Chapter Four

Deprofessionalized Critics in the Twenty-First Century

Matters would be easy if we could merely say—naïvely—that the beauties of art must be subtracted from any politicization, or—knowingly—that the alleged autonomy of art disguises its dependence upon domination.

—Jacques Rancière

A key condition of any institutional politics . . . is that intellectuals do not denegate their own status as possessors of cultural capital; that they accept and struggle with the contradictions that this entails; and that their cultural politics should be openly and without embarrassment presented as their politics, not someone else’s.

—John Frow

When we study “the relation of the social structure to individual action,” Talcott Parsons wrote of the professions in 1939, we find “that the dominant importance of the problem of self-interest has been exaggerated” (56). I have argued that by setting aside our critical fascination with the problem of self-interest—or with the hypocrisy of disinterest—we can see that the mid-nineteenth-century novel did not fashion professional identity primarily by flourishing the ideal of disinterestedness but rather by rhetorically negotiating their professionalizing protagonists’ relationships to the market. By illuminating the labor involved in polishing the marriageable woman, The Professor assigns its professional the exchange value he needs at the same time as it grants him professional objectivity. William Crimsworth’s disinterested—rather than lascivious—relations with his students result from the fact that he must view clearly the faults he renders invisible to future suitors. David Copperfield gives David professional disinterestedness not by
denying his relationship to the market but by adopting one particular relationship to it rather than another—an industrial rather than speculative one. Born around the same time as the finance capitalist and also engaged in manipulating knowledge and symbols, the professional had to be distinguished from that suspicious figure, something Dickens accomplished by running his professional in the reliable time of the factory clock rather than the future-oriented time of speculation. Finally, in *The Three Clerks*, far from compromising professional integrity, the market ensures it. Refusing an ideology that mystifies the economics of art, Trollope’s professional admits his self-interest and is rewarded with the kind of success that is, in fact, the best guarantee of good behavior. Trollope did not expect someone like Charley to behave well when placed in a disreputable office, but a good, well-run office like Weights and Measures called forth the qualities it both required and instilled. In this final chapter, I extend the insight discussed in the preceding chapter—that disinterest is a function more of circumstance than character—to an analysis of the debate over the state of the profession.

In the introductory chapter, I argued that Foucauldian criticism attained its dramatic influence in Victorian studies at least in part because it expressed—by displacing—the larger sociological reality of the profession. The relative helplessness and overdetermination of the Foucauldian subject rhymed with critics’ experience of their own circumscribed agency. At the same time, with professional competition intensifying, producing a two-tiered system of stars and adjuncts, Foucault’s account of a power-hungry expert class also made good common sense. Perhaps critics’ eager mistrust of their nineteenth-century counterparts implied a self-indictment, as if outing the expert class absolved critics of their own troublingly redoubled will to power. Or perhaps, more simply, Foucault’s description of experts planting in the populace what they then discover and cure—thereby generating their own careers in a sleight of hand—seemed accurate to critics working in a vocation that paid homage to the principle of disinterestedness but increasingly organized itself according to market logic. As with fantasy in general, there was nothing particularly rational about this dynamic wherein we experienced ourselves as at once powerless (in the face of the market) and megalomaniacal (in our pursuit of academic celebrity). Only yet inchoately grasping the dynamic downsizing the profession, how were we to know that both experiences of the professional self were related by-products of what Marc Bousquet (“Rhetoric of ‘Job Market’” 212) calls “the structural transformation of the university”?

The structural transformation of higher education is a shift of power from faculty to administrators, who are reorganizing the conditions of academic
labor. As a result, unless one’s prolific publications catapult one to academic celebrity, one now faces “increased teaching loads, fewer funds for research, pressure to match research with the interests of corporate donors, higher standards for promotion and tenure, greater competition for fewer tenure lines, and, at some schools, the elimination of tenure altogether” (K. Newman 30). As the explicitness of this list suggests, the changes squeezing our profession are now in sharp focus. Today, most of us are clear that the problem lies not with careerist professionals who have forsaken—or never subscribed to—the ideal of disinterestedness but rather with the last three decades’ steady erosion of professional autonomy and authority. Even as we loathed ourselves for our “expertness,” that status was being taken away from us, and we were fast becoming “academic labor” or, in Gary Rhoades’s intentionally oxymoronic phrase, “managed professionals.”

