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PRESENTISM, PASTISM, PROFESSIONALISM

By Bruce Robbins

IT SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE, and probably doesn't, that cultural studies and Victorian studies have much in common. As George Levine observes in his overview of the earlier field over the past quarter century, "the founding of [the journal] *Victorian Studies*, in 1957 . . . was almost exactly contemporary with the publication of Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, one of the most influential books of the last half century" (136).¹ Williams's book was equally influential, indeed something of a founding text, both for Victorian studies and for cultural studies. And this makes sense. Williams's tough-minded but generous salvaging of the romantic anti-capitalist tradition from Burke through Arnold and all the way to Orwell, which did so much to reinvent Victorian studies for the left, might also be seen as an argument for the necessity of cultural studies, which went on to integrate the tradition of romantic anti-capitalism into its pluralized, anthropological view of culture and to extend it into the present.

The surprise is that Williams himself, like many of his readers, ended up taking a somewhat skeptical view of cultural studies. In "The Future of Cultural Studies," a lecture he delivered in 1986, Williams lamented its success in passing from a genuine vocation (Adult Education) to a mere discipline: "having got into the university, English studies had within twenty years converted itself into a fairly normal academic course, marginalizing those members of itself who were sustaining the original project" (153). It became "a professional discipline" (153). Then, in the 1960s, "a body of theory came through which rationalized the situation of this formation on its way to becoming bureaucratized and the home of specialist intellectuals. . . . The whole project was then radically diverted" (157).² This is similar to the reservation that George Levine notes, again in a discussion that is on the whole more positive than negative: "literary studies have become cultural studies" (144), Levine says, and they have done so on the basis of a body of theory, epitomized in the Foucauldian work of people like Mary Poovey and D. A. Miller, that "leads invariably to reading against the grain, and almost as invariably to professional advancement" (150).

Levine is right, I think, that the new Foucauldian-style Victorianism "needs to be altered to take into account its own professional dominance and the potential incoherence of its own positioning" (150). And living as we do in what the *Intellectual History Newsletter* has called "the age of cultural studies," (vol. 18, 1996) when the term has broken loose from the Birmingham Center and come to designate a style of inquiry that pervades

a wide range of fields and periods, we certainly have good motives for asking what we have gotten into.³ Nevertheless, it is curious to find the word “professional” popping up in these two critiques, as it is curious that the “Culture and Society” tradition which gave birth to cultural studies should also lead to a denunciation of cultural studies.

For better or worse, professionalism is no less characteristic of Victorianists than of practitioners of cultural studies. What then is the word doing in these critiques of cultural studies? One answer might be that, for all their reflexivity, practitioners of cultural studies tend to make large political claims for their practice, claims that assume a dramatic break, real or potential, with the institutions to which the practitioners belong — in effect, a break with history. Hence the temptation to put them back in a shared institutional and professional context. This is not inconsistent with another answer: that it is the critics of cultural studies who are making a break with history. On this view, the term professional would stand in for an abyss putatively separating cultural studies from the “Culture and Society” tradition: the abyss of the market. On one side would be the Burke/Arnold proponents of culture, who take their value, despite their often reactionary views, from their opposition to society, that is, the market. On the other side would be cultural studies, seen as professional in the precise if slightly displaced sense that it is complicit with the market, hence unable to wield the earlier tradition’s critical edge.

