CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Literary Economics and Literary History

ONE OF THE most interesting reactions to the Literary History of the United States has been a demand for a revision of the methods of literary history. Discussing the work in a recent issue of the Kenyon Review, Professor René Wellek declares that the way out of the problem of literary history "can only be through a definition of its subject matter, through a development of a clear methodology, through a conception of what is meant by history and what is meant by literature." I agree on all counts. It is easy to agree also with the opinion quite evidently held by Wellek and Warren, in their distinguished book, The Theory of Literature, that literary history is not sufficiently literary. I believe that it is equally important to recognize, however, that much literary history is arid because it is not historical enough. It is a safe estimate that 95 per cent of all past literature, by any definition of that word, has little or no intrinsic value for the intelligent, non-academic, non-scholarly reader of today. The real present value of books that once interested readers is historical, the same kind of value that we attach to a past election, revolution, railroad system, school law, or system of ideas. Literary historians sometimes try to persuade us that a dead book is really still alive because it embodies an idea or exhibits a form that is still current. One might as well argue that grandfather is still alive because he was a Republican or a yogi. Literary history has been much too busy trying to prove that past writers shouted loud enough to be heard by
posterity. We should be more interested in knowing how far their voices carried in their own generation, and—equally important—whether their generation talked back.

It has been recognized often enough that the relation between the writer and society is reciprocal. But recognition is not enough; we need more demonstration. The tendency is to assign a dynamic role in this relationship to the author only, and a merely passive one to society as represented by the reader. Still worse, most scholars assume that literary history can be adequately represented by a line—with the writer at one end and the reader at the other. Actually, instead of being merely linear, the pattern is triangular. Opposite both the writer and the reader stands the whole complex organism of the book and magazine trade—a trade which for the last two centuries, at least, has had a positive and dynamic function in the world of literature. In this triangle, cultural force or influence runs in both directions. The book trade is acted upon by both writer and reader, and in receiving their influence the book trade interprets it and therefore transmutes it. Correspondingly, writer and reader dictate to, and are dictated to by, the book trade.

These reciprocal influences are complex, and our instruments for determining and evaluating them are, to say the least, inadequate. Current criticism and anthropology are attempting to illuminate them through the concept of "myth." According to Wellek and Warren, the imaginative artist's "need" for myth is "a sign of his felt need for communion with his society, for a recognized status as artist functioning within society." Certainly the concept of "myth" is a rich and rewarding one for literary study. But though critics identify past myths readily—and recklessly—enough (recent articles on The Confidence-Man and Billy Budd are examples), how do they know whether or when the artist succeeded in communing with society by means of myth? Surely the question is relevant. Until we know more about public response to myth, myth-hunting will remain what it is at present
—a playground for the critical imagination, rather than a branch of cultural history. A writer’s success in communing with society cannot be determined by guesswork. The critic and historian both need instruments: publishers’ records; the correspondence of authors and editors (much of it still unpublished); facts about the circulation of magazines and sales of books; and—most difficult of all to find—reliable evidence of reader response.

I propose from this point on to explore some reader-writer-book trade relations in America between 1800 and 1860, with the purpose of suggesting methods for getting at some of the neglected realities of cultural history. I hope to show that recognition of the triangular pattern I have suggested will contribute a better understanding of the ways in which writers have produced and communicated.

The book trade first. We recognize at once that through the book trade the whole economic life of the nation was brought to bear upon literature and literary life. The rise and decline of literary centers is to be explained not by theories of “culture cities” but by the facts of transportation. In one period a new and regular packet line to England gave Philadelphia priority in the reprinting of Scott and Byron, thus enabling that city to dominate American literary publishing for two decades. The geographical isolation of Boston kept it from being the literary center it is generally supposed to have been until mid-century, when a railroad line across the Berkshires enabled its publishers to compete in the western market. But a deep harbor and the Erie Canal insured the eventual and permanent leadership of New York in literary publishing.

Other economic facts were equally compelling. Any depression, any spurt of wildcat banking, an early freeze on the inland waterways, might result in a writer’s being told, “We are accepting no new books,” or “Yours must wait two or four or six months.” Improvements in technology, leading to cheap printing, helped to kill the American novel temporarily in the forties
because the market was flooded with ten and twenty-five cent editions of British novels. Publishers then said to American writers, "Stop writing novels and turn out short stories for magazines." But competition killed off the reprinters of foreign works, and publishers said, "Give us novels again." Stereotyping was perfected, and books that might have died in a year were kept in circulation for ten or twenty.