Mimicking industry’s shift in the last thirty years from stable mass-scale production to flexible accumulation, universities and colleges are actively replacing salaried, tenure-line professors with waged adjunct labor bereft of benefits, security, or autonomy. The latest data show that 65 percent of college teaching is done by contingent faculty (AAUP). The number is undoubtedly higher in the humanities, whose required English, history, and other general studies classes generate plenty of work for non-tenured faculty and graduate students but whose faculty members, unlike their colleagues in science, business, or engineering colleges, are often unable to draw large amounts of funding to the colleges in which they work. Lacking directly apparent instrumental value, the humanities struggle to defend themselves as the market model consumes administrators’ thinking. Situated at the point of greatest ideological tension is perhaps the English department and its faculty who “mak[e] a self-referential claim to authority which is not derived from the economic usefulness of their skills” (Martin 19). Not only is the scholarship of literature without obvious exchange value, but the notion of aesthetic value that historically justified the study of literature—and, thus, English departments—developed in direct opposition to exchange value. From roughly Kant forward, art became that which is not commodity, an opposition that generates the double discourse of value. This discourse, referred to throughout Novel Professions, distinguishes between “money, commerce, technology, industry, production and consumption, workers and consumers” and “culture, art, genius, creation and appreciation, artists and connoisseurs” (Smith 127). “In the first discourse,” Smith writes, “events are explained in terms of calculation, preferences, costs, benefits, profits, prices, and utility. In the second, events are explained—or, rather (and this distinction/opposition is as crucial as any of the others), ‘justified’—in terms of
inspiration, discrimination, taste (good taste, bad taste, no taste), the test of
time, intrinsic value and transcendent value” (127). The double discourse of
value remained relatively intact, with some refinements and mutations, from
the late eighteenth century until about the last quarter-century. It sought to
keep its terms pure and separate, not only incommensurable but opposed:
where economics is quantitative, aesthetics is qualitative; whereas commodi-
ties possess utility, art objects embody intrinsic value; and while one
exchanges labor for wages, one participates in disinterested free play in art
and literature. As it becomes clear that the profession needs to develop a strat-
egy if it is to offer its practitioners a decent living, the question is: What do
you do when the very terms with which you have traditionally defined your-
self are in direct opposition to the only terms that now enjoy, well, purchase?

In the last five years, a handful of literary critics have tried to answer this
question, and their answers typically take one of two positions. They either
argue that we must revive the principle of disinterested service despite its mar-
ginality, hoping that whatever authority such a principle once enjoyed is not
irrevocably lost, or they argue that we must unionize and fight the university
in economic terms. The one strategy attempts to recuperate the discourse that
asserts its incommensurability with the economic while the other appears to
abandon that discourse by arguing for the value of literature not in the aes-
thetic language of transcendence but in the economic language of labor.

These two strategies reflect a long-standing tendency within literary criti-
cism to oscillate between one discourse of value and the other, a pendulum
effect that, as John Guillory’s historical account of the double discourse of
value in Cultural Capital makes clear, is built into criticism by the binary
opposing aesthetics and political economy. Political economy and aesthetics’s
“separat[ion] at birth” dooms aesthetic criticism to an oscillation between
exposing aesthetics’s concealed exchange value and reasserting aesthetic dis-
interest (Guillory, Cultural Capital 303). (See chapter 1 for a more extended
treatment of Guillory’s account.) I sketch this oscillation’s most recent mani-
festation here by juxtaposing a work paradigmatic of criticism in the 1990s,
Martha Woodmansee’s The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History
of Aesthetics (1994), to a recently published work in Victorian studies that is
in some important respects its mirror other, Amanda Anderson’s The Powers
of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment (2001).
Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology, I then argue that once we
widen the frame of analysis to include the sociological conditions in which
these representative works were produced, we catch a glimpse of how and
why the oscillation within criticism is reproducing itself within the debate
over the profession.
In her influential study *The Author, Art, and the Market*, Martha Woodmansee argues that “the momentous shift from the instrumentalist theory of art to the modern theory of art as an autonomous object that is to be contemplated disinterestedly” occurred in reaction to the eighteenth-century development of a middle-class market for literature (32). The older instrumentalist theory of art which held that a work’s purpose was to move its reader “was found to justify the wrong works,” precisely because it justified those works the market rewarded. The aesthetic principle of disinterested autonomy, conversely, provided writers neglected by the market with a “set of concepts with which to address the predicament in which they found themselves—concepts by which (difficult, or ‘fine’) art’s de facto loss of direct instrumentality could be recuperated as a (supreme) virtue” (32). For example, in her opening chapter “The Interests in Disinterestedness”—a title that, though he’s never cited, seems taken from Bourdieu—Woodmansee attributes Karl Philip Moritz’s abandonment of his mentor’s instrumental theory and his adoption of the principle of aesthetic autonomy to his mounting “financial worries” (29). He and the literary elite of which he formed a part found themselves to have been “betrayed by the profit motive and by the laws of supply and demand,” she explains (28). “In the claim,” continues Woodmansee, “that the ‘true’ work of art is the locus of intrinsic value—a perfectly self-sufficient totality that exists to be contemplated disinterestedly, for its own sake—Moritz makes a triumph of defeat and ‘rescues’ art from determination by the market” (32–33).

