The Beginnings of Professionalism

1. The Literary Life in New England: Barlow, R. T. Paine, Dennie

ON JANUARY 10, 1783, Joel Barlow, a “Connecticut Wit,” wrote to Elias Boudinot, President of the Continental Congress, a letter which shows why professional authorship in America had thus far been impossible:

As we have few Gentlemen of fortune sufficient to enable them to spend a whole life in study, or enduce others to do it by their patronage, it is more necessary, in this country than in any other, that the rights of authors be secured by law. Indeed, we are not to expect to see any works of considerable magnitude, offered to the Public till such security be given. There is now a gentleman in Massachusetts [Timothy Dwight, another Connecticut wit] who has written an Epic Poem, entitled “The Conquest of Canaan”, a work of great merit. It has lain by him, finished, these six years, without seeing the light; because the Author cannot risque the expences of the publication, sensible that some ungenerous Printer will immediately seize upon his labors, by making a mean & cheap impression [edition], in order to undersell the Author & defraud him of his property.

This is already the case with the Author [John Trumbull, another wit] of McFingal. This work is now reprinted in an incorrect, cheap edition; by which means the Author’s own impression lies upon his hands, & he not only loses the labor of writing, & the expence of publishing, but suffers in his reputation by having his work appear under the disadvantages of typographical errors, a bad paper, a mean letter & an uncooth page, all which were necessary to the printer to catch the Vulgar by a low price. The same Gentleman had by him a number of original Poems which cannot be brought forward for the above reasons.
The letter closed with the request that the Congress recommend to the several states the passage of a copyright law similar to the English one, which protected a book for fourteen years after publication.

Before the month was out, Connecticut had passed such a law (the first in the United States), and the literary property of the Wits was safe within their own state. But they were not protected in other states until 1790, when the first federal law guaranteed copyright for fourteen years, renewable for another fourteen. That the country had got along without a copyright law for over 150 years does not mean that it had not had a literature worth protecting, but rather, as we shall see, that a small and scattered reading public and poor transportation depressed the commercial value of all books. Time would take care of population and transportation, but no literary profession was possible until law had given products of the mind the status of property.

The need for copyright was obvious and primary; but two groups of key words in Barlow's letter reveal other needs which were not to be satisfied for decades. The first group is "patronage," "Gentlemen," "study," and "the Vulgar." Barlow's phrasing here is a sign of a general condition: that when the new nation began its career, its writers were thinking of the social status of literature and authorship in terms of British aristocratic tradition, which was partly myth. In that tradition, imaginative literature was a class commodity, produced and consumed by the elite and by those on lower social levels who identified themselves with the elite and depended upon them for support. Literature, furthermore, was a by-product of learning or study, which presupposed leisure. The gentleman might take pride in his by-product, but he considered it as only one of many accomplishments in an active life. He never wrote for money, never put his name on what he wrote, and rarely even condescended to put what he wrote in print. His work was addressed to a small group of equals. But he met an obligation to society at large by "patronizing" the talents of men of humbler origin. Patronage took the form of out-
right gifts of money, hiring the writer as tutor or secretary, subscribing for his books, exerting influence to get him sinecures in church, court, or government, and giving him “protection”—which meant the privileges which derived from being identified with the upper classes. The writer thus patronized and protected might, from necessity, sell his work in the open market where it could be bought by “the Vulgar,” but because society despised him for doing so, he published anonymously. Such status as he enjoyed was the result not of his talent but of the acceptance of his talent by someone socially secure.

Modern history and research show that this system and these attitudes, which were at their height—and depth—in the reigns of Elizabeth and James, were a burden on creative writing rather than a support; that the writers who endured the system were degraded and unhappy; and that at the moment Barlow was writing, it was in a state of final and permanent collapse. But Barlow and his contemporaries accepted the myth and did not know that it was a bubble already exploded. For four years up to the time of his letter he had been seeking a patron in the state of Connecticut, and he may even have received some handouts from a prosperous gentleman named Titus Hosmer. But the effective patron he actually found was, incredibly enough, the American army. It is a sign at once of the prestige of the clergy and of the social structure of that civilian army (many of the officers were, in the British tradition, “gentlemen” of means and education) that the chaplaincy was a well-paid sinecure—£360 a year and long vacations—for little more than a sermon a week, and now and then an ode for an officer’s celebration. Barlow took advantage of this paid leisure, and the government had the pleasure of helping to finance the writing of his epic, *The Vision of Columbus*. It is one of the earliest instance of American government patronage of the arts through job-holding.