Then, too, we have never recognized the effect of discount policy upon the sale and circulation of books, upon the American writer's prosperity, and ultimately upon regional culture. In the 1820's, for example, native novels retailed in America for the same price as British novels—about two dollars; but Cooper had to be paid and Scott did not, and Cooper's royalties had to be squeezed out of discounts. A Philadelphia bookseller got a 45 per cent discount on Scott in quantity; a maximum of one-third on Cooper. His profit on a Cooper book was adequate when he sold it at retail in Philadelphia, but when he sold it to bookshops in the interior he had to split the discount, and half of one-third was not an attractive profit for either wholesaler or retailer. Therefore, in a Pittsburgh bookshop Scott had an advantage over Cooper that had nothing to do with literary quality. As a result, American literature in the twenties had an adequate circulation in Atlantic urban centers, where distributors could take the whole discount; but for obvious reasons its circulation in the interior was limited. On the other hand, British literature flowed west in much greater quantity. This fact, of course, has some implications for cultural history.

Until mid-century Emerson's essays were not widely sold outside New England because he would not let his publishers discount his books at more than 10 or 20 per cent. When a new race of enterprising Boston publishers took over his books in the fifties, his work was for the first time made easily available to a national audience. Literary history tends to place Emerson's audience and influence in the thirties and forties, which is correct
as far as his relations with contemporary writers is concerned. But he did not have a national audience or a national response until the second half of the century.

Other economic factors also influenced literary form. When Scott began to write his romances, the booksellers of Great Britain had established the three-decker as the most profitable form for the publication of fiction. By 1820 new Waverly romances were selling at thirty shillings a set. Scott's share of this was one-sixth, and his return on the first issue of *Ivanhoe* was $15,000 (about $60,000 in terms of modern money). At that rate Scott could not afford to worry about functional or organic construction. The material for every novel was poured into the three-decker like so much concrete into wooden forms. But, as the American market could not absorb the expensive three-volume set, Scott was republished here in two-volume, two-dollar sets. When Cooper began writing in 1820, the two-volume novel was his predetermined form. For thirty years, no matter what his theme or plot, he padded and stretched and invented incident to fill two volumes of four hundred pages each. So did his contemporaries—Neal, Kennedy, Sedgwick, Simms. Any study of the form of novels in that period ought to begin with recognition of this crude fact.

As economic pressures had formed the two-volume pattern, so, in the 1840's, other economic pressures broke it. In the violence of American competition for British books, our publishers were forced to print novels in one volume, because that form was cheaper, and to charge according to length. Now a novel in one volume could be as short as *The Scarlet Letter* or as long as *Moby-Dick*. We discern organic form in both works. We should remember that both were published during a brief era when the book trade did not dictate some aspects of form to the professional novelist.

In the late fifties a new economic influence on the form of the novel took up where the old one left off. Magazine serializa-
tion of fiction had been going on sporadically since the eighteenth century, but in 1850 Harper’s New Monthly Magazine established permanently the lure of the words “to be continued.” Because from then on the novelist could sell his books at least twice, it was a foregone conclusion that the novel would become the dominant literary form for professional writers. But the novelist paid for his new prosperity by submitting to a new tyranny. Editors began to dictate the length and number of instalments, and instalment publishing itself predetermined form to a certain extent. A writer could not simply send an editor thirty pages of his manuscript for the March issue; he had to finish off the instalment as a unit, and, if possible, make the reader look forward to April. Can there be any doubt that the form of the novel after 1850 was affected by the economic fact of serialization? Much criticism of the form of James and Howells is simply naïve because of a failure to look at their work as it appeared serially in magazines, and at the correspondence (most of it unpublished) in which they quarreled, sometimes bitterly, with editors over problems of instalment publishing.

Poetry was not exempt from such material pressures, as a rather appalling episode of 1845 shows. Graham’s Magazine is mentioned in all the literary histories, but one is rarely taken into its inner sanctum where literary history was made. The editor had agreed to pay Longfellow fifty dollars a poem on condition that he publish in no other magazine. Longfellow consented, but one of his contributions drew a protest from Graham. The poet had charged fifty dollars for a sonnet. This, hinted the editor, was cheating: it raised the cost of verse to almost four dollars a line, and did not fill enough space for the money. The editor’s economy was not the poet’s. Graham operated on a budget—so many pages to be filled, so much cash to be paid for filling them. But, as Thoreau had pointed out, the poet has an economy too. From Longfellow’s point of view, a sonnet might cost as much in time, work, and inspiration as forty lines of quatrains. One can
assume a connection between this episode and the fact that, before the fifties, Longfellow, an excellent sonneteer, wrote few sonnets but many poems in space-consuming quatrains.