While much of Woodmansee’s research—especially on the obscure Moritz who, it seems, articulated the logic of aesthetic autonomy a decade before Kant—is original, her point is not. In *Culture and Society* (1958), for example, Raymond Williams made the similar point that “there are some obvious elements of compensation” in the theory of aesthetic value (36). But unlike Woodmansee, Williams did not leave it at that. “Yet, undoubtedly,” he continued, “this is to simplify the matter, for the response [of artists to postindustrial market forces] is not merely a professional one. It is also (and this has been of the greatest subsequent importance) an emphasis on the embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying” (36). Woodmansee calls the principle of aesthetic value “convenient and very powerful,” but it is its convenience for the professional egos involved that she explores and, other than as a vague reference to the principle’s durability, what she means by “very powerful” is left unclear. As one reviewer complained, “her focus on the personal motivations of Moritz and Schiller seems to reduce the origin of modern aesthetics to a case of sour grapes on the part of individual writers” (Kaiser 104).
Woodmansee's suspicion of the notion of disinterested aesthetic value pervades her text, evident even in the scare quotes in the sentence above: “Moritz ‘rescues’ art from determination by the market” (32–33). Was some kind of rescue not necessary? Should aesthetic value be determined solely, or even primarily, by exchange value? What separates her self-described “materialist” account from Raymond Williams’s is its lack of dialectical reason. Exposing Kantian (or Moritzian) aesthetics’ ideological side, Woodmansee seems to assume that she must then reject such aesthetics wholesale rather than seeing it as at once regressive and progressive.

In place of the high aesthetic tradition, Woodmansee champions an early-nineteenth-century form of reception theory that she finds in Francis Jeffrey, a follower of the associationist theory of aesthetics, which “privile[g]ed the recipient in a model of appreciation” (133). Jeffrey, she writes, was “convinced that aesthetic disagreement is not rationally resolvable, and [he was] entirely comfortable with diversity” (135). “Refreshingly current,” as Woodmansee says, Jeffrey argued that there need not be a standard of taste. While this certainly reads more happily than any aesthetic that strives to adjudicate taste from above, it is, in the final analysis, indistinguishable from the market populism best loved by classical political economy wherein the consumer “cannot be wrong—except by consuming too little,” as Woodmansee herself acknowledges (136). Rejecting an aesthetics of disinterest, Woodmansee reverts to an aesthetics uncritical of the market.

Such an aesthetic is the symmetrical counterpart to Kantian aesthetics, then, but not necessarily in the way Woodmansee imagines. She conceives of Jeffrey’s aesthetics as Kant’s counterpart because it privileged the spectator of art rather than the (difficult, self-sufficient) art itself, but as any reading of Kant or Schiller makes clear, the spectator was the privileged site of that version of aesthetics as well. The difference between the two versions, though, is that whereas Jeffrey assumed immediate (abstract) equality among spectators, Kant recognized that people are not all given equivalent access and potential as spectators—only those with full bellies, literally and figuratively, are capable of disinterested judgment. Although Jeffrey rightly eschewed snobbery, he might well be accused of a certain amount of bourgeois bad faith in his version of the spectator, a version that does not consider the inequality of the material conditions in which tastes develop. The aesthetic tradition may well have authorized a high culture in which only the leisured enjoyed aesthetic authority, but in its desire for a mode of perception liberated from economic necessity, the aesthetic tradition also acknowledged the material conditions inhibiting and distorting free judgment.

Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* attends to precisely the “dis-
tinctive virtues” of disinterest or “enabling detachment,” in order to “enlarge and reframe current understandings of aesthetic and intellectual practice in nineteenth-century Britain” (5). (Anderson’s use of the term “detachment,” she tells us in her introduction, is meant to include the aesthetic notion of disinterestedness as well as scientific concepts such as critical reason.) Calling her book “polemical,” she characterizes her approach as “going against the grain of much recent work in literary and cultural studies, which follows the critique of Enlightenment in its insistence that cultural ideals of rationality or critical distance are inevitably erected as the exclusive province of elite groups” (5). Anderson explores the ways in which various Victorians distinguished between forms of detachment. In “Disinterestedness as Vocation: Revisiting Matthew Arnold,” for example, Anderson recovers “another line of thinking in Arnold’s work” that emphasizes “the successful subjective enactment or embodiment of forms of universality, as distinguished from other moments where he seems to valorize impersonal or objective standards” (97). Rather than appealing to some fundamental, elitist standard of taste, then, as Anderson claims critics assume, Arnold focused on articulating “an ideal of temperament or character, whose key attributes bespeak a kind of value-laden value-neutrality: impartiality, tact, moderation, measure, balance, flexibility, detachment, objectivity, composure” (115).

