

authorial professionalism and the literary marketplace 1885-1900

nelson lichtenstein

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century professional authorship in America achieved its modern dimensions. The institutional and economic framework within which the American man of letters had functioned was reestablished on a new economic basis involving large and complex markets, relative economic security and a qualitatively new relationship between publisher and editor. The concept of authorial professionalism took root as a new generation of American writers threw off the last vestiges of a pre-commercial, romantic view of their craft. During the 1890s these authors became conscious of their role as producers of a literary commodity, which in common with other fruits of a market economy might be bought and sold at the highest price. The basis for much of this transformation lay in certain technological and demographic changes which wedded the entire institution of American literature more closely to a capitalist ethos.

When American literature first took on a recognizable coloration in the early nineteenth century it inherited from its English background much of that nation's attitude toward the role of the man of letters in the creation and dissemination of his work. Traditionally, and perhaps mythically, the creative writer was not a professional author or a producer of a literary commodity 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 the larger reading public. According to this tradition, the author wrote when the spirit moved him, enduring none of the pressures of commercial time and the market, sought reputation—"fame" in the Renaissance sense—but not publicity.¹

In England the industrial revolution had undermined this older

tradition and laid the basis for a wider literary market, but most English figures of the Romantic period continued to reject their larger commercial "public" while contemptuously dismissing popular sentiment as a test of literary worth. The artist drew back from a vulgar world. And as Raymond Williams has explained it, the pressures of the market "create, as a defensive reaction, the separation of poets from other men and their classification into an idealized general person, 'Poet' or 'Artist' which was to be so widely and so damagingly received." The Romantic poet would make his appeal not to the living community, but to the great "mediator and . . . redeemer, Time."²

The rise of a robust commercialism in the Jacksonian era also turned American writers from the test of contemporary sentiment. In his seminal essay, "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson rejected the idea of popular patronage as the gauge of an artist's success. "His office," Emerson told the Harvard class of 1837, "is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation. . . . These being his functions, it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself and to defer never to the popular cry. He and he only knows the world."³

The sheer failure of the literary world to support financially more than a handful of full-time writers reinforced the diffident attitude of such authors toward their public. Until 1835 American publishing remained predominantly a local enterprise: almost all publishers were primarily retail booksellers. When such a publisher printed a work whose interest transcended local boundaries he sold printed sheets to booksellers in other towns who bound them up for distribution in their own small market. Moreover, most of these bookseller-publishers were notoriously undercapitalized. They normally shared the expenses of book production with the author by means of the "half-profit system" whereby each partner shared both in capital expenses, such as printing and transportation costs, and in any profits which might result. For authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper who could afford to pay for publication in advance, with the profits to come later, the system was quite lucrative, but for those of less popularity and financial independence—Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau and others—the system was unworkable.⁴

Although the growth of professional authorship in America required the development of a national market and well capitalized publishing houses, the extension of the railways and centralization of the publishing industry in New York and Philadelphia did not solve the problems of American writers because a flood of cheap English reprints depressed the domestic literary market. The lack of a copyright law kept American authors in competition with a huge and venerated contemporary literature, published largely without payment to even its foremost living masters.

The large publishing houses of New York—Harper's, Appleton and Putnam—specialized in British and non-literary writing, as did their magazines—*Harper's Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Putnam's*. It was left to the Boston houses, such as Ticknor and Fields, to publish much of the work of the "Renaissance" of the 1850s, but their reach was far less than that of New York and Philadelphia houses.⁵

Thus before the Civil War, the publisher failed as patron to the American author, and the latter turned to the government, the lecture platform or some other source of income for his sustenance. Hence the well-known employment of Hawthorne at the Liverpool Consulate, of Emerson upon the lecture platforms of Illinois and Iowa, and of Melville in the notoriously corrupt New York customhouse. William Charvat, literary historian of early American authorship, has estimated that in the years before the Civil War 60 to 75 per cent of all male American writers either held public office or tried to get it.⁶ The inability of the institutions of American literature to support such writers reinforced the skepticism of the gentleman-author toward popular patronage, an attitude which in turn justified the contemporary cultural image of the writer as a Byronesque and impractical figure long into the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The difficulties involved in publishing *belles lettres* before the Civil War were partially resolved after that conflict by the growth of the American magazine and its domination of the literary marketplace. Compared with the rather chaotic and provincial publishing arrangements of the years before the war the great magazines of this time—*Century*, *Harper's Atlantic*, *Scribner's*—and the publishing houses that stood behind them, provided a rather stable national market upon which the profession of authorship might base itself. Selling at 25 to 35 cents per issue, these magazines provided an adequate, even substantial income for those contributors who published consistently within their pages, and whose serialized novels or short stories later appeared as books from the publishing house which owned the magazine. William Dean Howells, for example, signed a contract with Harper Brothers for \$10,000 for the serial rights to his annual output plus 12 per cent commission on the subsequent books. Charles Dickens received even larger sums from the same publishing firm. By the 1870s magazine serialization was virtually institutionalized as the first step in the publication of a well-known novelist's work.⁷

The literary sources from which these magazines drew their material and the public to which they addressed themselves were narrow ones, far too narrow for a nation whose population doubled each generation and whose newspaper readership quadrupled every decade. In 1885 *Scribner's*, *Century*, *Atlantic* and *Harper's* had a combined circulation of only 600,000 in a nation approaching 75 million. Furthermore, these magazines provided American authors with a pitifully small market.