The words “cheap” and “uncooth” are also signs of an imported tradition. In England, for two centuries, a society in which the poor consumed sensational pamphlets and broadsides, badly
printed on poor paper, had emphasized the prestigiousness of ex-
ensively manufactured books for the well-to-do. It was comfort-
ably assumed that a cheap format was the natural dress for cheap
content. But note the implication of Barlow's statement that “the
Vulgar” were buying a cheaply printed *epic*; the assumption of a
necessary relation between content and format had broken down
by the end of the eighteenth century, and the era of cheaply
printed “good” literature had begun. Yet the vestiges of patrician
attitude are evident in Barlow's words. Twenty-four years later
he engrafted the new tradition on the old one. When, in 1807, he
published his revised epic as *The Columbiad*, he reaffirmed his old
assumption of a necessary relation between creative literature and
the upper class by pouring ten thousand dollars into an edition
which was declared the most sumptuously printed volume thus
far produced in America; but simultaneously, he issued it in two
cheaper grades of paper “in an effort to reach various levels of
the public.” But by that date Barlow had become both a rich
man and a radical “republican.”

Another phrase in Barlow's letter—“risque the expence of
publishing”—is an index to the publishing situation in the era
preceding the establishment of commercial or democratic patron-
age of literature. That John Trumbull paid for the manufacture
of his own book describes the commercial status of almost all
American literary works produced before 1820. Publishers rarely
took the risk of manufacturing costs; the author paid, and the
publisher served as his distributor on a commission basis. The
author was thus literally in the publishing business. But in the
absence of a predictable market, an efficient system of distribu-
tion, and the transportation necessary for a national market, the
author tried to avoid risk by finding his buyers before he pub-
lished. Almost all literary works before 1800 were published by
subscription, that is, by promises to buy (on the basis of a pro-
spectus) obtained from friends, friends of friends, public digni-
taries known to be patrons of the arts, and booksellers willing to
serve as agents. Subscription was another inheritance from Eng-
land and an outgrowth of aristocratic patronage. At the back of the subscription book frequently appeared a list of the buyers, who thus enjoyed advertisement as patrons of the arts. But in England the system was almost moribund by 1783. It had never been very profitable, and because subscription-hunters were considered nuisances, it contributed to the degradation of the author’s status.

Joel Barlow found 769 subscribers, at a dollar and a third per copy, for the first (1787) edition of *The Vision of Columbus*. (The army again appears as patron in that 117 officers are listed for an average of three copies each.) He is said to have “grossed” $1,500 on the edition, but inasmuch as he paid for manufacture and delivery, and had to give discounts for copies sold by booksellers, his profit could not have been much. And, at any rate, it had taken him five years of time and effort to find his subscribers. When the second edition failed, Barlow gave up the system. Subscription publishing, as inherited from England, probably got its death blow in 1820. In that year a young and ignorant, but later spectacular, publisher—Samuel G. (Peter Parley) Goodrich—advanced John Trumbull $1,000 on the profits he expected to make from subscribers to the Wit’s *Poetical Works*. So many subscribers refused to accept their copies that Goodrich lost the thousand.

Within a year after the publication of *The Vision*, Barlow began a lucrative connection with a land company, and by 1796 he was in a position to be so careless about the copyright of his mock-heroic poem, *The Hasty Pudding*, that seven editions and innumerable magazine piracies put nothing in his pocket.

Nevertheless, Barlow has an important place in this history because he was the first American author to contribute to the growth of a genuinely democratic psychology of authorship. This growth had no direct relation with politics or with Barlow’s belated transformation into an ardent republican of the French-Jefferson-Tom Paine school. A poor farmboy of undistinguished parents, he had had, to begin with, none of the sense of family
prestige enjoyed by his brother Wits. That he got an upper class education at Yale was an accident due to the perceptiveness of a minister who thought the boy worth encouraging, and to small inheritances which were just sufficient to support him in college. As a young man he naturally identified himself with the class into which he had been able to climb, and naturally he absorbed some of the class attitudes implied in his reference to “the Vulgar” and in his search for patrons. But his willingness to put his name on the title pages of his books, instead of resorting to the traditional anonymity of the gentleman author, and his early and unique determination to make literary work a way of life—-independent of any of the established professions—were sure signs that he did not share all the patrician conceptions of the status and function of the writer. For his brother Wits it was a foregone conclusion that the writing of poetry must be incidental to a career as minister, lawyer, or public servant. Barlow, unable or unwilling to devote his central energies to law or the ministry, yet obsessed with the idea of being a poet, stood between two historical British symbols—the “gentleman-lawyer-minister-scholar-poet” and the “beggarly poet.” He was too class-conscious to be the latter, but he would not make the compromise required by the former. His chaplaincy (based, professionally, on a few months’ hurried study and an examination) was a solution for three years only, and was a means to the end of poetry. When the war was over, he had to face reality. It is of the greatest significance that he then turned not to the professions but to “trade”—a choice unthinkable to most gentlemen. For two years he was a publisher in a Hartford partnership, edited the firm’s magazine, and sold groceries and cloth along with books. But the literary drive was still central. All the while, he was finishing and revising his epic, getting subscriptions for it, and encouraging other poets by publishing Timothy Dwight’s *The Conquest of Canaan*, which found three thousand subscribers. When the partnership broke up, Barlow resigned himself briefly to the profession of law, but was rescued from it by the land company.
As a professional poet he had failed because social conditions and the book trade were not ready for him. But since Barlow's verse (if we may judge by reprints for the general reader) hardly survived Barlow, one may well ask whether his failure did not also lie in the quality of his work—in his lack of some great private source of creative power. The modern reader knows that he lacked it: that his major work was almost totally derivative in form, language, ideas, and subject matter. But the question in this history must be whether his lack of original power made a difference in his fortunes in his own generation. Probably it did not. Poetry that is commercially successful in its time has always been public poetry—that is, poetry that is keyed to the culture, the sophistication, and the language of contemporary readers. Public poetry has sometimes been written by poets of private power, but it was popular in its time for its public rather than for its private qualities.

