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THE AMATEUR PROFESSIONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL AMATEUR

*Criticism, is, I take it, the formal discourse
of an amateur.* —R. P. BLACKMUR

THE ELECTION of Jesse (“The Body”) Ventura, a former professional wrestler and radio talk-show host, as governor of Minnesota was described by the *New York Times* as an example of “the lure of inspired amateurism.”¹ But of course American politicians have often tried to present themselves as amateurs, from George Washington to Ronald Reagan. Politics is a dirty business, and a professional politician an object of suspicion. Better to have a background in something, almost anything, else.

Like sports, for example. Former Senator Bill Bradley was a professional basketball player. Jack Kemp, a former housing secretary and candidate for vice president, was an NFL quarterback. Representative Steve Largent, the top draw for Republican fund-raisers in 1998, was a Hall of Fame wide receiver for the Seattle Seahawks. J. C. (Julius Caesar) Watts II

was a college football star. “Let’s hear it for the athlete as president!” said tennis player John McEnroe at a fund-raising rally in Madison Square Garden for candidate Bradley.²

Or consider, at least in the state of California, politicians from the world of entertainment. Not only Ronald Reagan but Sonny Bono, Clint Eastwood, George Murphy—and even, briefly, Warren Beatty. Or business. Think of the campaigns of Steve Forbes and Ross Perot, and even the trial balloon sent up by Donald Trump—all candidates who presented themselves as can-do men untainted by politics, bringing the power of their success in the marketplace to bear on national problems.

Disinterestedness seems to be an implied corollary of inexperience—or at least, inexperience *in the particular profession* to which the candidate aspired. Inexperience is just the experience the electorate often values most in its politicians. Amateur status, at least on the surface, seems to be a guarantor of virtue. Leave the rough stuff behind the scenes to the political operatives and the media consultants.

Still, it might be said, and quite properly, that politics is an unfair example. We don’t so much value amateur surgeons, for example, or amateur lawyers. We live in a world of professionals and professionalization, from big league sports to massage therapy. Even something apparently impossible to professionalize, like “motivational speaking,” is a high-paying job, performed by migrating professionals from other fields: Colin Powell, a retired army general and former chief of staff; Naomi Judd, a country-and-western singer; Terry Bradshaw, the former quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers; Mary Lou Retton, a gold-medal Olympic gymnast.

What I want to try to establish at the outset, though, is that, like the terms of any binary opposition, *amateur* and *professional* (1) are never fully equal, and (2) are always in each other's pockets. They produce each other and they define each other by mutual affinities and exclusions. One is always preferred to the other ("it's better to be an amateur"; "it's better to be a professional"), but the preference is not consistent over time. Indeed, what is most fascinating is the way in which these terms circulate to make the fortunes of the one rise higher than the fortunes of the other, while determinedly resisting the sense that one is always the necessary condition for the other.

Not only are they mutually interconnected. Part of their power comes from the disavowal of the close affinity between them.

Playing for Love

The apparent opposition of the terms "professional" and "amateur" is perhaps most familiar to us from the culture of sports, where until fairly recently "amateur" had a certain cachet and a certain association with the upper classes. The amateur was idealized as playing for "love"—love of the game, love of country, love of school. The professional, by contrast, played for advancement and for money.

In sport after sport, from football to boxing, the amateur/professional distinction was once built in as part of the class structure of the sport. Amateurs were gentlemen; professionals were upstarts, class jumpers, and roughnecks. Aristocrats

and gentry engaged in sporting events with the assistance of servants. Hunters had “gillies” or “beaters” to flush the game they shot, as well as gamekeepers to prevent poaching. Golfers were accompanied by “caddies,” paid attendants who carried their clubs.

Here are a few examples of how this divide has been negotiated:

- Rugby associations at the end of the nineteenth century took steps to root out the “veiled professional,” by which was meant the working-class player. “The Rugby name, as its name implies, sprang from our public schools,” remarked one amateur rugby player and cricketer. “Why should we hand it over without a struggle to the hordes of working-men players who would quickly engulf all others?” Under pressure from amateurs, the sport split into two, with different rules and spirits: English Rugby Union, “the game of the public schools, the universities and the professions,” and Rugby League, “deeply embedded in its northern working-class communities,” and becoming “an important form of working-class self-expression.”³
- Grace Kelly’s father, John B. Kelly, was an outstanding oarsman who won an Olympic medal in 1920. But he was banned from the Henley regatta that same year because he was a bricklayer, not a gentleman. He was therefore not an “amateur” according to the understood rules of the game. Some decades earlier, half the oarsmen entered in a regatta on the Schuylkill River near Kelly’s native Philadelphia had been banned because they were “not amateurs.” By the ruling of the nominating committee, any-

one who hoped to benefit financially from the regatta or competed for money was not an amateur—a definition that was ratified by a general meeting of rowing clubs in 1873. John Kelly, of course, earned a measure of revenge, since he made a fortune in the construction business and his daughter went on to become a princess. A road running along the Schuylkill River is now called “Kelly Drive.”

- At the turn of the century tennis was a signature sport of wealth and leisure. Amateur tennis tournaments sponsored by organizations like the All-England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club date from 1877, when the first Wimbledon Championship was held. The U.S. National Lawn Tennis Association was founded in 1881, and Australian, French, and Canadian amateur associations all developed within the next decade. Professional tennis began in 1926, and by the late 1940s the leading amateur champions were turning pro. In point of fact, the best players, while playing as amateurs, were already making a living from the game, since lesser tournaments had begun to pay them to show up and attract the crowds. In December 1967 the British Lawn Tennis Association unilaterally abolished the distinction between professional and amateur. A few proudly “amateur” events continued, like the Davis Cup, and some players resisted turning pro in order to represent their countries in such events. But by 1997, after years in which top United States players declined to compete, the U.S. Tennis Association was offering \$100,000 to those who would agree to join the team.

- Popularized by the most celebrated “amateur” sports competition in the world, the Olympic Games, figure skating has become a major viewer draw, rivaling pro football for television ratings. It’s difficult even for competitors to keep the lines between professional and amateur straight. Olympic gold medalist Tara Lipinski appeared in a show called *Skate, Rattle and Roll*, and former world champion Michelle Kwan in the U.S. Pro Championship. Both made money for skating, but Lipinski is no longer allowed to compete in Olympic or national championship events, while Kwan is aiming for the 2002 Winter Olympics. As a sports reporter observed, “In the world of figure skating, it’s more correct to say Lipinski is more pro than Kwan, rather than to say Lipinski is a pro skater and Kwan is an amateur.” And skater Elvis Stojko’s coach said simply, “There doesn’t seem to be much of a difference between amateurs and pros these days. . . . You just about have to be a Philadelphia lawyer to understand it.”⁴

The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, insisted in 1894 that his international association develop the spirit of amateur sport throughout the world. New bylaws adopted in 1976, however, allowed athletes to receive compensation while retaining their amateur status. Permissible forms of compensation included personal sports equipment and clothing, travel money, hotel expenses, and payment for what was called “broken time”—that is, time that would otherwise have been spent earning a living.⁵ So a competitor can in fact work full-time at his or her sport, while

retaining eligibility as an “amateur.” This is a good paradigm case of the “professional amateur.”

It may be worth noting that the amateur nature of the original games was to a certain extent Coubertin’s fantasy. Athletes in ancient Greece received prizes for winning and substantial benefits from their home cities; they became full-time specialists, like their modern-day counterparts. The breakdown of the binary between amateur and professional was, that is to say, always (or even always already) present within the categories themselves.

“The line between professional and amateur sports is a joke,” declared a sports and entertainment attorney. Amateur college athletes get free clothes from corporate sponsors. They practice not only the sanctioned twenty hours a week but another twenty “voluntary” hours (to get around National Collegiate Athletic Association guidelines). They have the use of student-athlete academic centers, financed by dotting alumni and equipped with state-of-the-art computers and other amenities. As a national newspaper observed, noting the contract signed between a television network and the NCAA for the right to broadcast the annual men’s college basketball tournament, “Amateurism has never been more lucrative.”⁶ In effect, these “amateurs” are professionals.