As Frank Tooker, a long-time staffer on *Century* magazine remembered: "At that time [1885] every properly conducted magazine was expected to present to its public two long serial novels every year." Thus the bulk of the contents of a magazine might be scheduled as much as nine months in advance. When young Tooker joined the *Century* staff in 1885 Henry James' *Bostonians* and William Dean Howell's *Rise of Silas Lapam* were running; they were excellent literary choices indeed, but a cheerless prospect for those American authors who saw the *Century* closed to their work until the eminent serialists had unwound their plots many months ahead.⁸

These magazines addressed themselves to a restricted audience not only because of their relatively large price but also because their editors accepted a model of the American reading public divided into the vulgar and the cultivated. The vulgar read newspapers, the cultivated read magazines. Newspaper readers were men who scanned the headlines with a cynical detachment; magazine readers were women and children of a far more impressionable nature. If the magazine's audience was a tenth the size of the newspaper, it was only because of the limited size of the genteel audience in America. Henry Mills Alden defended the relatively small circulation of *Harper's* in terms of that magazine's relationship to American culture. "Its constituency" he wrote "is limited to a cultivated audience, one which is constantly increasing with the steady advance of culture. The demands of that audience cannot be met by any standard lower than the best."⁹

Furthermore this domestic readership had placed its literary trust in the wise hands of the discerning magazine editor. William Dean Howells, editor of *Atlantic* until 1881 and literary mentor to a generation of American writers who eventually broke with genteel standards, still defended the self-imposed limitations of such magazines as late as 1893. "Between the editor of a reputable English or American magazine and the families which receive it," Howells wrote, "there is a tacit agreement that he will print nothing which a father may not read to his daughter or safely leave her to read herself." While it was true, said Howells, that newspapers teemed with facts far fouler and deadlier than any which fiction could imagine, the reporter was less of a threat because he did not command the novelist's skill "to fix impressions in a young girl's mind or to suggest conjecture."¹⁰

The editors of these magazines had assumed that their audience was a narrow one because they saw the public in highly stratified cultural terms. The relatively large prices charged for these magazines reflected their cost of production, but it was also a statement of the literary and cultural exclusiveness of their upper- and middle-class readership. This genteel perspective came to restrict severely the prospects for American authorship, in both financial and literary terms. As one disgruntled

writer complained, "the female reader and her magazine was the Iron Madonna who strangles in her fond embrace the American novelist."¹¹

Yet a huge "vulgar" audience existed in America, represented in the cities by the readers of the penny press and the dime novel and in the country by the millions of subscribers to the local weekly and the clients of the subscription book agent. This audience was willing to patronize the literature of even the most genteel and Victorian magazines if only it were available in a cheap and ready fashion. In the 1880s the literary syndicate first tapped this audience for the serious writer. Newspaper syndicates had existed in America since the Civil War. Headquartered in Chicago, these journalistic institutions supplied rural weeklies with a steady flow of farming news, weather predictions, practical advice and Sunday sermons. In the 1870s the Kellogg Newspaper Company first used stereotype plates to supply the rural press with a variety of "patent insides," including children's serials and gossip columns from New York.¹² But it was not until the 1880s that magazine fiction distributed in this form reached as an audience large metropolitan newspapers.

Samuel S. McClure, an imaginative Midwesterner who came to seek his fortune in New York, first hit upon the idea of the literary syndicate while working for the *Century* company's youth magazine, *St. Nicholas*. His original plan was hardly innovative; it consisted merely of reprinting material from the back numbers of the *Century* and *St. Nicholas* in country newspapers. The rejection of this idea by his employers and his subsequent dismissal from their dignified offices forced McClure to petition contemporary American authors for his material rather than glean it from back issues of those magazines. Their response was immediately favorable. McClure was working in a buyers market and the initial capital for his enterprise consisted almost entirely of the money he owed his contributors after the receipt of their stories and essays.¹³

His syndicate worked on the simplest of principles, a simplicity that made it an extremely sensitive indicator of the popular taste. Upon receipt of a manuscript purchased from an author, McClure gave the story to a nearby metropolitan newspaper which in return printed up forty or fifty galley sheets. McClure sent these to the various newspapers that had indicated a willingness to try his syndicate. Because he had no contract with these newspapers, McClure received an immediate response from the editors each time he sold a story or serial anew. Editors who were dissatisfied with a serial could and did cut it off in the middle and refuse payment. Hence McClure knew precisely what the public sought, and he transmitted his desire, unconsciously or consciously, to his contributors. Initially, McClure's syndicate contained roughly the same sort of material as that published in the quality magazines; his own tastes were rather romantic and sentimental. His earliest contributors included Bret Hart, H. H. Boyesen, Frank R. Stockton and Robert Louis Steven-

son, whom McClure idolized, and whose journey to the South Seas the syndicate heavily subsidized.¹⁴

McClure and the competitors who soon joined him essentially supplied the equivalent of a small literary magazine each week to their subscribers. Much of their material appeared in the Sunday supplements then enjoying a heyday in the metropolitan press. By 1887 McClure was publishing three full length serials, one by Jules Verne in thirteen papers, one by Julian Hawthorne in twenty and one by the very popular E. P. Roe in nineteen. In addition he published ten short stories per week. The volume of his syndicated material had soared from 5,000 words per week in 1884 to over 100,000 in 1887. At the same time rival syndicalist Irving Bachellor was supplying the equivalent of a full *Century* magazine to the newspapers each week, while on a more popular level, Edward Bok had begun to distribute sentimental romances and advice to the woman's pages of country newspapers.¹⁵

The advent of the literary syndicate had an immediate effect upon the relationship of the author to his work, his editor and the financial rewards of his industry. McClure's role in the newspaper syndicate was initially that of a literary agent who found new sources of income for material which passed through his hands essentially unchanged. In his role McClure dramatically expanded the demand for the short story and short essay, as well as the longer serial. His remuneration, which ranged from \$30 for short sketches to \$8,000 for a Robert Louis Stevenson adventure, equaled or surpassed the rates paid by the established literary monthlies. Even before the boom in ten- and fifteen-cent magazines a few years later, McClure and his competitors were forcing the price of short fiction to double what it had been before 1885.¹⁶

As literary editors, McClure, Bachellor and other syndicators were released from the self-imposed restrictions which guided the editorial hand of the prestigious monthlies. For Richard Watson Gilder of the *Century*, this editorial function had essentially been the negative one, of censorship, of shielding his readers from material they might find offensive. But the syndicate editor was under no such compulsion. His medium was the metropolitan newspaper and McClure, for one, probably accepted the supposition that newspapers were essentially masculine fare. The hardboiled newspaper editors who reviewed syndicate essays and fiction held veto power over their publication; the responsibility did not lie with the owner of the syndicate.