Note how often critics rely on the fatal assertion that, by its nature or historical moment, cultural studies expresses the force or logic of the market. This is implied, for example, when Bill Readings writes that “the emergence of Cultural Studies must be understood as a symptom” (102–03). Cultural studies observes phenomena like punk music and dress styles whose value, Readings goes on, is “not that of authenticity but of *marketability*” (121). If its object “no longer offers an authentic alternative to the market system but is now a form of access to the status of the commodity” (121), the field itself seems consigned to or defined by the same commodification. In *Cultural Capital* (1993) John Guillory said much the same thing. The decline of literature and the rise of cultural studies, he argues, correspond to changes in the market: “The professional-managerial class has made the correct assessment that, so far as its future profit is concerned, the reading of great works is not worth the investment of very much time or money. The perceived devaluation of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline in its *market value*” (46). In a more recent essay, “Bourdieu’s Refusal,” Guillory makes a more indirect and ingenious argument in the same direction. Acknowledging that Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital strangely allows for no reference to capitalism as a historical phenomenon, Guillory turns this into a virtue. He makes the argument (a counter-intuitive one, given Bourdieu’s attachment to a notoriously reductive model of self-interest) that Bourdieu deserves credit for “an aesthetic distance from the market itself” (386). It is thanks to this distance from the market, uncharacteristic in the present era, that Bourdieu can serve Guillory as an alternative to cultural studies. In suggesting that social action resembles art, both Bourdieu and Guillory make a case for the autonomy of the aesthetic.⁴

Whatever one’s position on the autonomy of the aesthetic, one should not confuse it with what might be called “pastism.” Presentism we know. A sin of which cultural studies is regularly accused, it is a temptation stemming from an asymmetry in all periodization: the present period, however defined, seems drastically different in kind from all others in that to study it is, at least potentially, to intervene in it. Hence the enticement to make exaggerated political claims for such study, even as the present redefines itself instant by

instant as the past. This is what I take Jonathan Arac to suggest in an essay on Macaulay as representative intellectual. Macaulay, for Arac, challenges the cultural studies claim to the special political value of action. Macaulay “seems to combine literature with politics, achievement in writing and in action” (192) in a way that “many critics now yearn for,” especially critics associated with cultural studies. Yet Macaulay is not a heroic icon for cultural studies. Is it the fact that the “Minute on Indian Education” is so ineligible as an object of political identification? But in historical perspective that would be true of most if not all actions. The history of actions in the past is irreconcilable with action as a present ideality, a criterion of value. So it is historical perspective itself that is effectively refused. In Arac’s subtle, tongue-in-cheek argument, this refusal marks the need for a version of (Arnoldian) critique that, if not quite disinterested, knows at any rate that it will not always be possible to find an immediate and politically satisfying outlet in something “to be done” (192).⁵

Pastism is the mirror image of presentism. It consists of confusing aesthetic or political value not with action in the present, but with pastness itself, pastness in the abstract, emptied of any particular content other than its putative difference (*any* difference) from a present that can always be depended upon to require criticism. It is what we see, in many arguments for the aesthetic or the literary, when temporal priority or obsolescence substitutes silently for a more difficultly definable transcendence or critical edge. If the present is the market, then the art and literature of the past are . . . something different. Or are they? The question defines a whole scholarly enterprise.

“The deepest and most fundamental feature shared by all the modernisms,” Fredric Jameson writes, “is . . . their hostility to the market itself” (304). Postmodernism, on the other hand, offers a “resonant affirmation, when not an outright celebration, of the market as such” (305). If the aim of any periodization is not to prove beyond question the validity of the dividing line it proposes, but rather to determine the shape of the controversy it will inevitably provoke, then Jameson’s periodizing act has been wildly successful. For even in disagreeing with him, as they often have, critics have generally accepted his notion that “the market as such” is indeed the decisive point to argue about, that it can and must serve as a demarcation or standard. They have accepted, that is, the premise that there exists, outside the realm of blatant ideology, such a thing as “the” market, and that this phenomenon is the central and definitive fact of twentieth-century society, hostile or affirmative reactions to which define the greater or lesser critical value of literature and criticism alike.

Critics on the right as well as the left tend to accept Jameson’s premise rather easily, and this ease offers immediate grounds for suspicion. It is a reminder that the discipline of criticism has been defining itself against the market for at least a century; for most if not all of this period, distinctions between critics of the left and critics of the right have in effect been subsumed into an anti-market politics shared by the discipline as a whole. It seems likely, then, that the discipline as a whole has a vested interest in preserving a certain conception of its antagonist, that this image of a barbaric market beyond the university gates may have been and may still be (to paraphrase Cavafy) a certain solution. It is thus necessary to ask how far this disciplinarily convenient barbarian Other does or does not coincide with the actual dynamics of social injustice. And if they do not coincide, if residual opposition to the market has in fact distracted and distorted disciplinary politics, then what might be the politics of an emergent discipline that no longer stakes its sense of itself on that opposition?