Let me point toward one further and familiar context—in addition to politics and sports—to frame this set of assumptions about amateur professionals and professional amateurs. For, as I hope is becoming increasingly clear, the two categories of amateur and professional, apparently distinct, are not

only mutually enfolding but mutually constructed and mutually policed. My third context, one particularly beloved of college professors (perhaps because we like to think it's closer to what we do), is the world of classic detective fiction.⁷

Sherlock Holmes is a professional amateur who is an expert in a dozen obscure sciences and plays the violin, while his friend Watson is a medical doctor with an avocation as an amateur sleuth. Holmes, we are told, discovers his calling by chance when, while visiting the home of a college friend during the summer vacation, he performs some offhand feats of deduction and is advised, "That's your line of life, sir." Recalling the moment many years later, Holmes confides, "that recommendation . . . was, if you will believe me, Watson, the very first thing that made me feel that a profession might be made of what had up to that time been the merest hobby."⁸ Holmes and Watson are in competition not so much with the criminals they pursue as with the police, in the person of the literal-minded and long-suffering Inspector Lestrade—the professional detective.

Agatha Christie's Miss Marple is not only an amateur but an "elderly amateur female sleuth," underestimated by professional crime solvers and by witnesses and victims. Her abject position (other characters in Christie novels often condescend to this little old lady with her balls of wool and her self-abnegating manner) is actually an excellent vantage point for observation (people expect old women to be snoops and gossips), and her *modus operandi*, the "village parallel" (reasoning by analogy), is paired with an unrelentingly low opinion of human nature. Miss Marple is an amateur professional.

Christie's other major detective, Hercule Poirot, is a retired officer of the Belgian Sûreté, also working free-lance, often in competition with the police, certainly not an amateur but also not simply a professional. With his Watson-like friend, the clueless Captain Hastings, he regularly outwits the authorities, and also protects his clients from unwanted publicity. Poirot is, in my terms, a professional amateur, in that he comes from a professional training but works as a free lance and for the pleasure of problem solving.

Mystery writer Dorothy L. Sayers offers a similar array of inspired amateurs, from the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey, whose hobbies, according to the stud-book, are incunabula and crime, to his protégée Miss Climpson, a middle-aged spinster whom he sets up as head of an unofficial detective agency composed entirely of women like herself—unmarried women who can quietly take up positions as secretaries, clerks, and paid companions and, virtually unnoticed by their employers, “detect” and investigate crimes. Wimsey's friend and brother-in-law Charles Parker is a middle-class Scotland Yard policeman with all the hallmarks of the professional: unimaginative, methodical, and dull.

Significantly, Poe's C. Augustus Dupin, the model for both Holmes and Poirot (and indeed, in a way, for Lord Peter), is explicitly a gentleman amateur and a collector: born “of an excellent, indeed of an illustrious family,” fallen in material fortunes, but possessing “a small remnant of his patrimony,” which he spends on books. “Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries.” It is in fact in an “obscure library in the Rue Montmartre” that he first encounters his amanuensis and benefactor. They are both “in search of the same very rare and very re-

markable volume” (which of course goes unnamed), and before too long they are sharing a mansion paid for by the narrator, who feels “that the society of such a man would be a treasure beyond price” and is “permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing” a suitable dwelling. The two friends spend their time reading, writing, and conversing—the activities of leisured gentlemen—until Dupin’s extraordinary analytical powers are put to the service of solving crimes. Again, Dupin’s foil is the professional, the prefect of the Parisian police, who, like his men, fails because he considers only his own ideas of what is clever, and searches assiduously in all the obvious and conventional places.⁹

Dupin’s aristocratic birth and mania for book collecting are symptomatic, for he is in fact a true descendant of the most honored tribe of amateurs, the *virtuosi*.

*The Virtuoso, the Dilettante, and
the Public Intellectual*

These days the word *virtuoso* has come to connote brilliance, ease, and perhaps a certain unseriousness. Like its more abjected companion, *dilettante*, it is associated with a kind of trifling or dabbling: the amusements of a rich man. (The normative virtuoso is still male, unless she is a musician or performer.) But in its original usage in the seventeenth century a “virtuoso” was not only a gentleman of leisure but also a learned person: a scholar, an antiquary, and a scientist.

Virtuosi were connoisseurs and collectors, gentlemen of wealth and leisure, identified with the aristocracy. Their in-

terests ranged from painting and antiquities, coins and shells, to—increasingly, as the century wore on—“natural philosophy,” or Renaissance science. The “virtuosi” were members of the Royal Society. But, it is crucial to note, their interest lay in the sheer pleasure of learning and the cultivation of reputation, whether for knowledge or for the possession of an enviable collection—not in what Francis Bacon would call “benefit and use.”

The word *virtuoso* was first used in England in 1634, by Henry Peacham in his book on *The Compleat Gentleman*, to describe those who possessed rarities like classical statues, inscriptions, and coins: “Such as are skilled in them, are by the *Italians* termed *Virtuosi*.” The virtuoso blended the traditions of the courtier and the scholar, to become, precisely, a gentleman-scholar. He was not only an aristocrat; he was also, often, eager to distinguish himself from the “intruding upstart, shot up with last night’s Mushroome” (the phrase again is Peacham’s). There was a “snob appeal” to being an English virtuoso in the seventeenth century: you needed money, leisure, ancient family (Peacham’s recipe for distancing yourself from the intruding upstarts was to study heraldry), intellectual curiosity, and someplace to store your collections, whether of shells, stones, coins, statues, or paintings. In the sixteenth century, the number of books owned by private individuals was, by modern standards, very small: except for clergy, only about a dozen members of the upper classes had more than a hundred.

In contrast, by the second half of the seventeenth century several country houses had rooms called libraries to accommodate their growing collections. And in addition to books,

the gentry and the nobility began to collect and display paintings (not only portraits but landscapes, seascapes, and mythological paintings), sculpture and statuary, coins, gems, and medals, and what were called “curiosities”: natural and man-made objects of interest from the remains of a dodo (collected and displayed by Elias Ashmole, the founder of the Ashmolean Museum) to the gloves of Edward the Confessor and “Henry VII’s dog collar.”¹⁰ These collectors, and Ashmole foremost among them, were “virtuosi” or “virtuosos.”

As Walter Houghton wrote more than fifty years ago, “we are misled by derogatory connotations which, in the course of time, got attached to ‘virtuoso,’ ‘dilettante,’ and ‘amateur,’ but which clearly did not belong to their primary and normal meanings; a ‘dilettante’ in the seventeenth century was still one who delighted—and it might be seriously—in learning and art.”¹¹ The eighteenth century was a century of dilettantes. In 1733–34 the Society of Dilettanti was founded as an exclusive gentleman’s club. Shortly thereafter Lord Chesterfield could characterize himself, however disingenuously, as a “humble dilettante” [*sic*] seeking information from a better-informed “virtuoso.” But by 1886 John Ruskin was dismissing someone as a “mere dilettante.”

