

AMERICAN LITERARY PUBLISHING  
IN THE  
MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY  
THE BUSINESS OF TICKNOR AND FIELDS

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- 4 Retail sales book, 6–7 October 1856 [fMS Am2030.2 (37), p. 9].
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	Consumer	Wholesale
1840	1.04	0.95
1841	1.05	0.93
1842	0.98	0.81
1843	0.89	0.75
1844	0.90	0.78
1845	0.91	0.82
1846	0.92	0.83
1847	0.99	0.93
1848	0.95	0.78
1849	0.92	0.82
1850	0.94	0.91
1851	0.92	0.87
1852	0.93	0.88
1853	0.93	0.96
1854	1.01	1.03
1855	1.04	1.10
1856	1.02	1.10
1857	1.05	1.19
1858	0.99	0.98
1859	1.00	1.01

## INTRODUCTION

IN HIS 1949 ESSAY “Literary Economics and Literary History,” William Charvat suggests that “much literary history is arid because it is not historical enough.” He explains:

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.<sup>1</sup>

He ridicules the attempts of some literary historians to insist that past literature expresses ideas or uses forms that remain meaningful to modern readers, and proposes instead that the proper activity of the literary historian is to investigate and interpret an author’s work in the context of the world that brought it into being. In the remainder of the essay, Charvat outlines his approach to literary history; that of investigating the complex and reciprocal relationships of the reader, writer, and the book trade.

Charvat’s essay was written in part as a response to René Wellek’s criticisms of the *Literary History of the United States*. This collaborative work of three volumes, which had been published the preceding year, presented a general history of American literature by bringing together essays that focused on the literary works of individual authors, along with others that traced the development of American writing (understood in its broadest sense) in its relationships to social, cultural, and intellectual history. The particular approach to literary history espoused by Charvat was represented by a series of chapters – two of which were written by Charvat himself – briefly exploring the state of the book trade and its effects on authorship in each successive period. In his critical review, Wellek had judged the work eclectic and unfocused:

Literary history, as conceived by our distinguished editors, has no subject matter or rather any amount of subject matters, no definite method, no focus of interest, no coherent critical standards. It is social history, intellectual history, history of sentiment, biography, anthology, and literary criticism, all rolled into one.<sup>2</sup>

Its most serious deficiency, he claimed, was “the failure to provide a continuous and coherent history of poetic styles, prose-genres, devices and techniques – in short, a history of literature as art” (p. 504). While recognizing the value of

chapters “on the media of literary culture,” he found that “their relation to the actual history of imaginative literature is only tenuous” (p. 503). It is clear that Wellek, as Charvat himself pointed out, found that the problem with much literary history was that it was not concerned enough with literature. For Wellek the solution to this problem lay in a clear “conception of what is meant by history and what is meant by literature” (p. 506).

Certainly the general course of the academic study of American literature during the following decades reflected the approach advocated by Wellek: one favoring the attempt at critical interpretation of the language and forms of literary works rather than historical investigation of the contexts of their original production and distribution. Despite its successes, however, it is telling that this critical approach did not produce a general or comprehensive survey of American literature to replace the *Literary History*.

Charvat’s own career is instructive: his work, more than that of any other American literary scholar, took the approach to literary history that he himself advocated. Focusing on authorship as a profession defined by its relationship – mediated through publishing – to contemporary audiences, he examined source materials in a new way. Authors’ papers and publishers’ records yielded information not only on the author’s creative process, recorded in successive drafts or stages of proof, but also on the economics of authorship and the influence of economic facts on the creation and reception of a work. In the 1940s articles on the literary income of Herman Melville and Henry W. Longfellow were followed by an investigation of early book promotion in the United States and the ways that publishers attempted to influence reviews and sales. In 1949 – the same year he published the essay quoted above – Charvat, in collaboration with the historian Warren S. Tryon, edited for publication the early cost books of Boston publishers Ticknor and Fields, thus making available to scholars important data for the study of American literary publishing for the period before the Civil War. This data remained – and to a large extent still remains – unexploited, and during the 1950s Charvat turned away from this approach to the study of literature. In 1959 his *Literary Publishing in America, 1790–1850*, a slim volume of three essays originally presented as the Rosenbach Lectures, was published. It presents a tantalizing glimpse of an outline for an American literary history, written along the lines of his earlier work. However, a proposed full study of the profession of authorship in the United States from 1800 to 1870 remained unfinished and unpublished at the time of his death in 1966.<sup>3</sup>