Where Woodmansee did not acknowledge the critical force of disinterestedness, Anderson professes herself “devoted” to precisely this ideal (32). But if economic details appeared to hold too much weight in Woodmansee’s analysis, they seem to carry no weight in Anderson’s. Woodmansee simultaneously reduces aesthetics to the market (a lack of exchange value motivates the articulation of aesthetic value) and champions an aesthetic itself reducible to the market (consumer choice), but what marks Anderson’s study is how little a mark the market leaves. Anderson cites Bourdieu in her introduction, quoting his statement that “the most effective reflection is one that consists in objectifying the subject of objectification” (30). However, she attempts to follow through on this advice not by analyzing the material conditions shaping her own perceptions but by remaining attentive to the ways in which the articulations of detachment she explicates in Arnold and others fall short. Yet, in turn, these figures do not fall short because of any disposition shaped by their material and social positions. Arnold, for example, is taken to task for his “inability to imagine reciprocal social relations as a site where one’s principles might be enacted,” but “the limits of his social and political vision” are presented as just that—limits of a vision, inadequacies of an individual. They are not understood as a consequence of Arnold’s habitus or the logic of the field in which he moves. Anderson pays little attention to the economic and
social conditions that predispose Arnold's thinking to expand in certain ways and contract in others.

When Anderson's approach throughout the book is held up to Bourdieu's actual methodology, it appears to fall into the very trap of idealist reflection Bourdieu criticizes. “One cannot avoid having to objectify the objectifying subject,” Bourdieu writes; “It is by turning to study the historical conditions of his own production, rather than by some form or other of transcendental reflection, that the scientific subject can gain a theoretical control over his own structures and limitations” (Rules of Art xii). Consider Bourdieu's approach to “objectification” more generally. In The Rules of Art, for example, he submits the literary world of mid-nineteenth-century France to an intensive objectification by mapping each figure's position on the continuum of heteronomy (insertion in the market) and autonomy (distance from the market and economic necessity). By not analyzing the conditions in which her figures produce and are themselves produced, Anderson remains in the realm of transcendental reflection, unable to account for her figures’ limitations or, for that matter, their achievements except as individual failures or feats of will and imagination.

Anderson wishes to reject what she calls the “all or nothing” form of criticism, arguing:

Current critiques of detachment...[come to the] immediate and unwarranted assumption that any and all practices of cultivated distance claim a kind of pure or absolute objectivity for themselves. Countering with the view that no such objectivity exists, critics show themselves unable to imagine critical distance as a temporary vantage, an unstable achievement, or regulative ideal: it's all or nothing. (32)

Yet she inadvertently fosters just such a mode. First, by neglecting the material context in which such vantages and achievements become possible, Anderson fails to develop a discourse that can treat the (impure) material world and the (pure) ideal world in the same register, thereby implicitly and inadvertently reinforcing their dichotomous relationship. Secondly, the language that she does use, particularly such phrases as “temporary vantage” and “unstable achievement,” suggests that disinterest is in itself pure but simply fleeting. Bourdieu's sociology of culture illuminates the logic by which “disinterest” is simultaneously self-interested and disinterested.

An engaged treatment of Bourdieu's work on aesthetic autonomy might have enabled both Woodmansee and Anderson to move beyond the either/or framework they establish wherein disinterest is either really disinterested or
some masked form of self-interest. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, Bourdieu demonstrates in *Rules of Art* that the disinterested disposition is a function of the field—the habitus simultaneously selected and called into being. Viewing “disinterest” this way and not as evidence of certain individuals’ extraordinary capacity for self-renunciation, we are more, rather than less, likely to believe in its authenticity.

Bourdieu’s reframing of aesthetics constitutes a dialectical advance, taking us beyond the materialism/idealism opposition within which we have been stuck, shuttling between the two discourses. In fact, Bourdieu argues, this tendency to shuttle is built into the study of aesthetics:

> The science of art and literature is threatened by two opposite errors, which, being complementary, are particularly likely to occur since, in reacting diametrically against one of them, one necessarily falls into the other. The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art. Consequently, in order to escape from the usual choice between celebratory effusions and the reductive analysis which, failing to take account of the fact of belief in the work of art and of the social conditions which produce that belief, destroys the work of art as such, a rigorous science of art must, *pace* both the unbelievers and the iconoclasts and also the believers, assert the possibility and necessity of understanding the work in its reality as a fetish; it has to take into account everything which helps to constitute the work as such, not least the discourses of direct or disguised celebration which are among the social conditions of production of the work of art *qua* object of belief. ("Field" 35)