The foregoing examples and episodes indicate, I think, that the role of the book trade in American literary culture was anything but passive. We are only now beginning to write the history of that trade; but the findings of such scholars as W. S. Tryon, Rollo Silver, and Walter Sutton,* when made available, will contribute to a much needed revision of our literary history.

So much for the place of the book trade in the pattern. We are perhaps even more ignorant of the reader as a force in literary culture. Here the problem of method is particularly troublesome. Theoretically there can be no complete account of the reception of a work of literature until every reader's reaction to it has been polled and classified, and this, of course, is impossible. Actually there are many little used shortcuts which offer acceptable clues to reader response. Publishers' sales records, of course, are primary evidence. So are the library circulation reports which began in the seventies and which were printed in the book-trade journals. Otherwise, the most valuable evidence lies scattered in the correspondence of authors, publishers, and editors.

To return to the unpublished Longfellow-Graham letters for illustration. Before the Graham era of economically efficient literary magazines, American poetry was seldom paid for, and editors did not think it worth while to copyright the contents of their issues. As a result, newspapers throughout the country clipped freely from the magazines such poetry as most pleased their readers. For this reason, by 1840, some poets were beginning to enjoy a national reputation even before the advent of national magazines and publishers. It is probably safe to say that the

rise of a truly popular national poetry was directly connected with this neglect of editors to take advantage of copyright law. After Graham had built up a circulation big enough to permit high payment to authors, he used the statistics of newspaper reprints as a measure of a poet’s popularity and rate of pay. Thus Graham wrote Longfellow in 1844, explaining why Lowell’s poems were worth only twenty-five dollars: “I know the test of general popularity as well as any man—and he [Lowell] has it not. He is well-known in New England and appreciated there but has not a tythe of the reputation South and West possessed by yourself and Bryant. This, of course, I know—it is no guess work, for with a thousand exchange papers scattered all over the whole Union I should be a dolt in business not to see who is most copied and praised by them.” Graham was right, and the records of Ticknor and Fields, Lowell’s publishers after 1848, confirm his judgment. Here is evidence of reader response which should not be overlooked by historians.

Nothing better demonstrates the dilemma of literary history than its uncertainty about what to do with popular writers in general, and with the fireside poets—Bryant, Longfellow, Whit-tier, Lowell, Holmes—in particular. In every new history the space devoted to them shrinks. The shrinkage may be justified on critical, but hardly on historical, grounds, for the importance of these poets in their own century cannot decrease. We err, as historians, in allowing the taste of the modern reader to nullify the taste of the nineteenth-century reader. It is as if the political historian were to ignore the administration of Grant because it was not in accord with the social principles of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The error, I think, arises in part from our persistent neglect of the reader as a force in literature. The more we neglect him, the more we lose in historical perspective. And I suggest that we do not gain perspective by relying on the contemporary critical reception of a writer as an index to his standing with
his readers. We have had a good many "reception" or "reputation" studies in recent years, and historians have drawn upon them heavily. A doctoral candidate faithfully and tiresomely quotes from all the contemporary reviews he can find, adds them up, and says, this book was successful in its time, this one was not. The method is unrealistic and misleading, because it ignores certain practices of the book trade. In some periods the favorable tone of most book notices means simply that periodicals wished to be kept on the publisher's free list and to receive complimentary copies of his expensive books along with those which he simply wished to plug. Sometimes publishers put reviewers on their payrolls as professional readers and enjoyed, as a result, a certain amount of immunity or privilege. Often, favorable reviews originated in the publisher's office; or the publisher clipped a good notice from a journal, copied it, and sent it around to all the other journals where the reviewers were too busy, or too tired, to read all the books they discussed. In some periods criticism reflected inter- or intra-urban literary gang squabbles. In the era of the gentleman-author, well-known writers had friends in practically all the leading magazine and newspaper offices. We cynically recognize that many of these facts are operative in the publishing world of today. Why do we become credulous when as literary historians we make use of past criticism?