Furthermore, the increasing sensationalism of the daily press influenced the character of the syndicate's fiction. Newspaper syndication presented an opening for those writers disposed to tinker with the new techniques of realism in American fiction. Before they had found the editorial doors of the quality magazines and publishing houses closed to their contributions, but the newspaper syndicates and the editors of the metropolitan press demanded dramatic, fast paced, realistic material.

To the newspaper editor who sought to eliminate the difference between an event and its reportage, there could be equally little distinction between literature and life. Hence Bachellor's literary syndicate first published Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* in New York and Philadelphia papers after it had been rejected by a New York publisher. And McClure's syndicate (and later his magazine) published some of the first stories of Jack London and Frank Norris.¹⁷

The syndicates of the 1880s had expanded the market for American literary property, but the ten- and fifteen-cent magazines had the most dramatic impact on the profession of authorship in this country. The rise of this new medium in the 1890s was directly linked to the nationalization of American business. The periodicals of the era became the first generation of American magazines to depend on advertising revenue for the bulk of their expenses, which until then had been limited by the regionalism of American trade and business. The extraordinary growth of industry in the 1880s, the completion of a relatively dense rail network and the consolidation of nationwide industries provided the base for national advertising purchased by manufacturers and designed and distributed by modern advertising agencies. As the only national medium of the time, the American magazine was the chief beneficiary of this new source of revenue.¹⁸

Aside from these basic structural changes, the federal government indirectly subsidized magazine distribution by reducing rates for second-class matter from three to one cents a pound in 1885, and by establishing a system of rural free delivery, begun experimentally in the 1890s. Finally the invention in 1889 of the half-tone process for the reproduction of hand-drawn illustrations or photographs immensely enhanced the possibilities of cheap magazine production. Prior to this development the single most expensive item in the production of the usual magazine article had been the illustrations. Half-tone photo reproduction reduced the cost of illustrations by ten-fold if photographs were substituted for costly hand drawings. A typical article in *Century* magazine, with three full page drawings and ten small ones might cost \$125 for the text, but the artist's salaries and engraving fees could easily boost the total to \$1,000.¹⁹ Use of the half-tone process not only reduced the overall cost of printing but also allowed the author's share of expenses to rise. The advantages of the half-tone process for photo reproductions, coupled with the flood of national advertising, left only a psychological and ideological barrier to the redefinition of the American literary magazine in terms of a mass heterogeneous audience.

The depression of 1893 triggered the cheap magazine boom of the 1890s. Frank Munsey first slashed his price from a quarter to a dime in October 1893 and the competition quickly followed suit. McClure, who had founded his magazine during the summer, was already at fifteen cents while John Brisben Walker's *Cosmopolitan* was forced to the curious

price of 12½ cents. The 1890s produced a score of cheap magazines. By 1905 their combined circulation totaled over five and a half million. By the end of the decade both *McClure's* and *Munsey's* were approaching circulations of 500,000 while the *Ladies Home Journal* probably sold 700,000 copies each issue. In the offing was the revitalization of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1899. By 1914 the *Post* printed 2,000,000 copies every week. This era, before the rise of such competitors as movies and radio, has been appropriately labeled the Golden Age of Magazines. The ten and fifteen centers had at least 85 per cent of the magazine field. While some, such as *Munsey's* or Edward Bok's *Ladies Home Journal*, aimed at either a lower-middle-class or exclusively woman's audience, *McClure's*, *Collier's* and *Cosmopolitan* competed directly with the older big four of the magazine world for both readers and contributors. Of these McClure unquestionably set the style and pace the rest were to follow; even arch rival Frank Munsey admitted it.²⁰

For both fiction and non-fiction the cheap mass circulation magazine was a key institution in the transformation of the authorial process. During the last years of the nineteenth century the creative initiative shifted subtly, almost unknowingly, from writer to editor and publisher. For the first time in American literary history, the writer had found a generous if exacting patron. In the 1890s many of the most important younger American authors responded to this change by adopting a thoroughgoing professionalism which rejected the earlier romantic view of their work and accepted, within bounds, the market as an arbiter of literary success.

The relationship between S. S. McClure and the authors he employed illustrates the substance of this transformation. As a syndicate editor McClure had begun to order articles and stories from his writers, suggesting ideas, topics and angles the syndicate hoped to cover.²¹ Now McClure centralized editorial control even more tightly. He made his editorial offices the creative podium of the modern magazine, and McClure, the dynamic, imaginative, almost naively enthusiastic conductor, orchestrated the work with surprising sensitivity to an enlightened public taste. Within his organization McClure provided a never ending stream of ideas to his author-employees who fleshed them out into full-blown articles, essays and stories. A magazine ought to be a unity, said McClure:

It must represent the ideas and principles of one man or a group of like-minded men; it must have a single purpose all through. Anybody could make a magazine by hiring a competent staff of assistants, burying a certain amount of historical matter, a certain amount of fiction, of descriptive articles of travel, of poetry and so on and mixing them together in suitable proportions; but it would not make a good magazine nor would it be likely to be a success, lacking unity, the inspiration and direction of one central head.²²