To this historically interesting pair, the virtuoso and the dilettante, both borrowed from the Italian, we might add two more terms from European aesthetic culture that have come to connote amateur appreciation, the Spanish *aficionado* and, from the French *belles-lettres*, the *belletrist* or *belletrist*, a devotee of the literary arts. *Aficionado* has its roots in *afición*, affection (just as *dilettante* comes from *delittare*, to delight), and began as a term for the enthusiasts of bullfighting. The *aficionado*,

like the dilettante, is a “lover” or “amateur,” though he, or she, need not be a practitioner. A dilettante painter paints; an aficionado of swing music may or may not ever wield the baton. *Aficionado* still carries the sense of the knowledgeable enthusiast, with a certain sense of elite pleasure or offbeat expertise, as in the name of an expensive fan magazine like *Cigar Aficionado*

Belles-lettres, the French term for “fine letters” or “literary studies,” began as the equivalent for literature of *beaux arts*, “fine arts.” In its early uses in the eighteenth century, *belles-lettres* was simply equivalent to literature or even the whole of the humanities. In Edinburgh and Glasgow, after the 1707 Act of Union between Scotland and England, professorships were founded in the new vernacular fields of “rhetoric and belles lettres,” the forerunners of today’s study of “English.” Over the ensuing century, however, it became a term of vague disapprobation, something between appreciation and literary dabbling, especially when used as an adjective (“belletristic”) or an adverb (“belletristically”). Matthew Arnold described himself, whether disingenuously or not, as “an unlearned belletristic trifler,” and a nineteenth-century Oxford don wrote with satisfaction, in an account of his university’s academic organization, “we have risen above the mere belletristic treatment of classical literature.” By the 1920s literary critic John Middleton Murry was combining *dilettante* and *belles-lettres* in a consummate gesture of dismissal. “No amount of sedulous apery or word-mosaic,” he wrote, “will make a writer of the dilettante belletrist.”¹² Today, although there is some nostalgia, at least among book reviewers and arts critics, for “what used to be called *belles-lettres*,”¹³ as well

as signs of resurgence of “literary appreciation” in college courses and scholarly books, the phase *belles-lettres* itself has pretty much vanished from academic use. Occasionally it surfaces in a journal or a magazine to describe gifted writers who might also be called virtuosi; thus a newspaper headline could characterize Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer as “boy toys of belles-lettres.”¹⁴

In the United States, as in England, the gentlemanly amateur enjoyed a protracted ascendancy throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A good case in point, well documented by Timothy Duffy, was that of Charles Eliot Norton, businessman, essayist, social and literary reformer, Dante scholar, and ultimately professor of fine arts at Harvard University (1874–98).¹⁵ The prestigious Norton Professorship of Poetry (significantly encompassing “together with Verse, all poetic expression in Language, Music, or the Fine Arts, under which term Architecture may be included”) is named after him.¹⁶ Norton in the antebellum period was an “amateur intellectual” in the best sense, participating in activities from political theory to social reform, then the typical sphere of women. He belonged to a number of clubs and literary associations, like the Saturday Club, the haunt of Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, and Longfellow. The Saturday Club at that time—and indeed until the second half of the twentieth century—did not admit woman members. The very *absence* of women allowed for the pursuit of sympathy and the expression of affectionate bonds between men. Charles Eliot Norton was a typical “amateur” of his time in his romantic same-sex correspondences with overseas friends like John

Ruskin, who professed himself jealous of Norton's fiancée, later his wife.

Norton's work on art history stressed moral lessons, the emotional power of medieval architecture, and the rewards of leisure, pleasure, and friendship. His Dante translations included passages of digression and personal reflection. Then came the Civil War, and with it an emphasis on "manliness." The blurred gender of gentlemanly work was increasingly precipitated out into male and female spheres. Amateurism was no longer in vogue. Pleasure and self-education, the amateur intellectual tradition, gave way to a desire for professional "work." Norton traveled in Europe in the 1860s and '70s, and when he returned, he asked his cousin, Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, for a job. It would, he wrote to Eliot, "give me a definite status in the community, and this to a man of my age, without recognized profession, is of importance."¹⁷ In 1874 Charles Eliot Norton was appointed professor of art history.

Norton's work changed. He began to add footnotes and technical notations to his formerly more sociable and personal translations of Dante. He wrote that no woman had ever produced first-rate poetry or works of imaginative literature. He criticized the "feminine passionateness" and "feminine susceptibility" of his male literary friends.¹⁸ In short, the consummate "man of letters" had become a spokesman for "a more purely masculine definition of intellectual authority" and, in the process, had helped to separate what Duffy describes (paraphrasing Norton) as the "feminine dimensions of the life of letters" from the "organization of knowledge according to professional and objective standards."¹⁹ That

this attitude on the part of a professor of fine arts would rebound against the prestige of the humanities was an ironic but perhaps inevitable result.

Not coincidentally, American higher education was itself in these years undergoing a similar makeover, moving away from the conversational and the personal toward “science,” the specialization of knowledge, and a more “professional” notion of scholarship. Norton praised the founding of graduate schools, for example, because they would raise “the standard of professional learning and labour.”²⁰ The word *amateur*; and its derogatory spin-off, *amateurish*, were increasingly terms of ill repute.²¹ “Letters” and “literary” pursuits were associated with clubbiness and leisure, as well as with sentiment, gentility, and—invariably—femininity and women.

And what *of* women? While men were creating a “professional” sphere that distinguished and protected their work from gentlemanly (and womanly) amateurishness, was the same divide between amateur and professional in force for women? Ann Douglas writes that in nineteenth-century America both ministers and women were “professionals masquerading as amateurs,” pursuing careers rather than vocations.²² Unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century women accomplished in the arts were admired if they were amateurs, but the word *professional* carried with it the hint, and the taint, of immorality—just as *pro* today, in policeman’s slang, means “prostitute” (or, as we might translate it, “professional lover”).

The sequence offered by a dictionary of slang is symptomatic:

Pro. 1. A professional in any field, as distinct from an amateur, and mainly distinguished by superior and dependable performance. 2. A seasoned and dependable performer; expert; model of excellence (also *old pro* or *real pro*). 3. A prostitute.

(As the dictionary speculates, the latter usage might come from “*professional* reinforced by *prostitute*, or vice versa.”²³)

This doubleness—like the fact that in a number of languages “a public man” is a statesman while a “public woman” is a whore—tells us not only something about gender but also something about class, since it repeats, with some difference, the gentleman/amateur versus working-class/professional opposition we’ve seen in the history of sports.

It may be useful at this point to return to the specific terms of my topic, “The Amateur Professional and the Professional Amateur,” to explore how these confusing terms might be different, and what difference that difference might make. My title takes the rhetorical form of a chiasmus, but these two crossing terms may threaten to collapse into an identity. What *is* an amateur professional? And what is a professional amateur? How are they different from one another? And why should it matter?

Provisionally, let us say that an *amateur professional* is someone who is learning, or poaching, or practicing without a license. The tyro; the amateur sleuth, whether of crime or of scholarship. Or, more recently and perhaps more pertinently, a person trained in one field who writes, thinks, practices, and publishes in another.

The *professional amateur*, by contrast, is someone who glories in amateur status. Often the professional amateur is *not* a professor, at least not one with a conventional academic training. If he or she *is* one, the odds are that some pains will be taken to disavow that fact. The dabbler, the dilettante, the virtuoso, the “man (or even “woman”) of letters,” the book reviewer, the belletrist, the polymath. And that current favorite, the “public intellectual.”

The contemporary nostalgia for the category of the “public intellectual,” the sense that some magic, synthetic moment of the recent past has been irretrievably lost, was exacerbated by the death of the “New York Intellectual” Alfred Kazin. Thomas Bender, a consistently thoughtful commentator on this question, has offered one of the best working definitions of “public intellectual” I’ve come across. Bender suggested that Kazin’s accomplishments as a literary critic did not themselves suffice to make him a public intellectual. It was rather what he used literature *for*. “He used literature for larger purposes, to talk about subjects that mattered to contemporary society. His capacity to speak to more general and deeply felt worries, questions and aspirations, and to do so in a common idiom, made him a public intellectual.”²⁴ Obituaries loved to dwell on the serendipity of Kazin’s career; the story of his reading a book review on the subway, storming off the train in Times Square to confront the *Times* book review editor about it, and promptly being offered a job. This is the stuff of which legends are made. Kazin, we were reminded, wrote for magazines and newspapers, reviewed books for a living, and made the Reading Room of the New York Public Library his “home office.” He belonged to the natural aristocracy of

letters, achieved by merit, not by birth.²⁵ Although in his later years he taught at universities, he was not that now despised thing, “an academic.” Rather, he was forged in the working-house of thought of New York City, following in the footsteps of older (and WASPier) critics and intellectuals like Edmund Wilson, Dwight Macdonald, Lewis Mumford, and Malcolm Cowley.

What I want to stress here is the degree to which these “intellectuals” were, and still are, celebrated for their professional amateurism. It has become, in effect, a sign of realness, what I’d call an “authenticity effect.”