But beyond all this stands the fact that the reviewer, or critic, was and is simply another reader. His thinking may have represented that of a group or a class, but so did that of the individual reader. Particularly before the establishment in the 1850's of regular signed book-review columns, which bore the stamp of professional and predictable critics like George Ripley, a book notice might represent the opinion of a thousand, a hundred, or no readers at all—except the critic. Consider the hostile critical reception of Cooper's *The Bravo*, and then note that sales records show this to have been one of his most popular
books. Cooper himself early decided that sales figures were the only true index to his standing with the public, that there was no necessary correlation between critical response and reader response. Publishers have always recognized the unreliability of critical opinion as a trade index. They do not care what a critic says as long as he says it. In the book trade it is not criticism that matters but publicity. To the historian, past criticism, though sometimes useful as a clue to the thinking of the segment of society that produced it, is almost valueless as a guide to reader taste.

Turning finally to the place of the writer in the pattern, we recognize at once that in so far as he was dependent upon, and influenced by, the reader and the book trade, he was not only artist but economic man, and that his artistry and economics were usually at war with each other. As artist he had his private vision, his values, his aesthetic or intellectual or spiritual mission, which rarely corresponded exactly with the values and ideals of the society in which he lived. Inevitably he was alienated from much of society part of the time, and from some of it all the time.

This alienation was intensified by his sense of his social place as an artist. Historically, the creative writer was not a worker or producer, but a gentleman-amateur who exhibited his talent to his social equals but did not depend upon it for a living; or he accepted the patronage of a social superior, and was still independent of buyers and readers. He wrote when the spirit moved him, endured none of the pressures of commercial time and the market, sought reputation—"fame" in the Renaissance sense—but not publicity. In a pecuniary society under democratic patronage, this proud and independent attitude was an anachronism, but vestiges of it survived until 1850 and later. We recognize the typical attitudes of the patrician writer in the literary magazines of early decades, like the *Monthly Anthology*, which, according to their title pages, were edited by "societies of
gentlemen”—and not for profit. We perceive them in the letters of Jefferson, William Wirt, Hugh Swinton Légaré, Francis P. Gilmer, and young Emerson, who conceived of the “literary profession” as a life of study and scholarship to be pursued by gentlemen of independent income. Long after Byron and Scott had proved that a gentleman could write for money, we see the mark of the patrician in the American writer’s demand for privacy, for dignity in his commercial relations, and in his resistance to commercial exploitation. Gentleman psychology largely explains the persistence of literary anonymity—the fact that Cooper and Irving kept their names off their title pages until the early forties. Irving in 1820 even hesitated to send out review copies to strangers lest he seem to be courting the favor of the market; Longfellow in the forties objected to the use of his name on the mastheads of magazines to which he contributed; Emerson in the fifties severely restricted the advertising of his books—at the very moment when Barnum, Beecher, and Bonner were inventing the modern art of ballyhoo. But such reticences were doomed. Books had become articles of commerce, as Cooper frankly recognized. Authors’ names were brand names; to be sold, goods must be “promoted.” And of what avail was an anonymous title page when copyright law required that the owner of a work put his name on the back of that page? Under these conditions the fastidious attitudes of gentleman authors could not survive. During the twenties and thirties writers like Irving, Cooper, and Emerson, who began as patrician amateurs, were transformed into hard-working professionals, but they never ceased resenting the forces that brought about that change. Yet the American author of the period was resourceful in protecting his integrity from the pressures of the market and of democratic patronage. During the twenties he learned that if he went to a publisher with nothing but a manuscript in his hands he was at the mercy not only of the shaky financial structure of the book trade but of the publisher’s interpretation
of public taste. The publisher might, and frequently did, say, "No, I cannot risk my capital on this book; take it away, and write it differently, or write something else"—or, just "Take it away." But the writer was not so vulnerable if he could reply, "I will take the risk of manufacturing costs; you will simply distribute for me. I will decide the probable market and the number of copies to be printed; I will dictate the terms of discount to retailers; I will tell you how much and what kind of promotion I will endure. In short, I will decide who and where my public is, and on what terms I will meet it." There were other ways of controlling the book trade and resisting reader pressures, but all of them, like this one, required the writer's investment of capital. Conspicuously absent from the ranks of those who had this protective margin of capital were Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville; they were also the writers who suffered most in their struggle to make some adjustment with society.

But even for writers without capital there was another strategy for maintaining a kind of independence from democratic patronage. Most of them—not, of course, fortunates like Cooper and Prescott, or unfortunates like Melville—had secondary occupations, to which they resorted either regularly or occasionally—teaching, lecturing, or public office. For the writer who either could not or would not write regularly books which the public would buy in sufficient quantity to support him, this protection was essential. But the secondary occupation was not and never has been a complete solution of the artist's problem. An artist rarely has full control of the flow of his creative energy; he can seldom keep his other energies in a separate tank, to be drained from nine to five, and then turn on the creative tap after supper. Hawthorne in the customhouse is an example, and his problem justifies a brief digression into the subject of the American writer as officeholder.

