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Steven Goldleaf

## PROFESSIONALISM

Spanning the Civil War to the First World War, the rise of American professionalism brought about the model of a modern career: a vocation that claims service, not moneymaking, as its aim; that privileges expertise; that defines and protects systems of education that confer such expertise; and that takes for granted the professional's desire for upward mobility. For writers, the advent of professionalism meant a shift in literary taste from an amateur, romantic, and passively "feminized" style of authorship to one that was typified by training, realism, and traditional masculinity. In 1855 the poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) expressed his idea of artistic inspiration as "I loafe and invite my Soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass" ("Song of myself" ll. 4-5). By 1903, however, in "Getting into Print," an article in the *Editor* magazine, the novelist and short story writer Jack London (1876-1916) responded, "Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it" (p. 57). Replacing Whitman's reified muse with "something that looks remarkably like it," London's description of authorship reveals professionalism's link to the seemingly unrelated nineteenth-century developments of the steamship, railroad, telegraph, and telephone: technologies of mass communication that created and maintained the literary professions through the buying and selling of words as commodities. Thus, although the progressivist London and his contemporaries favored the reflection of "the real" in writing, at the turn of the twentieth century the profession of literature became increasingly aligned

with commercialism—with the look of inspiration instead of its substance. This point is crucial to understanding a central tension for professional authors writing from 1870 to 1920: the tension between high art—intellectual work supposedly performed for social good—and texts that were marketed for individual or corporate profit through systems of mass media.

#### THE CULTURE OF PROFESSIONALISM

The historian Burton Bledstein identifies the late nineteenth century in America as a “culture of professionalism”—a culture stemming from the delimitation of clearly defined, service-oriented careers occupied by experts; sustained by schooling; restricted by gatekeeping; and made popular by the association with the traditional American values of radical individualism, productivity, progress, and universal education. Not surprisingly, the Franklinian ideal of the self-made man thrived under professionalism. In an 1889 *North American Review* essay titled “Wealth,” Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) claimed that self-made millionaires should and would become the professional arbiters of American life, advancing all citizens with their expert distribution of the nation’s resources. “Individualism, Private Property, the Law of the Accumulation of Wealth, and the Law of Competition,” Carnegie claimed, “are the highest results of human experience. . . . We shall have an ideal state, in which the surplus wealth of the few will become, in the best sense, the property of the many, because administered for the common good, and this wealth, passing through the hands of the few, can be made a much more potent force for the elevation of our race than if it had been distributed in small sums to the people themselves” (pp. 657, 660). In part, Carnegie’s vision of this ideal state resulted in his endowment of large public libraries throughout the 1880s and 1890s to assist the working and middle classes of industrial cities. His libraries are but one example of numerous professional institutions that claimed a kind of manifest destiny—in which the overall improvement of the nation’s citizens seemed inevitable—while simultaneously helping to shape and preserve class stratification in America.

Professionalism’s inherent stratification was aided by the widespread industrialization that took place at the beginning of the century and the rapid increase of commodity manufacture and exchange that ensued. Commodity culture revolutionized jobs as disparate as bricklaying and city planning; representational systems as varied as novels, paintings, and clothes; and even the very language Americans used to talk about possessions—words such as “thingamajig,” “gadget,” and “jigger.” During these years world fairs abounded,

dedicated to professionalizing commodity exchange. At the first of these, the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, a hundred thousand thingamajigs were on display; in 1876 Philadelphia hosted the Centennial Exhibition, where a massive Corliss engine was shown along with international works of art. In his *Atlantic Monthly* essay “A Sennight of the Centennial,” William Dean Howells (1837–1920) identified America’s elevation of the commodity over the objet d’art. “American art ha[s] made vast advances on the technical side, but . . . it lack[s] what English art has got from its intimate association with literature.” And yet, Howells admitted, the Centennial “would be a barren place without the American machinery” (p. 95).

Though varied in focus, these exhibitions had a similar professional purpose: to display these commodities as marks of national value by making a show of the nation’s newly professionalized industries. In turn, in buying these products, citizens participated in professionalism by purchasing the moral and literal wealth of the nation. In this manner, middle-class consumerism created a new sphere of highbrow culture, presided over by professional highbrows; one accessed this sphere by shopping for the right goods and then displayed one’s familiarity with it by presenting those goods on one’s body and in one’s home: an 1880 *Punch* cartoon typifies this exchange, showing a bride holding up a decorative teapot to her husband, exclaiming, “Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!” As such, the material relationships of buying and selling commodities were constantly remade as noneconomic, professional exchanges. Thus, the consumer took the advice of the professional aesthete in order to buy the perfect teapot to display her or his good taste—or, in the same vein, the reader took the advice of the professional author in order to better treat the poor and thereby improve his or her own morality. In either case, an economic interaction (buying a teapot, buying a book) was recast as the passing on of knowledge from an expert to an amateur.