Whether poetry of any quality is popular at all in a given society depends on the status of poetry in that society, and upon the media available for its distribution. The Elizabethan, says the historian of the literary profession in that period, loved poetry but despised the poet who was in any way dependent on his craft. Probably the same can be said of Barlow's period. In the years 1780–1810 the status of poetry was high. It was an accepted form of political, religious, moral, and satirical discourse. College students were required to write it regularly, and they vied for the honor of producing commencement poems, which they almost invariably published afterward. Verse was used universally in newspapers and magazines—not only as filler but as primary material. Editors never paid for it because the supply was unlimited: everybody wrote it. Newspaper carriers presented their customers with specially written verses on Christmas. Theater managers ordered verse prologues and epilogues for new plays. Odes were written for every important public celebration. It would seem to have been the ideal time for poetry to become a profession—for the poet to enjoy the status of poetry.
But it was not. Perhaps because poetic form and language at the end of the eighteenth century was completely standardized—a shell into which any literate person could pour his thoughts—few persons would pay for contemporary verse. Editors did not. Publishers would not. Addicts would buy the work of poets of long-established status in England—Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Milton. And a small, unified society, like Barlow’s Yale-army-ministerial set in Connecticut, would patronize an equal’s work. But no such society was large enough to support a poet through purchased works, and the national market was still physically out of reach.

If Barlow fared poorly in Hartford, the Boston poet fared even worse. Hartford, at least, was a river town, with a protected water route all the way to New York; but between Boston and New York was a long stretch of open sea. This fact alone would explain why Boston did not rank as a literary center until the advent of the railroad in the 1830’s. With a population only half that of New York in the 1790’s, it had two-thirds as many booksellers, printed twelve novels to New York’s seven, and probably more volumes of poetry. Yet it had great difficulty selling its productions anywhere else. A mass of evidence on Boston’s backwardness as a literary center is summed up in one fact: that when Barlow thought of going into publishing and bookselling in 1784, his first choice was Baltimore (because “the wealthy in that country may think libraries an ornamental species of furniture”), and that when he decided to remain in New England, he chose not Boston but Hartford. That Boston had one great publisher, Isaiah Thomas, meant little to the creative writer. Thomas was too astute to accept many literary works, and he probably published none at his own risk.

Poetry had much the same status in Boston as in Hartford, but the poet was even less gladly tolerated. Like Barlow, Robert Treat Paine, Jr., attempted the literary life at a time when it was economically impossible and socially dangerous. Unlike Barlow’s, his social position was impeccable, for his father was a
signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Delegate to Congress, and a judge of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and his mother the daughter of a general. Yet after four years at Harvard, where he contracted an incurable literary itch, he became a business clerk rather than use up his vital energies in the law; left business for poetry and the theater; committed the unpardonable social sin of marrying an actress—for which he was cast out by his father; and after being imprisoned for debt, periods of drunkenness, expulsion from his house by his landlord, and sleeping in alleys, died a literary derelict, leaving his wife and children to be taken care of by his distinguished father. Society had no objection to his writing poetry; indeed, it subscribed so heavily to his pamphlet verse that, according to his biographer, who knew him personally, he cleared $1,500 on a Harvard commencement poem, *The Invention of Letters* (1795); $1,200 on a Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem, *The Ruling Passion* (1797); and $750 on “Adams and Liberty” (1798). The figures are incredible, for the first two were pamphlets which could not have sold for more than a shilling or two, and the last was a single lyric. Yet, even allowing for exaggeration, the story is evidence of the acceptance of his verse by his own class. And it was a group of social equals who financed him to a legal education because they wanted his talents to be “employed more for his own emolument [and] his reputation” than they had been. In a word, the gentleman-turned-beggarly-poet must be brought back into line not only for his own sake but for the sake of the clan. Paine tried hard to conform by serving the numerous clients that the clan sent him. But once again the literary itch set him to scratching, and with his head full of plans for poetry, plays, editing, and even a “new system of rhetoric,” he neglected his clients and sank into poverty and disgrace—“the living Muse,” as he said in one of his poems, “Bound to the mouldering corpse of Penury.”

