Foreword

IN THE death of William Charvat not only did Ohio State University lose one of its great professors but rational scholarship lost one of its most vigorous proponents. For him objective research was an end, or rather a means to an end, and not, as current doctrines of "appreciation" (dreadful word!) often assume, an obstacle to enjoyment. There are, I know, many in the academic world and too many outside it who think that literary studies are best carried on in an economic and social vacuum. They want nothing to do with the sale of books and the income of authors. Others assume that an interpretation of the march of mind takes on impurity if it stops to inquire how the ideas that influenced an age were made public to that age. Let us be fair. There is, I suppose, a kind of development from Homer to Herzog of technical skills in the treatment of character, the manipulation of story, the creation of atmosphere, and the transfer of sensibility from the writer to the work and from the work to the reader. In the later nineteenth century, moreover, when we were all evolutionists, studies of the evolution of genres went on without any reference to writer, printer, bookseller, or literary agent. So in our time, when a return to primitive, or primal, psychology is all the rage (can we so return?), critics and scholars interpret literary work as if the author's rational control of material were a form of hypocrisy to be stripped away in order to reveal hidden archetypal images, the mythopoetic energy of a submerged racial unconscious. Good histories of
painting, of music, and of other arts have been written without the slightest reference to the economic support of artists and with a minimal amount of reference to the social context of the works of art produced. Nevertheless, if a Carl Jung may visit with impunity Circe's island, lesser men might consider whether they, too, can bend the bow of Ulysses.

Charvat's philosophy was that whatever the ultimate interpretation of a work of art might prove to be, the first duty of scholarship was to ascertain the relevant facts. For him relevant facts were not only biography and technical bibliographical lore but also the patent truth that a literary work does not exist until it is made public—that is, somehow published. He argued, as I think rightly, that we cannot know the full stature of a literary artist, nor the nature of his repute, his vogue, and his influence, until we are as fully informed as historical evidence will permit of his struggles in the market of literary wares.

Of Charvat's great project for a definitive history of American publishing (in the sense of a definitive history of the tripartite author-publisher-reader relation), only fragments remain. But what fragments some of them are! A literary work in his view was not the original manuscript of a book, that mere object in space; it was what had happened when the manuscript was submitted to, and emerged from, the threefold tensions of public production: the judgment of the author in creating the work and submitting it for publication; the judgment of the publisher both of the aesthetic or philosophic importance of the manuscript and of its potential sales; and the judgment of the reading public, expressed in opinion and purchase, on the validity of the work as amusement, edification, or illumination. Literary history, he thought, even before the invention of movable type, is a threefold story—the interplay of producer, distributor, and consumer. If these terms sound harshly in the ears of sensibility, I point out that even in classical Greece the three contending forces existed. Somebody had to pay for staging that noblest of human
inventions, a tragedy; and a recent historical novel by Mary Renault, *The Mask of Apollo*, turns precisely upon the interplay of commercial (and political) demands and dedication to “art” as this interplay affects the life of a young Greek actor in Plato’s time. Artists have to live. Dr. Johnson, a great literary critic, bluntly said: “No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.” If this sounds like a sad descent from high art, Charvat’s remarkable discussions of Longfellow and Melville in their relations to publishing show that, descent or not, the market place and the muse cannot be severed in literary history.

Even if Charvat had lived, it is possible he could not have finished his history of the author-publisher-reader relation in America as he had planned it. His problem was virtually archaeological rather than historical. By this I mean that the raw material for his study existed like pottery shards only in a scattered and fragmentary state. He had to infer and guess, to assume that such and such things were true of the lacunae in his commercial evidence, to assemble the parts of things rather than to depend on continuous documentary flow. Commercial records of publishing houses disappear. We do not possess accurate information about the business of book-selling in the United States.