To give institutional framework to this formula McClure created the first true magazine staff. He wanted his writers on salary directly under his control so that he could shape their ideas and the direction of their work. As Lincoln Steffens put it, "He did not edit copy, he edited men."²³ McClure's approach to magazine editing was an abrupt contrast to the genteel tradition of the older monthlies. While William Dean Howells was editor of *Atlantic* he spent most of his time in his study, working on his next novel, writing reviews of recent books and exercising his editorial functions in a passive manner, merely selecting those manuscripts which flowed into his office for publication. His relationship with his contributors was so detached that on several occasions Howells published articles by authors of whose identity he was not aware, with embarrassing consequences when he was mistaken with regard to their sex. In 1893 Howells edited the *Cosmopolitan* magazine for a short time but resigned because he was unable to adapt to the more demanding pace of its editorial duties.²⁴

Ida Tarbell's 1894 series on Napoleon Bonaparte propelled McClure's magazine toward financial success, and as much as any other work exemplifies the nature of McClure's editorial imperialism. The genesis of the Napoleon series came when McClure found an excellent collection of the Emperor's portraits in the home of an acquaintance. The publication of these portraits would have a dual function; they would demonstrate the capabilities of the new half-tone photo engraving process for magazine illustration and take advantage of the "Napoleon movement" then sweeping France and America. McClure sought out a lively text to augment the photographs. He soon turned to Ida Tarbell, a young writer recently home from Paris, who assured the editor she would write an appropriately romantic and dramatic life. The McClure-Tarbell Napoleon was published simultaneously with *Century* magazine's "Life of Napoleon," by the well-known European scholar William Milligan Sloane. The latter's was a sober, well-researched history, but hardly the publication bonanza Ida Tarbell wrote for McClure.²⁵ *Century's* editor, Richard Watson Gilder, could hardly restrain his contempt after Tarbell wrote another popular and successful history for *McClure's*, her "Life of Lincoln." He summed up his entire view of the magazine with the remark, "They got a girl to write a life of Lincoln."²⁶

Gilder's contempt reflected the genteel opposition to what became known as the McClure method of magazine writing. McClure's non-fiction writers—Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Will Irwin and many lesser lights—were permanent employees, the first true magazinists. Writing on only two or three subjects each year they kept one eye cocked to the editor's angle and another to journalistic and historical accuracy. To S. S. McClure "magazining was an art in itself":

Only the magazine staff knows exactly how an article must be presented to be in line with the general attitude of the publication.

That is the reason why I or some of my assistants always collaborate with the author of a great feature, even going so far as to investigate and study his sources of material so as to get into the very spirit of the work.²⁷

The muckraking articles of the early twentieth century were the most important and successful fruits of this system. Tarbell's *History of Standard Oil* took eighteen months to research and probably cost McClure's magazine over \$300,000. McClure first proposed Steffens' *Shame of the Cities* series and he sent the author on lengthy journeys to Chicago and St. Louis to begin research on the articles.²⁸

The McClure method was most relevant to the writing of non-fiction, but popular magazine editors also applied it to fiction. When McClure received unsolicited short stories from an unknown author stationed in the Philippines, McClure instructed Lincoln Steffens to offer the young man a job in the office and show him the kind of popular stories needed by the magazine. At one point or another in their careers, Stephen Crane, Booth Tarkington, Frank Norris and Hamlin Garland were under salary to S. S. McClure. In another context poetess Theodora Garrison even supplied verse, of appropriate length and subject, immediately on demand for the *Butterick Magazine*. In his memoirs, Hamlin Garland reported that such editors as Bok, McClure and George Horace Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post* "appeared so genuinely interested in me that it was hard not to write to their order, especially as I was poor and could only now and again finish a story which Alden or Gilder considered worthy of their approval. Therefore I found myself writing three part romances for the *Ladies Home Journal* . . . biographical studies for McClure's and stories of the mountain west for Lorimer's *Post*."²⁹ Humorist and journalist James L. Ford struck a note close to the truth when he satirized McClure's editorial methods in the pages of *Puck*.

I paid a visit yesterday to the model village of Syndicate, founded by Mr. S. S. McClure for the benefit of the literary hands employed in his great enterprises, and I am bound to say that in point of neatness, order and the completeness of its sanitary arrangements it is infinitely superior to the similar towns of Pullman or any of the colonies established by the late Baron Hirsch. . . .

Mr. McClure took me through one of the large buildings and explained every detail of the work. Every morning the foreman goes from bench to bench and gives an idea to each author. Just before noon he passes along again and carefully examines the unfinished work, and late in the afternoon, a final inspection is made, after which the goods are packed and sent down to the wharf for shipment.

I inquired whether there was any truth in the report that several authors had been taken with severe illness immediately after beginning work at Syndicate, whereupon the foreman explained that this had happened several times but it had always resulted from giving an author a whole idea at once—something to which few of them had ever been accustomed.³⁰

Most of the established publishing houses resisted the innovations sweeping the magazine trade, but these new methods soon had a profound impact on the book world as well. American publishers had long fought a rear guard action against what they considered the “commercialization of literature.” For many years the lack of an international copyright law had depressed the market for American literary material. Among American publishing houses competition for new uncopyrighted work had forced down the price of foreign books, and at the same time, vastly increased the number and variety of commercially attractive titles.