While the “believers” uncritically assert the ideology of disinterest, the unbelievers disregard the collective belief in art’s structural removal from the market and, in doing so, they distort their analyses while imagining that they dispel illusions. We must understand art “in its reality as a fetish,” Bourdieu says—that is, as something that both is unaccounted for when accounted for by the deus ex machina of the “gift” or “genius” and yet also *is* a kind of deus ex machina because the traces of its production and the source of its origins have been obscured. Recognizing the effaced labor producing the “work of art *qua* object of belief” is to realize that art’s transcendent position outside the market is itself a product of history. Historicizing the aesthetic ideal of autonomy is, then, not the same thing as reducing it to its compensatory and ideological functions, but nor is it to retrieve it from the ash heap in order to revalorize it. Historicizing the aesthetic ideal may lead to the realization,
however, that it is changing now that the historical conditions that created it—the development of technologies of, and a market for, mass production—have themselves undergone substantial alteration.

Interestingly, the current debate over how to handle the profession’s “crisis” reveals something about the ideal’s transformation, if only symptomatically. To get at what it reveals, I return to Bourdieu’s injunction to objectify the objectifying subjects by making room for the sociological conditions in which Woodmansee and Anderson produced their work. Why, that is, did an analysis of aesthetic autonomy that implicated it in the market logic it claimed to disavow make sense in the larger context of literary criticism in the 1990s? And why is a book rescuing aesthetic autonomy not from the market but from literary critics themselves necessary today?

*The Author, Art, and the Market* fit broadly within 1980s and 1990s post-structuralist work as part of the larger trend referred to in the introductory chapter as a hermeneutics of suspicion. It also fit with the development of cultural studies and the relatively new academic interest in popular culture. Helping to collapse the boundary between high and mass culture, Woodmansee’s book suggests that the concepts of difficulty and self-sufficiency that authorize the privileging of high art are themselves in some sense unauthorized insofar as those that authored them did so for reasons other than the ones they gave. Anderson positions her study of the Victorians within the context of developments in literary criticism, and though she never mentions the larger sociological context of the English departments that house such criticism, her project might be viewed nonetheless as an implicit response to the increasing visibility of higher education’s commercialization. It is no accident that as the humanities lose ground in the university, literary critics like Anderson find themselves wishing to reassert the possibility and integrity of disinterestedness. It is as if, after years of demystification and suspicion, critics find themselves in the ironic position of needing to reconstruct what they have just deconstructed. Indeed, exemplifying the oscillation of criticism within their own careers, some of the very critics who most effectively exposed the power dynamics underwriting apparently disinterested works during the “culture wars” of the 1980s and early 1990s are the ones now calling for a reassertion of disinterest. For example, Mary Poovey, whose demystification of “disinterest” in *Uneven Developments* I discussed in the introduction, has responded to the corporatization of the university by attempting to invigorate the discourse of aesthetic value.

In her essay “The Twenty-First-Century University and the Market: What Price Viability?” Poovey writes:
We have to suspend the market model entirely in favor of an alternate system that defines value differently. The only way we can do this, in turn, is to identify, a priori, goods that are goods in themselves—that defy market evaluation because they are not quantifiable, thus not subject to commodification. In order to identify these goods—or more properly to assert they exist—I have to risk something that poststructuralism has taught me to abhor: I have to essentialize the ‘human.’ (6)

Acknowledging that her strategy requires her to unlearn the poststructuralism that shaped her scholarly work, Poovey articulates a rhetorical strategy that is, finally, the same one that English departments conventionally used until around 1970, when poststructuralism arrived: the assertion that aesthetics or, as Poovey puts its, “human creativity, is an end in itself, an autotelic, self-sufficient totality nonreferrable to market value. What is implied in this argument is that poststructuralism (and maybe cultural studies—all those literary critical modes governed largely or in part by a hermeneutics of suspicion) has inadvertently conspired with market ideology to destabilize the humanities. “I fear,” Poovey writes, “that we have allowed our postmodern skepticism to neutralize the very criticism it initially fostered. By turning critique against the possibility of critique, I worry that we are helping the market render the very category of value meaningless” (7). If we, at least in our “public” selves, get back to our old line—the aesthetic line that until a few years ago we excoriated as elitist, colonialist, and patriarchal but that we now see might have, as Anderson says, “distinctive virtues”—we might stem the tide of corporatization. “Ironically,” Poovey writes, “the humanities’ lack of economic potential may be the only asset capable of insulating us from market logic” (7). The very thing, then, that makes literary study so vulnerable—its inutility—might turn out to be its best defense.

