;—and that one
man will always know it. (219)

This understanding of professional work as something that could be effort-
lessly translated into exchange value did not address the complexity of intel-
lectual labor, with its stored knowledge and developed expertise, nor did it
address the awkward, indirect status of professional services within the mode
of commodity production. As a theory of professional labor, in short, it was
woefully inadequate. As a rhetorical strategy for Trollope’s own career, how-
ever, one is tempted to say it was a triumph.

**SELF-INTERESTED LABOR AS AUTHORIAL STRATEGY**

*The Three Clerks* is not a novel of suspense. Trollope might simulate move-
ment from time to time—making comments like, “What were the faults in
[Harry’s] character it must be the business of the tale to show” (5)—but, in
fact, we always know where the novel is headed before we get there—even the
above comment is hardly suspenseful, considering that the narrator says we
must wait to learn Harry’s faults right after he has finished describing them
(namely, Harry’s priggish sense of reserve). “It is not very pleasant,” E. S.
Dallas wrote in his review of *The Three Clerks* for *The Times*, “to follow the windings of such a story, in which we see the end from the beginning” (108). In the only important criticism on the novel to date, Cathy Shuman makes an ingenious argument about this feature of the novel—what she calls its “static, fairytale quality” (92). Realism and the exam, Shuman observes, both claim to read interiors, realism by “relying on a narrative surface encrusted with material objects that metonymically contain and define the penetrable depths within” and the exam by “revealing inner talent” (“Laborer and Hire” 88). Unlike both realism and the exam, Trollope’s fiction refuses this illusion of depth, wherein things turn out to be other than what they first appear. Shuman argues that Trollope held empty labor or routine work in such high regard, because it is what it is without aspiring to be anything else. While Marx and others saw labor as vulnerable to alienation and abstraction, Trollope privileged labor, because it is, in another sense, inalienable—one must be present when one performs it—and immediately identifiable—one is either doing it or one is not. For Trollope, Shuman writes, “identity and value are metonymically rather than metaphorically related: a man may produce or possess value but he may not represent it” (“Laborer and Hire” 97).

Shuman does not consider, however, the way this theory of value relates to Trollope’s own heteronomous position in the literary marketplace. Placed within that context, Trollope’s “theory” comes into view as an astute move within the literary game.

*The Three Clerks* was the first novel Trollope sold outright. With all five of his previous novels, he entered into half-profit share agreements with publishers. Novelists forced to enter into such contracts were “morbidly suspicious of how their profit share was calculated” (Sutherland 90). First shopping *The Three Clerks* at Longman’s before selling it to Bentley’s “out and out,” as Trollope put it in his notes, he was told that Longman’s would accept the novel only on half-profit terms. He wrote in his autobiography:

> When I went to Mr. Longman with my next novel *The Three Clerks* . . . I wished him to buy it from me at a price which he might think to be a fair value, and I argued with him that as soon as an author has put himself into a position which insures a sufficient sale of his works to give a profit, the publisher is not entitled to expect the half of such proceeds. . . . I thought that I had now reached that point, but Mr. Longman did not agree with me. And he endeavored to convince me that I might lose more than I gained, even though I should get more money elsewhere. ‘It is for you,’ said he, ‘to think whether our names on your title-page are not worth more to you than the increased payment.’ This seemed to me
to savour of that high-flown doctrine of the contempt of money which I have never admired. I did think much of Messrs. Longman's name, but I liked it best at the bottom of a cheque. (108–9)

Mr. Longman asked Trollope to trade one form of capital for another, to exchange economic for cultural capital (the prestige of the imprint). In Trollope's view, the publisher attempted to invoke the artist's supposed disin-terest, or distaste for money, so that he himself could laugh all the way to the bank.

"By depreciating his work through understatement, Trollope rhetorically enhances its value," Christina Crosby writes (295). Trollope's supposed devaluation of his work—repeatedly referring to his novels as mere commodities, for example—might have been strategic self-deprecation but it was also his way of refusing to be duped. Only the open market, in which even the most incommensurable objects—novel and cheque—could be rendered commensurable, ensured the fairness of a transaction. With the half-profits system by contrast, "the author was entirely dependent on the integrity of the publisher in rendering his accounts; it put an intolerable strain on the relationship" (Hamer 21). An arena of competing agents who do not pretend to be other than self-interested, the market provided a degree of transparency that, in turn, underwrote the value of professional labor. "Such a demand [of half-profits]," Trollope continued to sputter, "is monstrous as soon as the article produced is known to be a marketable commodity" (Autobiography 108).