The poetry left behind after this wreckage was not much. He wrote it rapidly and without difficulty, and it is now, with its standardized rhythms and tiresome figures from classical myth-
ology, indistinguishable from run-of-the-mine eighteenth-century verse. But since Boston society clearly respected his talent, his career indicates that his class granted status not to the poet as poet, but to poetry. Paine’s persistence in seeking his own way of life is admirable, but judging by the tone of commentary on him for half a century afterward, he was used as a horrible example in his community, and probably delayed the growth of a professional literary attitude in New England.

The relation between writer and society in Boston in the 1790’s is even better illustrated by the career of Joseph Dennie. Lacking Paine’s family prestige, he wooed Paine’s class assiduously, and when it rejected him, he bitterly attacked Boston culture. As a social climber he not only adopted the social prejudices of the wealthy and well-born, but went to political extremes which even they could not stomach. Almost monarchical in temper, pro-British and traditionalistic in his cultural tastes, a leader of the witch-hunt that followed the French Revolution, he called Jefferson a political imbecile; Tom Paine a loathsome, drunken atheist; and the Declaration of Independence a “false, flatulent and foolish paper.” But unlike most writers who were actually of the class he identified himself with, he set out deliberately to exploit that class by writing essays that would bring him a literary income at the same time that they fed his law practice by appealing to the politically conservative. When he went down to Boston from Walpole, New Hampshire, in 1795 with this plainly expressed purpose, he deluded himself into thinking that because of his earlier newspaper essays and satires on republicanism, he was “caressed by those who possessed the greatest Genius Wealth & power.” Though experienced publishers like Isaiah Thomas and Benjamin Russell refused to encourage him to dream of literary wealth, he found one who agreed to publish his old essays on the half-profits system and to sponsor an essay-periodical called The Tablet. He expected his share of the profits of the latter to be £150 a year.
Believe me, my dear Mamma, it leads to property, to my legal and to my literary eminence. A design so novel has captivated all the principal characters here both in literature and politics, and all are pleased with a paper intended for amusement and rejecting the impertinence and prolixity of uninteresting news and advertisements.

Professionally he was on the right track in planning to write for diversion, but he overestimated either his ability or the size and loyalty of his audience—or both. The “tasteless and mercenary Bostonians suffered [The Tablet] to die and me to starve” after three issues.

Retired by Boston to the country circuit, as it were, he got a local printer in Walpole, New Hampshire, to back a magazine for him—the Farmer’s Weekly Museum, in which his famous “Lay Preacher” sermons began to appear in 1796. For editing this magazine he was promised a salary of £110 a year (he had a £90 income from the law). But to earn his salary, he had to learn the first—and for him, bitter—lesson of the profession—to avoid political and class partisanship. “In my editorial capacity, I am obliged to the nauseous task of flattering Republicans.” This led him to reflect that it was

... a serious evil to have been born among the Indians and Yankees of New England. Had it not been for the selfish patriotism of that hoary traitor, Adams, and the bellowing of Molineux [of the Boston Tea Party] I might now, perhaps, in a Literary, Diplomatic, or lucrative situation have been in the service of my rightful King, and instead of shivering in the bleakness of the United States, felt the sunshine of a Court.

He now suffered one of the chronic pains of early American authorship. His publisher, David Carlisle, who had brought out a collection of his “Lay Preacher” essays in 1796, apparently had been living off Dennie’s half-profits, for in 1799 he went bankrupt, owing the editor a year’s salary and all the profits on his book. Book and periodical seem to have been successful, for their
time, but the village publisher could hardly have given either a wide circulation. Dennie wrote his friend Royall Tyler that his *Algerine Captive*, another famous Carlisle imprint, "has been examined by the few and approved," but that "Bostonians could not supply themselves with a book that slumbers in a stall at Walpole"—little more than one hundred miles away.

Dennie was now through with Boston, that "Jewish, peddling, and commercial quarter," whose literary folk were "mostly fools" and "all lazy"; and with New England. He had run for Congress, backed by "unbiassed citizens," of whom there appear to have been exactly six, for that was the size of his vote.

Considering his disgust with the "levity and weakness of the people" and his "profound contempt for the herd of society," he needed a change of atmosphere. He begged a job as secretary (the title of *clerk* "hurte my pride") to Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, and combined it with another as editor of a Federalist newspaper. But even as a party hack his days were numbered, for Pickering was removed by Adams because of his High Federalist sympathies, and Adams himself was succeeded in the Presidency by the loathsome Jefferson. It was high time for a man of his "feelings and principles to abandon public life, and perhaps even my country," which was full of the "Jewish and cheating and canting descendants of the Regicides." He abandoned neither. In Philadelphia he found a "ready passport into good company," was respected as a "professed man of letters," went to an Anglican church, and dreamed of recognition in England. "I love all Englishmen I meet," he wrote, and like James's "passionate pilgrim" he was sick with nostalgia for his "old home." He imagined fondly that by now his "old home" would have paid him three or four thousand pounds for a work which was a pale imitation of a British manner and matter long outdated.

