

## Introduction

### The Business of *The Business of Letters*



There is no shortage of books or articles on authorship and economics in early national and antebellum America; indeed, when put together, they form a venerable tradition in American literary historiography. For the most part, such works have been concerned to explain when, and to a lesser degree how and why, authorship became a profession in America. Although it probably reached its highpoint in the career of William Charvat, who published seminal articles and books on the history of authorship in the 1940s and 1950s, this tradition actually stretches a century, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. The works that constitute the authorship-and-economics tradition share a number of core presuppositions in common: that there is such a thing as professional authorship; that it developed out of, and reflected a rejection of, the world of amateur authorship; that it was an inevitable and irreversible process; that it was staged in the literary marketplace; that it crystallized in the middle of the nineteenth century; and that it can be measured objectively, through such indices as income, press runs, and publisher longevity, and less objectively through aesthetic practice and, especially, statements of authorial self-satisfaction. Whether scholars have applauded the growth of professional authorship and the development of the book trade, as Charvat so obviously did, or have resisted its more insidious implications, as scholars have more recently done, they have always shared these assumptions in common, which is precisely what makes their books part of this tradition.

This is not one of those books, however, and it does not belong to that tradition. *The Business of Letters* was written out of a conviction that the paradigm of professionalization studies was fundamentally flawed in conception, and that it has now outlasted any heuristic or collateral

value it might once have had. Concepts such as ‘professional’ and ‘amateur,’ when applied to antebellum authors, as I explain at some length in the first chapter of this book, seem, when looked at carefully, to be both too ahistorical and too simplistic to be useful, while the ways in which the former are said to have transformed into the latter have come increasingly, as they have hardened into orthodoxy, to obscure more than they reveal.

In the chapters that follow, I have attempted to offer a new account of authorship and economics in the first half of the nineteenth century that offers a more historical and nuanced analysis than the professionalization model can provide. My account is predicated on three core arguments of my own that displace those advanced by practitioners of the professional paradigm. The first of these we might call taxonomic, because it argues that we need to cease speaking of authorial economics (in the singular) and start speaking of authorial economies (in the plural). Authorship in the antebellum period, I claim, was transacted through a multitude of distinct economies, each of which had its own rules and reciprocities, its own exchange rituals and ethical strictures, and even, sometimes, its own currencies. There is a world of difference, that is to say, between a work that was introduced into a patronage economy and one that was passed through a gift economy; between a work that was written under contract and one that was entered into a literary competition; between literature written to raise charity and literature offered as tribute. This book proposes to explain what such differences entailed and why they were significant.

My second argument is sociological (or perhaps anthropological) in nature, and it suggests that their diversity notwithstanding, the various authorial economies available to writers through the middle of the nineteenth century were characterized by what economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi calls embeddedness. By this, I mean that they served not simply to convey goods and money from one party to another, but also, and at the same time, functioned to create and sustain powerful social bonds. Borrowing, bartering, gifting, or selling a book an author had written created webs of connection that were no less important a part of a transaction than any money that might have changed hands. Indeed, status and social connection—which, following Pierre Bourdieu, I refer to as symbolic and social capital—were two of the more important currencies that were exchanged for works of literature during this period. And it is precisely because such ‘currencies’ cannot be quantified in ledger-like terms that I have eschewed the imprints-and-income approach to authorial history that has been the mainstay of book history. Grasping the

fundamental embeddedness of authorial activity in antebellum America is important for many reasons, not only because it helps us understand what was at stake in acts of authorial exchange, but also, and perhaps more pointedly, because it teaches us to appreciate that the cultural work of writing extends beyond what authors wrote to how they bought, sold, begged, borrowed, bartered, and gave away what they wrote.