Of course, by the rules Bourdieu outlines, Trollope might not have been seeing through the game of cultural capital so much as playing it badly. Perhaps he did not realize that a particularly impressive imprint might mean less profit now but more later. Certainly, in the short term, Trollope's choices, particularly his rhetorical presentation of those choices, hurt his reputation. The standard view is that his star fell precipitously after the publication of the Autobiography. If, as Paul Danahy writes in his study of Victorian autobiographies, "male authors represent themselves as autonomous and implicitly repress the social context of their labor" (3), Trollope's Autobiography in which he "unblushingly paraded sums, dates and details of contracts" must be the great exception (Sutherland 240). Trollope famously focused on the material details of the context in which he wrote at the expense of the texts themselves. Margot Stafford writes of the Autobiography, "Trollope's bid to win respect for the profession only resulted in a loss of respect for himself" (7). "Of course all artistic work is done, to a great extent, mechanically," George Gissing admitted in The Commonplace Book, but Trollope "talked about it in a wrong and vulgar tone" (qtd. in Stafford 7).
But was Trollope any less read during this period in which critics looked askance at him for his seeming vulgarity? Is it possible, furthermore, that in the long run that very vulgarity was part of why he continued to survive—and, today, thrives—in the annals of criticism? If, as John Sutherland argued, artistic autonomy “was harder to come by and hold on to” for Trollope than for Dickens or George Eliot, then is it any surprise that given the choice between bought and unbought brains, Trollope chose to claim the image of the former (78)? By preemptively claiming it, Trollope could suggest that “true daring belongs to those who have the courage to defy the conformity of anti-conformity, even though they run the risk thereby of winning bourgeois applause,” to quote Bourdieu on “bourgeois intellectuals” (Rules of Art 163).

Anticipating the highbrow reviewer’s critique before he could make it, Trollope “turn[ed] his adversary’s weapons against him by resolutely assuming the image instead of simply enduring it” (Bourdieu, Rules of Art 163). Choosing to represent himself in his Autobiography—and his heroine in The Three Clerks—as a hack, but doing so in such a way that he appeared to have a choice, that it was something he ironically and self-reflexively embraced rather than simply endured, Trollope managed to escape being reduced to a hack by posterity. “Although he accepted the conditions that produced the hack novelist,” Sutherland concluded, “Trollope was not a hack” (81).

What if we see Trollope’s avowed and self-conscious predictability not as an “ostentatious subversion of realist conventions,” as Shuman sees it, but as an ostentatious submission to those conventions (my emphasis, “Laborer and Hire” 89)? Slyly summing up one of The Three Clerks’ central plots, Trollope’s narrator says, “It need hardly be told in so many words to an habitual novel-reader that Charley did get his bride at last” (540–41). Yes, Trollope says here, I am playing by the rules, but I am no fool; I know what I’m doing. Winking at his readers, Trollope satisfied the average reader’s expectations while also anticipating the elite reader’s antipathy toward the formulaic. “React[ing] to the reaction of the intellectual critique which he is prepared to anticipate even before it has been formulated,” Trollope wrote for a commercial market but attempted to arm himself against the critical consequences (Bourdieu, Rules of Art 163).

The Three Clerks ends with a scene in which Charley’s mother-in-law reads aloud a review savagely critical of his latest novel, a review in fact playfully fabricated by Charley’s wife Katie but one that apparently repeats criticisms now familiar to Charley in his lusterless career. The review reads: “No moral purpose can be served by the volumes before us. The hero acts wrongly throughout but nevertheless he is rewarded at last” (553). And it adds regarding Charley himself, that there is something about the novelist that “gives us
the idea of a boy who is being rewarded for having duly learnt by rote his daily lesson" (552). This is, of course, an apt description of *The Three Clerks*. One unprincipled man overshoots himself and gets thrown back to the starting line, one overly principled man never goes anywhere, and a third man who is neither excessively ambitious nor unnecessarily self-denying behaves badly for awhile and, then, once he shows a little rote effort, gets what he was, in any event, most likely to get. The clergyman’s son becomes a moderately successful professional and marries a clergyman’s daughter. *The Three Clerks* is the story of a lack of distinct progress or maybe, more accurately, the story of predictable progress—a bildungroman with an unheroic hero who develops only “the aptitude to be what [he] is” (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art* 11). One imagines that other unheroic hero Arthur Pendennis encountering these final pages of *The Three Clerks* in which Trollope preemptively reviewed the book he has just written. Skimming *The Three Clerks* as he struggles to finish his umpteenth book review that month, and having already jotted down the outline of his review, Pendennis reaches these last pages, curses Trollope, and starts from scratch—just the first in a long line of critics to be foiled by the position Trollope plotted for himself in the field of cultural production, brilliantly poised on the border between the canonical and the disposable.