To avoid unrestrained competition for this uncopyrighted material reputable American publishing houses evolved an institution known as “trade courtesy” whereby American publishers agreed to respect the arrangements each house had made with its British writers. Unfortunately this courtesy applied to American writers as well, and was decked out as the only proper mode of gentlemanly business conduct. As Henry Holt put it, “No one of [the old publishers] would go for another’s author any more than for his watch.”³¹

Trade courtesy obviously limited the author’s market freedom and potential remuneration, but the publishers defended the practice on the grounds that an intimate and longstanding relationship between an author and his publisher was essential to the writer’s literary reputation.³² As late as 1900 the institution was so strong that when Howells sought to change publishers, from Harper’s, then undergoing a financial crisis, to Dodd Mead and Company, the latter refused his offer, though he certainly would have been a lucrative client. As long as authors saw themselves as gentlemen amateurs trade courtesy fit nicely into the genteel tradition of American letters. But after the passage of the copyright act in 1891 the institution became increasingly anachronistic, first for the author, then ultimately for the publisher as well.³³

Change soon came to the staid world of American book publication. In the 1880s the quickening pace of American magazine and syndicate publication was reflected in the book trade as the number of new titles rose each year. A truly dramatic increase took place in the 1890s, stimulated by the vast fiction market in the new magazines and by the passage of the copyright act. By 1901 twice as many new works of fiction were issued annually than had been in 1890, while books of general literature and essays, many collected from articles previously published in the cheap magazines, had quadrupled in the decade.³⁴

Just as in the magazine and syndicate field this dramatic expansion of the author’s opportunities was accompanied by the growing initiative publishers took in the creative process itself. In the 1880s and 1890s Henry Holt and G. P. Putnam produced a series of books on science, history and geography directed toward a lay audience. These books, written on the initiative of the publisher, were heavily edited and re-written to suit a particular readership. Authors who contracted to

produce this sort of work received a lump sum payment rather than a royalty, an indication in itself of the shift in the writers' relationship to the published product.³⁵

The public realization of these new circumstances became clear in 1890 with the publication of Archdeacon Cannon Farrar's phenomenally successful *Life of Christ*. The work earned for its English publisher Cassell and Company over 50,000 pounds and for its author a far from paltry 9,000. Nevertheless Farrar protested loudly and vehemently in literary journals on both sides of the Atlantic, claiming he had been cheated of his just rewards as author of the book. Cassells defended itself on the grounds that "we projected a work which was to be a popular life of Christ. The whole scheme of that work as well as its general character was conceived in this house; Nay more, it was put into concrete form before Archdeacon Farrar received it. In addition it was extensively advertised."³⁶ Commenting on this widely reported incident, publisher George Haven Putnam agreed that modern authors have no right to complain when publishers make large profits. With the increasing complexity of the market and the importance of work written "to order" and on contract, authors need an acute publisher all the more. Putnam agreed with Cassells's that Cannon Farrar had received more than adequate compensation considering the relatively minor role he had played in initiating the best selling biography.³⁷

During the 1890s the tendency of the publisher to contract his books also extended to the realm of fiction. Publishers as much as writers pushed current fads in dialect humor, historical romance and foreign adventure. McClure pressured Frank Norris, for example, into several literary schemes: a series on great American battles, a trip to Cuba and Greece, a novel of the West.³⁸ Commenting on this experience, Norris wrote:

More novels are written—practically—to order than the public has any notion of. The publisher again and again picks out the man, suggests the theme, and exercises in a sense all the functions of instructor, during the period of composition . . . Time was when the publisher waited for the unknown writer to come to him with his manuscript. But of late, the Unknown has so frequently developed, under exploitation and by direct solicitation of the publisher into a "money making proposition" in such formidable proportions that there is hardly a publishing house that does not now hunt out with all the resources at its command.³⁹

Most American authors welcomed the financial opportunities of the expanded literary marketplace, even if its price was a reduction in that theoretical independence the artist had previously known. This more limited view of the creative process came to be identified with the idea of literary professionalism in the writing trade. Professional writers shaped their material for a specific market or a particular editor. The new attitude was subversive of the genteel tradition in American letters, for it freed the writer from the obligations to an artificial unitary standard

of culture and permitted the artist to deal quite frankly with the demands of the market. And to the extent that authors accepted their work as a commercial commodity, they were forced to abandon the Emersonian vision of the artist as moral guide and mentor to the populace. In truth, literary professionalism emphasized the skills needed for market success rather than the values traditionally associated with literary endeavor.

During the 1890s this emphasis on writing professionalism took on the character of a minor social movement. One of its first institutions arose in 1887 with the founding of a new trade magazine, *The Writer*, subtitled, "a magazine for literary workers." Former newspaperman and editor William H. Hills designed the magazine to be "first and foremost a practical guide" to the writing of magazine and newspaper fiction and non-fiction. Hill's magazine was unique in its programmatic, market-oriented approach to literature and the magazine's first responsibility was to the welfare of the writer rather than to literature *per se*. Its first articles included discussions of the law of libel, the use of plot outlines for novelists, as well as more prosaic tips on filing letters, using a typewriter and saving money on postage.⁴⁰

A recurrent theme was an attack upon the creative artist as a romantic genius or gentleman dilettante. "It is no longer necessary for a literary man to wear long hair and roll open his shirt collar like Byron" cautioned a typical article, which then proceeded to catalogue the virtues of hard work and regularity necessary for success in the writing trade.⁴¹ Another contributor warned prospective writers not to wait for "inspiration to replace perspiration" as a source for their ideas. "Those who write for pleasure are the only ones who can afford to depend solely on 'genius'. As a profession these writers are not generally successful."⁴²

Perhaps the question which most clearly divided the new professionals from an older authorial generation was the compatibility of a writer's literary fame and his financial solvency. Thomas Wentworth Higginson spoke for an older generation when in an 1888 Harvard lecture he called upon American authors to choose between two mutually exclusive forms of success—fame or money. Though on rare occasions the two forms might be combined, he advised young authors to choose "for their peace of mind" which kind of success they most desired.⁴³ Higginson applied this dichotomy to literary success because he mistrusted the market's judgment. Like the editors of the genteel magazines, he conceived of the reading public in a rigidly hierarchical framework with a cultured minority above opposed to the more vulgar stratum below. Popular success could be a liability, reflecting the less refined tastes of the mass audience. Combining this perspective with a genteel belief in cultural progress, Higginson indicated that only some future more enlightened audience could identify and reward true literary genius. As Higginson put it:

The greatest pain of authorship is the absolute impossibility of an author's determining what is his greatest work or of his

knowing when he has a good thing or indeed whether he has ever accomplished anything. He cannot judge the quality of his work, nor for that matter can the editor or audience.⁴⁴

The new generation of writers repudiated Higginson's point of view. In the December 1890 issue of *Writer* a young lawyer and part-time poet from Lewiston, Illinois compared the literary life and the legal career he was then reluctantly pursuing. Both were legitimate professions, wrote Edgar Lee Masters, and in both honest work should be rewarded, in this world, and not in the next. Masters attacked the cult of literary fame as a subterfuge to deny the author his legitimate place among the self-sustaining professions. "Literature is a profession and writers must live," wrote Masters, "not one-tenth of us will be remembered a hundred years hence. The present is ours—the future is the world's." Similarly, Jack London saw the distinction between fame and money in terms of those authors who write because they have a message for the world, and those who write to meet the "belly need." London, in characteristically hardboiled fashion, scorned the first as pansies and cast his lot resolutely with the second, who were concerned with the tangible, pleasurable, things in life.⁴⁵

Writing in 1901, Frank Norris heartily accepted the commercial conventions of the writing and publishing professions. In a series of articles for the *Boston Evening Transcript* Norris drew on his experience as a reporter, a writer for McClure's magazine and a reader for Doubleday, Page to describe with great relish the commercial mechanisms of the industry. Norris equated his frank interest in literature as a business with an attack on the aesthetic or gentleman scholar, both of whom would supposedly greet with horror any association of art with cash. To Frank Norris, whose literary credo identified life with literature, the business affairs of an author were an inevitable product of his participation in the world of men outside his study, and were as much a matter of legitimate interest as the life activities of any group.⁴⁶

In many ways William Dean Howells bridged the gap between the disdain such men as Higginson, Alden and Holt felt for the association of money and literature, and the hearty acceptance of commercialism by the new professionals. Furthermore, Howells' analysis was by far the most sophisticated in terms of the problems of the creative artist in a capitalist society. When Howells wrote his essay "Man of Letters as a Man of Business" his disenchantment with American society was fresh after the "judicial murder" of the Chicago anarchists and the editor's enthusiastic reception of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a book which was at once a harsh Christian critique of America and a program for its salvation. Furthermore, Howells had just resigned as editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine after he found the high pressure methods of his co-editor John Brisben Walker intolerable.⁴⁷

Howells accepted the genteel verity that there is something profane,

even dishonorable, in a writer's exchange of money for his art. Art, said Howells, should be a man's privilege and its results free to all, but the "grotesque confusion of our economic being" reduces all the finer things in life to their cash basis, and artists, like other tradesmen, are forced to barter even the most "mystical messages of their genius" for their daily bread. "Writers submitted to the conditions which none can escape," Howells wrote, "but that does not justify the conditions, which are none the less the conditions of hucksters because they are imposed upon poets."⁴⁸

William Dean Howells was no Marxist, but his critique of American society was sufficiently advanced to enable him to recognize that the reason artists were forced to choose between fame and money lay in the demands of a highly stratified capitalist economy. Like all workers the artist was the producer of a commodity, which like other products of labor was disproportionately consumed by a small upper class. The writer's true market consisted of the masses but they were deaf to all but his coarsest work, whereas the classes found the artist amusing but essentially irrelevant to their money-making concerns. The social and economic inequalities of our society had created the cultural distance between the writer and his true audience. Writing in 1893, Howells hoped American authorship was entering a period of transition, one reflecting an expectant transformation of the American plutocracy into some higher and more altruistic order.⁴⁹

But to writers such as Norris, Masters and London the rejection of the duality of fame and money, of popularity and culture was an acceptance of the new conditions of the literary market in the 1890s. By frankly insisting that an author, as a professional, was expected to earn a living wage, and that a fairly good indication of the quality of his work rested upon his earnings, these authors helped break down the artificial distinctions between popularity and literary reputation that had gained such a foothold in American cultural life since the early nineteenth century.

To give shape to the new professional attitudes of many American authors, two institutions arose during these years designed to defend the writer's interests in the literary marketplace. The first of these institutions, the author's society, was ineffectual; the second, the literary agent, had a permanent impact upon the relationship of authors to the public and their publishers.

Of some influence on American writers in the 1890s was the formation in England of the Society of Authors, established in 1887. The society was organized by Walter Besant, a popular sentimental Victorian novelist, and it immediately launched a public campaign against publishers based upon the accusation of outright fraud on their behalf. These accusations were never fully proven but Besant's organization successfully publicized the rights of English authors and helped create the same self-consciousness

on the American side of the Atlantic.⁵⁰ Like Edgar Lee Masters, Walter Besant sought to place literature on the same professional basis as the ancient disciplines of theology, medicine and law and with the new professions of science and engineering. Besant's essay, "The Art of Fiction," so effectively criticized by Henry James, was merely the attempt to assign to the literary guild the same techniques and rules he thought he saw operating in the learned professions he so envied. "Fiction like other arts," declared Besant, "is governed and directed by general laws which may be laid down with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion."⁵¹ And if fiction writing was a profession then its practitioners should be accorded the same rewards as other honored servants of the crown; titles, monetary prizes and a royal society.