Poovey is hardly alone. A growing number of literary critics worry that poststructuralism has destroyed a belief in the mission of literary studies at the very moment critics most need the power of their convictions. Director of the Association of Departments of English David Laurence worries that the hermeneutics of suspicion has led to “the erosion of conviction about the educational formation called literary studies and institutional formation called the English department” (17). David Bell complains that “Foucault’s view of the literary as a field defined through exclusions and prohibitions . . . stoked the fires of suspicion toward literature” (488) and that a suspicious mode continues to prevail in literary studies: “The ‘end of the age of high theory’ . . . has not fundamentally changed the suspicion toward literature” (487). He writes:
If we are to argue persuasively to undergraduates that a major in literature—or any study of literature, for that matter—is a worthwhile pursuit, then we need to explain why literature cannot simply be characterized as a field given over to power and its ruses. Unfortunately, the necessity for this explanation comes at a historical moment of suspicion when such an explanation is perhaps harder to provide than it has been before. (488)

Having argued that this is a “historical moment” and, thus, presumably, not something we can simply refuse when we think better of it, Bell nonetheless gives his essay the voluntaristic title “Moratorium on Suspicion?”—as if critics could agree to collectively shed a critical disposition that was two decades in the making now that it has become a professional liability.\(^5\)

It is not hard to see why a rhetorical mobilization of “disinterest” is an appealing strategy at this point—it champions disinterest against profit as a vital human principle at a time when acting disinterestedly appears strange or self-defeating rather than noble. But there are at least three interrelated reasons why it is not a useful path to pursue.

First, from a certain perspective, it looks like an act of bad faith. Ruthlessly deconstructing the political and economic subtexts driving rhetoric elsewhere, the critic shies away from publicly disclosing the material reality, the struggle over class position and power within the university, that is the subtext of her own writing. While Poovey places her call for the rhetoric of aesthetic autonomy within this material context, she does not call for that context itself to be made publicly visible. Whereas the culture wars centered on the politics of race, sexuality, and gender, the crisis facing humanities departments now is clearly about class and economics (this economic crisis was already underway then, too, but was less visible). Asserting disinterest in this context is not an invocation of the “work of art qua object of belief” but a particular strategy for combating the market takeover of higher learning and for shoring up an eroding professorial class. It is the critic’s subject position as critic (not as female, black, queer, and so on) that is at stake. In this case, rather than agitating for others or for her social group and, thus, enacting “disinterest” even as she exposes it as myth or alibi in texts, the critic must agitate for her own economic welfare. In this scenario, she cannot escape acknowledging explicitly that she is acting, in part, out of self-interest.

Recuperating the old model is, then, an unintentionally disingenuous strategy, but second, and more important, it will not do what these critics want it to. Though it may provide a rationale for what we do, a rationale will not defend English departments from retrenchment. As Michael Bérubé
notes, “the market works by variables that have nothing to do with the profession’s intellectual interests” (Employment of English 101). In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion cannot be blamed for our alleged decline in enrollments—surely, students got as great a charge from interrogating as from revering literature—nor can it be blamed for administrators’ penchant for phasing out tenure lines in the humanities. Administrators do not reduce English departments’ tenure lines because they do not understand what humanities faculty do or how important they are—indeed, many administrators came straight out of humanities departments. They do it because they are under enormous budget pressures, and it is cheaper to hire adjuncts. Furthermore, administrators can hire adjuncts without experiencing much, if any, immediate loss of value. That is, it is certainly not the case that hiring literature adjuncts is “like staffing a hospital all with orderlies,” as one pundit has claimed (Businessweek). Adjuncts are often just as qualified as, and sometimes more qualified than, their tenure-line counterparts. (Of course, over the long term, there is a very real loss in value—the loss in committee service, institutional loyalty and memory, and the like.) Under these circumstances, shared governance will continue to unravel and the gulf between faculty and administration will grow wider until it becomes unavoidably obvious that faculty can no longer count on the university as a whole to act as a profession but must defend their profession against a university increasingly dominated by the business model.