In recent criticism, Jameson's distinction between modernism and postmodernism is far from predominant. Modernism may have presented itself as viscerally hostile to mass, commercial society, but its actual relation to the marketplace, it is now affirmed, was less oppositional than complicitous. No one seems interested in denying the sway of the market even over modernism's littlest magazines and most avant-garde authors. No one who mentions the market at all seems to have any stake in recognizing limits to its power. In fact, who can be heard asserting that market forces were inefficient or inoperative *anywhere*? This thunderous lack of controversy suggests a general agreement that the market is in fact everywhere — that it has become, like textuality, narrative, and discourse, a term that will stand for “everything.” And like these other “everything” terms, it has also shaken loose from the present and drifted further and further back in time. Jameson's portrait of market-affirming postmodernism now covers not only modernism but earlier periods as well. Historical critics have argued again and again over the past decade that the writers of the decadent, naturalist, Victorian, and romantic periods, each of them long thought to be irreconcilably unfriendly to the market, were on the contrary unconsciously expressing the ethos of the market, if they were not consciously manipulating the market to their own advantage or marketing themselves. Pushing postmodern premises backward through modernism and beyond, critics have apparently been undoing the discipline's founding opposition between culture and the market, repeatedly and almost ritualistically showing that the first is simply the second in disguise.

So for example Louis Menand's book on T. S. Eliot reveals modernism to be nothing but “professionalism in art.” According to Eliot, Menand says, “the literature of the nineteenth century teaches by negative example the value of what he does not scruple to call literary professionalism: . . . ‘Conspicuously the Victorian epoch is anti-professional’” (123). According to more recent critics, however, literary professionalism was already well under way in the Victorian epoch. Working chronologically backward, we find Jonathan Freedman arguing in *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* that “the aesthetes and Henry James both consciously set themselves in opposition to the market economy, and particularly to the commodification of art and literature wrought by such an economy; both, however, participated in as they critiqued this process, largely through what we might want to call . . . the rise of aesthetic professionalism” (xii). This accords with Regenia Gagnier's description of Oscar Wilde, in *Idylls of the Marketplace* (1986), as “the professionalization of the aesthete” (12).⁶ In America, we have Walter Benn Michaels's analysis of naturalism, arguing (in Jameson's paraphrase) that “Dreiser's is a work of absolute *immanence* to the market” (201). Before Gagnier's period, we find Thomas Richards's *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (1990) and Daniel Cottom's *Social Figures* (1987), which aligns George Eliot with “the rise of the expert” (17). And before Michaels's period, we find Michael T. Gilmore's *American Romanticism in the Marketplace* (1985), which argues that “The American romantic period was the era of the marketplace,” the era that saw the transition from the “gentlemanly author who wrote for a like-minded group of equals” to “the professional who depended for a livelihood on sales of his books to an impersonal public” (1).⁷

What is so fascinating in this repeated structure of argument is the disparity between a general assumption apparently agreed upon in advance (the market is everywhere) and a need nevertheless to make the individual case (the market is *here*), which logically speaking should not require to be made at all. The resistance that in each case is overcome,

even while it is not believed in, is not I think a textual resistance so much as a critical resistance — criticism's unwillingness to give up its own critical edge, its resistance to give up resistance itself, the hostility to the market that formed literary criticism as a modernist discipline. If the case must, as it seems, be made again and again despite presumptive agreement about its conclusion, then either scholars are wasting their time — a hypothesis that cannot be rejected *a priori* — or, as I think more probable, there is reason to suspect a certain slippage or duplicity within the *concept* of the market, a non-identity between what is effortlessly assumed about the market in general and what is laboriously demonstrated about it in particular analyses.