Charvat begins the preface to the 1959 work as follows:

These chapters are, in one sense, a skimming, in other ways, a condensation, of materials which I collected years ago toward a history of the economics of authorship in America. I had hoped to add a new dimension to literary history, but the dimension turned out to be too narrow. Literary history, no matter what the historian’s approach, must be primarily concerned with literature. If the approach is wholly extrinsic, as mine was at the beginning, the product is likely to be sterile. Facts and figures about sales of books and

## INTRODUCTION

incomes of authors are interesting – but not interesting enough, unless they specifically reveal something about the ways in which writers and their writings function in a culture. Similarly, the history of publishing, with which I became deeply involved, tended, like most specialties, to become an end in itself. Publishing is relevant to literary history only in so far as it can be shown to be, ultimately, a shaping influence on literature. I believe that it is and always has been precisely that, but literary historians have only superficially recognized the fact.

Charvat appears at first to concede Wellek's criticism of his broad view of literary history, but in the final sentence this concession is qualified. He continues:

When these things became clear to me, I limited my study to those writers for whom both art and income were matters of concern, and whose work, accordingly, revealed the often conflicting pressures of the will to create and the need to create for a buying public. This plan eliminated not only the private poets and hack writers, but such authors as Thoreau and Whitman who, "public" though their purposes were, never succeeded in becoming professional on an economic plane. At the same time, in order to keep literature at the center of my investigations, I began working from the inside out – that is, from what the literary work itself could tell me about the writer's relation to society, out toward the reading public and publishing economy which conditioned that relation.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his belief that publishing is and always has been a "shaping influence on literature," Charvat narrowed his work, both in scope and method, to focus on those selected canonical literary authors, the critical interpretation of whose texts might be expected to be influenced by evidence of the production and transmission of these texts. He seems to contradict himself here and to be unable to find a theoretical basis to sustain his belief in the importance of publishing history to the study of literature. He offers instead scraps from an abandoned enterprise, one that he found to be somehow irrelevant, but also – as he admitted later in this preface – severely limited by "the lack of adequate research tools" (p. 9), especially bibliographies recording the output of the American book trade. Given Charvat's own reservations, it is scarcely surprising that scholars of American literature have not concentrated their efforts on investigating the history of publishing and the book trade in the United States.

I do not mean to suggest that there has been no work in these fields since 1950. Certainly a number of important bibliographical and research tools for the study of the history of publishing and the book trade in the United States have appeared in the interim. The work of Ralph R. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker on *American Bibliography* and of Shoemaker and his successors on *A Checklist of American Imprints* has provided a basic checklist of the output of the American book trade from 1800 to the 1840s, continuing the earlier work of Charles Evans for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Access to copies of these and other works in American libraries has been simplified by the publication of the massive *National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints*, and has since become easier as bibliographical databases and electronic on-line library catalogs have become available through the Internet. Jacob Blanck's *Bibliography of American Literature*, which I completed in 1991, for the first time provides accurate and detailed bibliogra-

phical descriptions of the first publication in book form of the writings of a large number of American literary authors. A record of the literature of American book trade history, both primary and secondary, is ably provided in G. Thomas Tanselle's *Guide to the Study of United States Imprints*. Microform publications have also been important. Of special interest have been: the reproduction of all known American imprints through 1819 in the *Early American Imprints* project directed from the American Antiquarian Society; the reproduction of material listed in the three volumes of Lyle H. Wright's *American Fiction*; and the publication of that part of the surviving archives of Harper and Brothers housed at Columbia University.<sup>5</sup>

The study of American book trade and publishing history has attracted the interest of librarians, booksellers, and historians, as well as literary scholars, and a number of important works have indeed been published since the 1950s. Rollo G. Silver contributed monographs on the American printer and typefounder during the first decades of the nineteenth century, and Walter Sutton's *The Western Book Trade* gives an account of the rise and decline of Cincinnati as a publishing center. Warren S. Tryon's illuminating biography of the Boston publisher James T. Fields draws in part on information from the cost books of Ticknor and Fields that he had edited in collaboration with Charvat. David Kaser has published a study of the Philadelphia publishers Carey & Lea and edited the earliest cost book of that firm, covering the years 1825 to 1838. James J. Barnes has explored the intricacies of international copyright and its effects on the Anglo-American book trade. Two publishing-house histories – Eugene Exman's *The Brothers Harper*, and Ellen B. Ballou's *The Building of the House* (about Houghton Mifflin) – are noteworthy for the careful scholarly attention to detail they display. Madeleine B. Stern has been a tireless investigator of the nineteenth-century book trade, and her pieces are collected in several volumes. Richard J. Wolfe has produced a masterful bibliography and study of the publication of sheet music during the early years of the nineteenth century. The development of binding and printing machinery has been described in fascinating detail, and their impact on book production and distribution explored, in two works by Frank E. Comparato. The massive four-volume *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* by John B. Tebbel, though frequently derivative and uncritical, has brought together a tremendous amount of information previously scattered among many books and periodicals.

