This is an attempt to write the history of American literature in terms of the profession of writing and the business of publishing. It is much like the effort to describe a building in terms of internal structure—foundations, supporting beams and columns, strains and stresses—instead of presenting photographs of façades and finished interiors.

It cannot be a complete history because many—perhaps most—of the documents of the profession have been lost; and because some literature—some of the greatest—is produced unprofessionally and with little or no dependence on the book trade. The profession and the trade had, for example, no influence on Emily Dickinson’s production of her poems, and very little on Emerson’s Nature. The first was a private performance; the second was addressed to a small coterie who might as well have read the work in manuscript.

The terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of extended sale in the open market, like any article of commerce; and that it is written with reference to buyers’ tastes and reading habits. The problem of the professional writer is not identical with that of the literary artist; but when a literary artist is also a professional writer, he cannot solve the problems of the one function without reference to the other.