The formation of an American society of authors stemmed directly from Walter Besant's articles in an 1892 issue of *Forum*—describing in glowing terms the English Society's work on behalf of its members. Popular historian Charles Burr Todd worked with Besant to found an American Society based on the aggressive principles of the English group. However, the society quickly degenerated into a social rather than political and literary organization and faded in the late 1890s. Not until 1912 did the Author's League of America, a major organization for writers to this day, establish itself after recent legal action had threatened the author's ownership of the dramatic and movie rights to his work. The protection of these secondary but lucrative markets became the League's most important function.⁵²

The complexity of the literary market in the 1890s, the increasing sums involved, and the tensions between authors and publishers (whether well-founded or not) all gave rise to the most effective institution of authorial professionalism—the literary agent. Initially anonymous literary bureaus assumed some of the essential functions of the literary agent—the actual marketing of literary property and the protection of authors' rights. As early as 1878, the Athenaeum Bureau of Literature invited correspondence from authors wishing to sell their manuscripts. Founded in 1883, the New York Bureau of Literary Revision promised to revise and market manuscripts for a fee. In 1887 the *Writer's* ambitious editor William H. Hill set up the Writer's Literary Bureau whose functions precisely defined the work later literary agents would perform. "The number of writers who know where to find the best market for their productions is exceedingly limited," wrote Hill in his prospectus for the Bureau. "A manuscript must fit the publication to which it is offered as a glove to the hand." According to Hill the bureau's experience insured that each article received would be sent immediately to the best possible outlet. At first the bureau merely revised and typed manuscripts for a fee and advised its clients where their work might be marketed. By 1894,

however, the bureau was earning most of its money selling manuscripts at a commission of 25 per cent.⁵³

Perhaps the first true literary agent in America was Paul Revere Reynolds who alternated as a representative for English publishers in New York and as an author's agent in England. Shortly after the passage of the copyright act of 1891 the English firm of Cassalls and Company employed Reynolds in New York as their representative. By 1895 he was working for English publishers Heineman and Cassalls as well as approaching American authors independently. His clients at this time included Stephen Crane, Ellen Glasgow and Paul Laurence Dunbar.⁵⁴ Crane's letters from England to his agent in New York are a graphic example of the uses by which literary agents served their clients. In England Crane turned out a variety of literary material; short articles for the daily press, stories for the magazine market and his next novel, first for serialization and then for publication in book form. All the complicated negotiations for their sale Reynolds carried out for Crane, while advancing him money when the latter's needs became desperate. By the First World War probably a dozen literary agents worked in the United States and perhaps twice as many operated in England.⁵⁵

American publishers remained unreconciled to the presence of the literary agent for many years. They attacked them because of what they considered their unreasonable demands upon the profits of the book, and because the new institution threatened to destroy the intimate creative relationship which most publishers thought existed between themselves and their clients. Moreover the literary agent directly contravened the canons of trade courtesy. Because agents introduced a relatively free market into the buying and selling of literary manuscripts publishers viewed them as the quintessence of commercialism. On one occasion, when offered a manuscript from the English agent, A. P. Watt, Henry Holt shot back, "If the matter is to be made in any sense one of competition among publishers, pray spare yourself the trouble of communicating with us any further, as we do not enter into competitions."⁵⁶

In America the literary agent's primary function was not so much the protection of the author from the rapaciousness of his publisher, as the rationalization and centralization of the distribution of literary property to the several rather distinct markets that were emerging in the 1890s. In fulfilling this function as literary clearinghouse the agent gave an added dimension of freedom to the professional writer, at the very time when editors and publishers were becoming more demanding in the requirements they imposed upon their contributors. Thus, while authors who worked in one particular market were more constricted in their work, they were given a greater choice of markets in which to work. The literary agent was the key to this new freedom. By the early twentieth century the writing and marketing of much American literature

came to resemble in fact the laissez-faire competitive system American capitalism resembled only in theory. Ohio Historical Society

footnotes

1. William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (Columbus, 1968), 292.
2. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York, 1958), 48.
3. "The American Scholar" in Stephen Whicher, ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1957), 73.
4. William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Philadelphia, 1959), 43; Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*, 294.
5. Robert E. Spiller, et al, *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1963), 515; Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America*, 62.
6. Charvat, *Profession of Authorship*, 295. After the Civil War even this oft-times capricious source of authorial income was limited by new civil service reforms such as the Pendleton Act of 1883.
7. Donald Sheehan, *This Was Publishing* (Bloomington, 1957), 44.
8. Frank Luther Mott, *History of American Magazines*, IV (Cambridge, 1957), 20-31; Frank L. Tooker, *Joys and Tribulations of an Editor* (New York, 1923), 226-27.
9. Henry Mills Alden, *Magazine Writing and the New Literature* (New York, 1908), 69.
10. Clara Marburg and Rudolf Marburg, eds., *William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction* (New York, 1959), 75.
11. H. H. Boyesen, "Why we have not Great Novelists," *Forum*, III (February, 1887), 628.
12. Elmo Scott Watson, *A History of Newspaper Syndicates in the United States* (Chicago, 1936), 33-37, 50. Between 1880 and 1900 daily newspaper circulation rose from 3.5 to 15.1 million. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, 1976), Part 2, 810.
13. S. S. McClure, *My Autobiography* (New York, 1914), 165-70.
14. *Ibid.*, 70-90, passim; see also Peter Lyons, *Success Story, The Life and Times of S. S. McClure* (New York, 1963), 66-71.
15. Lyons, *Success Story*, 74; Watson, *Newspaper Syndicates*, 43-47; Edward Bok, *Americanization of Edward Bok* (New York, 1921), 106.
16. McClure, *Autobiography*, 189; Mott, *History of American Magazines*, IV, 39.
17. R. W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: Letters* (New York, 1960), 27; Lyons, *Success Story*, 69-70.
18. Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 20.
19. *Ibid.*, 20; McClure, *Autobiography*, 207-08; Edward Bok, "Cost of Articles in Magazines," *Author*, III (May, 1891), 179.
20. George Britt, *Forty Years—Forty Millions: The Career of Frank Munsey* (New York, 1935), 84-91; Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 30-35, 39; Lyons, *Success Story*, 171.
21. See, for example, the correspondence between McClure and Edward M. House, a popular writer on Japanese life. Between 1889 and 1893 McClure's editorial initiative and control increased, keeping pace with the rising fees he paid for articles on Japanese topics: McClure to House, January 16, November 13, December 11, 1889, April 24, 1893; House to McClure, September 21, 1889, Mark Twain Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
22. *New York Tribune*, October 17, 1897, p. 9.
23. McClure, *Autobiography*, 245; Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, (New York, 1931), 358.
24. William Dean Howells, "Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship," *Atlantic Monthly* (November, 1907), 594-602; Mildred Howells, ed., *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* (Garden City, 1928), 24.
25. Ida Tarbell, *All in a Day's Work* (New York, 1939), 147-50, 152. The series doubled McClure's circulation.
26. Lyons, *Success Story*, 135.
27. *New York Tribune*, October 17, 1897, p. 10.
28. Steffens, *Autobiography*, 367-74, passim; McClure, *Autobiography*, 240.
29. Steffens, *Autobiography*, 360-61; Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 35; Hamlin Garland, *Roadside Meetings* (New York, 1930), 343.
30. James L. Ford, *The Literary Shop* (New York, 1899), 299-305.
31. Sheehan, *This was Publishing*, 60; Henry Holt, *Garrulities of an Octogenarian Editor* (Boston, 1923), 209.
32. This argument is repeated ad infinitum. See for example Walter Hines Page, *A Publisher's Confession* (New York, 1905), 65-72; George Haven Putnam, *Authors and Publishers*,