As such, knowledge became its own commodity, and this development spawned the establishment of a number of professional associations as well as the formation of the modern university. Prior to the 1870s, American men and women of means pursued the work of studying history, practicing politics, or writing poetry; vocations such as medicine, law, and teaching were deemed lesser insofar as they necessitated working with one’s hands or interacting with the great unwashed. After the Civil War, however, as areas of expertise from demography to American history began to garner respect and take on the form of discrete disciplines, professional organizations flourished. Largely due to class bias against their occupations as second-rate, medical

practitioners founded professional societies as early as the 1840s: psychiatry organized itself under the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutes for the Insane in 1844, while the American Medical Association was established in 1847. The latter half of the nineteenth century was the time of an unprecedented incorporation of professional associations. To name but a few, the American Bar Association was formed in 1878, the Modern Language Association in 1883, the American Historical Association in 1884, the American Folklore Society and American Economics Association in 1888, the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1898, the American Public Health Association in 1899, the Association of American Law Schools in 1900, and the American Political Science Association in 1903. These associations all had similar aims: to bring together as well as to regulate professors, teachers, and specialists through membership, annual meetings, and a hierarchical infrastructure; to spread the language and ideas of professionals through journals published by the associations; and to influence local and national policy making by publishing reports, building archives, and directly affecting the development of educational curricula as well as programs to improve social welfare.

To achieve further cohesion and regulation among the new professions, the American university emerged as a primary locus of professional activity, indoctrinating its faculty, staff, and students under the twin principles of public service and individual ambition. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, universities began appointing the first professors of disciplines such as history, politics, and social work, and by the turn of the century nearly half of American college graduates were taking up service-oriented jobs in public administration, government, and teaching. These graduates were novitiates under an ideal professional system: they had been screened as applicants, followed a proscribed course of study, read standardized textbooks to take standardized tests, and assumed that their intellectual expertise would grant them a position of wealth and leadership in society. Contemptuous of attacks on their professional authority, they believed an entrepreneurial spirit was the key to an ever-improving society; a largely ignorant and even fearful clientele made up of women, the poor, ethnic minorities, and the uneducated justified their intervention into such social issues as poverty, hysteria, disease, intemperance, promiscuity, miscegenation, secularism, and sexual "deviance." As the popular novelist and commentator Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911) explained in her 1897 memoir *Chapters from a Life*, "I wished to say something [in my novels] that would comfort some few . . . of the women whose misery crowded the land. . . . The women—the helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted

women; they whom war trampled down, without a choice or protest; the patient, limited, domestic women, who thought little, but loved much, and, loving, had lost all, —to them I would have spoken" (p. 97–99). This rhetoric of reform cut across economic class, gender, and race, and yet professionals such as Phelps had to marginalize certain groups—in this case "helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted" women—at the same time that they "uplifted" them into the values and practices of the professional class.

#### LITERARY PROFESSIONALS

After the Civil War, the figure of the professional made its way into the pages of the American novel. Some writers idealized this figure: in 1871 Edward Eggleston's (1837–1902) *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* popularized the idea of the professional teacher. No longer would the stereotypical schoolmaster be the incompetent and austere Mr. Creakle of *David Copperfield* fame; Eggleston fashioned his Mr. Hartsook as an educational hero, a man whose professional expertise led boys from ignorance to understanding. In turn, other writers sought to reflect various ideological struggles within the new professions. In *The Story of Avis* (1877), Phelps created Avis Dobell, a female painter who wrestled with professional objectivity against subjective passions, and in 1884 Howells published *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a novel that warned against the perils of professional businesspeople seeking profit over spiritual worth.

As its own profession, popular authorship had become fairly systematized and even lucrative by the 1850s as the literary marketplace sustained a period of major growth. For instance, the sales and distribution patterns of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* invented the very category of the latter-day "best-seller." After the 1851–1852 serialization in the *National Era*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) made roughly \$10,000 from the first three months of sales, and in the first year *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 300,000 American copies. The novel sold even better abroad; by the end of 1852 various legitimate and pirated editions made for 1.5 million sales in England, and the book had been translated into more than 40 languages.