Literary scholars have also made significant contributions to the understanding of American book trade and publishing history in the decades since 1950, chiefly through the energetic production of new scholarly and critical editions of the works of major American literary authors. This activity resulted from the application to nineteenth-century American texts of the theories and techniques of literary editing developed in England by W. W. Greg and others for English Renaissance drama. Charvat himself was involved in one of the first of these editorial projects – the Ohio State University Press's Centenary Edition

of the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne – but the work of Fredson Bowers and G. Thomas Tanselle has been more influential in demonstrating the usefulness of a careful examination of the process of publication and its effects on the transmission of American literary texts. In the course of their editorial activities, these and other scholars have made important discoveries concerning composition, proofreading, and correction in nineteenth-century American printing shops, as well as the relationships between American authors and their publishers, both at home and abroad. The investigation of these matters has been seen, however, as useful only insofar as it helps to establish the text best representing the author's final intention, and much of this information has remained buried in the textual introductions and notes that accompany the published text.<sup>6</sup>

The industry and accomplishments of all these scholars in investigating American book trade and publishing history must not be slighted, though their efforts seem random and uncoordinated. Each appears to have wandered into the field with a separate point of view, and to have followed up individual concerns without reference to others. Despite all that has been learned, much still remains obscure or untouched. In particular no systematic account of the workings and development of the American book trade has emerged, nor has there been any attempt to provide an analysis or interpretation of the importance of books and the book trade to American culture and society. Only in the past decade or so has it been possible to begin to formulate a general theoretical framework in which to place scholarly investigations of the book trade, and to explore their contribution to our understanding and appreciation of American literary culture.

One important development has been the rise of a new, interdisciplinary field that has come to be known as the history of the book. Interest in this field was inspired by the pioneering work of French scholars, who applied the socio-economic concepts of the *Annales* school of history to the study of the book trade. Turning away from a traditional concern with individual books, persons or events, which earlier bibliographers and historians considered significant or influential, these scholars brought to their investigations a broader approach that placed the book in relation to a range of economic, political, social, cultural, and religious forces in an effort to see it as part of a "total" history. Their work strove to discover trends and structures within the book trade: it tended to emphasize statistics over separate facts, and the popular literature of the masses over the high culture and literature of the elite. One of the first publications reflecting this approach was Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *L'Apparition du livre* of 1958. Part of a multivolume historical series on the evolution of humanity, it attempted a general history of the book from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century. This work was followed by further studies by Martin and his colleagues and students, which successfully investigate more specialized topics including the role of the book in particular regions and periods, previously neglected genres –

notably the popular *Bibliothèque bleue* – and the clandestine book trade. The four-volume collaborative *Histoire de l'édition française* stands as an impressive monument to the achievements of these scholars of the history of the book, while the work of Roger Chartier – Martin's collaborator in editing the *Histoire* – remains an important force in shaping the field.<sup>7</sup>

The first American scholars to recognize the importance of this approach to their own work were historians of European history. Natalie Zemon Davis's work on the role of literacy and the book in early modern France, Robert Darnton's investigations of the illegal and semilegal publishing world of France before the Revolution, and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's discussions of the role of the invention of printing as an agent of change during the Renaissance and Reformation all focused attention on the importance of the history of books. Scholars of American history, most notably David D. Hall, also began to investigate the role of books in American life and culture. This new field became institutionalized and academically respectable with the formation of the American Antiquarian Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, inaugurated by Hall's James Russell Wiggin Lecture of 9 November 1983, "On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book." Since then the Society's program has been a focus for American work in the field, publishing a newsletter and sponsoring a series of conferences, public lectures, seminars, and research fellowships.