My final argument is historical, and it proposes that the crucial transformation of nineteenth-century authorial activity was not the professionalization of writing, but, rather, its social disembedding. Over the course of the nineteenth century, that is to say, the economies through which authors worked became detached from the dense social worlds of which they were a part, and which they in fact helped to create. Exchange became less personal and less trusting, less flexible and less sustained. It became more characterized by the exclusive use of cash and contracts, and by various mediatory individuals and agencies who stood between an author and his or her readers. I also argue, in ways that I hope do not undermine my historical trajectory, that the disembedding of these various authorial economies was a complex and often incomplete process, no more inevitable than it was irreversible, and, for that reason, some of the traits we associate with embedded authorial economies persist to the very present.

Having just laid bare the largest operating assumptions of my book, it might also be prudent, at this juncture, to spell out some of the other suppositions, big and small, that undergird the project. I begin with the chronological parameters of the study. In essence, this is a study of the period from the 1820s through the 1850s, although it often creeps back to the later eighteenth century and occasionally into the later nineteenth. In one or two cases, most notably in the epilogue, I bring contemporary authorial practices—particularly those of twentieth-century academics—to the forefront. Such temporal fluidity is entirely in keeping with my argument that embedded economies had deep historical roots that were never wholly unearthed, but it also suggests a potential problem in terms of framing. Why, given the sprawling scale of the phenomena in which I am interested, do I start where I do? Why end where I end? “Really, universally,” as Henry James so very aptly put it in 1907, “relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.”<sup>1</sup> Just so. The geometry of my own narrative is, in part, simply a reflection of my scholarly training. I am a scholar of the antebellum period, so I have focused on the economies of authorship in the period I know best and in which I have the most sustained professional invest-

ment, but I am aware that the book might have been framed differently. I might have written about the seventeenth century (as Philip Round did) to establish the pedigree of my multiple economies, or I might have discussed the fin-de-siècle James himself (as Michael Anesko has very deftly done) in terms of his authorial and economic practice. There are some very real advantages, however, to staying focused on this forty-year period, since it shows with perhaps unique clarity both the erosion of embedded economies but also their great persistence. Dwelling, as I do, on the antebellum years doubtless emphasizes discontinuity and transformation, but not, I hope, at the expense of the *longue durée*. Had I taken a longer perspective in the book, the emphasis might have changed, but my argument, I suspect, would have stayed much the same, because the antebellum era does seem to be the epicenter of this transformation. And while I have always been reluctant to invoke historian Stuart Blumin's hilarious Blumin's Law—"it happened in my period"—in this case I think that "it" actually did.<sup>2</sup>

My title will also, I think, lead many people to expect a work of literary criticism, or at the very least a work of literary history, and to the extent that this is the case, there is bound to be some disappointment. Although the subject matter and chronological parameters within which I work are those familiar to literary historians, this is not, itself, a work of literary history. Rather, it is a history of literature, and, more specifically still, a social history of authorship. My goal, in undertaking this project, was to understand in as fine-grained a way as possible, a series of culturally inflected economic practices in which works of literature were entangled, and through which they passed. I have been considerably less concerned with the ways in which such practices were depicted *in* works of literature, and not at all in how they could be said to have been allegorized or homologized in such works. As such, I align myself with those who ask, in Leah Price's words, not "what book history can do for literary criticism" but, rather, what criticism "can do for book history."<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, some clear aesthetic conclusions to be drawn from my work but I have resisted very consciously and consistently making the ultimate pay-off of my argument a new set of textual interpretations. This isn't because I don't find such readings interesting or important, but simply because I set myself a different task: to tell the history of practices as practiced, not the history of the practices as represented. The book you now hold in your hands is already long, even without a literary critical dimension, and while it might have been richer for an additional interpretive layer, there is a decidedly practical economics that impinges on

modern authors, just as it impinged on antebellum ones: very long books don't get bought or read, so they often don't get published either.