This assertion may come as a surprise to many. Any large library usually has a whole section devoted to volumes that purport to be the history of this or that well-established house. The histories of publishing companies, however, tend to fall into one or the other of two unsatisfactory categories: an “official” or commissioned account, commonly issued as a centenary memorial book (or booklet); or a book of reminiscence by a prominent member of the firm. In addition to offering all the characteristic weaknesses of any commissioned history, the first type gets written on a sort of Samuel Smiles formula. The firm of Font & Folio began in a humble fashion, by industry, prudence, shrewd judgment, and the Benjamin Franklin virtues, it survived depression and disaster, beat its competitors in a perfectly nice way,
and emerged as a famous firm, the proof being the names of prestigious authors and titles on the back list. In such a book nothing much is said about the bargains struck with (or against) authors, trade discounts, publicity, the ways by which a valuable literary producer was kept with the firm, and the ways by which the firm seduced some other famous writer from a rival company. Publishing flops are discreetly passed over; publishing hits are due to the insight, instinct, prophetic outlook, or fine taste of either Font or Folio. As far as it goes, the history may be authentic; but it does not go very far, and it certainly does not plow very deep. And it is usually lacking in detailed and verifiable statistical information.

The book of reminiscence written by a prominent member of a publishing company upon his retirement is naturally filled with a golden haze. The volume is one of happy anecdotage. Amusing or distressing stories abound illustrating the eccentricities of authors, the whimsicalities of taste, the oddities of print or prudery. Publishing was once a proud profession, now it has become commercialized; the old days were more leisurely and the new age one of pressure; and though the author as a young publisher may ruefully confess to this or that error in judgment, on the whole he has had a good life, known a variety of interesting persons in the world of books and magazines and clubs, and is making a contribution to high culture. These volumes have value. They do illuminate high culture. It is good to know why Henry Holt insisted that publishing books was like practicing law, or why Macmillan’s took on so weighty a work as Bryce’s The American Commonwealth. Both from the commissioned history and from the volume of reminiscence one can learn something about the perennial puzzle of author-publisher relationship and how this shaped publishing, and therefore literary, history. What is lacking is what the commissioned history also lacks: exact financial information. In this country, at least, publishing as an industry has not yet drawn the attention of business historians,
and there are virtually no studies of publishing as a business, on a scale with the Hidy and Hidy *History of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey).*

Of course, what is true of the records of American publishing firms has been true of most American business houses before the rise of entrepreneurial history as an important field of investigation. In the April, 1967, issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin* Professor Arthur H. Cole relates how by a kind of accident he stumbled upon valuable records of the American wool trade, likely at any moment to be destroyed, how he secured them, and how he thus pioneered the archival use of business records. Not every area of business activity, of course, is equally valuable to the historian; not every company preserves its "dead" files; not every company finds it expedient to make these files available to scholarship. In proportion as any enterprise is relatively impersonal, like the manufacture of plows, it is easier to persuade the company that no harm will come if its business history can be studied, but in other fields of business enterprise—for example, real estate—the relations between company and customers may be highly personalized, idiosyncratic, and open to misinterpretation, or so the head office is likely to argue. Enthusiasm for archival treatment of past records is in such a case at a minimum.

Publishing is such a personalized enterprise. If, on the one hand, the connection between publishing and the development of the art of literature is obvious and close, as books of reminiscence seem to say, so that one thinks publishers would be happy to preserve the history of their contributions to culture, on the other hand, the book trade, like the real estate world, is a highly personalized world. Occasionally, of course, important records are made available; a notable instance was the publication in 1949 by the Bibliographical Society of America of *The Cost Books of Ticknor and Fields and their Predecessors, 1832–1858,* edited by Warren S. Tryon and William Charvat. But I have known of a famous American publishing company which, on
moving from its old location to its new one, dumped its back
records without regard to their historical worth for scholarship.
On the whole, indeed, publishing has not as a business come
within the sweep of interest in entrepreneurial business history
and therefore of archival preservation, and the reasons are
obvious. No business is more competitive. Publishing firms dis-
solve and reform. Heads of departments leave one house to take
a post in a competing house, sometimes bringing a string of
authors with them. Literary agents are now a hidden force in
contract-making. There are standard contracts; but as soon as
some writer becomes a notable literary property, he is likely to
demand special financial consideration known only to him, his
agent, and the publishers, and publishers are not anxious to
publicize their differentials. “Advances” are not always retrieved.
Writers are themselves careless bookkeepers. In short, no business
outside of the entertainment world is more deeply entangled with
relations of personality; and consequently, at the very heart of
the author-publisher-reader triangle there is for the scholar an
almost insoluble problem. That Charvat managed to accomplish
all he did is a tribute to his patience and to his developing and
mastering a rather special sort of economic sleuthing that seems
at first sight very far from literary study. But is it, in fact, any
more remote than the fine points of professional bibliography?