At the same moment that this new discipline was establishing itself, some literary scholars were beginning to question the bibliographical assumptions and practices that underlie traditional textual editing. D. F. McKenzie, in his penetrating "Printers of the Mind," drew on his work with the archives of Cambridge University Press to show that many bibliographers had lost touch with the reality of the actual processes and conditions of book production that lay behind the texts they were editing. In this and other articles, he demonstrated that sound editorial decisions about literary texts can only be made when they are based on an understanding of these processes and conditions, which results from the investigation of documents and material that might not, in themselves, be literary. In his work on Congreve, McKenzie further explored how the formal presentation of a text affects its meaning in ways that had been ignored by scholarly editors. Other literary scholars, including Jerome J. McGann and Peter Davison, found that traditional ideas about copy text and authorial intention were inadequate to explain or handle actual relationships and situations that they discovered in their editorial work. It became clear to them that the authority of a text does not spring solely from the author, but might also be the work of a variety of collaborators – such as secretaries, editors, or typesetters – and reflect the importance of market forces, censorship, or social expectations. These scholars recognized the limitations of examining a literary text in isolation from the world within which it was created.

More generally, over the past decades many scholars have been reexamining

the basic assumptions of traditional literary and cultural history. Their work has questioned the relationship between a limited view of the literary canon of the past and the total published output from that time, and exposed the falseness of the belief that the literature of the past is restricted only to those works that we choose to read or value today. In the process they have stressed the importance of genres and literatures that have been overlooked, undervalued, or suppressed. Others have explored the concept of authorship, especially the conditions that control authorial agency or deny it to segments of the population defined by race, gender, or class. Yet others have shown that the meaning of a literary work changes over time: not only is the text altered as it is transmitted through new editions and impressions, but furthermore its meaning, which is in part contained within the physical forms in which it is realized, necessarily changes as these change. The process of reading – the construction of meaning from texts – has also been investigated and shown to depend on the social and cultural identity of the reader as much as on the text itself.

Common to the work of these scholars, and to that of recent book historians and bibliographers, is the basic understanding that literature is a human institution – part of a matrix of social and cultural forces from which it emerges – and not a pure or abstract ideal separated or independent from history. No published text, literary or otherwise, exists in isolation: rather, it is the collaborative effort of many people – authors and editors, papermakers and printers, publishers and readers, among others – and it acts as a political force in the social and cultural worlds of these historical collaborators.

This insight explains the continuing influence of Charvat's work and helps resolve the dilemma he faced when he put that work aside. It is clear that in the end he did not share this understanding of literature. He assumed that literature was indeed pure, an ideal that must remain extrinsic to history, though he recognized and was fascinated by the ways in which historical forces shaped and influenced literary writers as they created their specific, nonideal works, and literary publishers as they produced and distributed these works in printed form. Since for him literature and history remained essentially distinct, he saw his interest in the history of publishing in danger of becoming an end in itself. Without recognizing clearly that literature was a part of history, he was unable to rationalize his interest in publishing and failed to understand the wealth of insight that the historical study of literary publishing as a cultural and social activity and institution can bring to the appreciation of literature.

This book is my effort to continue the work that Charvat pioneered. It explores the activities of the Boston publishing firm Ticknor and Fields – recognized as the preeminent publisher of belles lettres, especially poetry, in the United States of the mid-nineteenth century – in light of recent work, both practical and theoretical, in the history of the book, bibliography, and literary and cultural history. While much has been written recently on authorship and reading, I have focused on the world of American literary publishing at the very moment that

the publisher was emerging as the central entrepreneurial figure in the American book trade. I examine in detail how Ticknor and Fields operated in the historical world in which it existed, and how it participated in the literary and book trade institutions of which it was a part. Using the firm's surviving business records I reconstruct the business environment in which American literary publishing flourished. An introductory chapter briefly sketches the history of the firm, placing it within the context of developments in the American book trade before the Civil War, which resulted in the emergence of the publisher as the primary entrepreneur of that trade. This is followed by a description of the firm's business archives that examines how these records document its activities and organize the information used by the firm in its day-to-day operations. Succeeding chapters focus on publishing activities by exploring the types of publishing arrangements entered into by the firm and analyzing its entire published output from 1840 to 1859; the various methods of production and distribution employed by the firm and the costs and implications of each; and the firm's profits from the business of literary publishing.

Although this work is in the first instance a case study of one publishing firm in Boston in the mid-nineteenth century, I trust – as I suggest in my conclusion – that this investigation of Ticknor and Fields provides a foundation on which to build a fuller and richer understanding of how American literary culture emerged and functioned during the period.