Lastly, even if a rationale could save us, it would not be disinterestedness. As commodity production shifts from mass-scale to elaborate and flexible niche marketing, aesthetic categories are necessarily destabilized. During the past century and a half or so, high art was never truly independent of the market, as its principle of autonomy proclaimed. Rather, as I discussed in the last chapter, it was independent of a particular market (the mass market) while it circulated upon what Bourdieu calls an antimimetic market, a field of restricted production in which producers’ implicit audience is not the masses but other producers (see The Field of Cultural Production). High art relies conceptually upon the field of mass production by defining itself against it. As William Paulson explains, “The conjunction of mass literacy and the fully reproducible text made print the most advanced medium of marketed and marketable culture and thus made literature a leading early instance of an autonomous aesthetic field whose construction was both opposed to and facilitated by that impersonal and heteronomous cultural market” (“Market of Printed Goods” 403). With the structure of the impersonal, mass market fading, the categories “high” and “low” have been partially evacuated of meaning and force. This is part of a complex historical
evolution that cannot be fully explored here. For my purposes, it is enough to recognize that in this altered cultural and economic mode of production, the discourse of pure disinterest collapses into contradiction. We can capitalize on our “lack of economic potential” as our greatest “asset,” Poovey writes, contradditorily adopting market vocabulary to champion market transcendence. Of course, Poovey knows very well what she’s doing—this is the irony she alludes to—but precisely in knowing what she is doing, she reminds us that the double discourse of value no longer pretends to keep its terms separate and pure. It never could keep them separate and pure, but this fact was not acknowledged or, if so, only fleetingly and relatively incoherently. Such “innocence” was embodied in the two discourses’ various practitioners. That what used to be an embodied strategy has become a self-conscious one indicates that the double discourse of value no longer functions the way it used to. Perhaps nothing underscores this change more than the recent media attention given Jonathan Franzen’s reluctance to have Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club stamped on his novel. Of the incident, David Kirkpatrick wrote in the New York Times, “After disparaging Oprah Winfrey’s literary taste . . . [Franzen] was full of abashed apologies.” This shows, Kirkpatrick continues, “that if there was ever a time in the book business when authors wrote to impress critics and their peers without regard to book sales, getting caught in that posture is now almost embarrassing.”

In an analysis of the contemporary literary prize scene which beautifully illustrates the fact that the once-repressed logic opposing economic and aesthetic value has become conscious, fundamentally altering the “game,” James English writes that “without disappearing, the modern discourse of autonomy has become a tactical fiction, or at least an imperfectly sincere one” (124). Paulson, too, sees this new self-consciousness as reflective of a fundamental reorganization of cultural and economic logic: “It hardly seems possible anymore to base a theory and defense of intellectual autonomy on the institutions and practices of print, at least not without recognizing that such a theory and defense are calculated exercises in the strategic maintenance of residual formations” (“Market of Printed Goods” 405). And, indeed, calculation and strategy are everywhere apparent in the tone of Poovey’s essay. “In order to identify these goods [in themselves]—or more properly to assert they exist,” Poovey begins one sentence, highlighting her argument’s strategic essentialism by switching from a register of naive empirical belief to an ironic register that underlines its rhetorical status. Simultaneously full-throated and self-ironizing, Poovey juggles agency as if it were a hot potato, embracing a position and signaling her distance from it in the same moment. “I have to risk something that poststructuralism has taught me to abhor,” she writes:
“I have to”—I am forced against my will or perhaps better judgment to—“risk something”—take a position I’m not sure I can defend.

Poovey’s essay represents a new twist in literary criticism’s oscillation between exposing the exchange value concealed in aesthetic value and asserting the disinterest of aesthetic value. She side-steps what might be called the double bind of the double discourse, that bind whereby embracing the one discourse inexorably means disavowing the other. Instead, she signals some solidarity with both discourses by managing a tone at once sincere and ironic. Such an argument strangely echoes Bourdieu’s own, as he describes the literary and artistic field as a field that operates in bad faith but that does so in all sincerity. (More specifically, in “The Production of Belief,” Bourdieu calls the literary and artistic field a “bad faith economy” while elsewhere, particularly in Rules of Art, insisting on the sincerity of those who maneuver within it—a contradiction that yields a dialectical truth.) Of course, the difference is that Bourdieu aims to explain the (receding) logic of symbolic capital while Poovey wishes to reanimate it, placing herself not among the sociologists of culture but its defenders. Thus, what Bourdieu’s sociology seeks to disclose is precisely what Poovey’s strategy is necessarily predisposed to repress: labor. For Poovey, the emphasis falls on the “goods in themselves”—the artifacts that, to recall Smith’s distinction, can be justified in terms of creativity and uniqueness but cannot be explained or quantified as products of labor. For Bourdieu, the sociology of culture entails unearthing the enormous rhetorical, institutional, and individual labor that produces the “work of art” both as a material or linguistic object and as an “object of belief” and which, in order to succeed, was repressed as labor. Tracing the construction of the aesthetic discourse of disinterestedness, Rules of Art shows that the discourse is hardly universal or essential but rather developed to do necessary cultural work—specifically, the work of autonomization.