What I have been saying may be misconstrued to mean that
I think Charvat’s interest in literary history became less and
less “literary” and more and more sociological. This would be
to misunderstand both the man and the enterprise. If by an aes-
thete one means somebody likely to die of a rose in aromatic pain,
Charvat was no aesthete. He had small patience with small
sentimentalities. But he had the graver interest of the historian-
critic. One has only to read—I find myself coming back to these,
excellent as are some of the other essays—his studies of Long-
fellow and Melville to see that economic determinism as a mode
of interpretation was as far from his liking as mere aesthetic
sensibility. His study of Cooper is at this point also relevant: Cooper never pretended to the high subtleties of a Henry James, but he was an imperfect craftsman of great genius, and Charvat lets us see the interplay between Cooper the imaginative writer and Cooper the marketer of his own wares. But let me get back to Longfellow and Melville for a moment.

Having established the truth that Longfellow was a shrewd bargainer, that, partly as a result of his superior market position, a certain kind of work was expected from him, and that to fulfil these expectations as a “typed” author, he had to alter basically his original literary drive, Charvat next shows that he came more and more to regret the responsibility of being a “public” poet, a responsibility he had, as it were, drifted into; and then, leaving behind the question of the price of poems and their audience, our scholar turns about, so to speak, and says in effect: There is more to this repetition of the themes of longing and regret in this poet than criticism has hitherto realized. These verses about the irrecoverable past are not mere convention. They have, on the contrary, behind them a special, a highly personalized, experience. These continual statements about labor are real cries of anguish, not Longfellow imitating Longfellow. His unease at being forced to continue as America’s foremost “public” poet affects his style and it affects his soul. He tries to cut away from all his later verse the expectation of sentiment; he writes, as he wrestles to recover his artistic independence, a new, a compact, a more individualized verse. (Contrast the style of “To the River Charles” by the early Longfellow with that of “The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls,” written in 1879.) Charvat does not say that Longfellow’s boredom with the responsibility of being a typed poet “caused” this change in style. What he says is that the author-publisher-reader relation, supposed by careless critics to be virtually constant throughout the poet’s life, was in fact a relation of shifting tension, and he argues that the change in Longfellow’s attitude toward his burden should lead
us to inspect his poems a little more carefully, to interpret them
a little more sympathetically, and to view conventional judg­
ments about Longfellow a little more skeptically than we now do.

We do not lack explorations of the development of American
publishing. On the contrary there is a variety of books. The
annual Bowker lectures tell us much. A general history like the
Lehmann-Haupt, Wroth, Silver The Book in America, which has
gone through several editions, has the value of any sound survey.
We have had studies devoted to particular periods such as
Donald H. Sheehan’s This Was Publishing: A Chronicle of the
Book Trade in the Gilded Age, and volumes devoted to particular
types of books, like Frank L. Schick’s The Paperbound Book in
America. And we have Frank Luther Mott’s magisterial, though
unhappily unfinished, history of American magazines. Studies of
particular publishing houses—a good example is Raymond L.
Kilgour’s admirable Messrs. Roberts Brothers, Publishers—throw
occasional light on the relation of writer to book manufacturer
and the effect of sales upon the publishers’ faith in authors. These
are valuable. But the weakness of these volumes lies in assuming
that the principal fact about the book business is that it is a
business—a minor business, a rather queer business, but still in
the main a problem of bargain and sale, contract and delivery.

Dealing with an author, however, is not like dealing with a
carpenter, or a grocer, or even an inventor. It is not even like
dealing with an easel painter. Moreover, people do not buy books
as they buy shoes, or meals, or swimming pools. If the swimming
pool is defective, you can get it repaired. If you don’t like the
meal, you can complain to the restaurant. But if you don’t like
the book, you can’t complain to anybody or get the defective
article replaced by another unless it is physically damaged. In
most cases most readers do not even know who manufactured
the book, and in most bookstores most sales are final.