Hence the present-day nostalgia for Edmund Wilson and Kenneth Burke. Burke never completed college or took a degree. He was the music critic of the *Dial* and the *Nation* before turning to the field of literary criticism. He lectured at the University of Chicago for a couple of years, taught at Bennington, and held visiting professorships and lecture-ships in the United States and Europe, but he wasn’t a “college professor” in the ordinary sense of the term. Likewise, critics and editors like Mumford, Macdonald, and Wilson wrote essays, book reviews, journal articles, opinion, and polemic. They didn’t have university positions. They seem to have been free-standing, not tied to an institution, although the periodicals they edited were supported and sustained by institutions just as empowering as any professor’s bully-podium.

The nostalgia for these “last” or “lost” intellectuals is, like all nostalgias, produced retrospectively and structured like a fantasy. Its genius is that it brings together the mystique of amateurism with the grittiness of the self-made man, thus

magically banishing any taint of (a) hereditary privilege and (b) femaleness or femininity. Thus, this nostalgia solves an image problem: how to conceive of a literary intellectual, a “man of letters,” as a man.

It is interesting to note that complaints against the so-called “academic star system” of the 1980s and ’90s also break along the fault lines of professional amateur and amateur professional. When professors of the humanities and social sciences make headlines, it is often because someone thinks their salaries or lecture fees are too high. A star economics professor’s negotiations with two top Ivy League institutions were featured in the financial pages of the *New York Times*. Literary scholar Stanley Fish was described as “the finest example” of academics following the commercial model, since he “once wrote an essay in which he described the pleasure he had in tooling around campus in his expensive sports car.” An article in a major newspaper commenced with deliberate provocation, “Speaking fees. Are they academia’s dirty little secret?” But as a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, the luminaries brought to campus by student groups and compensated with five-figure speaking fees tend to be media celebrities, sports stars, talking heads, and politicians, rather than academics.²⁶ Nonetheless, in the public eye an “academic superstar” is often seen as a contradiction in terms. The phrase itself, now common in newspaper parlance, tells a story of commercialization and glitz. On the “love or money” scale (amateur vs. professional), such stars are seen to be in it for what they can get. They are poster professors—how can they also be “lovers” of literature, or art, or whatever it is they profess?

Perhaps the ultimate in professional-amateur training is the new, Ph.D.-granting “Public Intellectuals Program” at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. The president of the university declared in the program’s brochure that this degree in comparative studies will “help tomorrow’s public intellectuals find their path,” combining, he said in a flourish of humanist nostalgia, “the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*.” Designed by feminist critic Teresa Brennan, the curriculum of the PIP offers courses in ethnic conflict, technology, feminism, environmentalism, and (of course) the power of the media. It is significant that Brennan felt called upon to assure potential detractors that “this is not an anti-intellectual program.”²⁷ But despite the program’s merits, at least one skeptic doubted that “the Boca Raton intellectuals” would ever become a phrase to conjure with. The area codes of what he dubbed “publicity intellectuals” needed to be closer to New York, he thought, since “culture editors don’t take the time to delve too deeply into academe.”²⁸

Professional amateurs? Amateur professionals? Where the New York Intellectuals are seen—looking backward in time from a rose-colored distance—to have been somehow above the fray while in the thick of it, professors who “cross over” from academia to the public realm are subject, precisely, to a critique of their genuineness.

It may not always be possible to distinguish the amateur professional from the professional amateur. These are analytic categories, not transcendent truths, and I am introducing them precisely because they pose the problems of “difference within” that they do. But—and this is a key point—the degree to which individuals succeed in identifying them-

selves as the one or the other has a great deal to do with how seriously, and pleasurably, they are taken.

Getting Down to Cases

Here, then, are a few symptomatic examples.

- The success of a cultural icon like Sister Wendy, the nun who has “emerged from behind monastery walls” to become “the most unlikely and famous television art critic of our time,”²⁹ was predicated to a certain extent upon the romance of her “amateur” status. Discovered after she appeared in a BBC program on the National Gallery, Sister Wendy Beckett, with her trailing habit and her toothy smile, soon became a popular sensation. The apparent paradox (or titillating nonparadox) of a celibate nun in her sixties offering frank and admiring appraisals of sexual moments in great art, when combined with her straightforward, nonspecialist language, made for strong media appeal. One network official, seeing the original broadcast, remarked to his colleagues, “The only one we understood was Sister Wendy. Give her a series.” In Sister Wendy we have a member of a religious order who is celebrated, precisely, for her lay status, her amateur professionalism in the world of art.
- Oprah Winfrey’s status as arbiter of public literary taste was teasingly addressed by former *New York Times Book Review* editor Rebecca Pepper Sinkler in a piece called “My Case of Oprah Envy.” Goaded by Alfred Kazin’s grumpy descrip-

tion of Oprah's Book Club as "the carpet bombing of the American mind," and wondering whether she herself had retired "just before Winfrey's new TV book club would put all my colleagues in the lit crit industry out of work," Sinkler did the bold thing: she called Oprah and asked her. Turns out that, so far from wanting to usurp the role of book reviewers, Oprah depends on them, reading book review sections and looking for books that appeal to her. She sees herself as an advocate, rather than an "impartial" reviewer.

Oprah can make her own rules. Although she keeps the identity of a chosen book secret from the viewing public till the day the show airs, the authors and publishers are notified, wined and dined, and wafted to Chicago, where they appear on *Oprah!* with their hostess and hear her urge her viewers to "Buy the book!" And millions do. As Sinkler noted, "In marked contrast to rave reviews by keepers of the cultural flame, Winfrey's word moves the mass market."³⁰ In recognition, the National Book Awards ("the literary version of the Oscars") presented her with its fiftieth-anniversary gold medal, stressing that the medal was "being given for a literary reason, not a marketing reason," because Oprah "raises the cultural values of America."³¹ Who is Oprah Winfrey that she should have such power? Well, she's Oprah Winfrey.

Both of these examples—and I admit that they are, deliberately, both spectacular and tendentious ones—are *women* who have gained some authority in the *arts*. That one is a nun and the other an African American only underscores

the degree to which outsider status may actually undercut the fear of women. These are “exceptional” women in more than one sense. They are coded as “amateur professionals”—reaching over into a world of expertise centered in the humanities.

But, as we might perhaps expect, much of the action these days is on the frontier between the humanities and the sciences.

The word *scientist* was in fact coined on the model of *artist* in the 1830s, after the members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science had “felt very oppressively” the absence of such a term: “*Philosophers* was felt to be too wide and too lofty . . . ; *savans* was rather assuming . . . ; some ingenious gentleman proposed that, by analogy with *artist*, they might form *scientist*, and added that there could be no scruple in making free with this termination [-*ist*] when we have such words as *sciolist*, *economist*, and *atheist*—but this was not generally palatable.”³² A *sciolist* is a pretentious know-it-all; these are not, any of them, neutral analogies. The tone of this nineteenth-century account is both droll and witty.

So in linguistic terms *scientist* is a back formation from *artist*, just as *heterosexual* is a back formation from *homosexual*. In both cases the general category of analysis (knowledge, sexuality) comes under scrutiny, and the result is a pair of opposed terms, developed in relation to one another, where the one coined second is treated as if it had been coined first.

Here it may be well to remind ourselves that in the course of the nineteenth century, “science” had only gradually come to mean physical and experimental science rather than theology and metaphysics, and that the consequent division of knowledge had a class component at the universities, where a

classical education, the traditional education of a gentleman amateur, still outranked the vocational connotations of practical science. We might compare this with the supposed “uselessness” of a liberal arts degree today.

The lack of symmetry between professional and amateur, and between “male” and “female,” leads to some interesting developments on this borderline between scientist and artist.