If the discourse of disinterest authorized the historical autonomization of literary study, then it makes sense that critics would come to see poststructural, politically informed work as complicit with the devaluation of the profession. But scrambling to reverse course by defending aesthetic value will only perpetuate what Jeffrey J. Williams calls “the ideological gap, between the imaginary projection of motivation and goals in the humanities (fun, spiritual improvement) and the actual conditions of employment in universities” (“Life of the Mind” 209). Instead of reversing course, what if we were to see the rise of political criticism not as an inadvertent accomplice in the marginalization of literature but as a useful, if unrecognized, response to it? Guillory has made a less hopeful version of this argument in a widely read piece on the profession in the ADE Bulletin. Guillory suggests that rather
than having exacerbated the current crisis, the hermeneutics of suspicion was an ill-fated, only half-conscious attempt to forestall it. Sensing their obsolescence, literary critics responded by increasing their volume, in both senses—by producing more words and by being louder (in other words, more politically strident and attention-seeking). Hyperprofessionalized, hyperpoliticized graduate students, on Guillory’s reading of this behavior, act this out in exaggerated fashion, embodying the bid of an “increasingly irrelevant” discipline for political and professional power (4). “What I call preprofessionalism is nothing other than the realm in which the profession’s fantasies, both professional and political, are acted out,” he writes (“Preprofessionalism” 6). As I discussed in the introduction, Guillory views this political criticism as almost grandiosely deluded in its sense of its own potential impact. Instead, economic forces out of our control doom us to deprofessionalization.

I want to end Novel Professions by asking whether a less defeatist narrative than Guillory’s might be constructed, one in which his own work stands as evidence of what the last twenty years has made possible. Perhaps he articulates so clearly what the rest of us express as garbled symptom precisely because the profession has become increasingly political. Is it such a great leap, after all, from doing work in the name of a number of constituencies—feminist, queer, minority, postcolonial, and the like—to doing work in the name of our own constituency—the professional class? This heightened self-reflexivity—the objectification of the self, in the positive Marxist sense—might be possible now only because of feminist awareness of situated epistemologies, Foucauldian suspicion of liberal individualism, and, for that matter, Bourdieuan sociology, which has uncovered the material production of “disinterest.” However paradoxical at first glance, political criticism’s exposure of the material underpinnings of the liberal or aesthetic ideology of autonomy may be seen as precisely the precondition for our present recognition that our (relative) autonomy is endangered as well as the precondition for our willingness to adopt a political disposition earlier generations of gentlemen scholars were trained to abhor.

At the very least, the existence of these modes of critical thought (feminist, Foucauldian, queer, postcolonial, Bourdieuan, and so on) signals the improbability of recovering the ideal of disinterestedness as an unconscious component of our habitus. And this may be a good thing, if it leads us to abandon an ideal that encourages us to work, if not for free, then at a substantial discount. (Andrew Ross uses the phrase “cultural discount” to refer to the principle whereby certain kinds of “workers accept nonmonetary rewards—such as the gratification of producing art [or of teaching literature]—as compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of
their labor” [“Mental Labor Problem” 6]). Whereas Guillory views political criticism as essentially superstructural—“The politicization of the humanities is an effect of the latter’s marginalization and not the other way around,” he writes (“Literary Critics” 115)—the case might be made that political criticism responds in turn by making possible new resistance to the managerial marginalization of literary studies.

The self-reflexivity it engenders might motivate us to advocate “openly and without embarrassment,” as John Frow writes, for ourselves as professionals with the right to organize our own labor. Rather than a highly sophisticated blind alley, then, the last two decades’ deconstruction of disinterest might have cleared the way for a dialectical advance. At his best, for example, Foucault did not condemn experts but rather shifted the epistemological terrain they inhabit by calling upon us to “abandon the opposition between what is ‘interested’ and what is ‘disinterested’” (Discipline and Punish 28). Bourdieu—not to mention the Victorian novel itself—has already begun this post-Kantian work. Identifying the self-interest central to the historical production of “disinterest,” Bourdieu identifies the conditions in which disinterest becomes possible. Whereas others have also spotlighted the material context of disinterest, they have tended to assume that such illumination necessarily damns disinterestedness, exposing the naked emperor. Instead of continuing to exaggerate the problem of disinterestedness, whether by damning its hypocrisy or defending its nobility, critics need to focus on work autonomy, because autonomy is simultaneously a self-interested luxury and the material condition for genuine service. In our English departments, in public forums, and at the bargaining table, we need to fight to preserve intellectual autonomy by fighting to preserve the tenure-line appointments that make it possible, because, as Bourdieu warns, “durable virtues cannot be established on a pure decision of conscience. If disinterestedness is sociologically possible, it can be so only through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded” (Practical Reason 88).