That does not mean, however, that my book is devoid of textual interpretation, even of scrupulous semiotic analysis; far from it, in fact. Every chapter features what I hope are sustained and nuanced interpretations. What sets my work apart is that my close readings are of exchange rituals and the rhetoric that surrounded them. These are "cultural texts," as Robert Scholes has called them, or, more precisely, they are scripted performances; but whether they are texts or performances, they are decidedly cultural and eminently interpretable.<sup>4</sup> And while it might seem that my work is more indebted to a cultural historian like Robert Darnton, or his anthropologist colleague, Clifford Geertz, than to any literary critic, it is worth remembering that the anthropologists (and anthropological historians) took many of their interpretive methodologies from the literary critics in the first place; I'm just taking them back.<sup>5</sup>

Were I writing about any other commodity than literature, or working in any department other than a literary one, it would probably not even be necessary to make apologies for my methodological or substantive choices. There is, after all, currently a vogue for so-called commodity histories—of cod, salt, coffee, tea, tobacco, and chocolate, among others—and while I share many scholars' discomfort with that genre's consumer triumphalism, my work does share with those texts a fascination with the mobility, the promiscuity, of goods and how they 'created' or 'built' or 'invented' various social phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

The question that then arises is, Why literature? If what I am interested in exploring is not literature as a form of artistic expression but the various ways in which social bonds were created (and later not created) when literature qua commodity was circulated and exchanged, then isn't the commodity in question immaterial? Isn't what I have to say about the business of letters just as true of the business of baskets, or the business of broomsticks? In an important sense, the answer is yes. Gregory H. Nobles, for instance, has written illuminatingly about the tightly bound kin groups that produced brooms in antebellum New England, and how broom production also reinforced those kin networks before mass broom production associated with the Market Revolution eventually eroded those bonds. Laurel Ulrich Thatcher, likewise, has discussed the way in which Native Americans in 1820s Vermont solidified their imperiled sense of collective identity by making and selling 'authentic' woodsplint baskets to white settlers.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, then, it would be true in one sense to say that what applies to literature just as readily applies to

other objects of exchange. In a still more important sense, however, the opposite is also true. Brooms, after all, could not talk to their handlers, nor did they establish reciprocal relationships with them. When, on the other hand, author Samuel Kettell wrote a short story in 1837, entitled “Biography of a Broomstick” and narrated it from the broomstick’s own point of view, he was able to simulate through his narrative voice a quasi-human bond with his readers. We may not like our brooms, but we like a man like Kettell, who in his preface promised “to do my best to make you merry,” even if he was speaking through a kitchen implement. And this is the crucial point: words are powerfully affective and, perhaps, ineluctably social in a way that wood is not, because they can simulate the merriment—or distress—that we associate with human relationships.<sup>8</sup> The same point can be made with respect to antebellum baskets. While a recent volume on the subject promised readers *A Key into the Language of Woodsplint Baskets*, none of the baskets discussed spoke a language quite so clear, or created a bond quite so entangling, as the words on the newspapers that were often used to line them. The family that lined a Vermont basket with newspapers in 1821 probably purchased the basket from an itinerant Native American, a fleeting encounter, but the newspapers reflected a far denser entanglement. The family were subscribers with an ongoing economic and social commitment to their paper; they wrote their name on it; and they kept at least six months’ worth of back issues in their household.<sup>9</sup> Brooms and baskets can convey meaning, but books and other written items talk. In purchasing or otherwise receiving them, readers enter into powerfully affective relationships not only with the implied author and characters, but also with those from whom they have received them. Indeed, they proved to be tenaciously social, even as the economies through which they passed began to disembed. Even as printing became one of the more heavily industrialized trades, that is, and its products part of the consumer revolution of the nineteenth century, written words, by their very communicative nature, resisted disembedding and commodification.<sup>10</sup> I cannot say with confidence that the affective freight of literature was unique—indeed, I conjecture that the difference with brooms and baskets was more likely a matter of degree than kind—but it suggests a complex developmental trajectory, both economic and cultural, that has not been explored with any intensity by historians of the Market Revolution. As such this book contributes to the study of literature in particular and of the Market Revolution in general, with the former nuancing and illuminating the latter.<sup>11</sup>