One telling example is that fascinating midcentury figure C. P. Snow. Trained as a research scientist in the field of infrared spectroscopy at Cambridge’s celebrated Cavendish Laboratory, Snow, at the age of twenty-five, was elected a fellow of Christ’s College and seemed headed for a successful research career, until an awkward error—the announcement of a scientific breakthrough that then had to be recanted—led to his withdrawal from the research labs. Although he retained his scientific fellowship until 1945, the coiner of the phrase “the two cultures”³³ moved firmly and inexorably into the second, becoming a popular novelist and playwright, the author of the eleven “Strangers and Brothers” novels, and a controversial public figure and pundit. Snow’s critique of F. R. Leavis and others he dismissed as “literary intellectuals” was proffered by a writer best known at the time not as a scientist, but as a novelist who published middle-brow fiction about science. Leavis in turn lambasted Snow as someone who only “thinks of himself as a novelist” but who is, in fact, a very bad writer indeed, and moreover someone who doesn’t understand the very realm—academia—about which he has chosen to write.³⁴

Snow, we could say, was a professional who became a professional amateur. It was his “amateur” status, as well as his

history of professionalism in another venue, that gave him the authority to pontificate. Yet as a scion of the upwardly striving lower-middle class he attacked what he called “the traditional culture” (which he associated with gentlemen, literati, humanists and amateurs) on behalf of the rising “new class” of scientists, policy-makers and technocrats. In other words, professionals.

Consider now the case of naturalist E. O. Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner (for *On Human Nature* and *The Ants*), who wrote a book called *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. In *Consilience*, Wilson urged a return to the holistic view of knowledge, from molecular biology through ethics and theology, and embracing all the natural and social sciences, the arts and humanities.³⁵ The word “consilience,” meaning “the jumbling together of knowledge from different disciplines,” was coined in 1840 by William Whewell, the man who is said by some to have coined the word “scientist.” Wilson’s book was both praised as “an act of consummate intellectual heroism” and dismissed as “a narrow Procrustean bed of reductionism.” According to Wilson, “The central idea of consilience” was that “all tangible phenomena . . . are reducible to the laws of physics.” Thus, though many modes of knowledge could be combined, there was a hierarchy among intellectuals, with the scientist, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the top. Interviews with the genial and telegenic author appeared in numerous media outlets. He was described as “a towering figure in the study of the nature of human nature,” and criticisms of his earlier book *Sociobiology* were dismissed as misunderstandings or the carpings of the “radical left.”³⁶

But some readers took issue with the very premise of *Consilience*, as well as with Wilson's evidently limited views on cubism, genetics, and modern architecture. "It encourages us to see unity ahead of the evidence, to force the facts of observations into an arbitrary mould," said one. "And it invites specialists whose training has equipped them for a fairly narrow scientific niche to stray into fields for which they are ill-adapted."³⁷ The key point was, once again, the tension between generalist and specialist. "The central problems of art seem to have escaped Wilson's attention," wrote literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, arguing that "Wilson seeks not to reconcile the natural sciences and the social sciences, but to facilitate the absorption of the latter by the former and also to cede to the biological glutton the meaning of the creative arts and the direction of our moral and political actions."³⁸ Did Wilson's professional identity as a man of science (and a Pulitzer Prize winner) entitle him to generalize about all human knowledge and human nature? Had he earned the right to be a professional amateur?

Another scientist who has traveled far from his disciplinary home is Carl Djerassi, a chemist who played an important role in the development of the birth control pill. In his late twenties Djerassi was awarded a National Medal of Science and the Priestly Medal, the highest award given Americans for work in chemistry. He bought stock in Syntex, the "pill" company, gained control of it, and became a rich man. For a variety of reasons, both personal and intellectual, Djerassi began to write novels and, later, plays. Now he describes himself as an "intellectual polygamist." The only thing that keeps him awake at night, he says, is "a vicious review."³⁹

Significantly, one admiring account of a Djerassi play called it “not the creation of a fiction writer playing casually with a hot topic” but “real science, from the pen of a man who knows it well.”⁴⁰ In other words, Djerassi’s accomplishments as a professional chemist gave him authority and cachet as a writer. “Scientists don’t read much fiction,” says Djerassi, explaining why he feels somewhat estranged from both the literary and the scientific communities. “They think I have just given up on their field. The literary people look at me as a scientist who is now trying to hobnob. They make cracks like, ‘Gee, maybe I should go into the lab for a couple of years and see what kind of chemistry I can do.’ But I couldn’t have written my fiction if I didn’t steep myself in the scientific culture for my entire adult life.”⁴¹

So according to Carl Djerassi, as to C. P. Snow and E. O. Wilson, it is possible to go from a career in science to one in the arts. Scientists like Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins, and Stephen Hawking may well be regarded as a new genre of professional amateurs or “public intellectuals.” But can one go in the other direction? I’d say the jury is still out. Here are a pair of examples that may (or may not) seem to point in opposite directions.

Literary critic Elaine Scarry, a professor of English, published a long article in the *New York Review of Books* suggesting that the crash of TWA flight 800 was caused by electromagnetic interference, perhaps from military craft flying or floating in the area. The *Boston Globe* treated her outsider status with gingerly respect: “Scarry, though without personal expertise in technology or electromagnetic systems, has written on health and medicine.”⁴² Wire service reports led off with

the surprising nonfit between her job and the argument she was making (“A Harvard University English professor believes . . .”).⁴³ Scarry herself was quoted as telling a reporter that her interest in electromagnetic interference fit into “her academic specialty—cross-disciplinary studies, which she described as ‘looking at certain questions to see how they occur across different fields or disciplines,’ such as law, medicine, and science.”⁴⁴ An extremely polite and even courtly exchange of letters between Scarry and James Hall, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, was published in the *NYRB*, in which she said it was an honor to be in correspondence with him and he said he would get right onto this.

Scarry was in this case clearly writing as an amateur professional, not a professional amateur. She had done her homework, as the voluminous footnotes attested. She wanted to be taken seriously as someone who could speak science. It wasn’t “love” but moral and political urgency that motivated her argument. And yet there were skeptics who wondered what standing she could possibly have in this matter.

The disequilibrium between science and literature was well illustrated by the now-notorious Sokal affair, in which a physicist submitted an article full of high-sounding nonsense to the unsuspecting editors of *Social Text*. The editors bought the parody, and were exposed, gleefully, in *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life*. Alan Sokal and his Belgian coauthor, Jean Bricmont, proceeded to write a book, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*, in which they claimed to be exposing an even bigger hoax: the misuse of scientific terms and paradigms by French theorists like Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Deleuze and Guattari.

Of the many things that could be said about this risible, irritating, and self-important event, I want to restrict myself to one: the observation that humanists playing with scientific terms and concepts are often seen as less noble, and more ridiculous, than scientists playing with cubism and theology. Scientist E. O. Wilson was a consummate intellectual hero—or at least a sanctioned amateur professional, whose broadest and most “humanist” pronouncements (and TV appearances) qualified him also for professional amateur (or “pundit”) status. Steven Weinberg, winner of a Nobel Prize for his work in particle physics, also received the Lewis Thomas Prize, awarded to the researcher who best embodies “the scientist as poet.” It is difficult today to imagine a major prize for the obverse talent, the embodiment of “the poet as scientist.”⁴⁵ Humanist intellectuals like Lacan, Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray are not regarded as provocative readers of science but as imposters, spouters of “fashionable nonsense.” The split between amateurs and professionals reproduces itself in the relative standing of fields: scientists can become humanists more easily than humanists scientists, in part because the humanities themselves are perceived as closer to “love” than is science.

The Academic and the Journalist

It’s notable that most of the figures I have cited above, including those who earn their living as university professors, came to public attention not through their scholarship but

through the media, and especially through journalism and network television. One of the things professional amateurs do these days is have comfy chats with Charlie Rose. Why, then, is *journalistic* such a dirty word in academic circles, and *academic* such a term of opprobrium among journalists? In each case, there is almost no worse thing you can say. Each is the abject of the other.

The truly divided “two cultures” of our time may prove to be not, as C. P. Snow initially suggested, the humanities and the sciences—now approaching one of their periodic rapprochements, through the humanistic fascination with evolutionary psychology, fractals, cybernetics and the history of science on the one hand and the popular prestige of “the scientist as poet” on the other—but rather journalism and academia. The fact that the former group is populated to a certain extent by disaffected members of the latter, and that the latter secretly aspires to be as “mainstream” as the former, only exacerbates the periodic tension between the two.