Nevertheless, he continued to "drudge in literature for a mere subsistence in this execrable Country," and he now entered the last and noisiest phase of his bad-tempered career. As founder, editor, and owner (for seven years) of the Philadelphia *Port Folio*,

he conducted the most thoroughly “literary” periodical in the country. As long as he owned it, he abused democracy, praised England, spread sweet rumors of Jefferson’s intimacy with a female slave, and fought off libel suits. He should have remembered that his class had failed to support him and his prejudices in Boston. The *Port Folio* managed to break even, but it was not prosperous, as he bitterly complained. Long before 1809 he had alienated large segments of his reading public, and when in that year he was forced to put the magazine under commercial auspices by selling it to Bradford and Inskeep, the firm forced him to adopt a non-partisan editorial policy.

On inspecting Dennie’s career as a professional, one sees that he sustained himself by combining writing with law practice, magazine editing, and political jobbery—a pattern which was to be followed by many later writers. He was at a disadvantage because his professional stock was the essay, a form which has not had, since Johnson’s day, much commercial value. Short prose pieces, as Irving and Hawthorne learned later, required more work and care than longer works, and there was little demand for them in book form. Dennie’s essays might have sustained him financially had magazines been on a firmer basis in his time, but the double sale which he attempted was not very profitable when neither magazine nor book publishers could exploit a national market. Moreover, unlike some later essayists, Dennie had but one string to his bow. Irving was also a biographer and historian, and Willis was a poet and dramatist.

2. *The Philadelphia-New York Center: Rowson and Brown*

Even though Dennie was unhappy in Philadelphia, the fact that he was able to maintain himself there in work closely allied to creative writing was a sign that if there was a literary center in America at that time, it was not Boston but the area of which Philadelphia and New York were the two poles. These two cities
were close enough together, and transportation between them (roads and ship lines) was sufficiently well developed so that each could exploit the other's reader market. Some publishers in the one had branch offices in the other. A Philadelphia agent could distribute for a New York publisher in the upper South, and a New York agent could sell Philadelphia products in the Hudson River area. Though the population was still too small and too scattered to support an author, this middle region was beginning to be able to support an enterprising publisher.

By far the most able American publisher in the 1790's was Philadelphia's Mathew Carey. Knowing from the very beginning (1785) that the local market could not, alone, support him, he set up by 1790 a chain of over fifty agents—printers, booksellers, postmasters, general merchants, and private individuals—to distribute his books and magazines in towns from Halifax to Georgia. He flattered the subscribers to his American Museum, the most important American general magazine before 1800, by printing the name of each on a small strip of paper and pasting it on the cover, and publishing the entire list at the end of each volume of six numbers. He was the first extensive advertiser and promoter among American publishers. If he did not invent wholesale bookselling, he developed it so vigorously that by 1800 he was supplying the books of other publishers as well as his own to over one hundred dealers. He circumvented the currency difficulties of the time by exchanging books with other publishers rather than money. He saw to it that his travelling peddlers (Parson Weems was the most famous of them) turned up whenever crowds gathered on market days, elections, court sessions, and society meetings.

It is no wonder that with Carey setting the pace, Philadelphia attracted authors from all sections, including New England, and that during the nineties it laid the foundation for the leadership in literary publishing it was to achieve in the eighteen twenties and thirties. Yet before 1820 professional authorship flourished
almost as little in Philadelphia as elsewhere. Though Carey, a writer himself, and compiler of an anthology of American verse, was known to be partial to native authors, and although he served their interests by offering to booksellers a larger discount on American works than on imported books, he had too keen a sense of commercial values to publish very many purely literary works, or any at all at his own risk.

If any literary form could have succeeded anywhere in America before 1820, it would have been the novel in the Philadelphia-New York area. The publishers there were in close touch with an important book-trade development abroad. In the 1790's England discovered that the novel was the form which was reaching the widest market—that "the Vulgar" and the idle ladies of all classes and ages were eagerly renting novels of seduction and of "Gothic" adventure. The leading publisher in this development was the Minerva Press, whose owner, William Lane, a former poultry butcher, amassed a fortune from the printing and rental of sensational fiction between 1785 and 1810. The form was not a gold mine for the authors—mostly women working in anonymous secrecy—who were paid a flat fee averaging five to twenty guineas per book. As a form which did not have, or which at least had lost, literary status, it attracted few professional-minded male writers to whom prestige was important.

The fad reached America early in the nineties. How much of Lane's trash was reprinted it is impossible to say, for the facts have not been gathered and analyzed, but contemporary American book dealers' and circulating library catalogues show that great quantities of it were imported.

That there was a market for it was proved by the persistent demand for novels by book peddlers like Parson Weems, who knew their buyers; by the fact that many village printers found it profitable to publish novels even for their small clientele; and by the universal chorus of denunciation of fiction by American critics from 1790 to 1820. American imitations appeared at once, and
yet before Cooper in 1821 not one American novelist was financially successful. Of the score or more American novels before 1800 that have been identified, few went through more than one edition, and, judging by their imprints, those that did had not been copyrighted.