One final point of clarification remains, and that concerns the historical situatedness of my study. As Brook Thomas very sagely noted some

years ago, the resurgence of interest in authorship and the marketplace in the 1980s coincided almost precisely with a severe retrenchment in the humanities that saw university—and university press—budgets slashed to ribbons. Even as it became increasingly less feasible for university presses to publish every likely manuscript, or for every library to buy them, the requirements for hiring, tenure, and promotion continued to creep ever higher, placing pressure on academics and academic aspirants and forcing them to consider the nexus of authorship, economics, and professional identity in very personal ways. The *History of the Book*, as a discipline, is a product of the current status of the book as commodity.<sup>12</sup> This has certainly been my own experience, and as such, the writing of this volume has entailed a dual learning process. As I researched the conditions of antebellum authorship, I also came to learn about the conditions of modern, academic authorship. I would not want to suggest that there are direct connections between the two—the formal, business economies seem especially different—but I do think that a consideration of embedded and multiple economies in the modern academy can help shed a little light on the nature of the antebellum phenomena with which this book is concerned. For that reason, I end my book somewhat unorthodoxly with a brief epilogue that considers William Charvat, the preeminent twentieth-century scholar of authorship, as an author himself, enmeshed in the multiple economies of the academic world. I hope this will help suggest some of the ways in which historical authorship can speak to our own condition.

In most other respects, the organization of the chapters follows a fairly conventional trajectory. The first chapter offers an introduction to my methodology and an overview of the various ways in which it engages with, and diverges from, current literary scholarship; it also, and incidentally, provides an overview of authorship in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth century. It is the most ‘theoretical’ and the only polemical chapter of the book. Chapter Two complements the first by offering an extended case study of North Carolina poet George Moses Horton, who flourished between the 1820s and the 1860s. Horton, an illiterate slave who composed verses spontaneously for students who wrote them down and paid him for them, is precisely the sort of author who escaped scrutiny under the old Charvatan paradigm of authorial professionalism, inasmuch as his informal (and illegal) oral poetry business left no quantifiable financial data; as such, he makes an excellent test case for my methodology. While Chapter Two discusses a number of authorial economies in tandem, chapters Three through Five each consider specific authorial economies, and they are organized, together with the second chapter, in

such a way that the discussion moves from the most intimate and private of exchange practices to the most public. Thus Chapter Two focuses mostly on patronage and charity. Chapter Three explores the wide range of ways in which literature circulated through gift exchange in this period. The fourth chapter considers the way in which credit and debt relationships profoundly affected literary production and consumption. And Chapter Five examines the phenomenon of writing competitions in the early national and antebellum periods. My goal in arranging the chapters in this order is to establish the grounds of a larger argument that informal and embedded economies were not positioned in opposition to the world of business, but, rather, actually represented the ways in which business was done. The epilogue ties together the various arguments I have made by considering the relationship between the historical economies I study and the modern academic workplace, using the life of Charvat as an example of a modern practicing author.

The chapters I offer are designed to suggest the range and variety of authorial economies that were available in antebellum America, but they are not exhaustive, nor have I addressed every economy through which authors worked. One thinks, for example, of the ‘gratuity economy’ employed by newspaper carriers’ in the hundreds of broadside new year’s addresses they delivered to their patrons, an absolutely fascinating practice that bears striking resemblances to the modern practice of soliciting tips, in its use of both theatricality and euphemism to conduct transactions across clear social boundaries. One thinks also of the pervasive use of blackmail in antebellum America and the ways in which it inverted the protocols of the marketplace in demanding money in order not to write, and not to publish. I touch only glancingly on the subjects of charity and patronage, which really ought to have been given chapters to themselves, and I chose to excise, for reasons of space, a short chapter that considered the ways in which antebellum publishers engaged in a series of embedded economic practices in ways that paralleled those deployed by authors. In short, there is a great deal more to be said than I have been able to say here. My goal in writing *The Business of Letters* has not been to offer the last word on the subject but only the first few in what I hope will be an ongoing conversation.