For a scholar to describe a scholarly book as “journalistic” is to say that it lacks hard analysis, complexity, or deep thought. For a journalist to describe a scholarly book as “academic” is to say that it is abstruse, dull, hard to read, and probably not worth the trouble of getting through. Yet in their heart of hearts, scholars long for public and even popular recognition. The Holy Grail of the “crossover book,” one that impresses one’s colleagues but also appeals to the intelligent general reader and perhaps even makes the best-seller list, is a recurring dream in the profession. And in their heart of hearts, for all I know, journalists may long to

teach courses at a university and do months of research in libraries and archives. Certainly many journalists avail themselves of sabbatical opportunities to spend time on university campuses as fellows or visiting scholars, and many science reporters pursue in depth the subjects they touch on in their columns. Yet as in Snow's famous description, the journalist and the scholar sometimes seem divided by "a gulf of mutual incomprehension."⁴⁶ Where then did things go wrong between them?

In part this is merely a matter of the differentiation between neighboring fields, the overestimation of what distinguishes them—what Sigmund Freud memorably termed "the narcissism of minor differences." But the tension between journalism and academia also has to do with the very different goals of the two kinds of writing—goals that are misunderstood when they are described merely in terms of simplicity and complexity, or clarity and difficulty. It is not that journalists write in a style that is simple and clear (though some do) and that scholars write in a style that is complex and difficult (though some do). Some journalists use complex language, and some scholars' writing is both simple and clear (which does not necessarily mean that it is readily comprehensible to someone outside the field). The difference is rather that the journalist of ideas attempts to explain and describe them, while the scholar of ideas attempts to think through them, to enter into and advance an ongoing intellectual discussion. Every scholarly move is part of a dialogue. To hear only one side of the conversation and take it for the whole is almost inevitably to find the current speaker's contribution unaccountable, dogmatic, or slightly ridiculous.

A telling case in point here is the “Arts & Ideas” section in the Saturday *New York Times*. The columnists engaged in this brave venture have set themselves a daunting task, since one of the most difficult of intellectual challenges is to describe a complex concept in terms simple enough for the layperson to understand. All too often such simplifications run the risk of losing the very nuances and counterintuitive implications that make the original idea important and valuable. Thus, for example, I can read accounts of paleontology or string theory, topics about which I know nothing, and come away from them feeling (perhaps quite falsely) well informed. I don’t know enough to know where the popular account may have gone wrong. But when an article sets out to explain something I do know about, something perhaps basic to my own work, I often feel frustrated by the writer’s flattening-out of three-dimensional ideas. It may be a question of genre: what is lost in translation between academia and journalism is of particular interest (only) to people working in the field itself.

This is partly a matter of how many “bounces” you can allow an idea to have. The “one-bounce” idea is appealing but often false. “Deconstruction is nihilistic.” But hot-button words like this are what I might call “two-” or even “three-bounce” topics, which require an intellectual set-up in order to seem anything but foolish or willfully perverse. It is often said, for instance, that deconstruction does not “believe” in truth. But if deconstruction were to *affirm* that truth does not exist, then that statement would pretend to know the truth about truth, and thus be an *example* of the very thing deconstruction questions. Media accounts of deconstruction al-

ways attribute *negative* certainties to it, rather than describing deconstruction as analytical work performed upon the very *possibility* of statements of certainty as such, whether positive or negative.

One of the strategies initially adopted by the Arts & Ideas page was what might be termed prophylactic, protecting or guarding its readers against too unmediated an encounter with scholars. Thus, for example, a promotional newsletter distributed to *Times* subscribers promised them a steady source of information about “The (Next) Big Idea” in academic life but was careful to put distance between the *Times*’s own lively reports and boring scholarship. “You won’t find the word ‘scholar’ in any of our headlines,” it promised.⁴⁷

Another strategy might be described as ethnographic, since it consists of articles describing the strange folk and stranger folkways of that curious land called “academia.” The most exuberant of these articles fall roughly into two types, the celebrity interview and the silly-trendy-conference-and-research-field. The celebrity interview often has a cozy culinary component, the identifying mark of “genuineness” in journalistic accounts. Thus we find lead sentences like “Jacques Derrida, perhaps the world’s most famous philosopher—if not the only famous philosopher—was eating barbecued chicken with a knife and fork at the Polo Grill.”⁴⁸ Or, “[Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick, 47, was sitting in the shadows at a restaurant in midtown Manhattan and trying to explain ‘queer theory,’ the academic field she has helped create.”⁴⁹ Sometimes the humanizing detail is sartorial: “the amiable

[Stephen Jay] Gould, with a pair of glasses hung around his neck, hit upon Karl Marx's funeral . . . the year 2000 . . . and Yogi Berra's wisdom, before finally alighting on his thesis: that people, especially scientists, are terrible at predicting the future."⁵⁰

As for articles in the spirit of "What'll they think of next to waste your tax dollars and your kids' tuition money on?" these seem largely gleaned from old Modern Language Association programs and announcements of future conferences. I recall one article that seemed to be entirely based on conversations with scholars who hadn't yet given their papers but had announced their paper titles, and had been contacted—and elevated to A&I "queen for a day" status—on the basis of this promise of future work. There was the "Martha Stewart studies" article and the "shopping studies" article and the "millennial studies" article.⁵¹ In response to such articles it might be said that the risk of appearing absurd at times is necessary to the scholarly enterprise. If scholars always stayed within the bounds of prudence and common sense, many original ideas would be lost.

There are several models for the *Times* A&I page. One is the MLA program and the annual joke articles derived from it; a second is the eighties wave of "aren't they silly" tenured-radical books by critics of the state of academia; and the third, a more serious interrogator of the profession and its foibles, is *Lingua Franca*. Founded in 1990 as (in its own words) "a lively, engaging magazine about academic life—the working conditions and prominent personalities, the theory jousting and administrative maneuvering, plus news about

tenure appointments and the business of academic publishing,⁵² *Lingua Franca* filled a market niche whose existence many might have doubted. Described by its editor as “the best bathroom reading” a humanities junkie will ever find, *Lingua Franca* aimed, curiously enough, to broaden the views of the same “narrow specialists” targeted by critics of the academy. “Given the structure of the academic world, most people are forced to specialize in very narrow areas,” said publisher Jeffrey Kittay. “We’re trying to give academics exposure to all the interesting stuff out there so they won’t feel so pigeonholed,” added another editor.⁵³ Skeptics assumed that the general public would stay away in droves, but the magazine prospered (to the extent that magazines do), winning a number of awards, publishing a tell-all guide to graduate programs, and profiling both celebrity professors (Slavoj Žižek, Elaine Showalter) and academic obsessions (body building, fashion, jazz: “The word outside the academy,” read one symptomatic pull-quote, “is that jazz is too important to leave to academics”).⁵⁴

Lingua Franca was, indeed, almost irresistibly readable. It was “the *People* magazine of Academia,” one staff writer told the *Washington Post*, and was devoured the same way, “on the sly and with great pleasure and guilt.”⁵⁵ Alumni and alumnae of its editorial staff found their way into mainstream magazine publishing, and also into the world of book reviewing. Newspapers began to pick up the sillier snippets within even serious pieces and recycle them as sure-fire laugh lines, reinventing that old favorite, the “absentminded professor,” as his spectral opposite, what might be called the “presentminded professor,” a creature so concerned with ward-

robe, “trendiness,” and academic style that real scholarship was sure to be left behind.

It’s not without interest that once again the crossover was only seen as legitimate in one direction. For a journal about academics to resemble *People* was new and ground-breaking. For MLA president Elaine Showalter actually to write for *People* earned her scorn in a number of quarters, not excepting (you guessed it) *Lingua Franca*.

Headers and Footers

The slippery borderline between being too professional and being too amateur can also be traced to something as simple and as telling as the status of the footnote. In his feisty polemic about the Modern Language Association, *The Fruits of the MLA* (published in the fateful year 1968), Edmund Wilson attacked the pedantry of scholarly editions of literary classics, which (he claimed) took the pleasure out of reading. Extensive footnotes, variants, canceled passages, and erasures spoiled the reader’s pleasure in the text. Wilson’s friend Lewis Mumford had compared footnote numbers and other apparatus in the text to “barbed wire” keeping the reader at arm’s length. Wilson concurred, ridiculing the 89 pages of introductory material and 143 pages of notes that accompanied a scholarly edition of *The Marble Faun* (“This information is of no interest whatever”). Wilson mocked the professors who were reading Tom Sawyer backward, in the spirit of the Hinman Collating Machine, so as to be able to track textual variants without being distracted by the plot or

the style. The professionals had ruined the experience of reading for pleasure.