a *Manual of Suggestions for Beginners in Literature* (New York, 1897), 149-51; and Robert Stirling Yard, *The Publisher* (Boston, 1913), 145.

33. Sheehan, *This was Publishing*, 57.

34. Hellmut Lehmann-Haup, *The Book in America* (New York, 1951), 321.

35. G. H. Holt, *Garrulities*, 294; G. H. Putnam, *Memories of a Publisher, 1885-1915* (New York, 1915), 521.

36. Anonymous, "Archdeacon and the Publishers," *Saturday Review*, LXX (October 11, 1890), 413-14.

37. G. H. Putnam, "Author's Complaints and Publisher's Profits," *Forum*, XII (September 1891), 62-77.

38. Lyons, *Success Story*, 153-54; Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890's* (New York, 1968), 266-67.

39. Frank Norris, *Critic*, XL (May 1902), 449.

40. *Writer*, I (April and May 1887), 1-70, passim.

41. A. L. Hanscom, "Method Needed in Literary Work," *Writer*, II (March 1888), 84.

42. C. M. Hammond, "Writing as a Vocation or Avocation," *Writer*, II (February 1888), 35.

43. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Business of Authorship," *Author*, I (March 15, 1889), 142. *Author* was a companion magazine to *Writer*.

44. Higginson, "Pains of Authorship," *Author*, I (July, 1889), 79. Under a new title this is more of Higginson's speech at Harvard.

45. Edgar Lee Masters, "Writing for Fame and for Gain," *Writer*, IV (December, 1890), 267-68; Jack London, "The Material Side," *Occident* (December, 1916), 139, reprinted from 1899 *Editor*, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

46. Donald Pizer, ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin, 1974), 135-37.

47. Clare Marburg Kirk, *W. D. Howells and Art in His Time* (New Brunswick, 1965), 185-97; Kirk, *W. D. Howells, Traveler from Altruria* (New Brunswick, 1962), 50-52.

48. William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life* (New York, 1902), 1, 3. Howells' "Man of Letters as a Man of Business" was originally published in *Scribner's* in 1893.

49. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

50. Walter Besant, *The Pen and the Book* (London, 1889), 1-82, passim; Anonymous, "Authors and Publishers," *Saturday Review*, LXIII (March 5, 1887), 645. The author's society might have had some basis for their allegations because English publishers traditionally worked upon the half profit system in which both profits and expenses were shared equally by publisher and author. Publishers often charged against the author's account many of the fixed overhead costs of business.

51. Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (London, 1902), 6, originally prepared as a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution, April 25, 1884.

52. Besant, "Literature as a Career," *Forum*, XIII (August, 1892), 693-708; James Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent* (London, 1968), 68-72; Garland, *My Friendly Contemporaries* (New York, 1932), 34.

53. Hugo Erichsen, *Methods of Authors* (Boston, 1894). Prospectus for Writer's Literary Bureau is found in unnumbered pages of book. Other early "how to" books include Arnold Bainton, *The Art of Authorship* (New York, 1890) and Gelett Burgess, ed., *My Maiden Effort, Personal Confessions of Well Known American Authors* (Garden City, 1921). Burgess' collection of reminiscences was written for the Author's Society.

54. Hepburn, *Author's Empty Purse*, 73-74.

55. Cabled Crane from Cuba, "For Christ Sake, get me some money here quick by cable", Stallman, *Crane*, 144-46; Hepburn, *Author's Empty Purse*, 80.

56. Sheehan, *This Was Publishing*, 57. Those American publishers who were well established before the turn of the century usually devoted a few critical pages in their memoirs to the literary agent, who, they claimed, had contributed to the "commercialization of literature" since their retirement from active service. Those publishers who got their start after 1900 and continued their work into the 1920s and 1930s are far less hostile to the agent idea. Examples of the former are Page, *Confessions*; Putnam, *Memories*; and Holt, *Garrulities*. Among the latter type are George H. Doran, *Chronicles of Barabbas* (New York, 1935) and Roger Burlingame, *Of Making Many Books* (New York, 1946).