Not even Mrs. Susannah Rowson, the author of *Charlotte Temple*, succeeded as American novelist; but as the producer of nine works of fiction, four of which she wrote after emigrating, she is entitled to consideration as the first American professional writer of fiction. *Charlotte*, however, must be classified as a British book since she published it in 1791 before she left England. A work of purest Minerva strain, it contains a seduction, an illegitimate birth, a desertion, a murder, assorted treacheries, and a tear-soaked grave.

When Mrs. Rowson arrived in Philadelphia in 1793, she could not have guessed that *Charlotte* was destined to become the best-selling novel in America before the advent of Scott. It has gone through more than 161 editions. Of these, forty-two were printed before 1820 in seventeen cities; and the fact that ten of these were produced in New York and seven in Philadelphia, compared to one in Boston, shows that the middle region offered the greatest market for fiction. Estimates of its sales are many, but probably the most reliable was that of Mathew Carey, the American discoverer of *Charlotte* and the publisher of at least nine editions. When he was getting out a new edition at fifty cents in 1812, he wrote the author that the sales “exceed those of any of the most celebrated novels that ever appeared in England, [far exceeding] 50,000 copies,” and that it was “the most popular and useful novel ever published in this country.” Carey’s judgment is confirmed by the fact that in 1818 the leading figures in the novel were exhibited in a waxworks show in the frontier town of Columbus, Ohio.

*Charlotte*, her third work, had succeeded so well in England that she had felt encouraged “to proceed in my favorite employment,” and she produced two more before emigrating. In the year
after her arrival two of her old novels went through two Philadelphia editions, and another a single edition. Unprotected by American copyright, these four works brought her nothing, yet she had reason to hope that she could make novel-writing at least an adjunct of her main occupation, which was acting.

That she wished to exploit the market that absorbed Charlotte is obvious from the plot of her first American novel, Trials of the Human Heart (1795). The heroine is the putative daughter of a man who tries to commit incest. Her parents die, her brother is a cad, her relatives conspire against her, she is cheated out of her inheritance, is lusted after by every male who lays eyes on her, is disappointed in love, marries a man she does not love, is wrecked in the English channel, finds her real father and mother (a lady who at one time is wooed and won by the Sultan of Turkey without being subjected to improper advances), and is finally united with her real lover, now conveniently widowed. Subjected to every misery, she nevertheless gets through all perils (including a house of prostitution) unsullied.

These delights (rendered in Richardsonian epistolary form) were presented to the public by subscription, Mathew Carey cooperating. But only 110 subscribers partook of them, and the first edition was still unsold in 1812. Why Charlotte and not Trials? It is worth pointing out that as in radio soap opera, Charlotte’s unmitigated miseries are presented through a simple, straight story-line, whereas Trials has a wilderness of subplots. But aesthetics is less relevant to the question than trade problems. Subscription publishing was the wrong method for a book addressed to the general reader rather than to the discriminating few; there must have been many who refused to have their names publicized in the subscription list of such a book. Moreover, the list shows that Mrs. Rowson was unable to reach many patrons outside the Philadelphia-Baltimore area where she was well known as actress. Finally, in order to make a profit on a work she paid to have manufactured (there is a record of her husband’s buying paper for it from Carey), she had to charge $2.00 for the
four volumes, a price too high for people accustomed to paying a dollar, or renting.

As a professional-minded writer, Mrs. Rowson was now willing to try a new formula; as an increasingly patriotic American (attacked by William Cobbett for her apostasy, she called him a "loathsome reptile"), she was glad to apply the new formula to American materials; and as an immigrant conscious that America tolerated the seduction novel less willingly than England, she was ready to quit that genre. When she began *Reuben and Rachel* about 1796, she intended to "arouse the curiosity of the young" in the history of her adopted country, and brought to the work something of the grandiose and nationalistic spirit of Barlow's epic. But the historical novel had not crystallized as a form, and Mrs. Rowson had no good models to guide her. Hers is a fantastic tale of Columbus and his imaginary descendants down to the year 1700, replete with wars and Indians. Before she had finished it, she turned teacher, and settled down in Boston, where her novel fell dead from the press.

Most of her books were set in England, where she was born and married, and where she learned about British "high-life" in her career as governess and actress. Her firsthand knowledge of English society helps to explain why *Charlotte* was so much more successful than its American imitations. *Charlotte*’s numerous villains, male and female, were all Europeans operating on American soil. Their villainies seemed to "come natural" in the imagination of American readers who were already beginning to identify the fascinations of sin with Europe. In foreign countries, where the individual’s very identification was based on his place in class and family; where the law of primogeniture produced a class of irresponsibles, frequently army men; where property laws made a woman the chattel of the male; where a woman had a social existence just to the extent that she was dependent on and "under the protection" of a male; where men of the upper classes were condoned in considering the unprotected female fair game; it was natural that fictional plots should be based on the pursuit
of the female by the "gentleman officer," on lost-and-found parents, treacherous relatives, and incestuous situations which were the end product of bastardy. Raised in England, Mrs. Rowson understood all this, whereas her American counterparts learned it secondhand. Local scandals were sometimes used by Americans as the basis of seduction novels, but the home-grown female-misery plot somehow did not have the authenticity of the foreign one. Even in the late eighteenth century, the "more smiling" aspects of American life were beginning to be considered the more characteristic.