Gordon Ray, president of the Guggenheim Foundation, responded (in the preface to an MLA booklet called *Professional Standards: A Response to Edmund Wilson*) by noting that Wilson's critique "derives in part from the alarm of amateurs at seeing rigorous professional standards applied to a subject in which they have a vested interest." Ray saw such tensions in "field after field from botany to folklore" and concluded, "In the long run professional standards always prevail."⁵⁶ The battle between professionals and amateurs had (again) been joined.

The shibboleth of the footnote—a footnote fetish, if you will—has continued to be a marker of the professional/amateur divide. Newspaper and magazine journalists, of course, never use them. Instead they use "fact checkers" behind the scenes and—by the dexterous employment of these dedicated offstage professionals—keep their own writing pristine and unadorned. This creates what we might call "the knowledge effect": by erasing any trace of informants or sources, oral or written, the journalist seems self-sufficient, all-knowing, independent and whole. On the other hand, among scholars in many disciplines, footnote citation indexes are used as a measure of comparative value. The more you are cited, the greater your influence. "In the marketplace of ideas," says Jon Wiener, "the footnote is the unit of currency." As a result "citation indexing becomes a basis for promotion and tenure, for grants and fellowships."⁵⁷ So both footnotes and their absence can produce the knowledge effect, de-

pending upon the genre. And in some humanities fields scholars can be measured by the size of their footnotes—the mark of professional display.

In an article called “Where Have All the Footnotes Gone?”⁵⁸ first published in the *New York Times Book Review*, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb lamented the sorry state of footnote practice in the field of history and also in the publishing business more generally. A growing number of scholarly books, she noted, “have no notes at all, [and] even pride themselves on their lack of notes.” Urged on by publishers with crass commercial motives, who want to “make scholarly books look more accessible and thus more marketable,” some eager authors, scenting royalties, have acquiesced in this practice, “hoping to attract innocent readers by hiding the scholarly paraphernalia.” Himmelfarb deplores the end-note, which banishes the note material to the back of the book, creating an uncomfortable experience for the reader and, worse, a “demoralizing effect on the author,” who soon begins to exhibit laxity in footnote form, then laxity in footnote content, and finally, in a total capitulation to fallen standards, lapses into “contempt for any kind of notes, ultimately dispensing with them altogether.”

Despite my tone here, which mirrors Himmelfarb’s rather playful, if also heartfelt, prose, and despite the fact that she and I might not see eye to eye on some questions of politics and culture, I agree with almost everything she says about footnote loss. But I have also observed the undeniable fact that in some disciplines—literary criticism, for example—the absence of footnotes is a bold, in-your-face declaration of pro-

fessional amateurism in its most magisterial form. The book without footnotes trumps the merely “academic,” footnoted book, transcending ordinary scholarship and the presumed “political” or “careerist” or “specialist” concerns of professionals.

Learning from a Pro

A suggestive case in point is Harold Bloom’s book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, one of the few genuinely successful crossover books of our time. The book was described by *New York Times* theater critic Mel Gussow as “dutifully unscholarly, with no footnotes and not even an index.” It’s a book intended “to be useful to common readers and common playgoers,” said its author, who described himself as a “pure esthete,” as distinct from the “hideous ideologues” who inhabit present-day academia. “I don’t want a single person, with a few honorable exceptions, who ostensibly teach Shakespeare to even look at the book,” he told Gussow.⁵⁹ It is striking, however, that his publishers were betting, or wishing, the other way, paying for a full-page ad on the inside cover of the PMLA program, a publication read almost exclusively by professors and graduate students of literature.

Harold Bloom is a theorist I greatly admire. I was his colleague (though not his student), and he is for me a valued “old acquaintance” (a phrase he would recognize—it’s Prince Hal describing Falstaff). I don’t take issue with his book, which I read and enjoyed, but rather with the two

claims, reported in Gussow's article, that (1) someone interested in political and philosophical criticism of Shakespeare's plays can't also be a "pure esthete," and (2) that the way to demonstrate such purity is to omit any scholarly apparatus, including an index.

This kind of approach to Shakespeare is not, of course, without precedent. In the first part of the twentieth century, overt and determined protestations of amateurism by literary scholars set a certain gentlemanly tone. For reasons that may have to do with popular notions about the universal humanity of the author, these protestations seem particularly in evidence when the topic is Shakespeare. "Ladies and Gentlemen: I am no Shakespearian scholar, and if I have ventured, at the invitation of the Academy, to accept the perilous honor of delivering its Annual Shakespeare Lecture in succession to lecturers, and in the presence of listeners, whose authority on this subject is far greater than mine, it is for a definite reason." So classical scholar Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, commenced his remarks on "Hamlet and Orestes" before the British Academy in 1914.

"A critic who makes no claim to be a true Shakespearian scholar and who has been honored by an invitation to speak about Shakespeare to such an audience as this, feels rather like a child brought in at dessert to recite his piece before the grown-ups," began novelist, medievalist, and Christian essayist C. S. Lewis when he addressed the same body in 1942. "The method is completely open, unprofessional, unassuming," writes John Bayley in praise of Oxford Professor of Poetry A. C. Bradley's famous lectures on Shakespearean

tragedy, first published in 1904. “He talks about Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s characters as if he were discussing friends or colleagues, or the people he has met with in a memorable novel.”

Something of this magisterial “unprofessionalism” informs Bloom’s views of Shakespeare. But it marks as much of a change from his early intellectual style as he himself once proudly differed from the Oxford dons, the Yale mandarins, and, in his own phrase, the “neo-Christian cabal” of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics.⁶⁰

Bloom is, of course, a master of self-reinvention. To see just what this entails, let’s go back a little in history.

Starting in 1973, Harold Bloom, who had begun as a scholar of rebellious Romantic poets like Shelley and Blake, published a series of studies of English poetry in which he argued, compellingly and complexly, that all strong poets rebel against their precursors by rewriting them. The relation between one poet and another could be described through certain “revisionary ratios,” which Bloom denoted, deliberately, by uncommon words with Latin or Greek roots: *climamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis*, and *apophades*.⁶¹ The younger Bloom was—though he liked to deny it—an important member of what was referred to as “the Yale School,” and his writing style was dense with literary allusions and difficult terms.

Jerome McGann observed more than twenty years ago that the obscurity of Bloom’s prose displayed “rhetorical conventions [that] seem to be the common property of a small club whose only permanent member is Bloom himself.”⁶² Elizabeth Bruss, in a largely admiring analysis of Bloom’s achieve-

ment in “writing theory as a form of literature,” noted his “thickly encrusted allusions” to fellow Yale professors Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man.⁶³ Bruss points out that in *A Map of Misreading*, which Bloom published in 1975, the revisionary ratios “become notoriously difficult to apply. In fact, they are (perversely, but one suspects deliberately), both ill-defined and over-defined.”⁶⁴ Bruss astutely characterizes both the historical moment and the critic’s dilemma, for in this period, the early and midseventies, there was in literary studies

a highly charged atmosphere of competing schools and credos, of rapid accelerations and more-avant-garde-than-thou positions wherein the wrong allusion, a misplaced phrase, or a taboo word can expose one to contemptuous dismissal or charges of heresy. The overlay of citations and qualifications, the code words that fill so many recent essays (and not Bloom’s alone) are a function of this need for prominently displaying one’s sophistication. In such an atmosphere and amid such obvious evidence of intimidation and vested power, it [was] difficult for Bloom . . . to assume [his] former posture as [a] rebellious outsider. . . . [He] lived to see his own most cherished subversions become the elements of a new orthodoxy—an awkward circumstance that may have helped to push [him] toward greater extravagance and, ultimately, into adopting a new kind of theoretical discourse with a more ambiguously fictive status.⁶⁵

The fiction to which she refers is Bloom’s “gnostic fantasy,” *The Flight to Lucifer*, published in 1976.⁶⁶ But ultimately he chose a different path, rejecting his disciples by embracing

his sometimes distant and dead precursors, and, in a gesture of willed and scornful disinheritance, by refusing to read those now middle-aged critics who had profited from reading him. The stage of “*daemonization*” (“to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work”) was easier to achieve when the “earlier” work was, to use another Bloomian term, “belated”—when those critics he was responding to were, in fact, his own students, stepstudents, or grandstudents. The author of *The Anxiety of Influence*, which taught the (Oedipal) necessity of “swerving” from the path of prior giants, is now “swerving” from his *own* priority, excoriating current-day intellectuals for exactly the kinds of coinages, allusions, citations, and critical density that once marked his own prose.