However, despite the advent of the professional as a worthy subject—and the clear potential for a thoroughly professional book trade—at mid-century the literary marketplace continued to operate under the dual ideas of the "amateur author" and the "gentleman publisher," relegating authorship to an inspired side effect of leisure. The women writers who were most successful at mid-century—writers such as Stowe, Phelps, E. D. E. N. Southworth, and Gail Hamilton—persisted in sustaining an older model of amateur

authorship by rejecting market value in favor of moral instruction and by insisting that a story was more important than mere information.

Authors' discontent over the growing preference for information over storytelling was prompted, in part, by the laying of the first successful transatlantic telegraph cable on 5 August 1858. As Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) had foreseen in his 1854 memoir *Walden*, “[Though we] are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new . . . perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough” (p. 307). Instead of sequential, coherent stories connected to an international, national, or local purpose, telegraphic news became a series of competing headlines from people and places both distant and strange. In everyday terms, the technology worked more to fracture and isolate than it did to unify.

One of the primary reasons the telegraph encouraged nonlinear news was that its language traded in fact—disconnected dates, names, figures, and events. Fact gave a professional doctor, statesman, lawyer, or journalist scientific legitimacy; with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871, sources of professional proof in all fields were increasingly built on fact over emotion, intuition, or faith. Yet for a number of American authors writing in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, the turn away from storytelling as the basis for human understanding was more than irritating or perplexing; they believed it was culturally lethal.

Thus, this professional primacy of fact was met with a paradoxical fictionality, a revision of the professional languages of telegraphy, law, and science into emotionally driven novels of connection and unity. Even toward the end of the century, with the institution of realism (the faithful representation of the everyday in art and literature) as the primary high-art genre in America, professional fact was often remade into idealized fiction. A celebrated realist, Henry James (1843–1916) remarked in his notice of George Eliot's 1876 *Daniel Deronda*, “The ‘sense of the universal’ [in the novel] is constant, omnipresent. . . . It gives us the feeling that the threads of the narrative, as we gather them into our hands, are not of the usual commercial measurement, but long electric wires capable of transmitting messages from mysterious regions” (p. 131). In utilizing this metaphor, James remakes the “commercial measurement” of telegraphic cable into a mystical experience, suggesting that the social progress of humanity is cumulative and

inevitable and that hidden universal truths might be gained through reading novels.

These self-consciously realist writers, however, distinguished between the feminized sentimental and sensational fictions that had become popular at mid-century and the kinds of expert, professional fictions they themselves wrote. Many successful authors writing in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s—including James, Howells, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser as well as former sentimental writers such as Stowe and Phelps—worked to establish their work as “high art,” separate from the likes of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Mrs. Henry (Ellen) Wood. Though seemingly contradictory, Howells's definition of literary realism in his 1897 preface to *English Society* by George du Maurier (1834–1896) encapsulated the new professional realist's sense of purpose: “the very highest fiction is that which treats itself as fact” (p. 76). Within the larger culture of professionalism, then, the technical supplanted the moral; or, rather, the technical was the moral. Even though professional writing shunned subjectivity and held up data and method as the things that “spoke,” the new professional and realist authors alike provided images of and for their culture that were meant to excite an appropriate sympathy, a morality with qualities more culturally sustaining than what Howells once disparaged in his 1895 *Literary Passions* as the “artfully-wrought sensations” of the newspaper or sentimental novel.

These professional discriminations between high and low culture coincided with similar trends in all avenues of art, from painting to music to theater. Because fiction was simultaneously popular and elite—as Lawrence Levine notes, much like nineteenth-century opera and Shakespearean drama—novels were read by large numbers of people, primarily made up of the new middle class in America as well as a much smaller cadre of the economically and socially privileged. Even the word “culture” itself became increasingly joined with “art” and “aesthetics.” “The new meanings,” notes Levine in his 1988 study *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, “symbolized the consciousness that conceived of the fine, the worthy, and the beautiful as existing apart from ordinary society” (p. 225). In other words, as with “knowledge,” “culture” itself became its own professional commodity, and those who wielded words as—or in the service of—culture made writing a professional commodity as well.

Paradoxically, however, once the word was professionalized (a product of elite training, a marker of expertise, chosen or created for precision, hoarded and protected as intellectual capital, and employed in the service of social reform), it was simultaneously commercialized. As a result, “lowbrow” wordsmith occupations such as muckraking, technical writing,

and political propagandizing embraced the same precepts of professionalism as late-century literary authors, thus making their labor increasingly more precise (fact-based or "scientific"), realistic ("true"), and socially aware—more "masculine." Aided by new technologies that lowered production costs and virtually guaranteed the instantaneous transmittal of the word to a mass Anglo-American readership, modern features of mass professional discourse had been established by the turn of the twentieth century: literary agents, promotional campaigns for books and periodicals, headlines and bylines, and a full synergy of visual advertisements (goods) with text (ideas).