I estimate that from 1800 to 1870, from 60 to 75 per cent of all male American writers who even approached professionalism
either held public office or tried to get it. James Kirk Paulding set the pattern, by managing, during his twenty-five years with the Navy Department, to write seventeen books, contribute to at least ten magazines and gift books, and grind out the equivalent of twenty or thirty volumes of political copy for newspapers. One may either suspect the quality of Paulding's public service or question the propriety of well-paid public sinecures which permitted an officeholder to channel so much of his energy into another occupation; but there is no doubt that Paulding's achievement opened new vistas to the American writer. Officeholding seemed a perfect solution for the writer's problem. It offered financial security, leisure to create as one could, and freedom to say what one pleased rather than what the public demanded. It was a kind of republican patronage, similar to the monarchical variety, but better. Some editors even suggested that such employment of writers be put on an official basis, as a way of subsidizing the arts, and that beneficiaries also be granted pensions.

By 1860 some customhouses and foreign legations resembled salons, but no miracles occurred. Some writers, like Hawthorne and Irving, took their jobs too seriously to have any creative energy left over. Others found that monotonous routine killed their literary spirit, or that enforced loyalty to the party that held them under obligation damaged their integrity. Still others discovered that it was easier simply to live in an official rut than to use the job as they had originally intended. In the end this new resource left the American author where it had found him: in the trap that always catches the creative artist who is also economic man.

The tensions within the artist, and between himself and society, are revealed in the very form and substance of his work. In the last twenty years of Cooper's career we see political novels and tracts sandwiched in among romances of land and sea and the past, and we call it versatility. But we do not see the stubborn three-cornered battle between him, the reader, and the pub-
lisher in which he tried to force upon the reader sugar-coated political doctrine which he thought medicinal. In the long run the reader was right in rejecting the medicine: Cooper’s best novels were those which the public liked and bought most. We see Hawthorne as a short-story writer whose tales are often blighted by bald explanations of obvious symbolism; but we do not see the magazine and gift book audience which demanded these awkward and extraneous clarifications; nor do we see the trade conditions which led to his abrupt abandonment of the short story entirely in 1850. We see in his novels wretched final chapters in which he tied the threads of story lumpily together as if he were afraid the whole plot might unravel; but we do not see that such devices were forced upon him by publishers in response to the demands of readers who wanted to know what finally happened to Miriam and Donatello, and whether Hilda and Kenyon got married. We see Emerson’s recent and able biographer transforming him from an aspiring transcendental essayist into a worldly observer of English civilization and a stale repeater of his own ideas. But is it not more important to recognize that twenty years of professional lecturing on the lyceum platform taught Emerson how to communicate, and transformed him from a spokesman for a small coterie into a spokesman for a nation? We see Melville’s Pierre as a complicated philosophical performance, not as the desperate and unsuccessful attempt it really was to write a novel in the popular vein.

We, as modern readers of these writers, have gained about as much as we have lost by the pressures which contemporary readers and the book trade exerted upon them. Men like Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Emerson, who had the humility to recognize reader taste and reader resistance not as a blank wall of banality and superficiality but as a challenge to their ability as craftsmen, were at their best when they accepted the challenge. Emerson’s Essays of 1841 and 1844 are superior to his Nature of 1836 because in the intervening years his lyceum audiences
had made him express himself more plainly and more concretely. Poe's great short stories might never have been written had not the public, by rejecting his first three books of verse, forced him into the field of fiction. The superb balance of physical and imaginative adventure in *Moby-Dick* is partly traceable to the contemporary reader's preferring *Typee* and *Omoo* to *Mardi*. Hawthorne might never have turned to the novel had not a publisher—a shrewd interpreter of reader taste—persuaded him that his professional future lay in that field.

To sum up, the artist was sometimes at his best when the two pressures—creative and social—were in equilibrium. Many of the books which we still read, and most of those which we reject, reflect an imbalance—too much artist, or too much society. But it was the artist in balance with society who produced *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, *English Traits*, and *Moby-Dick*.

The limitations of the approach I have presented are obvious. It has little relevance, for example, to the historical study of non-professional writers like Thoreau, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. It is ancillary—and subordinate to—the historical study of ideas, of nationalism, of regionalism, and of cultural dynamics. But for all of these fields it is a potential corrective.