What is zealously preserved in Bloom’s rejection of footnotes and scholars is a certain attitude. “Rebelliousness” and “outsider” status are retained, as is even a measure of “subversiveness,” now put to the service of pathos. His own terminology can be set aside, since it is now seen to interfere with “pure” aesthetic response or connoisseurship. Instead of Bloom the romantic Young Turk, tilting at the Establishment, we have Bloom as Falstaff, upbraiding the cold and calculating Prince Hals of a successor generation. If younger scholars, following Bloom’s own example, coin or borrow terms from philosophy and rhetoric, he will decry them as technocrats and fakers and write instead in the magisterial and humanistic language of the predecessors against whom he once led the charge.

In short, Bloom has performed a perfectly and brilliantly “Bloomian” act, taking himself—his former self—as the

strong precursor. He will be both enfant terrible and éminence grise. Like Bottom, he will play all the parts.

Bloom does amateurism like an old pro. It's the transumption of his old self that produces the most empowered amateur.

This is a virtuoso move.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Ultimately, the twin phenomena of Bloom's book on Shakespeare and the Oprah Book Club draw attention to a key topic in this question of professional amateurs and amateur professionals: the old, and new, question of love that is crucial to the field of literary criticism. I want, therefore, to close by briefly taking note of a suggestive shift of emphasis within the humanities that bears directly on the matters we have been discussing: the so-called "return to aesthetics" and connoisseurship.

There has been much heralding of the return to aesthetics lately, accompanied by pull-quotes that make it seem more endangered and endangering than it is. Aesthetics is "the forbidden subject," "the bad child no one wants to talk about," two scholars told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.⁶⁷ This may once have been the case; there was a time not too long ago when the mark of the professional literary scholar was an engagement with history or politics or the sociology of literature rather than with what, in a yet older tradition, was called "appreciation." Resistance to the discussion of aesthetic plea-

sure in the classroom seems to have been premised in part on the idea that such pleasure bordered on “connoisseurship,” an ideal of the amateur elite. And if scholars could disagree about the aesthetic quality of a work of art without one of them being right and the other wrong, if value was plural and descriptions of beauty or pleasure could be contradictory, what then was the authority of the critic, or of the work of art?

On the one hand aesthetic appreciation was too easy, and on the other hand it was too hard. In any event, no matter how personally moved by an art object or a literary passage the critic might be, he or she had considerable professional incentive for setting aesthetic judgment aside in favor of social, historical, or cultural analysis. But the “forbidden subject” is now on everyone’s lips, and the “bad child” is—surprise!—the prodigal returned. Almost everyone wants to talk about it: a concern with aesthetics and ethics, the reappearance of certain notions of “value” and “values” on the literary scene, has preempted the stage, moving critical attention away from a previous decade’s concerns with politics and cultural identity. It is worth noting that this quite natural—and, indeed, again, inevitable—turn of the wheel, which has been repeated in every literary-scholarly generation (remember the move from the Old Philology to New Criticism?) is closely connected to the “love” question that always hovers so closely (like a pesky putto) around both “amateur” and “literature.”

When emeritus English professor Wayne Booth, the author of important books on rhetoric and fiction, writes one on “the glories of amateurism” called *For the Love of It*, extol-

ling in terms a reviewer called “unembarrassed” and “effusive” the pleasure of playing chamber music with friends, Booth’s authority as a literary scholar is what gives credence—and piquancy—to his amatory confessions.⁶⁸ “For more than 40 years he has been regularly practicing the cello, creating unusual counterpoint to his work as a teacher of rhetoric, irony, and fictional narrative,” wrote music critic and book reviewer Edward Rothstein. Rhetoric, irony, and fiction are here offered, unemphatically but unmistakably, as elements situated at the other end of the scale from the passion and lost “idyllic” romanticism of “the amateur spirit,” exemplified by the “grown men weeping at Haydn and sober scholars sobbing with Beethoven” that are lovingly chronicled in Booth’s book.⁶⁹ (This is not Booth’s own view, necessarily; his “heroes” are professionals who play with amateurs for pleasure. “Pro-amateurs,” he calls them.)

Amateur status has, indeed, become almost *de rigueur* as a claim for some practicing literary professionals. Author, critic, and editor Wendy Lesser published an engaging book of essays called *The Amateur* in which she declared herself to be an “eighteenth-century man of letters, though one who happens to be female and lives in twentieth-century Berkeley.”⁷⁰ To her, amateurism meant the possibility of hanging out in coffeehouses and theaters, and refusing “to have arbitrary lines drawn between things: between old masterpieces and contemporary works, between art and the rest of the world, between criticism and conversation.” What’s fascinating here is that this is a perfect description of what some scholars within the university call cultural studies, a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity that has, from the time of Mon-

taigne, always characterized the speculative essay. Yet the arbitrary line Lesser so rightly wishes to avoid drawing between categories in the liberal arts is one she is still willing to draw in terms of the amateur and the professional, deciding (in the admiring phrase of one reviewer) to “steer clear of the academic profession” in order “to pursue what she loves.”⁷¹ Is the longtime editor of the *Threepenny Review* really an amateur? Or is the word *amateur* the best tactical way of describing, and insulating, a certain kind of speculative writing—a kind of writing that Lesser does not principally associate with professional scholarship? As she would surely acknowledge, this kind of writing has been long favored by, and is again newly popular among, some of the most widely read and respected members of the academic profession.

“Criticism,” wrote R. P. Blackmur in 1935, “is, I take it, the formal discourse of an amateur.”⁷² The self-deprecating qualifier, “I take it,” is itself a genial gesture in the direction of amateurism. Blackmur’s own “amateur” status was certified by his training, or rather his lack of it. He had no formal education after high school, yet became a professor of English at Princeton and a key theorist of the New Criticism. We might compare him to other distinguished scholars and teachers, such as Harry Levin, who was a Junior Fellow at Harvard and had no Ph.D. The *absence* of the degree was in this case a sign of high status.⁷³

Hazard Adams describes Blackmur’s dictum (“Criticism is, I take it, the formal discourse of an amateur”) as a “well-known ironic phrase” and glosses it away: “he does not mean that the critic should be a dilettante, but that he should be the

opposite of a ‘professional’ insofar as he is not ‘professing’ a doctrine.”⁷⁴ But Blackmur’s famous phrase is the opening salvo of an essay with a title that is perhaps equally ironic: “The Critic’s Job of Work.” The “well-known ironic phrase” about the critic as amateur is a knowing gesture of disavowal, a statement in fact about the profession and the professional responsibility of the critic. The job of the critic is to account for love.

Put very briefly, what the return to aesthetics and connoisseurship does is to situate the professional/amateur conundrum *within* professional academic discourse, making “love” the subject and object of study. By making appreciation—love, delight, affection, virtuosity—part of the mission of academia, such a move adroitly preempts the outsider’s critique that today’s humanities scholars have abandoned “appreciation” for microanalysis. The terms that are developed in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* to account for the analysis of beauty—disinterestedness, universality, something valued in itself and not for any “end,” the production of “necessary delight”⁷⁵—become precisely the qualities of the amateur as over against the professional. And yet these amateurs are professionals.

Nowadays amateurism seems to be the goal of the profession. But it turns out that the professional makes the best amateur.

And this, too, is a virtuoso move.