By long tradition a writer, even a hack writer, moves in
mystery. He never pleads for a shorter workday like a brick-
layer, or goes on strike like the electrical union, or keeps regular working hours. His habits are allowed to be nonconformist and temperamental. By long tradition also, books (that is, books that are more than compendiums of information like dictionaries and almanacs), if they are a branch of the entertainment industry, are a very special branch of that industry; and if they are more than entertainment, they are like units in symphony concerts or paintings on a museum wall—something apart from, and above, the taint of trade. To read a good book is supposed to be a meritorious act. Great authors produce good books. The fact that great authors produce manuscripts, and that crass, commercial-minded publishing firms turn these manuscripts into something called books is somehow a part of the equation of literary history people don’t think much about.

From the commercial point of view the shining mediocrity of J. H. Ingraham, author of *The Prince of the House of David*, is a datum of no particular interest, since, after Roberts Brothers took over this novel in 1863, they sold more than a hundred thousand copies of it by 1898. From the point of view of art it is of no particular importance who printed Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, which came out in 1898, and in comparison with Ingraham’s novel did not sell. But once an author gets popular, he is typed; and public and publishers are likely to discourage him from all aesthetic adventuring. If an author remains steadily unpopular, as James did during most of his life, it makes a great deal of difference whether he has found a publisher with enough insight into literature and enough stubbornness to back his insight, to keep on publishing him. In either case the personal relations of writer to book-manufacturer may profoundly affect the personality of the writer and in the long run the development of literary art. Confidence or the lack of it between editor and author may warp or warm the creative psychology of the artist: the classic case is that of Maxwell Perkins and Tom Wolfe. But the relation of the House of Scribner
through Perkins to Tom Wolfe is by no means singular. The English romantic movement probably owes as much to the great John Murray and the first Thomas Norton Longman as it owes to the theorizing of Coleridge and the egoism of Byron. In the same fashion the secure place of the nineteenth-century New England men with us is as much a product of the industry of James T. Fields and Horace E. Scudder as it is of transcendental theory and abolitionist reform.

The special glory of William Charvat seems to me to be that he grasped almost intuitively the meaning of the triadic relation of author-publisher-reader in literary history. He saw that literary histories were being written in a kind of economic vacuum, whatever bows they made in the direction of social history; and that book publishing was being studied more as a branch of commerce than as a mode of culture and an expressive channel of art. He went to work to fuse the economic and the aesthetic points of view. He saw that the book is both a physical object and a spiritual fact. We have had no other scholar sufficiently tough-minded to grasp the raw materials of bookkeeping and twist cultural significance out of them, being at the same time sensitive enough to know that no quantity of statistical analysis can replace man’s belief that literature is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. He founded no school, but perhaps he will inspire others to go on.

Howard Mumford Jones

Harvard University
February 23, 1967
THE PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED STUDIES in this volume have been salvaged from William Charvat's files. They represent work in progress—or in some cases, perhaps, discarded work. All have been transcribed from his revised typescripts with no attempt to rewrite. Punctuation and spelling have been corrected; a few words have been silently supplied; and, where possible, quotations have been verified. No other editorial changes have been made. Square brackets in the text are reproduced from Professor Charvat's pages. Angle brackets have been introduced around material that he may have intended to delete or shift or rewrite. Illegible passages in the manuscript have been indicated by three asterisks.

A minimum number of stylistic changes affecting only non-substantive matters have been introduced by the Ohio State University Press in the texts of those articles that have previously been published in various journals, as a means of bringing some uniformity of style to the collection.

There is some duplication between the previously unpublished Chapter XII, "Melville," and Chapter XIII, "Melville and the Common Reader," which first appeared in 1958 in *Studies in Bibliography*. Both have been included because they show how Professor Charvat refined his own work to produce his time-saving prose.

A personal note. Near the end of his life, Bill Charvat told me that he probably would not complete his big study of the economics of authorship in America because other scholars had made his work unnecessary. He was wrong.

The selection and ordering of the material in this volume is mine, but I have been advised by Professors Roy Harvey Pearce and Claude
M. Simpson. I acknowledge with appreciation the secretarial labors of Mrs. Katharine Newland.

I am further indebted to Professor Simpson for his labors on the proofs. The Index was compiled by Miss Kathleen Addlesperger. The following members of the Ohio State University Center for Textual Studies staff contributed substantial editorial help: L. Neal Smith, John Manning, Michael Newell, and Richard Simpson.

M. J. B.