Apparently, Mrs. Rowson was not willing to continue to write as a foreigner. Having adapted herself within four years to the social and moral atmosphere of America, she was ready also to conform to American conditions of literary production. Conformity was not imposed on her by social pressure: as an emigré Englishwoman she enjoyed some immunities denied to her American counterparts. Boston frowned on Robert Treat Paine the poet for marrying an actress, but Boston sent its children to Mrs. Rowson's schools even though it had seen her on the local stage. And even as teacher she advertised herself on her title pages as the author of Charlotte. Her shift from the stage and from sensational fiction to the schoolroom, therefore, was not timid. When in the Preface to Reuben and Rachel she declared that she had become a teacher out of a compelling need to teach very young girls, she was exhibiting the same impulse that led her, quite ingenuously, to justify Charlotte as a book that would save somewhat older females from a fate worse than death. She was a born teacher with a strong itch to write. The English social atmosphere had permitted her to unite teaching with diversion in the form of sensational fiction. She was quite willing to continue in this line in America, but soon realized that the book trade could not yet support a novelist. As schoolmistress she had an occupation which served her as patron while she produced verse, non-sensational domestic fiction, magazine miscellanea, and textbooks for children. She was the same highly moral woman that she had been
while she was writing Richardsonian soap opera for Lane in England, and felt not at all ashamed of her past as actress or a Minerva novelist. But the conditions of book distribution and reader patronage were different here, and Mrs. Rowson adapted to them without fussing.

This readiness to consult the market and adapt to it her literary stock-in-trade, which was didacticism, gives Mrs. Rowson standing as an early American writer of true professional temperament. Modestly but mistakenly, she thought of herself as an amateur. Genuine amateurism, by contrast, is exemplified by a contemporary named Mrs. Wood, who was known on her title pages only as "A Lady from Massachusetts." Mrs. Wood's gaudy mixtures of seduction, bastardy, Gothicism, and morality, most of them appropriately set in Europe, the home of sin, were advertised as the work of a lady who wrote not to "remunerate herself" like the "common English novelist, who works for a living, similar to a mechanic," but for the "amusement of herself [and her] friends." Mrs. Rowson by contrast did not write for pastime, but from compulsion and for profit. All her American editions bore her name as a selling gambit, and many of her title pages asserted that her books could be bought from her as well as from dealers.

Charles Brockden Brown, who is called the first professional American writer, began to publish fiction about the time Mrs. Rowson quit. He had started out with the standard equipment of the young dilettante: a low-grade literary infection, a distaste for business and the professions, small talent, and grandiose, commercially hopeless, literary schemes. In 1785 he was dreaming of epics on the discovery and conquests of America, like Barlow's. By 1789 he was developing a melancholy, self-probing, self-conscious egotism which he mistook for literary temperament but which even his friends found tiresome. Essays which he published in a magazine that year under the title of "The Rhapsodist" illustrate not only what was wrong with him as a young writer but what made the prose essay before Emerson both a literary blight and a trade hazard. When he defined a "rhapsodist" as
“one who delivers the sentiment suggested by the moment in artless and unpremeditated language” and transcribes the “devious wanderings of a quick but thoughtful mind,” he was describing the slovenly, late-eighteenth century amateur impulse which lingered on in the poorer works of even such writers as Irving, Longfellow, and Hawthorne, and which publishers took seriously at their financial peril.

“The Rhapsodist” was amateurism at its worst, and Brown would have loved to continue loafing around the edges of the literary world with the other amateurs in his Philadelphia club. The writer-as-idle-man pose was to become standard among imitators of Irving, but loafing seems to be precisely what Brown did for five years after leaving in 1793 the law office he loathed. But his unprosperous merchant father seemed to have been unable to support him properly, and in 1798 he went to New York to see if he could make a living from the novel-writing he had already begun.

Considering the contrast between his early and lofty literary aims, and the low status of fiction in 1798, his choice of the form requires inspection. By the mid-nineties a group of English writers including Godwin, Bage, and Holcroft had worked out a new fictional formula which combined adventure, violence, and Gothic mystery with ideas and social propaganda. In the eyes of critics it was far more respectable than the seduction novel, and, being just as formless, could be composed at the speed necessary in Brown’s ill-paid vocation. Moreover, his choice had a certain cultural logic. Unlike the Richardsonian formula, the Godwinian was importable. Based as it was, frequently, on crime and its detection, and upon discussion of social problems, it could be naturalized in a country young enough to be still somewhat lawless and ideologically still so unsettled that social theory was in complete flux.