Thus, by the early 1900s, a new cadre of professional writers came to the fore as popular and highly influential authors. Designated as "progressive," writers such as Dreiser, Frank Norris, Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Upton Sinclair had once been journalists, a profession previously held in low esteem. Among these professional progressives, differences in region, politics, or class mattered less than a common language with which to engage concepts of efficiency, social progress, industrial deregulation, and a democratic, nonpartisan access to ideas. As such, the culture of professionalism radically shifted the popular image of an "author" from the previous century's man or woman of leisure and learning to a "voice of the people" who continually had to convince the public of the validity of that voice.

Ultimately, then, the legacy of professional authorship in America is a complex one. Professional authorship holds in perpetual tension high culture with low, timeless aesthetics with immediate commercialism, social reform with authorial ambition, sentimentality with realism, fiction with fact, and democratic access with elite gatekeeping. With seeming prescience of contemporary struggles with professionalism, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) commented in 1936 in *The Crack-Up*, "no decent career was ever founded on a public" (p. 89). Fitzgerald aptly articulates perhaps the keenest tension for the professional author: the tension between individual art and public celebrity. To succeed, professional authors had to found their own expert, reform-oriented careers on the amateur whims of their consuming public. In other words, such authors muckraked themselves, becoming their own commodities.

See also American Literature; Health and Medicine; Jurisprudence

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Jennifer Cognard-Black

## PROGRESSIVISM

See Political Parties; Reform

## THE PROMISED LAND

Mary Antin's (1881–1949) autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), was published as American fears concerning masses of immigrants entering the country were reaching a climax. In 1911 the Dillingham Commission issued a report to Congress that argued that immigrants entering the country from southern and eastern Europe were not as racially or culturally desirable as ones who entered from northern and western Europe. Against the commission's recommendation that immigration be restricted, Antin celebrated both the immigrant experience and the transformation being wrought in America by eastern European immigrants such as herself. Although she did not conceal the hardships of the immigrant experience, her example seemed to suggest that America could lift any willing person up and make him or her one with the country.

Excerpts of *The Promised Land* had first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the book became something of a sensation when it was published. Readers responded enthusiastically to Antin's assurance that the American dream did work and that even an immigrant Jewish girl from Poland could become a well-adjusted, patriotic American. Offering herself as an example of what was happening for millions of immigrants, Antin conveyed a hopeful message for the country's future. Her story describes how a girl born in a small, backward Jewish village on the edge of Russia becomes a prize-winning American author. She presents herself as an exemplary, but still typical, product of the U.S. public school system, proof that American institutions were absorbing its millions of immigrants and transforming them to create a better nation. One contemporary reviewer said that Antin's work "will do much to dissolve the gentle cynicism we take toward our so-called democracy," providing "encouragement as to our inherent possibilities."

For many, her life became a perfect example of how democratic institutions, and especially the public school, were working to renew America without changing its essential character.

For others, however, Antin's story obscured the dark side of the immigrant's American dream. According to this view, Antin is not the bold and optimistic immigrant who overcomes all obstacles to become a happy American but a Jew who had to sacrifice her cultural heritage in order to be accepted as an American. The educator Horace M. Kallen, who favored what he called cultural pluralism rather than melting-pot notions of American identity, describes *The Promised Land* "as the climax of the wave of gratulatory exhibition," the work of a "successful and happy" product of "the melting pot," who is more "self-consciously flattering American than the Americans" (p. 86).

### A NEW NOTION OF ASSIMILATION

Antin's story is more complicated than Kallen's formulation suggests—indeed its lesson was that she could be neither American nor Jewish without being both "American" and "Jewish." The writer Randolph S. Bourne recognized the complexity of Antin's story in his important 1916 essay "Trans-National America," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Bourne argued that in *The Promised Land* Antin does not merely adapt herself to America but also absorbs the America who reads her into her story. By positioning her assimilated audience so that they would identify with her story, Antin challenged what the notion of "assimilation" is conventionally understood to mean. Indeed, to the mixed dismay and approval of her audience, Antin wanted to convey not merely that "she" was one of "you," but that "you," whomever that you in her audience may have been, were also one with "her."

Antin signals her audience to the complexity of her Americanization in her introduction to the book, where she announces that her story is one of discarded selves:

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. . . . I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. . . . for *she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine. My life I still have to live; her life ended when mine began. (P. 1)

Throughout her autobiography Antin's narrative is driven by her recognition of her own "otherness," and the discrepancy that exists between the self of the story and the self that tells it. She creates the distance between her authorial self and her third-person self, between her Americanization and her prior

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