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Preface

The Harper American Literature reprints and invigorates what is now a nearly 150-year-old tradition of multivolume collections of American literature. From the publication in 1855 of Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck's two-volume Cyclopaedia of American Literature, readers wanting to explore what the Duyckincks called "the literary biography of America" have had ready access to what each succeeding generation judged the literature most worthy of its collective attention. But The Harper American Literature realizes for the first time a goal announced in the Duyckinck's preface and subsequently endorsed by the editors of virtually every collection of American literature—to bring together in one book convenient for perusal and reference . . . memorials and records of the writers of the country and their works, from the earliest period to the present day." What distinguishes The Harper American Literature from its predecessors is its commitment to presenting fully the richness of American literature, its thematic and stylistic range as well as its geographical and ethnic diversity. To this end, we have worked to extend the conventional boundaries of the American literary tradition.

Virtually all collections of American literature now in print begin either with a generous selection of Puritan writings or, in fewer instances, with Captain John Smith and his engaging account of the early years of the Virginia colony. Yet such beginnings ignore a great deal of compelling literature written in and about America long before the first settlements at either Roanoke Island or Plymouth Plantation—from Cabrera de Vaca's harrowing sixteenth-century narrative of his struggles to survive along the southeast coast of what is now Texas to the compelling creation myths of Native Americans. To supplant the narrow, northeastern, Puritan bias of currently available texts, we begin with a wealth of pre-settlement writing. "The Literature of the New World, 1492–1620," maps out new approaches to the important cultural forces that have helped shape American life.

The Harper American Literature extends America's literary tradition to another significant direction. In its final section, "The Literature of Contemporary America," gives unprecedented attention to our most recent—and eloquent—writers of