In Godwin’s Caleb Williams Brown found a model in which he could literally do what most Richardsonians merely pretended: combine diversion with instruction. Moreover, he saw
that the native scene was a welcome setting for such stories in a time when animosity to England encouraged nativism. In advertising his first work, *The Sky Walk, An American Tale*, early in 1798, Brown had declared that his country was a rich field for the "story-telling moralist" of the Godwinian type, for whereas the "popular" (Richardsonian) tale appealed to only one type of reader—"the idle and thoughtless"—the moral adventure story could, through "eloquence, the exhibition of powerful motives, and audaciousness" of characterization, "enchain the attention and ravish the souls of those who study and reflect."

This was a truly professional attitude: Brown wished both to serve reader taste, and thereby make a living, and to exploit serious material which he had not merely manufactured to sell.

But in the publishing world logic and good intentions are never enough. In the midst of production, the printer of *Sky Walk* died bankrupt, and the sheets of the novel were permanently impounded by creditors. For half a century more, American authors were to be caught in the wreckage of shaky publishing firms.

Meanwhile, he had begun serializing another novel, *The Man at Home*, in which he again used the American scene—Philadelphia in the plague year of 1793. Against a background of death and crime, Brown discussed the virtues and follies of man and argued about social problems. Interrupted by another plague, his serial never became a book.

Both of these attempts occurred before he moved to New York in July of 1798. Tradition has it that he now became a professional because of the encouragement of friends in a typical amateur group, the Friendly Club of New York. Actually, they impeded his literary progress by persuading him to found a collaborative magazine which they failed to support. The real influence on him as a professional writer was a French revolutionary then living in New York named H. Caritat. This gentleman had come over with a mission—to promote French republi-
can doctrine and to make a lot of money by establishing a bookstore, a publishing business, and the biggest circulating library in the United States. At the moment of Brown's arrival, the library contained 4,000 books, and within the next two years it grew to 30,000. Caritat's specialty in the circulation business was novels, and he was determined to make novel-reading a respectable, sophisticated pastime. As agent of the Minerva Press, he stocked all of Lane's trash, and as a student of Lane's library methods, he was a promoter who set up and stocked such libraries all over the country. Caritat's fiction catalogues are, for their time, marvels of salesmanship.

Closely associated with Caritat, Brown must have acquired the illusion that there was a commercial future for the author of novels as well as for the distributor, and Caritat must have shared the illusion—for he published and advertised at his own expense Brown's *Wieland* and *Ormond*. At a dollar a copy these tales of crime, insane obsession, and mystery should have been commercially attractive. But no second editions were needed, and records show that Mathew Carey, the biggest distributor in the country, ordered only twenty-eight of the one and forty-two of the other in 1799, and no more until 1803. Because the villain in *Wieland* caused some stir among critics, Brown capitalized on him in another novel, *Memoirs of Carwin*, which did not get into print in Brown's time. A Philadelphia publisher brought out two more novels for him in 1799, one of which, *Edgar Huntly*, was the only work of Brown's to go into a second edition while he lived.

In two years he had written seven novels designed to attract both the casual and the thoughtful reader, and four of them had been published in the central book market—without financial results to encourage him to go on. But he made one more compromise. Because readers complained of the "gloominess" and the "out-of-nature" incidents of his works, he tried a more cheerful formula. His last two novels, *Clara Howard* and *Jane
Talbot (1801), omitted murders, suicides, and violence, and concentrated on the ethical and social problems of love and marriage. With happy endings. They were serious books, epistolary in form, in American settings, and full of Godwinian discourse—but so dull that they were quickly forgotten.

Brown gave up in 1801. In at least fifteen books, finished and unfinished, published and unpublished, he had tried vainly to adjust his talents to the reader. Perhaps he succeeded, but the books never got to a big enough market. He spent the rest of his life storekeeping and doing hack work for Philadelphia publishers, leaving an estate of little over $1,600 when he died in 1810.

The question of his priority as a professional is a matter of definition. If the test is intention—the wish and the attempt to live by literature alone—Joel Barlow was first, in 1783; then Paine, 1794; Mrs. Rowson, probably 1794; Joseph Dennie, 1795; and Brown, 1798. If reliance on another though allied profession disqualifies, all five must be ruled out for their work in the church, on the stage, or in magazine editing. More important is the test of professional attitude. Anonymity is only a partial clue. Paine, Dennie, and Brown adhered to the traditional prejudice of the well-to-do amateur: that the gentleman does not put his name to a work, especially in a small unified society where its authorship quickly becomes known. (Brown signed his initials to prefaces.) But this convention aside, all five showed signs of outgrowing the amateur pose, and all five showed a rare willingness to be known in their time as writers by occupation.

Financial failure, in their time, was a foregone conclusion. Poetry had cultural status, and people listened to it and read it in newspapers, but few would buy it. Fiction had low cultural status but a rapidly growing public, especially among women. Most of these women, however, were novel renters, not buyers; and what the novel gained from them, it lost in the many homes where the novel was refused a place on the family book shelves. For all these reasons no professional before Washington Irving succeeded.