This is a problem for cultural studies no less than for Victorian studies. It entails remembering that “the” market — free and unregulated — exists only on the level of ideology. In historical fact, markets have always required the support of states, both visible and covert, by coercion as well as consent, and have been both organized and limited by the kind of support they received. Take for example Mahmood Mamdani's account of how the British colonial policy known as “indirect rule,” which defined land as “a communal and customary possession” (51), also produced a historically specific relation between state and market in sub-Saharan Africa:

To the extent that this remained the case, land remained outside the scope of the market; to the extent that peasant households remained in customary possession of land, the sway of market forces was limited. Beyond that limit, nothing short of force could push labor and its products into the realm of the market. (52)

But here is a twist. “Rather than being its antithesis,” Mamdani concludes, “force came to be complementary to the market” (52). Hence the impossibility of understanding recent African history as a simple reflection of integration into “the” market — that is, without factoring in the mutual entanglement of market and state power.

If one examines how markets have been organized and limited by the activities of labor unions, the same principle is revealed. And — to get at last to my point — the same is true for professions, among them the profession (ours) from which the market can supposedly be named and resisted. It seems incredibly revealing that, in the quotations I cite above, the term professionalism is simply equated with the market, or taken as evidence of submission to the market. There is of course a certain truth in that, but there is also the denial of another truth: the collective political project of organizing, limiting, and controlling the market for skilled labor. Even the most cynical view of professionalism has to acknowledge that it functions to *control* the market. As the critics are so fond of repeating, that's what professionalism is there for. The so-called freeing of market forces has in fact meant their harnessing on behalf of some and at the expense of others. Professions, like unions, are imperfect but somewhat efficacious modes of doing that harnessing.

My conclusion is a simple one. Romantic anti-capitalism lives, both in Victorian studies and in cultural studies (for example, as I have suggested, in Foucauldian form). But its continuing convenience as a disciplinary rationale should not mislead us: it is too blunt an instrument for the analysis of either the nineteenth-century past or the soon-to-be twenty-first-century present. It helps only feebly in understanding the limits and possibilities of professional organization (including its relations with unionization, on which the

future of a majority of Victorianist and cultural studies professionals arguably depends). It helps very little in formulating either scholarly or political goals. If we are searching for scholarly and political bearings, we are more likely to find them by trying not to start with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down on professionalism or the market, but by looking, both back and forward, for usable pasts and presents.

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NOTES

1. For a brief but insightful discussion of cultural studies continuities from Arnold to Williams, see Gallagher.
2. Perhaps inevitably, Williams himself has been criticized for not passing over completely enough from English studies into cultural studies. Johnson, who succeeded Stuart Hall as head of the Birmingham Centre, suggests in "Culture and Historians" for example that Williams's concerns, "have remained too literary to deliver the full implications" of his own redefinition of culture as a "whole way of life" (59). In another essay from the same volume, "Three Problematics: Elements of Theory of Working-Class Culture," Johnson asks of Williams and E. P. Thompson both, "Why did they choose to write about their deepest political convictions through the presentation of significant persons, mostly long dead?" (212).
3. To watch another discipline wrestling with cultural studies, see Dominguez.
4. Poovey makes a similar argument about the dependence of economics on the aesthetic in "Aesthetics and Political Economy in the Eighteenth Century: The Place of Gender in the Social Constitution of Knowledge," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*. This would seem to be the logic by which Michael Foucault has become the Matthew Arnold of the cultural studies era. Foucault repeats Arnold's skepticism about narratives of progress, and he makes a similar turn to the moral authority of the Greeks against a perceived excess of Hebraism. And, less visibly but no less significantly, like Arnold he displays a militant anti-economism.
5. Arac describes Victorian studies as "an interdisciplinarily oriented historical field that has been largely eclipsed as an active force by the emergence of 'theory,' including women's studies" (192). So-called "theory," here still encircled by the telltale quotation marks, has escaped them only by going practical and becoming a major component in cultural studies — a field that, however controversial, does not seem to require quotation marks.
6. Gagnier sees an Arnold who "knew his market" (27). She argues that "Having discerned the commercialism of his society, [the dandy] offers himself as a product, he sells his aura" (82).
7. Another example is Wilson's *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era*.

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